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Anthropology in the digital age: an analysis of social interaction on networking sites

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Anthropology in the Digital Age:

an Analysis of

Social Interaction on Networking Sites

by

Gloria Sauti

Submitted in fulfilment of the degree

Doctor of Philosophy

in the

Faculty of Humanities

University of the Witwatersrand

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Dissertation Summary

Anthropology in the Digital Age

An Analysis
of
Social Interaction on Networking Sites

By

Gloria Sauti

SUPERVISOR: Prof. David B. Coplan

FACULTY: Humanities

DEPARTMENT: Department of Anthropology

University of the Witwatersrand

DEGREE: Doctor of Philosophy

TOPIC: The Internet and social networking sites appear to have shaped communication in unique ways. The intention in studying these sites has been to uncover the interactive patterning of users.

Research Question: Have social networking sites redefined communication, friendship and intimate relationships, and have they perhaps caused users to share or show cultural experience in what could be new, unique, "wired (perhaps weird) virtual", online “societies?”

Declaration

I declare that this research report is my own unaided work. It is being submitted for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University.

_____

(Signature of Candidate)

_____day of_____2012

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Gloria Sauti
Virginia, USA
2012

***Please Note: All the names of informants used in this thesis have been changed in order to adhere to the code of ethics.**

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List of Abbreviations

AOL – America Online

BBs – Baby boomers

BBC – British Broadcasting Corporation

CAQR - Computer – Aided Qualitative Research

DOD – Department of Defence

FOAF - Friend of a Friend

Fox – Fox Broadcasting Company

MNSBC –Microsoft National Broadcasting Company

PO – Participant Observer

SRTM - Shuttle Radar Topographic Mission

SABC - South African Broadcasting Corporation

SMS - Short Message Services

SNSs - Social networking sites

SNS - Social Network Services

TV - Television

UCLA- University of California

USA - United States of America

UK - United Kingdom

USPS - United State Postal Services

WNW - Wave New World

WWW - World Wide Web

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"Our ability to communicate using language is often cited as the element that sets us apart from other animals."

Erös Szathmary & Szabolcs Számadó (2008)

And needless to say that ...

"Wherever I lay my Laptop, that's my Home"

Bill Thompson (2009)

Preview

Technology, digital tools and, particularly, social networking sites (SNSs) have provided unique ways for individuals to communicate, search for and find old friends or long-lost family members, and establish new relationships. In this document individuals will be referred to as users, a term that encompasses friends, Informants, twitters, facebookers, myspacers, Mxits and YouTubers.

SNSs are virtual "places" on the Internet where people "meet" to chat, socialise, debate and network. Some examples of SNSs include facebook, Mxit, twitter, myspace and YouTube. Regardless of the language, culture or nation in which the SNSs originate, all of them share more or less similar features that enable users to connect with others sharing similar interests. Via these sites, individuals are able to post and view pre-recorded or live videos, share photographs, chat and converse across the entire globe. These sites have established new trends in communication, and have become the primary method by which individuals from almost all generations, but particularly those of Generations Y and X, relate. The latter is prevalent on geography, advanced and/or emerging economies based on the availability of resources and access to digital devices or tools.

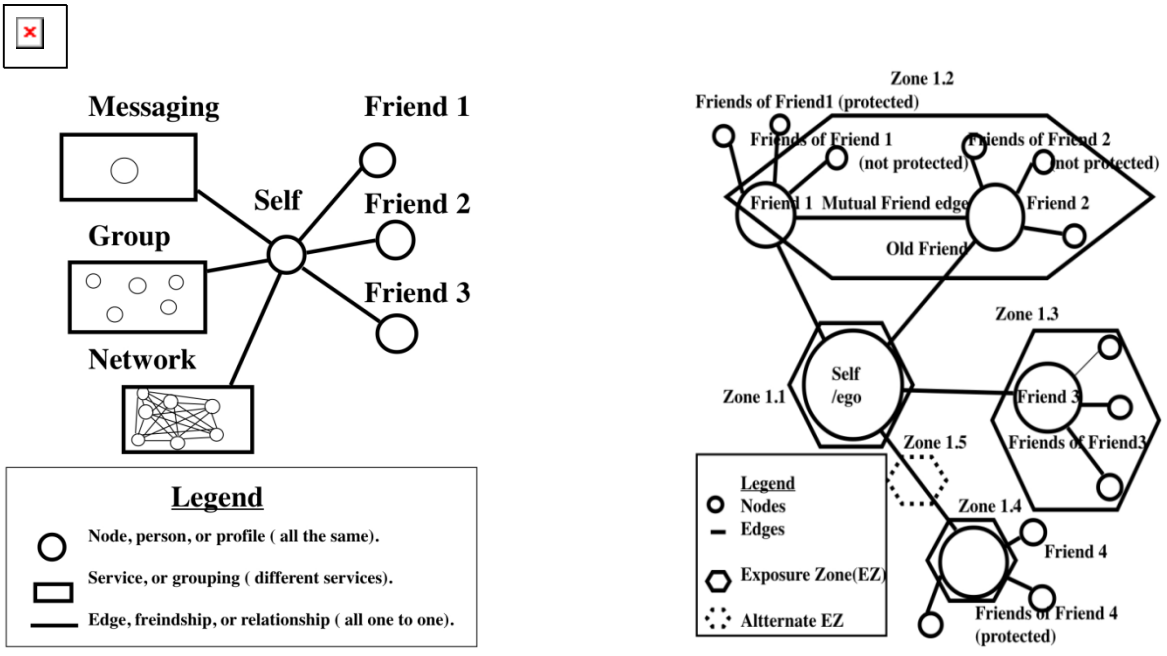


Figure 1 Exposed edges and tighter nodes, Timusk (2007)

Figure 1(a) Self, first 1st to 3rd friend and Network Figure1 (b) Friend Zones whom only Ego has access to.

Communication begins with speech: the distinctive ability which has made possible the evolution of human society. In speech, however, any topic—no matter how complex—can be communicated between people, from person to person within a room, in an assembly, or across a short open space. What distinguishes online communication from of offline communication is the speed and volume at which data can be passed on. It is almost instant over long or short distances.

It is, however, important to provide a brief history of how communication transpired prior to the digital era.

In the past communication could be as diverse as taking place face-to-face, or through drums which were used to broadcast messages that could be understood by others who knew the meaning of the rhythms. Smoke signals were one of the oldest forms of communication in the past, but there was no guarantee that the intended recipient would receive the message or see the signal. In addition, people communicated through letters**,** and later on through telegraphs. The first telegraphs took the form of optical telegraphs and included the use of signals, beacons or reflected light over short distances. These were invented by Claude Chappe in 1794, (Jones: 2005).

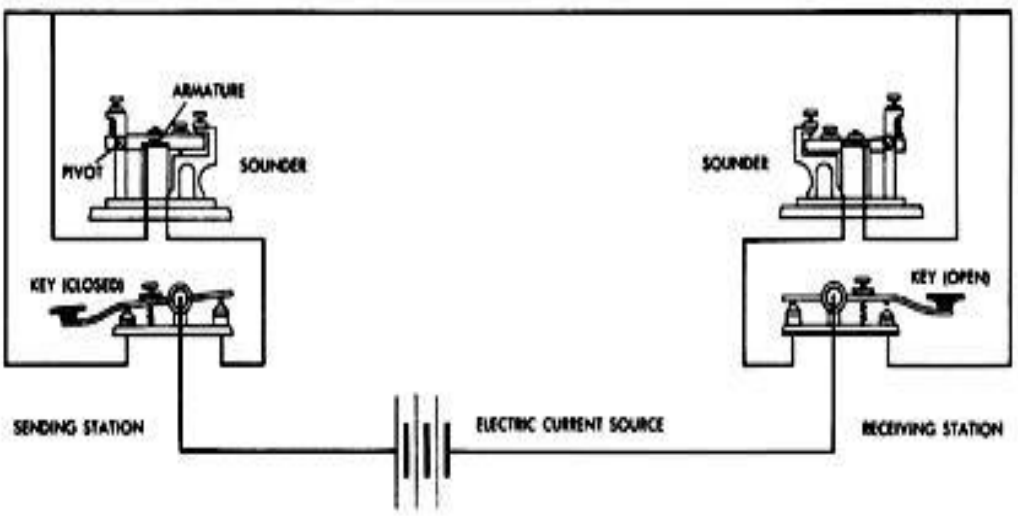


Figure 2 Basic elements of a telegraphic system (PrivateLine.com)

Long distance communication was revolutionised by the electrical telegraph which was individually patented by Samuel Morse in the United States in 1837. Figure 1 shows the basic elements of a telegraphic system. Morse developed a code (bearing his name) that assigned a series of dots and dashes to each letter of the English alphabet and allowed for the simple transmission of complex messages across telegraph lines. He sent his first telegram on 6 May 1838 across a distance of two miles near Morristown, New Jersey, and a second from Washington DC to Baltimore, Maryland in 1844.

Figure 2 provides an example of a short message sent over a telegraph. This form of communication became widely used by individuals from the Atlantic Ocean to Europe, History.com (1997-2011). The telegraph became one of the most important tools in the development of social and commercial life in America, however, its expense only allowed for the sending of urgent communications.

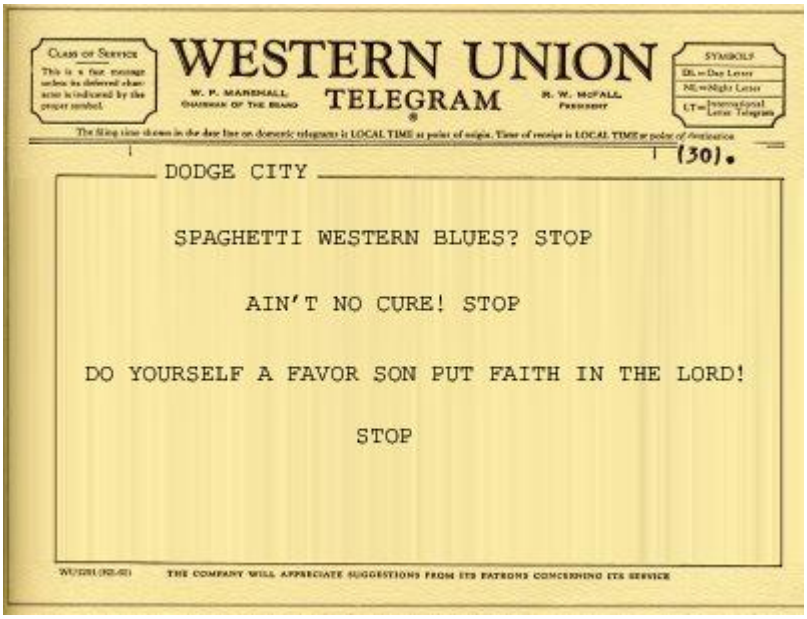

WESTERN UNION
TELEGRAM
(30).
DODGE CITY
SPAGHETTI WESTERN BLUES? STOP
AIN'T NO CURE! STOP
DO YOURSELF A FAVOR SON PUT FAITH IN THE LORD!
STOP
THE COMPANY WILL APPRECIATE SUGGESTIONS FROM ITS PATRONS CONCERNING ITS SERVICE

Figure 3 Illustration of short messages which were sent over telegraphs (psychoticadvisor.com)

Radio messaging was another method by which individuals communicated and incorporated devices that enabled individuals to also search for or establish new friends. Through radio stations and newspapers they could find friends, or "pen pals": a person with whom one becomes familiar through amiable, regular correspondence. These relationships may also have increased the literacy of people by exposing them to different nationalities and lifestyles (Morris, 2007:1).

However, these methods were often much slower to reach recipients, and it often took much longer to receive a reply.

Alexander Bell's invention of the telephone in1876 allowed him to become the first man to receive a patent for the device. Telephones are defined as point to point communication systems whose basic function is to allow two people separated by long distances to talk to each other. The invention of telephones facilitated communication and made it much easier and more efficient. Telephones quickly became widely used in most countries, except for those in under-developed economies where people could not afford to own or maintain the devices.

Then the Internet became a primary method through which users began to communicate. The seeds of the Internet were sown in 1957 when the US Department of Defense (DOD) created the Advanced Research Project Agency (ARPA). Its purpose was to create technologies that the military could use and in the 1960s, ARPA and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) corroborated to share information and technology. They did so by joining networks using computers. In 1966 Larry Roberts from MIT introduced ARPANET, which consisted of computers linked over long distances. In 1969 universities were allowed to be part of the network nodes (Who Invented It?, 2011:1).

It is, however, critical to note that the pioneering idea of the Internet began much earlier. The Internet was not created by any single person, although the initial impulse is credited as being that of Leonard Kleinrock's, after he published his first paper on May 31, 1961 entitled *Information Flow in Large Communication Nets*.

In the summer of 1968 the Networking Group (NWG) held its first meeting chaired by Elmer Shapiro of the Stanford Research Institute (SRI), with attendees Steve Carr, Steve Crocker, Jeff Rulifson and Ron Stoughton. They discussed solving issues related to enabling hosts to communicate with each other.

On August 29, 1969, the first piece of network, called IPM (short for Interface Message Processor) was instituted by the University of California (UCLA). On September 2 of the same

year, the first data moved from the UCLA host to the switch. At 10.30 am on Friday 29 October 1969, the first Internet message was sent from computer science professor Leonard Kleinrock's laboratory at the University of California And in 1972, Ray Tomlinson introduced network email—the first email messaging system to send messages across a network to other users (Computer Hope, 2011:1).

In the mid 1970s several more universities also began to make use of network email, and congress made it available to the public domain in 1982. The label "Internet" was used for the first time.

The Internet and personal computers, though, were only amalgamated in the 1990s", however, as a result, individuals were then able to sign up on an email site of their choice and begin communicating with family and friends by sending and receiving messages. Later on cellular devices became available and widely used.

The first cellular telephone was the culmination of efforts begun at Bell Labs. The first hand held mobile phone was invented and demonstrated by Dr Martin Cooper of Motorola in 1973, and in 1983 the DynaTAC 8000x became the first cellular device to be commercially available. Between 1990 and 2010, worldwide mobile phone subscriptions grew from 12.4 million to over 4.6 billion (Teixeira, 2010).

In the last decade, digital tools like computers, the Internet, search engines and– particularly SNSs–have either enhanced or transformed the manner in which communication takes place between people in unprecedented ways.

Social networking sites can be divided into seven different types depending on their primary content and target audiences:1) General and Friend; 2) Movies and Music; 3) Pets; 4) Hobbies and Special Interests; 5) Business; 6) Reading, and 7) Books.

The first friend-based social networking site was Six-Degrees.com, which was launched in 1997. Years later sites like Live Journal, Black Planet, MyGents, Cyworld, Friendster and Skyblog

were also launched. From 2003, additional SNSs like Couch Serving, LinkedIn and myspace were launched, and in 2006 YouTube, facebook, twitter and related sites came into being. myspace was initially intended for young crowds, and facebook for college students. Sites like LinkedIn are not friendship based, but are rather associated with professionals who share common or academic interests. Figure 3 illustrates the history of social networking sites.

During fieldwork the primary focus was on general and friendship-based SNSs which included myspace, YouTube, facebook, twitter and Mxit. What was particularly noticeable with SNSs was the unprecedented number of users they attracted globally.

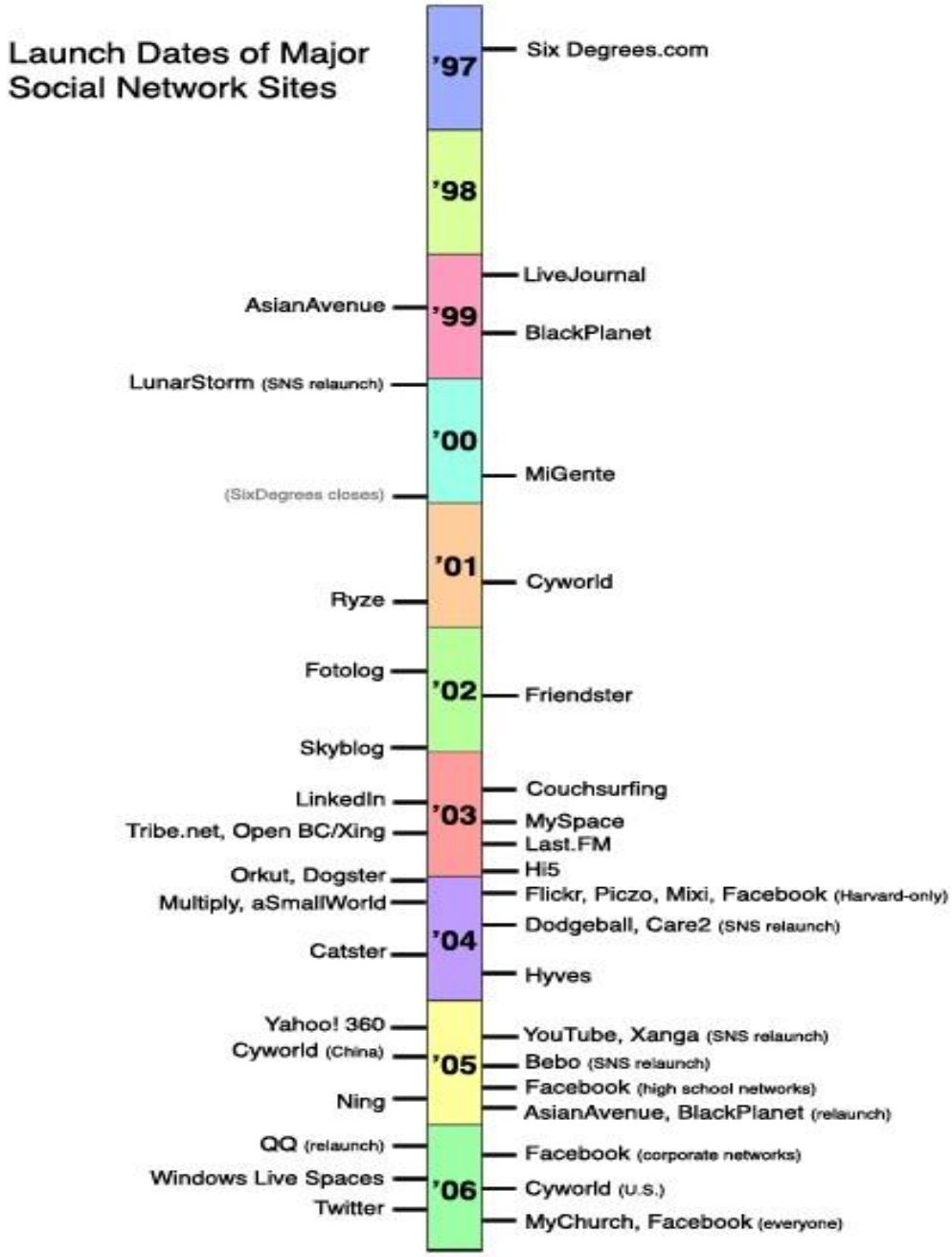


Figure 4 History of social networking sites (Michael Schultz; 2009-2011)

By 2009, more than 830 million users visited the sites via home and office based computers (Uberti, 2010:2). More recently, access is acquired through phones, tablet computers and related devices. Since then, and by September 2011, use of the sites intensified and resulted in what seems to be, an explosion or revolution in the amount of users they have attracted.

In October 2011, 98% of 18–24 year olds used SNSs each month according to Experience Simmons (2011), a consumer research insight website. The greatest growth sector is amongst older Americans: nearly 3 in 4 seniors use social media in a typical month, as do 82% of those aged 55–64, (Social Networking Watch, 2011). From the research conducted for this paper, it is apparent that the sites have established a global user-base, and the influence of those sites appears to have transcended that which television once had on conventional societies and the ways in which they function.

Social media enables users, out of their own accord, to access, accede to the rules, register and become part of what appear to be online societies or communities that have emerged and exist in their own right. The reality is that digital tools have become an everyday part of our lives, and are significant in enabling and encouraging users to receive and access large volumes of information. They have transformed the manner in which human beings communicate, converse and interact socially.

The central focus of this research was to examine and provide an in-depth analysis of the abovementioned sites through which the populace engages in online social interaction. Conducting a study on SNSs was extremely relevant, particularly considering their popularity and the dynamics through which they have shaped communication, friendships and intimate relationships. The ways in which social interaction ensues amongst users and their peers from diverse generations were also particularly intriguing.

Some of the key visible features on the sites which resemble those in offline societies required that they be analysed on a microscopic level. Therefore, the perspective presented here is that of an Anthropological one, however, it should not be ignored that some scholars in the field, like Dunbar, scholar and anthropologist, for example, provided their own perspectives on the social interactions of users, focusing particularly on friendships, as demonstrated in his article *How Many Friends Does One Person Need?*, from Dunbar's *Number and Other Evolutionary Quirks* (2010). In her article on SNSs, Boyd (2007), submitted her own perspectives on the definition, history, scholarship and school information, and defined her own unique analysis of the subjects

explored. Hence, in conducting the ethnographic fieldwork relevant to this document, the users' views and the definitions which they provided from their own perspectives were examined.

The primary goals in exploring the sites were to uncover the patterning of peoples' interactions and to explore the wired, or perhaps "weird", ways in which social interaction ensues, while simultaneously examining what seems to be the emergence of unique and modern online societies or communities. This is based on the intuitive notion that these patterns are important features of the lives of the individuals who display them (Eriksen, 2001).

It should be noted that social networking has been with us for a long period of time. The caveman sitting with his fellow hunters in front of the fire cooking and eating his latest kill was engaged in social networking, as illustrated in Figure 4.



Figure 5 Social networking caveman style (CavemanJoe; 2010)

This thesis conveys the overall observations of the author as a participant, as well as the views and perspectives of the users that were interviewed. ,

Moreover, the unprecedented ways in which users of the SNSs appear to communicate and converse with friends across various generations are also demonstrated here.

Figure 5 below demonstrates that this is a topic that is not geographically limited. The different colours used show approximately the number of users from diverse races and countries observed and interviewed, the majority of which live in specific countries that interact on the unique online platforms in which class, race, gender, age and social status is perhaps transcended.

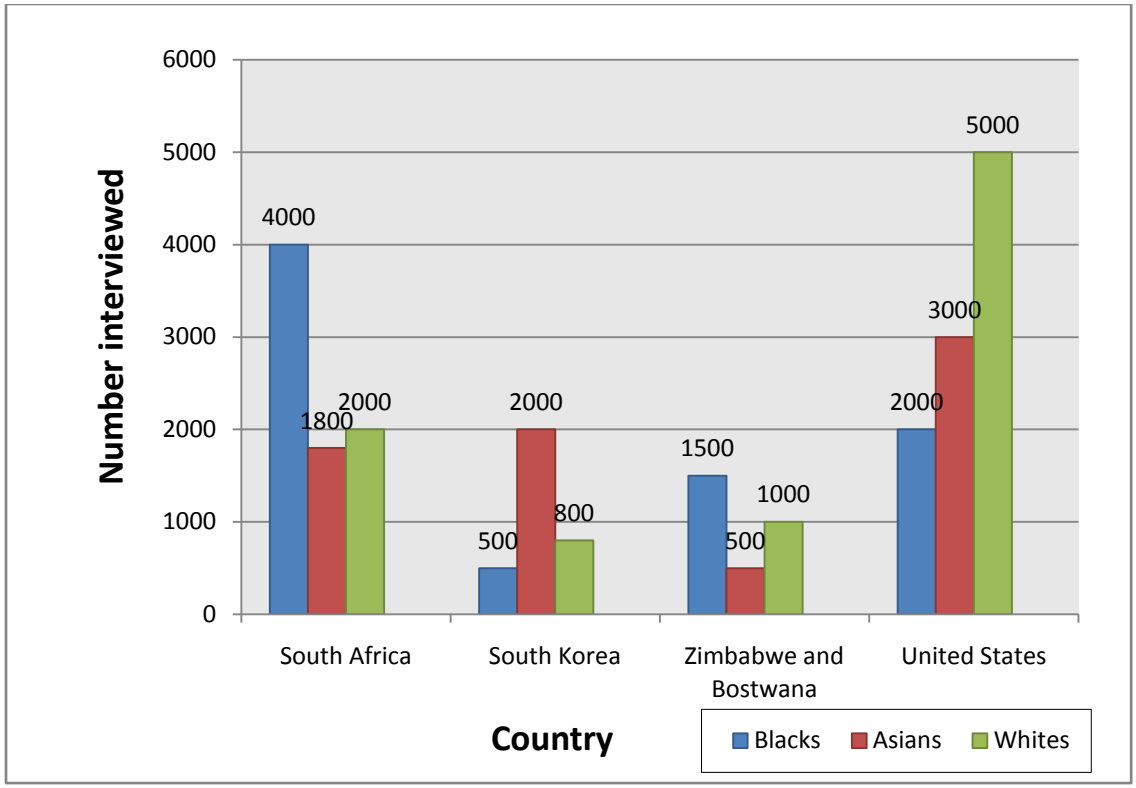


Figure 6 Demographic of users from countries shown in the chart, whose online interactions were observed and who were interviewed

During the study, the primary aim was to observe and examine the perspectives of the users regarding the following central issues. Firstly, the ways in which social networking sites shaped communication and enabled individuals to re-establish old friendships and make new ones across the globe were explored, as were the methods that enable users to locate long lost relatives.

The table in Figure 6 provides a breakdown of user demographics, how they are generally referred to both by senior and other users, and an estimation of the age brackets into which they fall.

Generation Y users are those users aged between 18 and 32, and who are referred to as millenniums or digital natives. Baby-boomers and their elders consider them to be those who grew up in the age of Internet and social networking sites, or those who were born with digital spoons in their mouths.

Generation Y users are less likely to have made use of traditional postal services to communicate with family and friends in 2011, and are most likely the group which will use the Internet for entertainment and for communicating with friends and family.

Generation X users were born into the era in which emailing became popular. They are estimated to be between the ages of 34 and 44 years old, and they tend to use both traditional methods of communication and digital tools, which include emailing and extensive Internet use for shopping and online banking.

Baby boomers were also examined for this study. The term Baby boomer is particularly common in the United States. It originated after World War 11 when, in 1945, many young couples married and started families. This resulted in a significant increase in the birth-rate of children between 1945 and 1964, and babies born in this period are called “baby boomers” (O’brien, 2011).

However, different sources often offer slightly differing age groups of baby boomers. According to Babyboomers.com, whose statistics differ from those of Wikipedia, they are considered to be individuals born between the period 1946 to 1964. The individuals grew up partially in the Internet era, but primarily communicated through traditional postal services, landlines, cell phones and email.

Finally, also examined were the perspectives of those born in the era in which the sending of letters or the use of telegraphs through traditional postal services were the primary method of communication. Fixed landlines, or telephones, were also popular (although limited in some cases.

Seniors comprise of those who are 65 years and older. The table shown in Figure 6 indicates the demographics of users, the names by which they are popularly known, and the age brackets into which they are likely to fall.

Of particular interest are the ways in which users from different races, ethnic groups and backgrounds invite each other to "dance" cross-culturally in order to share and/or show cultural or ritual differences on the various SNSs. Also conveyed are the ways in which they tend to observe, perhaps learn and/or embrace or cultivate an interest in the cultures of their friends.

With this was examined the possibility of whether or not–through the diverse influences that users encounter online–a new or unique online culture had perhaps emerged as a result of online social interaction. The users were also examined to see if acculturation (cultural change resulting from contact between cultures, or a process of external culture change) or enculturation (the process of becoming knowledgeable or competent in one's culture) (Kottak, 2007:1) had ensued.

Examined next were friendships, and the associated question of why users have such an unprecedented number of friends online, and how they manage and maintain these friendships. The impact that these friendships have on the users is also explored with a brief discussion of Dunbar's analysis on the number of friends that he suggests a single individual can have, and possibly maintain.

The term friend was used loosely on SNSs, and has resulted in much debate amongst researchers and scholars. In view of this it was deemed to be important to understand how users define the term friend or friends, and whether or not they distinguish their friendships in terms of buddies, close friends and family. Therefore friendships, whether close or long-distant, are what distinguish them from those that are formed in offline societies. Perhaps the notion that absence makes the heart grow fonder could legitimately be ascribed to the kind of relationships that appear to exist or develop on the sites.

Intimate relationships and how they are formed online was also an interesting focus. In addition to this will be discussed the impact that these relationships have on users' lives in general. Consequential relationships are also briefly touched on, as are users' perspectives on the advantages and or potential consequences of what are perhaps considered to be wired or weird relationships.

Finally, the paper provides an in-depth analysis on whether or not users feel that SNSs have indeed revolutionised into a new trend of online societies or communities; societies in which new and unique social norms appear to have emerged. Also described here are some of the key features within online societies that qualify them to be considered as such, and which perhaps reinforce the views of users that they live in those societies. Hence, it was important to list some visible aspects or features of online societies that are perhaps similar or different to those of offline.

Certain features of online societies highlight aspects of traditional societies that are gradually becoming a fundamental component of SNSs, and which reinforce the argument that the sites have perhaps resulted in the emergence of unique online societies or communities. Some of the features include policing, privacy issues, friendships, intimate relationships that resulted in marriages, education, religion, addictions and memorials (which are discussed in more detail in Chapter 8).

In all, it would appear that the Internet, and particularly SNSs, have not only granted users access to engage in social interaction, but they seem to have enhanced the dynamics of communication itself. These technological tools appear to have increased social networking ability and support, cultural exchange, exposure to the lifestyles and activities of individuals (particularly amongst close friends), as well as assisting in the diffusion of information and political and social organisation.

Chapter1 Introduction, defining concepts, justification for the study, and organisation of the thesis

1. Introduction

This chapter will define the concepts of social networking sites and social networking itself, and includes a brief description of each of the sites examined. Those sites comprise of facebook, myspace, twitter, YouTube and Mxit.

Firstly, the ways in which users employ these digital tools to communicate or socialise with friends will be discussed, followed by an outline of the various research questions which were put to users during the fieldwork. The questions were concerned with communication, culture, friendships, intimate relationships and societies or communities which have possibly emerged.

Also presented is a justification for the study with a demonstration of why it is imperative for scholars and, particularly, emerging researchers in the fields of social anthropology and other sciences to continue to explore the impact that current digital tools have on the social lives of users. Finally, the organisation of the thesis is discussed with a demonstration of the manner in which it will be structured.

1.2 Defining concepts: social networking and social networking sites

1.2.1 Social networking

A social network is a social structure made up of individuals or organisations known as nodes, which are connected to each other by one or more specific interdependency such as friendship, kinship, common interests, financial exchange, dislikes, intimate relationships or relationships, beliefs, knowledge or prestige. Boyd (2007) suggests that most sites support pre-existing networks, but others help strangers to connect based on shared interests, political views or activities.

Social networking can also be defined as a grouping of specific individuals into clusters, like small rural communities or neighbourhood sub-divisions. Social Networking.com (2011)

conveys engaging with friends in which values, visions and ideas are shared on a social level (Shah, 2011).

The term social networking has, in recent years, become renounced and has been introduced into the terminology of diverse societies. At the same time it may also ascribe to a set of relationships activated for a particular end, without necessarily being organised around a single person.

1.2.2 Social networking sites

There are hundreds of social networking sites, or spaces or places on the Internet where people come together in cyberspace to chat, socialise, debate and network. But, even more than this, these sites have evolved into the ideal places in which to meet people with the opportunity to begin to explore something more than chatting online. On the SNSs users, particularly the younger generations, express their likes and dislikes regarding movies, television programs, books and music (Cyber Safety Glossary, 2011:1). facebook, twitter, myspace and related sites are immensely popular with teenagers and young adults, and more so lately with older generations.

Social networking sites can also be defined as places where users can search for friends. The friends they search for may include old and current school friends and those from either universities or colleges, fellow or previous employees, or friends and acquaintances with whom they had previously resided with in the societies. It is also possible to search for family members with whom contact has been lost, or perhaps with those that they have never met and with whom they would like to start a relationship. Users can also search for family members whom they believe they are related to or are part of their heritage or family tree. More aspects of these SNSs are that users can post photos or videos of themselves online, can upload music files, or, on sites like Mxit for example, users form study groups with classmates.

A typical SNS requires users to complete a short registration form before they have access to the site. Once the registration process is complete users can create a personal profile, add other users as friends and exchange messages which may include automatic notifications when they update their profiles. They can join common-interest groups (Boyd, 2007) organised by the workplace,

colleges, schools or community groups, and categorise their friends into lists defining them as fellow employees, close friends, best friends and family members.

1.3 An Introduction to the social networking sites studied

facebook is the leading global social networking site. It was co-founded by fellow students and roommates at Harvard University, Mark Zuckerberg, Chris Hughes and Dustin Moskovitz in 2004. Its headquarters are situated in Menlo Park, California, USA. The website's name refers to the paper facebooks depicting members of a campus community that some US colleges and preparatory schools give to incoming students, faculty or staff as a way to help them get to know other people on campus (Mezrich, 2011).

As of November 2011 and the first half of 2012, facebook estimates that it has over 800 million active users. In addition, it has more than 900 million objects that people can interact with (on pages, groups, events and community pages). Although the United States currently has the single largest user base, other countries combined make up more than 75% of existing users, and more than 70 languages are used. The site has become a favourite destination for users throughout the world.

The above statistics, however, are not absolute and tend to vary according to different sources. This shifting base is a common problem across all the sites because, while they often provide their own statistics, sources like Wikipedia and Stats & Facts often provide different numbers. Stats & Facts (2011), for example, whose information differs vastly from the figures provided above by facebook for the same year, suggest that the site has just over 500 million users. A key observation during the study was the constant fluctuation in the statistics regarding the number of users they have.

facebook offers many features to users: individuals can chat with friends, post comment on blogs indicating whether they either like or dislike something that is being shown, like photos for example, or contribute to a conversation that is taking place. They can acquire information on social and political issues through engaging in discourse with friends, and interact with individuals across diverse ages, races, genders and social statuses on this global platform. In

addition, there are various social and support groups from which they can benefit. A study conducted by Pew, Bavaria (2011:1) advocates that facebook users tend to be more trusting of the facebook site, than of others; users have closer relationships with each other and get more social support from friends.

twitter is an online social networking and micro-blogging service that enables its users to send and receive text-based posts, informally known as tweets, of up to 140 characters. twitter was created in 2006 by Jack Dorsey and launched in October of the same year (Java & Song, 2007). twitter is owned by a company called Obvious Corporations based in San Francisco, with additional offices in San Antonio, Boston, New York City (Answers.com, 2011:1).

It is estimated by Wikipedia that, as of 2011, twitter had 200 million users. Charlson (2011) asserts on the one hand that registered users really means the number of account holders, and suggests that the reality is that twitter has opened 175 million accounts during its history. Obviously, this is a significant difference between the numbers. Bullas (2011:1) statistics, on the other hand, states that twitter has 100 million active users. This number is similar to the figures estimated by Wikipedia, but is almost half that of the numbers indicated by twitter.

twitter was originally available in six languages, and recently included Korean. Wauters (2010) suggests that only 50% of twitter tweets are in English. His analysis indicates that the top 5 languages used on twitter are English, Japanese, Portuguese, Malay and Spanish. It should, however, be noted that users communicate using various terms which can be called twitter language or slang. Cashmore (2008) suggests that some call this mode twitterspeak, and refer to it as an unforgivable abuse of the English language. He asserts that there are 66 twitter terms which he provides in his article. However, the vast majority of individuals that use the terminology on the site are understood by fellow users.

According to the *Harvard Business Review*, twitter has attracted **t**remendous attention from the media and celebrities (Heil & Piskorski, 2009). What differentiates it from other SNSs is that users can express themselves in a few words. It has also proven itself to be a powerful tool in

debating politcal issues and in organising protests.

Apart from the quick, short messages which the site enables users to send to friends and family, there are additional features available. Rowse (2008) lists 9 benefits for twitter bloggers; 1) research tool, 2) reinforce (and expand) their personal brand, 3) promote content, 4) extend audience – find new readers, 5) networking, 6) previews, 7) speed linking, 8) story gathering, and 9) users find out what people really think. Similar to their facebook counterparts, twitter users also benefit through engaging with friends in persuasive discourses on social and political issues.

myspace is a social networking service as opposed to a social networking site. The site was co-founded by Tom Anderson and Chris DeWolfe in 2003, and was then acquired by News Corporation in July 2005. Although the site surpassed Google as the most visited site in April 2008, it was overtaken by facebook during the second half of 2011 and in 2012 the number of users declined steadily as users migrated to, primarily facebook, in countries like the United States, and to BBM in South Africa. In June 2011, myspace was sold to Specific Media and Justin Timberlake (Ehrlich, 2011). The site's headquarters are situated in Beverly Hills, California, where it shares an office building with its current owner, News Corp, Digital Media Corp, owned by News Corporation.

In August 2011, Arington (2011) estimated the number of users on myspace to be around 33 million. According to Bercovici (2010:1) whose statistics reflect the number of users in February of the same year, the number of active users is considerably smaller than the 100 million plus cited in the site's online press kit. He suggests that in February 2010 the number of users was only 18 million, a 6% decline from the previous 30 days. In addition, he stipulates that the rate of decline seems to be accelerating and that the number of new users shrank by11%. However, based on the statistics given by Wikipedia, the actual number of users seems to be twice as much. Recently forums were removed from myspace and the site has moved towards more of an entertainment site for its users, and has made attempts to sustain its users sharing and communicating about the latest movies, music, etc.

The domain MySpace.com was originally used as a data storage site, and the name MySpace according to Schroeder (2008) emerged later and acquired its name.

Although the common language on myspace is English, the site enables users to communicate in 15 other languages. The alternative regional versions present content according to locality, and offer languages other than English (German, French and Japanese for example). myspace also accommodates the regional differences in spelling and conventions in the English speaking world (MySpace, 2011).

Although the site initially targeted independent music bands to create SNSs anchored around music, it later attracted additional users and businesses. like clubs, bands and party promoters offline to use the sites all together. Over time it attracted younger users in the United Kingdom, but older users in the United States.

There are various features available for myspace users which include making friends, finding old friends and interacting with individuals from diverse countries and cultures throughout the world. In addition, there are employment opportunities for the users. A number of companies admitted that they are continuously looking for talent on myspace. The companies have dedicated staff members to search myspace.com profiles and websites to identify possible talent which they could use in the future (Valid Information, 2011).

YouTube is a video sharing website on which users can view, upload and share videos. YouTube was founded in 2005 by Chad Hurley, Steve Chen, and Jawed Kerim, who were all early employees of PayPal. In November 2006, the site was bought by Google Inc. and is based in San Bruno, California (Wikipedia, 2011).

According to Elliot (2011), in February 2011 YouTube was estimated to have 490 million users worldwide. The number of users had increased almost thrice as much from the 120 million estimated by Parr in 2009. Unregistered users can also view YouTube videos. It should be noted, however, that the number of YouTube users seems to have increased rapidly over the years.

The name YouTube means You-yourself and Tube-broadcast yourself. It is an illusion of the cathode ray tube, a display devise used since the early days of television (Naschowolfs, 2011). YouTube can be used or viewed in 51 languages and is available through user interfaces.

Apart from viewers posting their videos, there are various features available for both registered users and viewers. The site has comment blogs where viewers can express their views on the content in a particular video. At times controversial, videos can result in major debates or persuasive discourse leading to users expressing their views on comment blogs of the site. Some of the videos which the viewers share include short films, music videos of key singers as well as those of users themselves who show their raw and upcoming talents, and ethnographies that showcase a variety of additional videos.

Mxit is an instant message service and social network site. Mxit, short for Message Exchange it, is pronounced mix-it. The site was developed by Mxit Lifestyle (PTY) Ltd in 2006. In 2007, media giant Naspers acquired 30% of the site, and in 2011 Mxit was acquired by South African investment group, World of Avatar. It originates from Stellenbosch, a university town in South Africa in the Western Cape. The site is primarily a communication and social tool.

Lacy (2011) statistics demonstrates that Mxit has a user base of over 19 million individuals. It is distributed internationally and has subscribers from over 120 countries, but the bulk of its user-base is South African and Indonesian, with fast growth streaming in from 123 other countries. Languages used are Spanish, French, German and Italian.

Features on the site enable users to make friends, shop, play, explore, send and receive photographs, send and receive one-on-one texts and multi-media messages to and from other users and chat rooms. There are additional benefits for users on the site which include movie clips, music and sport. Additionally, it is a place for users to discover and share nformation (UN Official Mxit site, 2011).

Mxit also means a free instant message (*Ask Dictionary*; 2011).

1.3.1 Common and diverse features on social networking sites

All sites appear to enable users to communicate or converse with friends and family on comment blogs and instant chats, although there are some key differences between them. YouTube for example is a video sharing website that enables registered and non-registered users to view pre-recorded videos. Registered users are able to upload and view pre-recorded videos of friends and those of other users. The videos are visible to registered users and none-registered users who can express their views.

Sites like myspace and facebook, in most cases, enable only registered users to observe and comment on videos and photos which are only visible to limited people, depending on access allowed by other users.

twitter is a micro-blogging site that enables users to pass on instant short messages which is almost similar to Mxit. YouTube and twitter share common features that enable non-registered users to read user tweets online. YouTube enables viewers to read comments given by other users with the difference being that twitter enables its users to While all the sites enable users to establish friendships, the difference in twitter's case is that the users' friends are referred to as followers. The individuals they follow are, most often, prominent figures or celebrities that they regard as friends. It should be noted that followers are also friendships formed amongst ordinary users. But the relationships or friendships are not necessarily reciprocal.

The sites all share a common instability in statics. For example, the number of facebook users increased rapidly in recent years, but the number of myspace users dropped significantly. Whittaker (2011) notes that; as of March 2011, myspace had lost 10 million users. On the other hand, Pachel (2011) suggests that while facebook numbers were on the rise, by June 2011 they had lost 6 million users from the United States. YouTube is a predominantly video sharing social networking site, although users also sign up and make friends. Comments blogs enable users to make comments and express their views on the sites.
Fluctuations in numbers are equally visible on the related sites explored, indicating that they are neither necessarily absolute, nor remaining stagnant, and often vary based on their popularity or un-popularity.

1.4 Justification for the study

For decades studies of socialisation in exotic (alien or foreign) countries had been far more widespread in anthropology than in comparative studies of modern societies. Anthropology has created an understanding of societies that remained outside the technological civilisation of the modern west. In fact, the field of research was at first restricted to those societies that had been given one unsatisfactory label after another: labels like savage, primitive, tribal, traditional, or even preliterate, and prehistoric (*Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, 2009:1).

Over time new trends in anthropological research have emerged: anthropology at home, includes anthropology in the digital age. In recent years scholars expanded their research to current and modern trends, which include social networking sites. This indicates that in the last decade scholarly research has continued to move with the times, and has kept up with new trends or societies, including those that are online. Through the analysis of the researchers across diverse fields of study, it makes those who are unaware aware of the progressive ways in which technology has expanded, and perhaps resulted in, the emergence of new and unique online societies.

The key aim of the study was to calculate the relationships between patterns of socialisation, social organisation and culture in general. However, it should be noted that some anthropologists have studied the possibility of cross-cultural invariants (a function, quantity and property that remains unchanged when a specified transformation is applied), or constants in socialisation, which means a situation or state of affairs that does not change.

This research will contribute immensely to issues which are socially important and relevant to trends in social anthropological research. It will create an awareness of new and unique ways in which individuals communicate and /or converse. The uniqueness in this research lies in understanding the ways in which users across diverse generations utilise current trends and Internet-based forms of communication to interact with friends, make friends, share and show cross-cultures in unprecedented ways, form intimate relationships in the absence of face to face conversations in what then appears—as a result of digital tools—to have resulted in the emergence of new and unique societies in which agency is the norm.

In addition, the research provides a rich source of data which encourages continued debates and research. It further contributes to the advancement of knowledge regarding online ethnographies and social media, and particularly on the social networking sites and the major impact which the sites have on the everyday lives of individuals, regardless of their race, class, culture, generations, gender or geography.

1.4.1 Some of the key reasons why a study on social networking sites was conducted;

- Social networking sites are used, increasingly, by individuals from all generations whose views would be interesting to explore.
- It was important to develop an understanding of why individual users spend such an unprecedented number of hours on the sites and on which they appear to practically live.
- It was intriguing to note that users are also making an unprecedented number of friendships online which from the numbers made offline.
- Social networking sites are widely used by the media, churches, education and various sectors within societies in which they play a major role.

The global impact which the sites appear to have on users worldwide, and on the various sectors within conventional societies which they have attracted, led to the exploration of how they impacted on the users' overall lives.

The Internet has also provided an avenue for parents to get in touch with their children on SNSs. What also contributed to this study on SNSs is the impact which the sites have on the social lives of users. What was equally intriguing was that the sites are the first contact which under-age children have with what could be referred to as unscrupulous adults whose intentions are to harm them.

One disturbing story on myspace, for example, is that of a young girl named Megan Taylor Meyer. This 13 year old teenager suffered from an attention deficit disorder. She had corresponded with Josh for more than a month before he ended their relationship abruptly. She was devastated when he told her that he had learned that she was cruel. After the hurtful comments made by this boy, who had appeared to be her young boyfriend, she committed

suicide (Associated Press, 2007:1). Undeniably, these incidents occur in traditional societies too, however, they seem to be more likely to occur in the absence of face to face communication.

These cases are obviously devastating; particularly for parents whose underage children use the SNSs unguarded. However, parental controls enable them to monitor their children. Additional advantages of this are that they can gain much in terms of education and information about the world. The consequences described here undermine the original aims and objectives of the sites.

1.5 Research questions

Social networking sites are used by individuals across all generations in communicating with one another, making friends and perhaps sharing and/or showing cultural experiences, which possibly result in intimate relationships and the potential creation of new and unique online societies or communities. Some of the key questions that users were asked during the research are given here. Each of the sections under Chapter 5 is indicative of the questions below, which provide user answers or comments. Detailed tools and questionnaires used during the study are attached to the appendixes at the end of the thesis.

1.5.1 Communication

1.5.1 (a) The big question

Social networking sites appear to be one of the key tools employed for communication with family and friends living within short or over long distances. How do they use these tools to communicate with or find old friends and relatives through the various sites?

1.5.1 (b) Intermediate questions

- What are the views of Generation Y users regarding the impact that the SNSs have had on the ways in which they communicate? How has the manner in which they converse online impacted on their everyday language?
- What are the views of Generation X users regarding offline methods of communication in comparison to SNSs?

- What are the perspectives that Generation X users have on conventional methods of communication? How do they compare and contrast with digital tools, and particularly with SNSs?
- What are the views of Baby boomers regarding previous methods through which they predominantly communicated, in comparison to digital tools and particularly SNSs?
- How do seniors view conventional methods of communication from the past, and how do they compare with digital tools, and particularly SNSs? Through which measures have they acquired digital skills? How have SNSs impacted on their lives in general?
- How do users from different generations describe the ways in which the sites have shaped communication?
- What are the perspectives of the users on whether or not the sites have increased or decreased communication between immediate family members in the home and with distant relatives and friends?

1.5.1 (c) Fairly significant questions

- What impact have the sites had on ways in which users express themselves and communicate with family and friends?

1.5.2 Culture

1.5.2 (a) The big question

How have social networking sites enabled users to show or share their culture with friends and vice versa? What aspects of their culture are they willing to share or show to friends? Has cross-cultural interaction resulted in acculturation (the adoption of behavioural patterns of surrounding cultures), or enculturation (the process whereby an established culture teaches an individual, by repetition, its accepted norms and values, so that the individual can become an accepted member of the society and find their role within it. Most importantly, it establishes a context of boundaries and correctness that dictates what is and what is not permissible within that society's framework).

1.5.2 (b) Intermediate questions

- What cultural barriers, if any, have users encountered whilst conversing with friends from diverse backgrounds? How have these been resolved?
- What aspects of their friends' foreign cultures are users willing to learn or explore and/or embrace?
- How do users regard their SNS friends who differ from them ethnically, and what are
- their perspectives on the notion of the significant "other?"

1.5.2 (c) Fairly significant questions

- What impact has online social interaction had on eastern cultural practices and views that appear to have remained stagnant for decades? Or have they gradually been compromised and weakened by the compelling forces of American and European influence?

1.5.3 Friends

1.5.3 (a) The big question

One of the key features of SNSs is the friendship that forms between users, and which has attracted much attention in the media and resulted in discourse amongst scholars. The concept of friendship itself has been thrown into serious question by the whole social networking issue. How do users define the term friendship, and whom do they consider to be their friends? How do users manage or maintain the unprecedented number of friends they have? What are the advantages and/or potential consequences of friendships formed online, compared to those that they form offline? Do users compete for friendships or friendship time in the mix of real and virtual encounters? Are they investing their involvement with values and qualities they do not really offer?

1.5.3 (b) Intermediate questions

- Who are users' friends? How diverse are friends in terms of gender, race, culture and/or ethnicity?

- How genuine are these friendships? Are friends on social networking sites also those with whom users socialise and interact with in traditional society, and how have these friendships impacted on offline friends?
- What is the difference between consulting a friend in the flesh or on the screen?
- Do users have a right to feel annoyed when they are in the presence of friends who spend their social time chatting with others online?
- Why do users talk and act in this manner on and off the sites?

1.5.3 (c) Fairly significant questions

- Friendships often face challenging incidents and sometimes fail. Have there been incidents where friendships have been terminated and/or mended?

1.5.4 Intimate relationships

1.5.4 (a) The big question

How are intimate relationships formed online, and what distinguishes these relationships from those formed in conventional societies? What are the advantages or potential consequences of relationships that are formed online? What are user perspectives regarding intimate relationships that are formed online, particularly in the absence of face to face communication?

It should be noted here that there are sites on the Internet which are geared specifically towards users who are interested in forming intimate relationships. These sites were not included in the research for this paper as the focus was intimate relationships that formed only on the sites mentioned in this document.

1.5.4 (b) Intermediate questions

- Are there any rules or guidelines in terms of time frames in which online relationships should be formed?
- What at the user perspectives of the overall outcomes or results of intimate relationships?

1.5.4 (c) Fairly significant questions

- Who do users choose to form intimate relationships with in terms of culture/ethnicity and or race, age and gender?

1.5.5 Online societies

1.5.5 (a) The Big question

facebook is considered to be equivalent to the biggest country in the world (Monstyn, 2010:1). Have social networking sites perhaps created societies or communities in their own right, with unique social norms? What are some of the key visible features of online societies which resemble or differ from those in traditional societies, and perhaps qualify them to be considered as such?

1.5.5 (b) Intermediate questions

- How do users regard virtual societies in general, and what are their perspectives on the visible features, eg., privacy, addictions, memorials, etc.? How do these impact on their overall social lives?
- What aspects of virtual societies are regarded as similar to or different from those of offline societies which justify the view that these are indeed, or are not, societies or communities in their own right?
- How much time spent online would qualify a user being labeled as practically living in online communities? And, can it perhaps be argued that their constant presence on the sites is indicative of addictive behavior?
- What is the quality of digital social life?

1.5.5 (c) Fairly significant questions

- Have social networking sites created new or unique social norms which are practiced and acceptable only to users?

1.6 Organization of the thesis

Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the study, and defines the concepts of social networking and social networking sites. In addition, the chapter provides an introduction to the sites explored

for this paper, and the research questions which users were asked in the field. The chapter further outlines justifications for the research, and the organisation of the thesis.

Chapter 2 is entitled, and demonstrates, the methods and tools which were used in the research, design and methodology to conduct this research.

Chapter 3 is entitled Literature Review and discusses the literature on scholarly and peer reviewed articles, books and journals relating to the topic at hand. The literature reviewed included scholarly sources on armchair anthropology, the primary method by which this research was conducted. Also described were those articles and journals that that define and discuss social networks and social networking sites, observation and participant observation of those scholars who had conducted their studies on the sites that are related to or fundamentally different from this study. In addition the chapter discusses literature on diverse issues that relate to social networking sites.

Chapter 4 introduces the first chapter on the fieldwork and is entitled *The ways in which social networking sites have shaped communication and enabled users to find the "lost" and "reach the unreachable"***.** The chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the ways in which users from different generations manage to communicate and how they use SNS tools to find old friends and family members and make new friends. Also described is how the views of users were observed and examined, and how they were interviewed. The chapter outlines the fieldwork conducted on each generation respectively, those being Generation Y, Generation X, Baby boomers and Seniors. The chapter further provides a presentation of the impact which online communication has on the friends and families of users, both in traditional society and in online societies.

Chapter 5 is entitled *Shall we dance? Showing and sharing culture on social networking sites,* and discusses ways in which users from diverse ethnic backgrounds manage to share and/or show culture or cultural experience while interacting on SNSs. The term "Shall we dance" is defined in the context in which it is employed in this chapter. The chapter further conveys the ways in which acculturation appears to have emerged. Also discussed is how Generation X and Y users and Baby boomers manage to share and/or show cultural experience through traditional

art, garments and accessories, dishes and social drinks as cultural phenomena, as well as through rituals, and music and dance. In addition, it demonstrates the ways in which users regard their friends' cultures, and vice versa through their own ethnocentric eye.

Furthermore, the question of whether or not enculturation has occurred was explored, together with the subsequent impact that the force of surrounding cultures may have had on users abandoning or rediscovering ancient traditions within their own families. The chapter also describes cultural barriers which users often encounter while interacting or socialising with friends from other ethnic groups. Finally, the chapter discusses whether or not a new online global culture has perhaps emerged in which differences are perhaps irrelevant, reinforced or ignored.

Chapter 6 entitled *An analysis of friendships on social networking sites: who are users' friends, and how do users manage or maintain this unprecedented number of friendships***?** The chapter provides an in-depth analysis on friends. To start with, a list of key words relating to the study is provided. The concept of friendship has come into question as a result of SNSs, therefore it was relevant to understand users' views in this regard, and to discuss the ways in which they define the term. Also provided is an analysis of the number of friends that users have, together with a picture of who their friends really are.

The different types of friendships users choose to make regarding gender, race, age, ethnicity, geographical location and socio-economic background or class are also analysed, as are the users' views on the difference between consulting a friend in the flesh or on the screen. Similarly**,** their perspectives on the advantages or potential consequences of keeping such a substantial number of friends are presented, followed by a discussion on the ways in which they manage and/or maintain friendships. Perspectives on whether or not users invest their involvement in friendships with values and qualities they do not really offer are examined, and a description of their views on how this impacts on friends both on and offline is submitted.

Chapter 7 is entitled *A match made in the clouds? Exploring intimate relationships on social networking sites,* and discusses intimate relationships which users form on social networking

sites. The term cloud is defined in the context in which it is used in the chapter. Also provided is an analysis of qualitative and quantitative findings on intimate relationships formed online, together with a discussion on intimate relationships which are coupled with various consequences. How these impact on affected users is also described in this chapter. The advantages or potential consequences of these relationships and how they impact on users lives in general are demonstrated. Additionally, the chapter describes what the similarities and differences are in comparison to those formed offline, and conveys the ways in which relationships can be terminated via the same medium.

Chapter 8 is entitled *A new country? Have social networking sites resulted in the emergence of new virtual societies, or communities with unique social norms?* The chapter discusses the ways in which social networking sites have potentially created new or unique virtual societies with unconventional social norms. Additionally, it explores the visible online features that are similar or identical to those offline, which reinforce the argument that a big country, or perhaps new societies or communities have emerged with unique social norms. Finally, the chapter demonstrates whether or not the borders which separate or restrict individuals to diverse ethnicities or cultures have, in some way, become superfluous or irrelevant as a result of cross-cultural relations that are formed amongst users online without what seem to be any physical restrictions per se.

Chapter 9 is entitled *Conclusions and findings*, and discusses the summary and findings of the research presented here. Additionally, it describes the overall conclusions and further research which was conducted on the different social networking sites.

Chapter 2 Research design and methodology

2.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the research design and methodology used to conduct the ethnography on social networking sites. In the chapter are conveyed the methods used each day with a description of how multiple hours were spent conducting research. A deep, is provided, as described by Geertz (1973) to be an in-depth description of the days and time spent conducting research on each site, demonstrating where there was interaction with and examination of users as participant observers.

Marion Pearsall (2011) describes participant observation as "a role, a means of getting data, and a methodology of understanding human behavior in a natural context." Or, through viewing or following and analysing comments made exhaustively by what could perhaps be described as an armchair researcher which is defined in the introduction. The first online ethnography is arguably Howard Rheingold's *The Virtual Community* (1993/2000) in which the homesteading metaphor of cyberspace began. However, it should be noted that De Saille (2006) criticises this metaphor.

The majority of this research was conducted primarily online as stated above. However, it should be noted that some scholars share similar views to that of Androutsopolous (2008:3) who discusses the potential and limitations in online ethnography, suggesting that "the value of doing ethnography on the Internet is not only as a research tool but also as a conceptual and methodological breach to other research traditions." He suggests that, "it is safe to say ethnography rather than linguistic." In addition, Androutsopolous advocates that computer mediated communication (CMC) research based on anthropology, sociology, media studies and social psychology draws heavily on ethnography to study the local and situated character of Internet practices to reconstruct the emergence of virtual communities.

To the contrary, and the author shares these views, Dholakia and Zhang (2004:2) affirm that the potential of the Internet as a rich data source and an attractive arena for qualitative research in e-commerce settings or cyber space as a field in the ethnographic sense has not received adequate attention.

The key purpose of conducting the study, as stated in previous chapters, was to observe and/or examine the ways in which Informants, whom I refer to throughout the thesis as either users, facebookers, twitters, Mxiters etc., communicate, show and share culture, make friends or form intimate relationships. In addition the study provides an in-depth analysis on whether or not new or unique societies have emerged in the interim.

The methodology demonstrates two ways in which the study was conducted. Firstly**,** it discusses the people studied, both off and online, while simultaneously describing the overall analysis as a participant observer on the different SNSs. It is imperative to express the value which online ethnographies provide in scholarly research. Online ethnographies overcome some of the disadvantages of traditional ethnography. Beyond the sampling advantages, this method encourages participation amongst users. The online environment, according to Ishmail & Thomas (2006), provides a sense of anonymity and safety which encourages a high level of self-disclosure.

Secondly**,** the methodology presents how each of the SNSs was examined, and describes similar and different approaches taken while each site was explored.

Also outlined is the methodology which was used to examine the views of users through observing and conducting open-ended structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews either online, or through general chats. Interviews were also conducted through discussions in chat rooms. Conducting research online caught the attention of a vast number of scholars who wrote to support or critique online ethnographies. Authors who are in favor of these ethnographies, such as James and Busher (2009:17), suggest that "it is evident that the Internet has the potential to open up a deeper view of life that is derived from real events and feelings as conversations as well as exposing those experiences, which might otherwise not be heard or read about."

While the ethnography was being conducted, also noted were comments on blogs made by users which were related to the study. In addition, questionnaires were handed out both on and offline which helped obtain the opinions of a wider number of users after observing the sites for an

extended period of time, thereby creating a real time, flowing, dynamic stream of information that we, as users and participants, can dip in and out of whether we participate in them or simply observe. We are part of this flow (Malik, 2009).

2.2 Where the fieldwork was conducted

The fieldwork was conducted in Hampton, Virginia in the United States, primarily on the Internet. The SNSs were observed intensely with a view to understanding how social interaction ensues on what appears to be wired, or "weird" online societies which appear to have existed for a period of almost three and a half to four years.

With the advent of computer mediated communication (CMC), ethnographers are pushing the boundaries of fieldwork even further than those conducted offline. Initial forays into the brave virtually constituted world were largely marked by cyber ethnographers who represented online interaction and identity performances as qualitatively different from those taking place in the offline world (Robinson & Schultz, 2009:686). This became evident during the author's own study as a CMC ethnographer, during which it was noted that people are more willing to communicate, share and/or show offline.

When I contemplated my ethnography, the primary purpose was solely to examine the views of users on the key SNSs mentioned above. However, for various reasons which are outlined below, some interviewees preferred to conduct their face to face interviews offline, or to complete questionnaires.

2.3 What it required to access the sites, and the methodology applied to conduct the study

In order to conduct this study it was necessary to establish a firm schedule. Studying the sites required long hours of intense concentration while being embedded in distinct SNS communities or virtual societies. Time was divided equally between each site, where the first hour was spent in observing the site, followed by the carrying out of the actual research. Each site was accessed, observed or examined in its own unique way which is evident in the following sections;

2.3.1. facebook

Facebook requires that each user registers and signs. Attractive features which are immediately visible are that it enables its users to share and connect with individuals that they already know, or knew in the past, and that it promises "Sign up, it's free, and always will be". This is a persuasive factor for any potential user. Once signup is completed it is possible to begin inviting friends immediately. Section 2.4 describes how it is possible to search for and make friends across a diverse demographic of users with whom social interaction is possible. Once the author had acquired a significant number of friends, and was contemplating additional ones, it was possible to begin conducting qualitative research through the Internet on each site respectively. This field is not widely explored by academic researchers, although there has recently been increased interest.

facebook has features which make it easy for one to interact with other users, analyse [what] and make comments on comment blogs which can be made visible to a user's friends. Each user can see and respond to comments made.

For some researchers the beauty of facebook is that it that it allows the study of individuals that it would not be possible to approach with a clipboard on the street. For example, Van Gilder Cooke (2011:1) affirms that Jamie Bartlett, lead author of a recently published report entitled *European Digital Populism* by British think tank Demos, advocates that before, when a researcher tried to approach people from the British National Party, it would be very difficult to identify them. One would have to go through the party without success. Sites like facebook cut them out – you go to them directly. All explored sites seemed to be similar in this respect.

With the Ask Question feature on the facebook site, it is possible to ask questions and receive responses. The chat feature enables chatting with friends who are online at the same time, and facilitates asking one-on-one questions. Chat rooms also allow conversations between users across different sites if they all offer the chat feature. It supports global communication in real time so that messages typed by users are transmitted immediately to the chat room where they can be read by anyone present (Dholkia & Zhang, 2004). Users are then able to respond to questions either via the chat rooms, the lengthier questionnaires, the comment blogs or by email.

Friends suggested that questionnaires were the easiest method of answering, as they could be completed in the user's own time and space.

It was often a requirement that sites be explored very late at night to accommodate the different global time zones in which the researched users resided. These explorations often proved to be most valuable as they allowed the observation of discussions between various users, the posting of responses to those discussions, and to initiate discussions on the topic of this paper. Users often responded to this topic and often enhanced the discussion. The chat features on the various sites were often also observed in these late night sessions, as they often provided the opportunity to ask questions. To that end it could then perhaps be argued that social interaction took place through commenting, asking questions and in responding to the comments, whilst simultaneously observing what is said and done on SNSs in the capacity of a participant observer.

2.3.2 twitter

One of twitter's key features, noticeable upon accessing the site, is a sign reading "follow your interests". Others, like instant updates from friends and industry experts, the ability to follow popular celebrities and to observe events taking place around the world also encourage users to sign up.

A substantial amount of time was spent on twitter observing and reading thousands of tweets sent by users to celebrities or friends, although the primary topic of interest for the author was that covered by this paper, conducting the study for this thesis required many hours spent typing questions on which friends could comment, and searching for answers amongst the user discussions.

Based on the methodology employed to conduct this study on twitter, it could perhaps be concluded that the greater part of the study was conducted as an armchair researcher, but there was also interaction, to a lesser extent, as a participant observer.

2.3.3 Mxit

Looking again at the initial features of attraction, Mxit enables users to chat instantly, shop, play and explore. Studying Mxit took place over the period of a year in South Africa, and allows easy access to groups of people.

The initial study consisted of observation of the discussions and conversations of users. Within days the author posed a few questions which resulted immediately in a major discussion. It is possible to speak to multiple friends simultaneously, and once they had been advised that research was being conducted, many users seemed to be willing to respond to the research questions while only a few remained resistant or skeptical. Merely observing the users from a distance would not have provided insight into the actual realities of how social interaction ensues on sites (Fabian, 1990:3)

It was also possible to send multi-media messages to Mxit users who responded in the same way, and questions could be discussed in chat rooms which resulted in users engaging in debating and expressing their views. Some preferred that research questions be emailed to them,

The participant observer method of research was used to study this site, as it was necessary to take notes of key points while engaging in discussions, and to review chats afterwards in order to make detailed notes.

2.3.4 YouTube

In order to gain an overall view of the social interaction of users on YouTube, and to research the comments made by them, it was necessary to spend many hours viewing pre-recorded videos related to this study. It was also possible to view videos in which scholars had either expressed their views or had presented material on social media and the youth; obviously subjects relevant to this topic. YouTube is also an excellent platform from which to explore differences in culture and to observe which aspects of culture users are willing to share and/or show on the site. Crucial to the study were any issues discussed by these users which might have been related to this topic, as well as viewing videos and analysing comments and responses to the views provided.

2.3.5 myspace

The observation of myspace also required an enormous investment in time, viewing user discussions and posting questions. Again, it was possible to interact with friends whilst simultaneously observing discussions. The available visible features allow observations of users based on their demographics and age groups, and the posting of questions specific to them. myspace originally had a "Groups" feature that allowed a group of users to share a common page and message board. Groups could be created by any of the users, and the moderator of the group had the ability to approve the request of another user to join the group, or deny it. Researchers appear to have the advantage of being able to decide which group or groups they want to join, interact with or post questions and comments to which might be relevant to the study. It was possible to chat with friends who were online and simultaneously post questions to them. Both features were discontinued in November 2010, and were replaced with advertisements and promotions of CDs and DVDs which users could either listen to online, or purchase offline. This was as a result of a significant drop in the number of users and their emigration to facebook and other sites.

myspace has a comment blog on which friends interact and share, which is similar to the one on facebook. Through this feature, it is possible to either make a comment or post a question which users respond to. During the study of myspace there were many changes that were taking place on the site which also affected the way that the study was conducted.

Changes to the site allowed users to load videos in a similar fashion to YouTube. It was possible to follow discourses related to this study, and to view what users were willing to share. Much time was spent observing and recording comments made by users, together with feedback that they provided on the questionnaires or surveys posted by the author.

Each site has its own unique features, thus necessitating that each methodology be structured accordingly.

2. 4 The methodology applied to find Informants and the demographic of users whose views were explored

Finding Informants, friends, followers or twitters on twitter, or facebookers on facebook requires a markedly increased presence on the different sites. In addition to those already listed on the author's email it was necessary to invite and make new friends with whom social interaction became possible, and which simultaneously increased the number of Informants whose views were available for research. Moabi (1976:30) suggests that in sub-culture tradition the individual must identify himself with the delinquent group to which he or she belongs, and must also adhere and conform to its values and norms. This is similar to what takes place on the various sites where users appear to identify themselves perhaps as facebookers, twitters, etc.

Informants were also found through friends who introduced the authors to hundreds, and in some cases thousands, of their own friends who were listed on their profile rolls.

Considering the spread of global users, sites like Friend Search, Find a Friend and Follow a Friend were invaluable in widening the Informant base even further, thereby increasing access to user feedback. These sites enable users to search for individuals known from schools or churches, or even those residing within their own communities. Friendships with Informants became very important as it was necessary to be able to see users as themselves without any performance or act in order to be able to obtain genuine perspectives regarding their overall social interaction online. Therefore, only once trust had been established between the friend and the Informant was the Informant made aware of the intention to conduct research. (Bernard (2006:443) suggests that anthropologists use passive deception all the time.

The perspectives of users on facebook, myspace, twitter, YouTube and Mxit were then examined through open-ended, semi-structured and unstructured interviews, and it was apparent that many users were eager to express their views regarding SNSs.

2.4.1 Specific features on the different sites which enable users to find and make friends

It should be noted that online content differs according to where it is found:

facebook – The Adding Friends feature and the Find Request feature were both used on facebook**.**

Mxit **–** Users are able to add contacts and to select groups to which they want to belong. It is also possible to search for friends by name, email or phone number, or through uploading a phone book which enables them to find friends automatically. Additional features were added in 2011 to ensure that users connect to their best mate.

twitter – Friends are found through a search box and through browsing lists of accounts that have similar interests, as well as through a view all link.

myspace – A browse link through which users can sort, sift and filter to find friends is provided.

YouTube – Whilst YouTube has a Find Friend function, the site was observed primarily for its social interaction, and the perspectives of users were analysed through examining the comment blogs on which they express their views.

It should be noted that all of these sites have additional features through which users can access music, product, books, etc.

2.4.2 The demographic of Informants observed and studied

During the study it was essential to examine who the respondents were. It was imperative to furnish a sample of the questionnaires (supplied in the appendixes) in order to provide an illustration of the questions they were asked.

The questions feature throughout the thesis, but they will be repeated the first time wording is discussed in the text. Each heading or subheading in the thesis comprises of the questions which Informants were asked in the "field."

2.4.3 Who were the respondents and what were they asked?

Figure 6 shows that users are from diverse generations, the collective name by which they are commonly referred to, and the age brackets under which they fall. These terms are used

throughout the thesis. It should be noted though that different authors and scholars provide different statistics of the age brackets under which generations fall, all relative to the purposes of their studies.

Generation	Common Reference	Age brackets they fall under
Generation Y	Millenniums, Digital Natives	18 to 29 years
Generation X	Digital Wise	30 to 49 years
Baby Boomers	Boomers	50 to 64 years
Seniors	No Common Term	65 and older

Figure 7 The demographic of users, whom they are generally referred to, and the age brackets they likely fall under

For example Matz-Costa and Besen (2009) provide the following statistics to define the different generations: Millenials/Generation Y: 26 or younger; Generation X: 27 – 42, Baby boomers: 43 – 61, and Seniors or Traditionalist (as they are referred to): 62 and older. It should be noted, however, that there does not appear to be much consensus between media and amongst scholars with regard to the age brackets between which the different generations fit.

An analysis describing the various methods by which differing generations communicate and search for lost and or unreachable persons is given in Chapter 5.

One of the key factors regarding communication on the SNSs obviously revolved around the perspectives of Generation X and Y users, the Baby boomers and Seniors.

1. Generation X and Y users were explored primarily with regard to culture.
2. Generation Y views were studied with regard to friends.
3. Generation X and Y users were again studied for their views on intimate relationships.
4. Questions on whether or not SNSs have resulted in the emergence of either new online countries or societies, and questions relating to visible features on virtual societies which are either similar to or can be compared with those in traditional societies were posed to all users.

5. In order to provide an overall analysis across all users open-ended, semi-structured and unstructured interviews, one-on-one chats, and chats in chat rooms across the various sites were conducted**.**

2.5 Fieldwork conducted offline and the reasons why Informants preferred this method

Although the intention was originally to conduct the ethnography primarily online, it was necessary in some cases to conduct face to face interviews with seniors in South Africa and in the United States.

Face to face interviews were conducted with over 500 seniors who are users on the various sites, and preferred this method. The interviews were often detail-orientated and occurred between breaks. The interviews were recorded using a tape recorder and notes on key points. In some cases younger Informants assisted by interviewing their grandparents. In most cases they made copies of their own questionnaires which they handed out to friends and used to interview their grandparents.

Some Generation Y users felt more at ease answering questions verbally rather than online. It was noted that although they spend much time socialising with friends and family online, they generally preferred to complete questionnaires offline so that they could remain anonymous.

Almost 1 000 paper questionnaires were handed out, and they reached about 4 500 Informants across diverse generations and SNSs. The vast majority of the questionnaires were completed by Generation Y users at a large South African cooperation where employees are restricted from using company resources to access the Internet for personal use. They generally preferred filling out paper questionnaires during their lunch breaks or after hours.

Users also preferred filling out questionnaires because; 1) This method did not intrude on their chatting or texting with friends online. It was evident that one of their concerns was that news aged quickly, and they felt they had to keep up; 2) that this method was much slower, and 3) they preferred to provide detailed answers in their own time and space.

The numbers of completed and returned questionnaires increased rapidly over time. As is the nature of SNSs friends pass on information to friends, and so on, and this research followed the same method. Friends printed out multiple copies which they handed to more friends, and so the cycle continued.

Demographic	Interview Method	Number of Informants	Percentage of informants in the demographic	Percentage of total informants
Seniors	Paper Questionnaires	300	30	37%
	Face to Face	500	50	61.7%
	Other	10	1	12.3%
Total				**100%**
Generation-Y	Paper Questionnaires	3000	300	73.3%
Generation-Y users	Surveys	1000	100	24.5%
	Other	90	9	2.2%
Total				**100%**

Figure 8 Number of users preferring paper questionnaires or surveys, and those with whom face to face interviews were conducted

2.7 Sources searched for on the Internet

The Internet is extremely useful when searching for books, scholarly journals, peer reviewed articles, etc. Different authors' perspectives on the Internet and social networking sites were also gleaned from such publications as *TIME Magazine, The Economist, National Geographic, Newsweek* and the *Scientific American*.

2.8 Current news and developments on social networking sites

These rapid changes were primarily as a result of Internet content which changes incredibly quickly. Every few years the Internet grows larger and better. Publishing tools improve and people share more content online. Towards the end of the last century digital content had started to grow exponentially. In the 21st century we are seeing changes in people's behavior regarding how content is shared online. This is as a result of three reasons; 1) The transition from mere interactivity to a more dynamic real time web; 2) The complete disaggregation of the web in parallel with the slow decline of the destination web, and 3) More and more people are publishing more and more social objects and sharing them online. A data deluge is creating a new kind of search opportunity (Malik; 2009:1)

2.9 Conclusion

In conclusion, the primary intention of this study was to analyse how users from diverse generations communicate, contact old friends and make new ones, find lost relatives, show and/or share culture, form intimate relationships and live their social lives in what appear to be the emergence of virtual countries, societies and communities in which unique social norms seems to have emerged. An additional objective was to improve understanding on how individuals interact with one another, and reveal what motivates them to act or behave in the ways that they do both on and offline.

Chapter 3 Literature Review

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents some of the literature reviewed while conducting this study on facebook, twitter, myspace, YouTube and Mxit. The literature reviewed includes books, journals and articles written by various scholars both in social and related sciences. In order to keep abreast of the rapid advances in social networking sites (SNSs), it was necessary to subscribe to magazines which included *TIME Magazine, The Economist, Scientific American,* and *National Geographic.* Online newspaper articles via the *BBC Online*, the *Mail & Guardian*, *The New York Times* and related material in which authors had presented their own unique analysis of diverse issues on SNSs were also reviewed.

Literature drawn from authors who defined the concepts that have been presented in this thesis is also submitted here, as are articles written by scholars who detail their own analyses on the diverse methods in which academic and, particularly, anthropological research is being conducted. This includes participant observation, interviewing, sampling and, specifically, "armchair anthropology" which appears to have re-emerged in the 21st century.

Furthermore, literature and pre-recorded videos relating to this study are presented. Also provided is an analysis of the limitations of the research conducted in order to provide the users' overall perspectives on the ways in which the sites have impacted on the methods in which users communicate, share and/or show culture, make friends, and form intimate relationships. The question of whether or not the sites have resulted in the emergence of new and or unique societies, communities or perhaps new countries is also explored.

3.2 Literature reviewed

3.2.1 Books, journals and articles of authors that define concepts and the methodology in research both on and offline

The *Encyclopedia Britannica* (2011) was essential in defining the concept of social networking sites. It defines SNSs as "websites that provide virtual communities for people to share their

daily activities with family and friends, or to share their interests in a particular topic, or to increase their circle of acquaintances. There are sites, dating sites and sites with business purposes and hybrids that offer a combination of these. Globally, hundreds of millions of people have joined one or more sites."

Tyson (2011:1) suggests in *Social Media and Networking, A Glimpse to High-Tech World Press Theme* how SNSs enable users to communicate with others in order to survive in this high-tech world. Similarly, he suggests that social gatherings are an important part of life, as they enable users to converse with each other when they find a common interest. Boyed, D.M. & Ellison, N.B. (2007) *Social Network Sites, Definition, History and Scholarship, School of Information***,** in which they define social networks as web-based services that enable users 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. In addition they describe that the nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site.

Scott (1992:1) suggests in *Social Network Analysis*, and Ulrike Gretzel, *Social Network Analysis, Introduction and Resources* that social network analysis has emerged as a set of methods for analysing social structures which are specifically geared towards an investigation of the relational aspects of these structures. The use of these methods depends on the availability of relational, rather than attributed data.

Shah's (2009:10) article *The Psychology and Anthropology of Social Networking* defines social networking, and describes how academics and commentators have understandably become interested in social networks and their impact on society. In the article he describes his interview with Dunbar, and questioned why people are interested in SNSs.

Danny L. Jorgensen 2009 in his book *Participant Observation, A Methodology for Human Studies***,** suggests that by constantly seeking an awareness of their personal and professional interests in human life and making explicit the actual procedures used to produce factual

information, participant observers confront the issue of truthful results directly and publicly. Participant observation likewise seeks constantly to bring about the awareness on the rights of the people whose lives are studied and the consequences of research for these people and their way of life.

Evans (2011) describes how in anthropology participant observation is organised to produce a kind of writing called ethnography. It can be applied or academic in nature. The key principle in this methodology is that one may not merely observe, but must find a role within the group in which to participate in some manner, even if only as an outside observer. Overt participant-observation, therefore, is limited in the context where the community understands and permits it.

It was imperative to review Prof John Wolford's (2002) Journal Anthropology 11, *Introduction to Cultural Anthropology*, particularly Chapter 4 entitled *Language and Communication* in which he defines language as the system of communication using sounds or gestures put together in meaningful ways according to a set of rules. These were particularly noticed in this study in instances where face to face interviews were conducted with seniors. In support of what became visible on the various sites explored were the words through which users expressed themselves while communicating with friends or answering the research questions.

Defining the term culture was imperative for the purposes of this study. In his article *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Clifford Geertz (1973) writes that culture is "an ordered system of meaning and of symbols in terms of which social interaction takes place." This article was particularly important to review and was ideal for chapter 5 of the thesis in which is described observations of the users' perspectives regarding the ways in which they share/and or show culture while interacting cross-culturally with users from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

An equally important article to review is that of Bruce, M. Tharp (2009) *Defining Culture and Organizational Culture: From Anthropology to the Office*, in which he argues what the term culture really means. He advocates that "a fixed universal understanding does not exist", and that

"there is little consensus within, let alone, across disciplines". Tharp suggests that "often culture is applied so broadly, merely as a social pattern that it means very little."

Androutopolous' (2008) article *Potentials and Limitations of Discourse* was critical in reviewing online ethnography, particularly since it had become a major method of research in the ways in which academic research is conducted and the arguments on what the shortcomings are. In his article Doring (2003:174-175) is quoted as saying in the author's translation that "the reason ethnographic observation is so important to Internet research is that it helps to describe larger social formations such as specific mailing lists, news groups, chat channels and multi-user domains (MUDs) holistically in their own structures and processes from the participants perspective." Participant observation was a critical methodology in studying users' overall social interactions in what appear to be virtual, wired or "weird," societies on which they spend a substantial amount of time and in which they seem to live.

Stanley Wasserman S. and Katherine Faust's (1994) article *Social Network Analysis* was vital in this study. The authors' assertions that "based on an assumption of the importance of relationships among interacting units, the social network perspective encompasses theories, models, and applications which are expressed in terms of relational concepts and processes." They suggest that the increased use of network analysis is coupled with central principles underlying the network perspective in addition to the use of the following relational concepts: "Actors and their actions are viewed as interdependent rather than independent, autonomous units. Relational ties (linkages) between actors are channels for transfer or flow of resources (either material or nonmaterial). Network models focusing on individuals who view the network structural environment as providing opportunities for or constraints on individual action and network models conceptualise structure (social, economic, political and so forth) as lasting patterns of relations among actors."

Dhlokia and Zhang's (2004) perspectives were essential for exploring online ethnographies in their journal *Online Qualitative Research in the Age of E-Commerce Data Source and Approaches,* describe how Netnography, a term coined by Kozinets (2004) and representing online ethnography, is based primarily on the observation of textual discourse observable on the

Internet. This approach differs from in-person ethnography in that in ethnography there is no balancing discourse and observed behavior that occurs during in-person ethnography. This was more often the case on sites like YouTube and twitter where textual discourse was primarily observed.

Research for this paper contained fieldwork which was conducted as a cyber ethnographer. Hence, it was essential to review Robinson and Schultz's (2009) book, *New Avenues for Sociological Enquiry, Evolving Forms of Ethnographic Practice*. The book describes the authors' views that since the 1990s the ethnographic study of online communication and virtual communities has constituted its object of study and its method in different ways, as the Internet itself has been continually reshaped by different user populations, field sites and interactive possibilities. In addition, they detail different phases in the growth of cyber ethnographic inquiry which is organised under approaches that they identify as pioneering, legitimising and multi-model. This highlights the importance of cyber ethnography as the result of an unprecedented number of individuals who seem to communicate and perhaps live and engage in online social interaction.

3.3 Research conducted prior to this study

Toren's (2009:1) article *Social Networking Sites Attract Older Generations Too! Young entrepreneur, Small Business, Big Vision* identifies the number of Baby boomers who make use of the Internet and social networking sites. In the article, Toren suggests that although it appears that the vast majority of Generation Y individuals use the sites, users across all generations make use of the SNSs.

Lev Grossman (2009:94) states in his article *Why Facebook Is for Old Fogies* that the site was designed for college kids, but that it took legions of people their parents' age to fulfill its ultimate destiny. Grossman reiterates that facebook is a relatively young site and demonstrates how old people argue that the site has found its "fullest richest expression with them, the middle-aged." One of the points of the article, is that facebook is about finding people with whom individuals have lost contact, but whom they can happily friend, foregoing any ill-will that may have existed in the past. He asserts that when users re-establish contact with old enemies "they are no longer

bitter about high school" and, "are bigger than that". He describes how middle-aged users represent themselves in comparison to their younger counterparts, but suggests that oldies "never get drunk at parties and get photographed holding beer bottles in suggestive positions." He asserts that they wish they did, but they don't. For them facebook is not just a social network; it's a business network. Older users make important comments on why they do not use twitter as a key form of communication.

Rory Cellan-Jones' (2010) documentary entitled *Unplugged: Living without the media*, follows the difficulties that students face when attempting to survive without the media, the Internet and a mobile phone for 24 hours. Some students claimed that "it's been akin to torture." The students were taking part in a global experiment called "Unplugged" which was designed to examine the relationships that young people now have with the media. The experiment intended to establish the impact on certain individuals when television, radio, the web, and mobile phones are removed. According to Cellan-Jones, when students were again given access to digital tools the first thing they did was reach for a "laptop, phone or check out facebook."

An article written for the BBC Online Newspaper (2011) entitled *Many Under-13's Using Facebook* provides information on the number of underage children who use social networking sites. It indicates that almost half of Britain's children, aged between 9 and 12 maintain a social networking profile despite the EU Kids Online rules which stipulate that children must be 13 years and older. The report indicates that such requirements would make it easier to monitor online behavior. Kidscape, a charity working towards anti-bullying and child protection, criticised the idea and argues that "it would lead to more cyber-bullying." The article also mentions a study conducted by the London School of Economics for the European Commission in which a survey was based on 25 000 young people across Europe between the ages of 9 to 16. When underage users were asked if they maintained a social networking profile, the researchers found that in the UK 43% of children aged between 9 and 12 answered yes, along with 88% of 16 year olds. The Netherlands had the highest figure of 70%. Across Europe the figure amounted to 38%. Report author Elizabeth Starksrud from the University of Osrod told the BBC "that it was inevitable children would be drawn to sites such as facebook." And she asserts that; "when you are 12 you want to be where your friends are."

Perhaps it should be noted here that the primary—although not exclusive—focus of this study was on users aged 18 years and older, although some examples do refer to younger users.

Curtin University of Technology printed an article called *Online Conference on Networks and Communities***.** In the article Cumming (2010) asserts that SNSs like facebook and myspace started influencing the way teenagers and adults communicate in their real world societies since their inception. Additionally, he suggests that of the almost 400 million users on facebook, over a quarter of those access the sites through their mobile devices, which he suggests draws attention to the increasing access of SNSs on mobile phones (facebook Statistics; 2010). According to Biddle (2008:1) who wrote an article in the *Scientific American*, *Digital Diet***,** *Computing Industry Gets Serious About Energy Conservation*, saying that "people are strangers and the amount of communication just explodes in your body as a result of the amount of people they meet and talk to.' He also asserts that; "there is no fear of personal interaction."

An article in *The Economist* (2010), called *Analysing the Web*, March 13 – 19, on Blog Mining, describes that the Web can be mined to track information about emerging trends and behaviours, covering everything from drug use or racial tension to interest in films or new products. The nature of blogging means that people are quick to comment on events in their daily lives. Mining this sort of data might therefore also reveal information about exactly how ideas spread and how trends are set. The article was significant to this study, and related particularly to some aspects covered in Chapter 8 which describes visible features on SNSs that are similar to those in traditional societies, and perhaps indicate that new online societies or communities have emerged with unique social norms.

Robyn Dunbar's analysis entitled *How Many Friends Does One Person Need?* appeared in Dunbar's *Number and Other Evolutionary Quirks* (2010), and ties in with Chapter 6 on Friends or Friendships. Primatologists label at least some of the things that happen on social networks as "grooming." What is important to note is several years ago Robin Dunbar asserted that the cognitive power of the brain limits the size of the social network that an individual of any given species can develop. Extrapolating from the brain size and social networks of apes, Dr Dunbar

suggested that "the size of the human brain allows stable social networks of about 148 individuals", which rounded to up to 150 has become known as the "Dunbar number."

It appears that many institutions ranging from Neolithic villages to the maniples of the Roman army seem to be organised around the Dunbar number. In the villages it could be that, as is similar in small towns, everybody knows everybody else. Such groups can run efficiently with a minimum of bureaucracy.

It appears, though, that Dunbar's hypothesis could be disputed because statistics from anthropologists like Russell Bernard and Peter Killworths submit that a number almost double Dunbar's can remain stable for the upper limit of human groups. The number of friendships users consider to be a stable network disproves Dunbar's arguments as their numbers significantly surpass his, and are more in line with Barnard and Killworths' submissions.

The Economist conducted an interview with Cameron Louw (2010), the in-house sociologist at facebook, in which she was asked to "crunch some numbers on the number of friends users have." She found that the average number of friends in a facebook network is 120, consistent with Dr Dunbar's hypothesis. In the interview Louw suggests that the number of friends women have supersedes that of men, and also that some people have networks numbering more than 500. The article was integral to comparing the analysis for this study, however, this study and Louw's arguments differ in that users interviewed for this paper claimed that they had a base of between 250 and 1 000 individual friends, i.e., excluding networks. Thus, raising the question of how this unprecedented number of friends is managed and maintained.

There is, more often than not, conflict in societies, and often across all hierarchies. Virtual societies are no different in this regard. Ben Mezrich (2009:72), published an article in *The Economist* entitled *Friends and Foes?* describing how conflict can begin at any level of relationship and illustrates this by outlining how facebook co-founders found themselves in conflict situations. He also demonstrates how their early success impacted on their lifestyles and dented their relationships.

Rebekah (2010), a post graduate student at the University of Tennessee conducted a project on facebook friends which she called *Is the Relationship Really Beneficial?* In her study she advocates that 84% of facebook users admit to being annoyed by their friends on the site. She describes the impact of the comments posted by users online, and asserts that the number of friends they make could be nothing more than a case of "friends overload." However, it is also true that individual's who have only one or two friends can also find themselves in conflicting situations. Her argument on "friends overload' does not resonate with the users examined for this paper.

Delaney and Kaspin's book (2011), *Investigating Culture: An Experiential Introduction to Anthropology*, was integral to gaining insight into culture—a key aspect explored in this study—concerning the ways in which users share and/or show culture on SNSs. In addition, the authors discuss cultural relativism, traditional dishes, and dress and food. The authors' views relate to submissions offered here in Chapter 5 of this thesis, and relate to the ways in which users display their various traditional garments for friends to see. The authors submit that "clothing does more than cover the body; it is also a cultural index of age, gender, occupation and class." They argue that it is then true that clothing makes the man.

The ways in which users from diverse generations communicate is discussed, hence, it was necessary to review authors' books, journals and articles that are related.

Wallace Chigona (2009), and his colleagues from the Department of Information Systems University of Cape Town, conducted a study entitled *Mxit Users Perceptions and Self Justification*. The study found that "the youth uses the system mainly for social networking, and that to most users the system is more than a communication tool: it is also part of their lives." Perhaps it could also be argued that, based on their overall online social interaction, they actually live in these societies. A comparative analysis between on and offline features was essential to indicate that users perhaps do, which could then reinforce the argument made that the social lives of users are based or occur online.

In her article *Engineering: Worldwide ebb, The International Weekly Journal of Science*, Moses (2009) conveys that over the past decade, complex network theories have begun to describe the structural features of networks. Moses demonstrates that in most social networks many people have only a few connections, whereas a small number of individuals are connected to an extraordinarily large scope of individuals. She suggests that connections are clustered; for example, we tend to know many of our friends' and colleagues' acquaintances, but are less likely to know people in diverse fields of study or social groups. This claim contradicts the findings of the author of this paper, which are that more users have a substantial number of friends, with only a few appearing to keep their friendships to a minimum of 100 or lower. It is only in exceptional cases that users have friends numbering below 40.

Also from the observations and study of the author, friends hardly ever choose friends based on their fields of study except in cases of sites like Linked-In. Perhaps the specificity of a particular generation or reference to offline could perhaps validate Moses' argument.

In her article *Their Love Has the Same Name*, Smiths (2009) describes how a couple met on facebook. Kelly Hilderbrandt searched the Internet in an attempt to see if any other person had the same name and surname as she did. Surprisingly, only one other individual, a male, did. She describes how their relationship was formed, and how they eventually got engaged. The couple married shortly thereafter, although they only knew each other for a few months. This is an indication that intimate relationships can be formed on SNSs in the absence of face to face communication. The forming of intimate relationships on various sites was one of the central focuses of this study.

In Lina Lofaro's article *facebook and Divorce* in *TIME Magazine* (2009: 93), Lofaro suggests that "social networking sites are great for when you want to connect but what about when you split?" She asserts that "for those who want to connect or reconnect with others, social-networking sites are a huge, glorious honey pot. But for those who are disconnecting, they can make things quite sticky." Similarly, she advocates that as the ages of online social-network users creep up, they overlap more with the age of divorce-lawyer users, resulting in the kind of public "laundry-airing" that can turn aggrieved spouses into enraged ones, and friends into

embarrassing spectators. She reiterates that "half the fun on social networking sites is the posting of personal news. The other half is the posting of personal opinion, something spurned spouses typically have in spades." This study highlights the views of users regarding the impact that sites have on intimate relationships, and reveals how they are formed, and the reasons why some of them end.

How Social Networking Sites Affect Relationships **(**Manuel; 2010). Manuel asserts that "in some cases one couple is online and the other is generally offline. Some of the questions raised were, would you ask your partner to delete photos/albums of his or her exes? Why would that be important to you? Is it important for partners to update their profiles? Why is it important to update?

Although some online relationships seem to be successful, particularly those of couples who argue that the SNSs are healthy for their relationships because they enable them to keep in touch constantly, other findings suggest that relationships have ended as a result of SNSs. Elizabeth Ann Persimmons (2009) affirms this in her article, *Five Ways facebook Destroys Relationships* in which she suggests that facebook is good for staying in touch with family and friends, but bad for relationships. She outlines the following reasons that support her argument; 1) You can filter, but it's not really an option to filter your significant other; 2) It is very easy for people to be jealous or weird on facebook; 3) facebook has a relationship status, one that tells everyone when you make changes; 4) People post their relationship fights on facebook through speaking indirectly about their significant other, and 5) They allow for cheesy, romantic posts.

During the compilation of this paper, it was necessary to establish the impact which user cultures have on SNSs, and whether or not SNSs have created new online cultures to which users conform. According to Dunkens and Franburg (2011) in their article *Youth Culture and Net Culture: Online Social Practices*, it is suggested that "globalization of our society has changed the social culture of young people forever in this day and age." The article aims to explore complex relationships between the cultures of technology and youth, while it outlines social activities and generational aspects of online social practices, and gender and social class.

One of the key features in society is education, and this appears not to be any different on social networking sites. The SNSs play a major role in the ways in which users acquire education. However, in some instances the manner in which individuals interact on the sites results in some restrictions being placed on what educators, for example, allow to be posted online. According to Jean McKenzie's article entitled *Schools Need Rules for Teachers on Facebook, Union Says (2011),* the National Association of Head Teachers suggests that teachers are experiencing problems by using facebook, and that schools should have clear guidelines on what is acceptable. Personal issues that teachers post online appear to have an impact on the way they are regarded by their pupils to whom they are often role models, and by whom they are often imitated. In every society older individuals often set precedents that younger individuals tend to follow. This pattern seems to also occur online.

In his article *facebook Population Equivalent to World's Third Biggest Country in the World,* which was imperative to review, Mostern (2010), asserts that facebook has bolstered its own position as the world leading social network by officially announcing it has more than 500 million active users. Censuses are always conducted in traditional societies to determine the number of individuals in a country, society, and on earth (which recently reached 7 billion according to 2011 statistics). This could be regarded as a key feature in virtual societies which are similar to those offline.

The reality is that Internet SNSs increase communication amongst individuals across diverse cultural backgrounds globally, and increase the number of friendships ordinarily encountered. Goldenberg & Levy (2009:77) contradict this argument. They suggest that the Internet was supposed to create a global village which could be compared to acquiring friends in one's own street: individuals make friends on these global platforms, which are perhaps societies in their own right. Users make friends cross-culturally and across societies or countries despite their ethnicity.

Adrian Pierces' (2011) article in the BBC entitled *myspace Loses Millions of Users in a Few Weeks* was crucial in establishing that new SNSs which emerge result in a decrease of users on other sites. The article is particularly appropriate for the final chapter of this paper in that it

indicates that as a result of the emergence of new societies or communities, some users tend to migrate from one site to another. This bears a similarity to individuals who migrate from one society to another or from one country to another in the real world in order to seek better opportunities or a more peaceful existence. The arrival of facebook also influenced the decrease in users, and changed the face of social networking. According to Pierce "five years ago myspace was booming, and for many it was the first place for users to talk to friends or listen to music." The article confirmed the author's own analysis relating to traditional societies which indicates that users often move from one country or state or community to another for various reasons.

Social Norms, Crowd Funding, Kristina Dell's article in *TIME Magazine* (2008:51) describes the ways in which a student made use of the internet to raise funds to pay for his tuition. Approximately 2 000 people responded via email, making several contributions in the hopes of receiving a piece of his graduation hat. Raising funds online appears to have become a much exploited activity which is a common tool in most offline societies.

In the *Economist* (2009:86), Jefferson Duarte of Rice University discusses his research on Physiognomy and Economics. He states that in the past if someone wanted to borrow money, he had to visit a bank because it was important for the bankers to see the face of the applicant. It seems that a person's credit worthiness can be judged by their appearance. As a result of the Internet it is now possible to do business directly with a stranger by using a peer-to-peer lending site. This article is important because it outlines the impact that SNSs have on users' social lives.

Bonnie Rochman (2009:51-52), wrote in her article *Religion and twittering* in *TIME Magazine* that Pastor David Mc Donald encourages tweeting at his church in Jackson, Michigan. She suggests that there is a time and place for technology and that most congregations feel that that time is not at morning mass.

However, there is a small growing number of churches around the country which follow John Voelz's lead in encouraging worshippers to integrate text-messaging into their relationship with God. There were, however, a few objections in which it was argued that twittering in church is

"kind of dumb." Some feel differently and argue that twitter's "haiku-like banter has helped them to meet lots of people in a 900 member congregation".

Pastors from other churches constantly email Voelz for guidance on how to launch twitter in their churches. The article highlights the extent to which social networking sites have impacted on almost every sector of offline society, and have even become worshipping platforms for some. Through the sites individuals can seek religious affiliations or communicate with their members.

Lev Grossman writes to the contrary in *TIME* (2009:50) in his article *Why twitter Should be Quitted?* He defines the term twitter and relates its practical use. He stipulates that when twitter was launched in 2006, "it was like a relic from the Jurassic period of the dotcom start-ups, when you could get funding for anything." He questions whether a service that seemed to be designed specifically for providing its users with incessant interruptions, empty of almost any meaning or importance, could really succeed. He states that "my powers of concentration, never formidable, are deteriorating, and I always have one eye on famous writers' twitter feed, waiting for the interruption that will distract me from my own, non-famous existence." The article seems to differ largely from the views of many younger users who seem to find the site useful and prefer it to alternative sites.

Grossman describes what could be defined as addictive behavior on the sites. The issue on privacy resulted in major debates and united users who expressed their views via instant messaging on sites like twitter. Protests are organised in similar ways.

Glen Chapman's (2009:1) article on twitter, *Stream Breaks Iran News Dam* describes the critical role which twitter played in organising porters in Iran "for the battle cries and to spread word about the clashes with police and hard-line supporters of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad." Chapman outlines how twitter became a tool which enables users to engage in political discourse through posting messages on the micro-blogging service. Some links to pictures streamed from Iran, despite reported efforts by authorities there to prevent news of protests over Ahmadinejad's

claim of having been fairly re-elected. This also indicates how users sharing common views debate issues and express their views online.

Steven Johnson's article (2010), *How twitter will Change the Way We Live (in140 characters or less)* in *TIME Magazine*, is quite the opposite of what Grossman advocates in his article *Why twitter Should Be Quitted*. In Johnson's article he discusses "how once just a whimsy, twitter is evolving into a powerful form of communication." However, he does question what twitter's growth says about the future of American innovation.

facebook memorialised its deceased users. Max Kelly's (2009) article, *Memories of Friends Departed Endures on facebook* was important with regard to Chapter 8 of the thesis which explored whether or not social networking sites have resulted in the emergence of new online societies or communities.

Anita Hamilton's' article in *TIME Magazine* (2009:67) was influential in this paper. In her article, *TECHNOLOGY: Outsmart Your Haters*, Hamilton comments on Tricia Walsh-Smith who "posted the first three Web videos in which she attacked a soon to be ex-husband for everything from his alleged personal shortcomings to what she couldn't stand about his family." The videos were viewed 1 million times on YouTube.

The speed at which news is circulated on SNSs perhaps reinforces its societal status. These videos appear to reflect a growing trend: unbridled online attacks are wreaking havoc on people's reputations. Although these attributes were dismissed as the "ranting of random hecklers", negative comments on the Web are being taken more seriously these days. Hamilton also explored ways in which offending material could be removed through hiring firms that specialise in online-reputation management by re-crafting Web images altogether.

Although the Internet is a major tool which provides access to social-networking websites and enables users to partake in various activities which include online shopping, it is coupled with major consequences that impact severely on the lives of under age children and vulnerable individuals who seek intimate relationships. In *TIME Magazine* (2009:49) an article written on

China's Internet censors, *Protecting China's Innocent from Smut, Violence and the Dalai Lama,* states that the Chinese government believes that the Internet is saturated with content that they disapprove of, and recently stipulated that every computer sold in China must be sold with filtering software called Green Dam Youth Escort which must be pre-loaded or supplied on a disk for users to install. This requirement has resulted in an uproar. The article is also critical about relationships formed which are detrimental to younger users.

Rowse's (2008:1) article entitled *9 Benefits of twitter Bloggers* lists the 9 benefits that individual bloggers who the use site will have.

3.4 Limitations in the research conducted by authors on social networking sites

The authors listed above provide their own analyses on the different ways in which social networking sites impact users. Although the articles reviewed contributed enormously towards an understanding of the roles played by SNSs in social interaction, it is apparent that there are still some gaps in information regarding the overall interaction of users on the various sites, and on their social lives in general. The intention of this paper was to fill those gaps. Some of the subjects explored required more in-depth analysis on the following:

- A comparative analysis on the roles played by the SNSs in enabling individuals from different generations to communicate, search for and finds lost family and friends.
- An in-depth analysis on the ways in which user's share and show culture, and an exploration on whether or not acculturation and enculturation have perhaps ensued through cross-cultural interaction amongst users from diverse ethnic groups.
- Further to the point above, an analysis to determine whether or not any original cultures have been replaced by the new ones that have emerged.
- The term "friend" has become very loosely used which has resulted in much controversy. An analysis of who the "friends" really are, who do users consider to be a friend and how they manage and/or maintain substantial numbers of friendships.
- Users own perspectives on how they define the term friend or friends.
- Generation Y users are often considered to be obsessed with or addicted to SNSs. The angles that have perhaps not been explored in their entirety are firstly, those in which the possibility exists that these are societies in which these users live and, secondly, the

reasons why they appear to be out of touch with conventional societies and the norms they are expected to adhere to.

- Features of virtual societies which are similar or different to those of offline societies needed to be explored more thoroughly, particularly in line with the vital similarities.

3.5 Additional articles which were essential to review for the purposes of this study

Vivien Schweitzer's article, *Arts* in *TIME Magazine* (2009:57), further elaborates on the diversity of the uses of technology. Schweitzer introduces us to Hannah Pauline Tarley, a 17 year old violinist who auditioned for the YouTube Symphony Orchestra by filming herself in her bedroom in Cupertino, California using a computer placed atop several volumes of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Approximately 3 000 professionals and amateur classical musicians in countries from Bermuda to Azerbaijan auditioned by video for the YouTube Symphony Orchestra between December 2008 and January 2009. This groundbreaking ensemble is the first to screen members entirely online, making it possible to unite viewers through collectively watching auditions online. This reinforces the view that SNSs are societies in which users reside.

There appear to be major shifts in the numbers of users across some of the sites. myspace for example, had users who seemed to have migrated to alternative sites for various reasons. This is indicative of users who tend to migrate from one society to another. Leadership in offline societies also changes for various reasons and such changes are evident in online societies too. Leadership in Offline News Corporation, who bought the myspace site six years ago, sold it in June of 2011. According to Brian Stelter (2011), in the article *News Corporation Sells myspace for $35 Million*, the site has tried to reboot itself several times and has not been abandoned completely. Stelter suggests that "the site still has 35 million visitors a month in the United States, and according to the measurement company Score.com facebook has 157 million users in the United States alone. However, the majority of the myspace users migrated to sites like facebook. This is not any different from offline societies where users tend to migrate from one state or country to another.

Some articles stipulate that in every society companies compensate employees for a particular task. This appears to not be any different on social networking sites, particularly on twitter,

where users gain some financial benefits for tasks which they have performed. This article in *TIME Magazine, Brought to You by twitter*, written by Sean Gregory asserts that although twitter can be a tremendous "time suck," imagine getting paid for wasting those precious minutes of your day." He advocates that companies who are desperate to reach consumers in the social media crowd, enable them to make a "buck or two, and even more-on twitter."

David Biello (2009) states in his article *Digital Diet*, that telecommunicating, Internet shopping and online meetings may save energy, as compared with in-person alternatives. However, he argues that "its green reputation is turning a lot browner." He asserts that e mailing, number crunching and Web searches in the US consumed as much as 61 billion kilowatt-hours last year, or 1,5% of the nation's electricity – half of which comes from coal. Users shop on SNSs in ways similar to those in which individuals shop in traditional societies. Concerns about the environment and going green are debated globally and constantly offline.

Gift-giving seems to be a large part of users' social lives online. Fitzpatrick (2009:59) describes in her *TIME Magazine* article *Paying for Virtual Gifts* ways in which facebook users acquire credits for purchasing gifts from virtual shops: gifts from icons to unicorns to sock-draped doorknobs (which seems to be the universal symbol for "Keep out, we're hooking up"). She draws attention to the unpleasant or shocking gifts that could be sent to friends of users, including their bosses. Such online activities indicate how similar instances tend to affect individuals in traditional society. Gift-giving is a common activity in offline societies, and the results thereof equally yield advantages or disadvantages. These similarities in virtual and offline societies resonate in the analysis regarding the emergence of unique online societies.

Also reviewed was the Digital Buzz Blog (2011) where an article appeared entitled facebook statistics (Stats & Facts For 2011), in which it is stated that facebook is now used by 1 in every 13 people on earth. And although the general overview is that facebook users still have an average of 130 friends, this number differs vastly from those interviewed for this study who averaged between 250 and 300 friends, although the majority had more. It was essential to view the number of friends online in comparison to those in traditional society.

SNSs also attracts the attention of prominent figures. Belinda Luscombe wrote a short article in *TIME Magazine's Web Watch* (2009:46), regarding Queen Elizabeth entitled *Her Majesty goes 2.0.* According to Luscombe, the queen's website needed a little "juice-up" and she re-launched her website invented by Tim Berners-Lee. The site's innovations include a map-calendar feature that plots where the royal family will be appearing, and a virtual tour of Windsor Castle showing numerous possibilities with classical sculpture, portraiture and gold trim. It includes YouTube videos of the Queen and her rallies as they go about the family business. Technology has opened up a whole new dimension in which users can observe the activities in the castle from the privacy of their homes, while participating in a part of royal society. The article also demonstrates how the Queen displayed aspects of English culture on YouTube by sharing with her fellow residents.

In a BBC News article entitled, *facebook Swahili Version Launch*, Symon Wonda (2009) asserts that a new version of facebook was launched by Swahili scholars with permission from the California-based Internet firm. The intention was to attract students of the native language.

facebook use has spread over the last five years in East and Central Africa. Wonda states that the youth use facebook far more than any other generation, and that they navigate through it easily when it is in a language they understand; preferably their own. The article point out that facebook is available in some African languages and will soon be made available in Zulu and other Southern African languages.

The network proves to be a major tool in attracting individuals who speak and understand diverse languages throughout the globe. One arena in which social networking sites have had a major impact in most countries is that of the postal services. In an article in *TIME Magazine*, *Pushing the Envelope,* Joel Stein (2011) points out that the United States Postal Services is in danger of bankruptcy. He suggests that the major reason for this is that people no long send mail. What he ignores, however, is that foreigners who live in the United States, and who are obliged to write letters to family members that might not have access to landlines or digital tools, still do.

In the article he indicates that as a result of the advancement in and excessive use of technology, he, like most individuals, would have to figure out how to get hold of a stamp and an envelope, leave it in his car and then a few days later wonder why the envelope is still there. He'd also have to learn to write with a pen. He says that people are reading mail on iPods and sharing pictures of their kids on facebook, and that companies are beginning to charge for sending bills by mail. He concluded by saying that the post office has become a "government–spam—delivery", and suggests that "everyone hates the surly person behind the post-office window, whose job requires human interaction." Stein points out that digital tools are having an impact on offline communication which appears to have become redundant for the majority of people in the United States.

Lee Feigenbaum and his co-authors published an article in the *Scientific American* (2007) entitled *The Semantic Web in Action* in which they describe how consumers began to use data languages and anthologies directly. One example given is that of the Friend of a Friend (FOAF) project. The authors suggest that it is a de-centralised social-networking system which is growing in a purely grass roots fashion. They describe how the Semantic web is different from sites such as facebook and myspace, in that it is a collaborative movement led by the World Wide Web Consortium that promotes common formats for data on the Web.

A Semantic Web vocabulary has been created for describing people's names, ages, locations, jobs, relationships to one another and for finding common interests among themselves. This article was fundamental in showing how networks of friendships tie in, and particularly how they impact on the everyday language of users.

Anthropologist Kerim Friedman's (2005) article on *Armchair Anthropology in the Cyber Age* expands on the importance and relevance of the armchair research method of conducting research. In his article he describes how we will slowly see the return of the "armchair anthropologists" which Malinowski so famously dethroned. Friedman also suggests that with current digital tools and the number of users online, PCs shifted from being a tool in the office to one in the home, and to becoming part of peoples' lives. He describes the role which anthropologists and other scholars play in technology, and in this article he suggests that

Malinowski was certainly not the first writer of ethnographies, nor even the first to get involved with his subjects, but we can certainly give him credit for the popularisation and institutionalisation of this methodology. He affirms that participant observation is a ritual that nearly every anthropologist must complete in order to secure a place in the discipline, and that the pervasive presence of wireless and broadband access is perhaps giving us even more opportunity of down-time observation.

Russell, H Bernard (2006) suggests in his article *Research Methodology Anthropology, Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches***,** that "observation, direct participation, sampling and choosing Informants, are important tools". This is validated by the fact that during down-time or after hours it is possible to observe how users express themselves more openly to friends regarding what they are doing, what their plans are for the evening, weekend or holidays, and in the various suggestions they make to friends on what to prepare for dinner, which are the best places to have dinner should they decide not to prepare meals at home, what book they are reading or which video they are watching or which music they are listening to.

Thomas Hylland Eriksen's book, *Small Places, Large Issues* (2001) was a prerequisite for the purposes of conducting fieldwork research on social networks. In his book he not only defines the terms social systems or social networks, but suggests that the ways in which culture is integrated makes it possible for two or more actors to understand each other. He describes ways in which studies regarding Internet users have been confined to online research. He suggests that while this research strategy may have been rewarding in many ways, anthropologists will ask questions which require them to collect other kinds of data as well. In this book, Eriksen proposes that "the relationship between online activities needs to be studied if we are going to understand the place of the Internet in people's lives."

Jaz-Hee-jeong Choi (2010), who conducted a study on Cy-World and South Korea and published an article entitled *Living in Cy-World: Contextualizing Cy-Ties in South Korea*, compares the individual's social interaction in traditional society with their individual concerns, as well as those of their group. It appears that Cy-World is similar to facebook, Mxit and related sites in that it provides a search function with which users can search for a particular person by name..

However, he asserts that the uniqueness of CyWorld lies its embracing of not only the collectivistic traditions, but also the increasing individualistic traits of contemporary Korean culture. He asserts that Cy-World is an individual network system giving users the freedom to establish and manage their own personal space in which their online network activities occur.

It can be argued that technology has impacted severely on cultural practices which were once protected by borders. What transpires currently is that technology appears to have broken barriers which once isolated or protected nations or societies like Africa, for example, from Western and European influence. Technology has spread rapidly into previously sheltered regions.

Technology has penetrated even more deeply into Asian regions where technological devices are so dominant that they have created web addictions amongst the youth in China who spend unprecedented amounts of time online in comparison to their counterparts in other counties. The Chinese have even created camps in which measures are taken to prevent further damage amongst the youth, who show visible signs of antagonistic and averse behavior. The enormous amounts of time spent on the Internet have resulted in the youth demonstrating an inability to interact with their immediate families and showing noticeable mood swings in behavior which make them unbearable to live with.

3.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, the literature reviewed and outlined in this chapter includes that of authors who have written on diverse subjects relating to this study in books, journals and articles written by various scholars both in the social and related sciences. Also included are articles written by scholars who detail their own analyses on the diverse methods in which academic and, particularly, anthropological research is being conducted. Armchair research, participant observation, structured and unstructured interviews and sampling are all part of this.

The literature discussed is also drawn from authors who defined the concepts that have been presented in this thesis such as social networking, social networking sites, the methods of research conducted, culture and cultural relativism, etc.

Some of the key methods in which anthropological research is conducted and is included here focus on articles on the sites explored. In addition they describe those that relate to features found on the sites, and are similar to those observed in offline societies, and include addictions, relationships, education, marriage, religion, emigration.

The population of facebook for example, which is said to be equivalent to the third biggest country in the world after China and India, is discussed in Chapter 8. Equally important is literature which outlines the research conducted and discussed in each of the chapters in relation to the analysis of the fieldwork covering the overall social interaction of users.

Additionally, I also discuss pre-recorded videos on YouTube which feature aspects such as traditional garments and accessories as discussed in the ethnography. Simultaneously, I outline some limitations in the research conducted and hence convey the reasons why it was essential to the subjects discussed. Literature, which was essential to review for the purposes of this study, outlines the impact that the site has had on anthropology in the digital age.

Chapter 4 Fieldwork: the ways in which social networking sites have shaped communication or conversation, and have enabled users to find the lost and reach the unreachable

4.1 Introduction

This chapter provides an analysis of a qualitative and quantitative study conducted on the views of users. One of the key questions posed to users was: "In which ways have social networking sites shaped communication and perhaps enabled users to find the lost and reach the unreachable? Additional questions are outlined further in the text. Questions were put to users of facebook, myspace, YouTube, twitter and Mxit, thus providing an in-depth description of the ethnography observations as well as the overall findings on users' perspectives regarding the way in which SNSs have shaped communication in the 21st century.

A brief analysis of more traditional methods of communication is also outlined here, as are the author's observations and findings regarding the tools which Generations Y and X users, Baby boomers and Seniors use to access social networking sites. The modes by which users communicate on SNSs are discussed, together with a demonstration of the users' overall perspectives on; 1) Traditional methods employed for communication between family and friends in the past, and; 2) User views regarding digital tools. An analysis on whether or not SNSs have increased or decreased communication in the home between family members and between family and friends is presented with a discussion on user perspectives regarding the ways in which lost family and friends are found.

4.2 Defining concepts

4.2.1 Communication

Communication is the activity of conveying meaningful information either face to face, in a letter, over a fixed landline or cell phone, on the Internet in an email or, in the last decade, on social networking sites. Communication requires a sender, a message, and an intended recipient, although the recipient need not be present or aware of the sender's intent to communicate at the time. Thus communication can occur across vast distances in time and space. "The

communication process is complete once the receiver understands the sender" (The Freedom Dictionary; 2011:1). This defines ways in which users appear to communicate with friends by sending messages or comments either on their walls or on the general comment blocks on sites which they can respond to there and then or at a later time.

Language is required for users to be able to communicate and this is defined as "a system of communication using words put together in meaningful ways according to a set of rules" (Wolford; 2002:90-117).

4.3 A Brief history on traditional methods of communication

Face to face communication was one of the first ways in which people communicated. Drums and smoke signals were also used and, more recently, the first electric telegraph that was made around 1837. Later telegrams were sent to family and friends, but this system was expensive and was used mainly for urgent communication. Morse code came into being with its short and long tones (dots and dashes), with the specially coded alphabet being named after its inventor, Morse. The telegram still exists today but it no longer bears the badge of emergency, and nor does the sight of a messenger approaching an individual's home raise feelings of foreboding. Lately, telegrams bring tidings of joy, congratulations or goodwill and often contain birthday or seasonal greetings (Neil McEwen; 1997:1).

Fixed telephones and public telephones were originally used by those who could afford to either own a device, or could at least afford the cost of a call. Individuals also made calls from public telephones.

Over time, postal services became the primary method by which letters, telegrams and packages were sent. Most of the mail sent was to communicate or converse with family, friends and organisations. The difference between postal services and the current digital tools is that mail sent through the postal service was much slower and therefore took much longer to reach recipients. It could take months sometimes, and, in rare cases, years or even decades. A wonderful example of this is the story of a love letter that actually did take decades to reach its destination. According to Ranasafdaralikhan (2011), a university student sent a letter to his

girlfriend (who later became his wife) that finally arrived 53 years after having been written. The letter, postmarked 1958, appeared in July 2011 in the mail room of the University of California.

The letter was addressed to Clark C. Moore who had changed his name to Mohammed Seeddiq some time after sending the letter. As a result of the name change the post office lost track of him and was unable to return his letter." Sadly, Seeddiq and Vonnie divorced eight years after their marriage and they hardly speak to each other. Seeddiq, 74, still wanted to read the letter.

This is completely different from the instant messaging of the 21st century via email, SNSs like twitter and BBM.

Electronic mail, more commonly known as email or e-mail, is a method of exchanging digital messages from an author to one or more recipients. The first email was sent in 1971and resulted in individuals being able to communicate with family and friends much faster than was previously possible.

Cell phones came into use around 1983. They functioned as telephones and as devices which enabled users to access the Internet. A cell phone is a mobile telephone which links into the public switched telephone system over a radio link. The first hand-held phone was demonstrated by Dr. Martin Cooper of Motorola in 1973. In 1983, the DynaTech8000x (a series of cellular telephones manufactured by Motorola Inc.) were the first to be commercially available. In the twenty years from 1990 to 2010, worldwide mobile phone subscriptions grew from 12.4 million to over 4.6 billion, penetrating developing economies and reaching the bottom of the economic pyramid. "The constantly changing cell phone is here to stay" (Hitch, 2006:7).

The launch of social networking sites transformed ways in which users can access family or friends via their PCs and cell phones. Blackberries and other digital tools changed the dynamics of communication in unprecedented ways. According to Simons (1996:37) a revolution of wireless telecommunications began in the first decade of the 20th century with Guglielmo Marconi winning the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1909 for his pioneering developments in wireless radio communication.

Other inventors include Wheatstone, Morse and Bell for the telegraph and telephone, and Baired and Farnsworth for television. Telecommunications currently play an important role in the world economy with the worldwide communications industry revenue estimated at US$ 3.5 trillion in 2008. The service revenue of the global telecommunications industry was estimated to be US$ 1.7 trillion in 2008, and is expected to reach US$ 2.7 trillion by 2013.

Consequently, traditional methods of communicating in the past, like the postal service for example, have been severely affected. In the fiscal year of 2011, postal revenues fell by nearly US$ 7 billion. The USPS (United States Postal Services) estimates that they will lose nearly US$ 8 billion in revenue by in 2011. The huge decrease in mail volumes and the falling revenue of the postal services are attributed mainly to the number of individuals that use the Internet, particularly as a result of social networking sites as the preferred medium of communication.

4.5 General observations of the tools which users employ to access social networking sites and their views in this regard

4.5.1 General observations

It was important to establish which digital tools users have employed to gain access to SNSs, and to understand how those tools have influenced the ways in which users communicate. Generation Y users (aged 18 to 29) appear to be generally experts on almost every device, and are constantly willing to explore, own, and use the latest mobile digital gadget via which they communicate with friends and family. They rarely use PCs, which are considered cumbersome and inhibiting in a fast-moving world, and which they know could be under parental scrutiny. Almost 80% of the users confirmed that they generally use cell phones with advanced features to access facebook, twitter and Mxit, etc.

In early 2012 BlackBerries became significantly popular amongst users of this age group because of the phone's BlackBerry Messenger (BBM) facility. It was found that this generation also makes use of iPods, iPhones and tablets from Apple and other manufacturers. It seems that laptops are rarely used for communication, but rather for more computer intensive processes

such as watching DVD movies. Increasingly, where there is adequate bandwidth, such content is now streamed to their mobile phones.

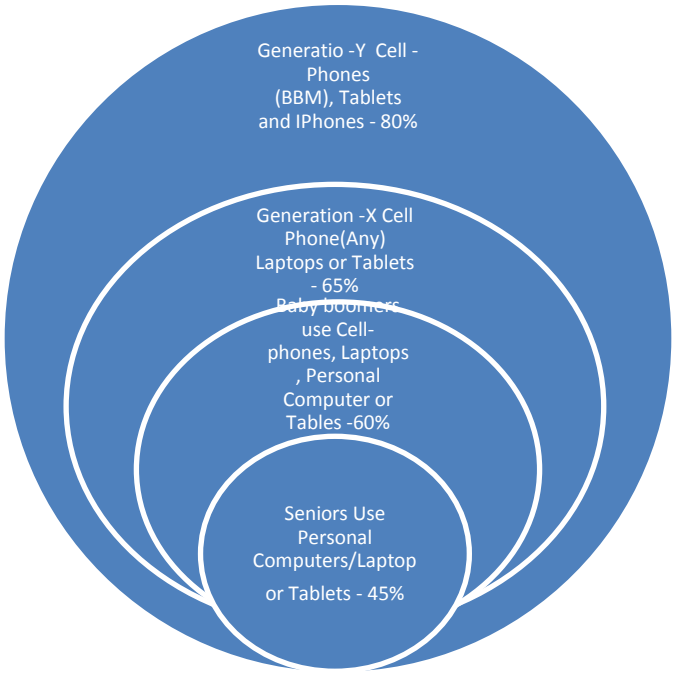


Figure 9 Shows the digital tools which users from different generations use to access social networking sites (Date for 2012)

Generation X users (aged 30 to 49) make use of cell phones and many of their advanced features. Although many users preferred BlackBerry phones, the majority would not necessarily go out of their way to purchase one. This generation generally also prefers to access the Internet using tablets, laptops and iPods. While some users from this generation seemed to not mind reading books on an iPod, most of the features on these tools are hardly used and many of them are viewed as "complicated, unnecessary, and a waste of time." In spite of this though, they seem to be open to the younger generations suggesting that they explore some of the features like setting up a diary or a yearly calendar to record their activities.

Around 60% of Baby boomers (aged between 30 and 49) access SNSs through their PCs, tablets or cell phones. One in five suggested that the BlackBerry features and other digital tools are too complicated and time consuming to learn to use. Users often express the sentiment that their key concern is to be able to access sites without any assistance, and to be able to communicate with family and friends.

Seniors (65 and over) are also considered to be the least tech-savvy. Only 45% suggested that they generally prefer using their PCs, laptops or tablets. Cell phones are primarily used to make and/or receive calls. Many, though, seemed at some point during their productive years to have acquired the skills to be able to send emails to colleagues, family and friends. They felt, however, that it would be much more difficult to use cell phones and other digital tools to access SNSs.

Although Seniors are able to use their personal computers to a certain extent, in the majority of cases they seem to find it difficult to access sites on their own and often require the assistance of younger people. While some users of this generation are much more computer literate, many still need assistance or go for training to learn how to use the tools independently. Overall, it appears that many Generation Y users, in comparison to their counterparts, seem to prefer their BlackBerries or other modern devices to access SNSs. However, the devices they have often reflect the images they want to present, and many users are often under much pressure to have the latest device or risk appearing old fashioned, from a different era, or totally out of touch. This group of users is also willing to explore the latest devices, and they are often the first to purchase them. When Apple launches a new device these individuals do not hesitate to spend an entire evening in a long queue to ensure that they are among the first to purchase it.

It appears that the type and quality of devices that users own are associated with user identity and agency which is equally important for their image. These users see themselves as mature and don't want to be monitored by their parents. Purchasing their own devices provides a certain amount of freedom for the users and reduces pressure from nagging parents who apply rules on when the device should or can be used.

It appears that many users find the tools that they use essential in connecting them to the world, and suggest that apart from the fact that the tools enable them to communicate or converse with friends, they can also find lost friends, make new ones, keep up with what is happening in their own societies and remain alert to crises.

A point to consider, though, is the digital divide and how unequal access to resources plays a major role in the tools that users have access to. For example, BlackBerries, iPods and tablets are used extensively in developed areas like the US, Asia or Europe, and developing countries like South Africa, but the vast majority of lower income users have to use devices where they can access them at low cost, like Internet cafes, for example.

In July 2011 petroleum workers protested for a number of days, thereby causing a fuel shortage. SNSs became a significant tool for users, allowing them to contact friends and family member on facebook, twitter and Mxit to let them know at which service stations they could find fuel.

4.6 The modes on social networking sites through which users communicate

There are several methods which users employ to communicate online; these are listed in the following paragraphs.

4.6.1 Chat rooms

Chat rooms are particularly popular on some of the sites. They are electronic forums from which users can share their views on a wide range of topics. Chat rooms serve as places for people with common interests to come together to form a community where they can converse. They are known as websites or parts of websites that typically do not need a specific type of software to run on.

Upon entering a chat room it is common to see a list on the screen of all the users who are currently online or using the chat rooms and users are often alerted when another enters or leaves the room. Communication amongst the users occurs through entering text in a box, which, once submitted, appears in the public message area where all users can read and respond to the entry. Chat rooms allow users to converse with many individuals at the same time.

This is particularly popular feature on almost all the sites explored for this paper. Users can see if friends are online, and if they are available they can chat instantly and for as long as they like.

Users can chat in multiple chat rooms via Mxit. In these chat rooms they can share notes with friends and even meet with celebrities. They can speak to people in their own areas or create their own fantasy worlds. Users can decide which topic they prefer to engage in and join that particular chat room.

Barone (2010:1) suggests that on twitter "a chat is a guided conversation where users interested in a particular topic hop onto the service to chat. The chat is given a hash tag, which makes it easier for anyone looking in to identify the chat and participate."

On facebook, while users either make comments or respond to those posted by friends, they are simultaneously able to view which of their friends are online and available to chat.

YouTube does not have a video chat option, but the site enables users to go to http://www.6rounds.com and engage in video chat. Once users chat they are able to open up the YouTube activity.

It might also be interesting to note that facebook, twitter and myspace are integrated through channel pages on Justin.tv that include four tabs across the chat box, reading Chat, twitter, myspace, and facebook as illustrated in Figure 7 below. These integrations enable users to log into their accounts as a third party site on Justin. tv and engage in real time conversations with friends. They can also push status updates about what they are watching back to twitter, facebook and myspace (Justin.tv; 2010).

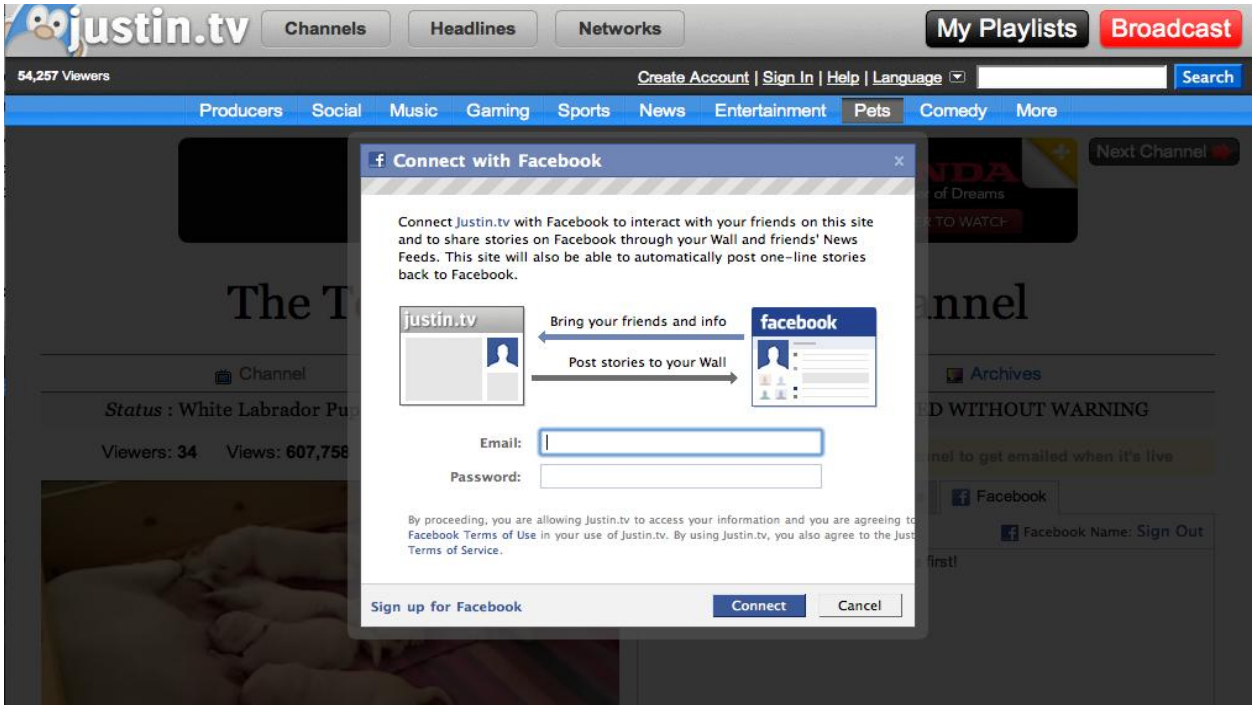


Figure 10 User guide for facebook, twitter and myspace integration (Justin.tv; 2011)

4.6.2 Tweets

Users on twitter communicate by sending tweets to friends. Tweets require less than 140 characters, which has birthed a language understood by the users. Barthers (2011:1) submits that through tweets, twitter gives its users the opportunity to communicate with other like-minded individuals who share and send information instantaneously. This form of global communication has affected the way that we as an audience receive text. And it provides users with the ability to form opinions on world affairs through a variety of perspectives.

Barths (2011:1) also asserts that twitter plays host to millions of users worldwide, allowing them to continuously update, or tweet, about happenings anywhere and at anytime. Through tweets users are able to communicate their views on diverse issues, social and/or political.

4.6.3 Pre-recorded videos

YouTube is known primarily for its accessibility to pre-recorded videos and viewer comments, but facebook, twitter and related sites also enable users to upload videos of themselves, various events, and view pre-recorded videos filmed and posted by other users. Wikipedia (2010:1) suggests that "YouTube enables users to upload videos, post comments, flag or watch restricted

movies."

When facebook launched its own platform, it also released its own application for sharing videos and users have the option of video messaging. facebook also provides features which allow users to post pre-recorded videos which friends can access and perhaps respond to or comment on.

myspace also enables users to view pre-recorded videos, communicate or pass on messages or information to friends or viewers.

4.6.4 Comment blogs

Via facebook, twitter and YouTube, users are able to make comments on blogs, and follow what is being discussed. Users can read thoughts posted by friends, and vice versa. They are able to comment on pictures which users post for all their friends to see. According to Heffernan (2009:2) "facebook refers to this feature as status updates, also simply referred to as "status." If friends like a thought or picture that had been posted they can click the thumbs up button to indicate that they are in favour of what is being said.

In general almost all the sites explored send their users updates or alerts through either their Yahoo or Gmail accounts to let them know of the comments friends made or the pictures which they posted on the sites in their absence.

4.6.5. Walls

A wall on facebook is the area on a profile of a page where friends and fans can post thoughts and views for everyone to see. Walls have three viewing settings which are users + others, just the user, just others. Most walls automatically display the users + others option, showing post links, tag material and other information posted by both the page operators and their friends or fans. Walls also incorporate the newsfeed and displaying updates made by the uses friends or fans, However, these settings can be changed by clicking the "filters" option at the top of the wall, (Klaasen 2011:1).

Users can send messages or pass on a comment to friends. A user's wall is only visible to themselves and their friends.

According to Gerolimos (2011:1) recent updates appear on user walls, and are also noticed on the "recently updated" section of their friend lists. Originally, the purpose of this feature was to enable users to inform friends of their current status, for example current feelings, whereabouts, or actions. Different wall posts are also visible for individuals or friends whose wall posts show up their newsfeed. Many users use their friends' walls for leaving short temporal notes. For more private users, however, wall settings can be set so that only friends can see thus allowing the spaces to be considered as private for the users.

It should be noted that as a result of the ways in which users communicate or converse on SNSs, everyday language and the way in which older generations have changed the their methods of communication have been significantly impacted . These are outlined in more detail in the sections below.

4.7 Users' perspectives on offline methods of communication which had been utilised for decades, and the impact on digital tools and the ways in which they have shaped communication

It was essential to examine Generations Y and X, Baby boomers and Seniors with regard to their perspectives on offline methods of communication, and the impact which digital tools—and particularly SNSs—have had on the ways in which they communicate. Also explored was how these tools have impacted on the ways in which they communicate and converse with family and friends.

The transition of Seniors from the traditional methods of communication that they have employed for decades, to digital tools and SNSs, which seem to have become their primary method of communication, were of particular interest.

The primary intention during fieldwork was to examine users' views on the ways in which the sites seemed to have shaped communication or conversation. Therefore the ways in which the

sites have enabled users to make and/or find old or lost friends and family and make new ones are described. Also conveyed are the users' views on whether or not the sites have increased or decreased communication, both in the home amongst family members and between friends.

4.8 Generation Y users

During this study, the perspectives of around 6 000 Generation Y users, who employ facebook, myspace, YouTube, twitter and Mxit to communicate with family and friends, were explored. Of these 2 000 use facebook, 1 000 use myspace, 1 500 use twitter and about 1 500 use Mxit.

4.8.1 The users' views on offline methods through which individuals communicated with family and friends in the past?

With the advancement of digital tools, the ways in which Generation Y users communicate are vastly different from those of their senior counterparts. Postal services, once the most favoured option of older generations, seem to be foreign and are hardly used by this one.

Almost 65% of the users interviewed revealed that apart from short letters which they learned to write at school and which were simply notes to their friends, they have never written friendly or formal letters that needed to be sent through the postal services. This was particularly so for users aged between 18 and 24 years old. Of the same group, almost 60% had, at some point, communicated primarily through landlines, public or cell phones, but that is no longer so. Only about 20% of these users said that they used postal services to send letters to family and friends and for academic purposes like, for example, posting applications to universities or for job employment, and as a result they were of the opinion that technology had improved.

Almost 15% of the users stated that they still make use of landlines as a primary form of communication. They generally live in countries where resources are either scarce or expensive but despite that they still make use of SNSs either through Internet cafés or via their cell phones when they can afford it. Only 5% of users had no comment on either of the offline methods of communication employed by Seniors in the past.

4.8.2 The ways in which digital tools and social networking sites have shaped communication

Generation Y users were asked how social networking sites have shaped communication. They were generally of the view that communication improved once they could afford or owned a personal cell phone device that could provide access to the Internet. Some users aged 26 years and slightly older confirmed that they owned cell phones but they could not afford devices with advanced features through which they could access the Internet. Over time though, most phones came standard with the ability to access the Internet thereby enabling email and the use of SNSs as key communication tools. Almost 1 in 30 of the users suggested that they were aware that communication had improved rapidly because for them communication in the past had been via written letters.

The primary method of communication for users between 18 and 26 years old has always been either email or SNSs. They do, on occasion, use their phones to call family members, however, communication between their friends takes place via chats on facebook, myspace, twitter and Mxit. They also operate under the knowledge that if one digital tool doesn't work others are always available. There are so many choices between facebook, twitter and YouTube, etc.

Jean uses facebook, YouTube and twitter, and comments on how communication has improved. She says that in the age of the Internet and social networking sites, social and political information is at our fingertips.

Real time micro-blogging, for example, has allowed them to communicate information instantly, but has also appeared to be particularly beneficial in times of crisis. They confirmed that there are some advantages to the sites which result in users finding themselves in the presence of a multitude of friends with whom they are constantly in conversation.

Older generations also attest to the fact that communication has indeed rapidly improved as a result of SNSs. It appears that quick communication allows them to feel much safer and they are reassured by the fact that they can call for help instantly when they are in danger or in need of assistance and thereby allowing them to alert family and friends as to their whereabouts; an advantage that previous generations lacked.

It appears that individuals belonging to this generation are never alone per se, and are always surrounded by friends who look out for them and family members that can be contacted instantly. This is demonstrated by the story of an American student who was arrested in Egypt, and by managing to tweet the single word "ARRESTED" made his plight became publicly, thus leading to his quick release.

Users can instantly express their political concerns on SNSs too. In Britain, for example, the prime minister's office agreed that people should be able to find out what their premier is doing and, as a result of twitter the information is communicated to thousands of users almost instantly.



Figure 11 An image of a user tweeting friends (Charles Arthur; 2009)

Almost all users acknowledge how the use of SNSs has shaped language in unique ways. One of these is by reducing the number of words needed to convey messages. Sentences have decreased from the long and tedious constructions required by academic institutions and communications with older generations to short, concise messages.

It became evident that everyday language used in communication via SNSs and other digital tools has become a unique sequence of cryptic letters strung together, and often understood only by their peers. Here are a few examples of the lingo employed by Generation Y users: "W u d – what are you're doing?"; "Wt – watching TV"; or "W a m – watching a movie"; "Y o l o – you only live once"; "B r b – be right back"; "W u u 2? - what are you up to?"; "1 4 3 – I love you";

and "L o l – Laugh out loud". Having given these examples, however, it appears that the ways in which users communicate online differ vastly from the way in which they speak offline.

Rich's Random Thoughts (2010) suggests that while sites like facebook distract students on the one hand, they are an ideal tool for teachers to communicate with students and perhaps guide them where they need more clarity. They are also mediums through which students can assist each other with homework, perhaps allowing them to conduct study groups in which they can focus much more intensely than they would face to face.

Digital tools continue to be manufactured and improved in the market, thus confirming user sentiments that digital tools and SNSs have shaped communication in the 21st century in a way that they can only describe as "remarkable."

4.8.3 Generation Y users' perspectives on whether or not social networking sites have increased or decreased communication in the absence of face to face communication.

4.8.3 (a) Within the home, with family members

Almost 55% of the users interviewed confirm that, from their perspectives, SNSs have indeed increased communication amongst their siblings. They feel that the sites have enabled them to stay connected with siblings and parents during the day when they are in different places, thus enabling parents to keep track of their children's whereabouts.

This does not seem to be the case so much with Generation Y individuals, however, who use primarily twitter, Mxit and BBM (BlackBerry Messenger) which are tools that are less likely to be used by older generations. Sites like YouTube, though, do allow parents to keep an eye on their children's activities. An illustration of this was evident when a student posted a pre-recorded video on the site showing how her school mates physically abused her (YouTube; 2009). The video caused an uproar and, although disturbing, alerted parents and caught the attention of the media.

In spite of this incident, however, many of the users felt that they cannot always understand the fuss made by their parents, who feel strongly that SNSs have led to a breakdown in communication within the home. The youth feel that it is not necessary to speak to family members all the time, and feel that the mere fact that they are at home is indication enough that they are present. Parents, however, constantly complain that their children are in a world of their own, not understanding that there is so much information available for these youngsters who feel the need to be kept informed: being online means keeping up with friends and information, and being offline means falling behind as news becomes stale very quickly. The majority of them seem to unaware of the amount of time they spend online, and the extent to which it impacts negatively on family

Mxiter Rowena makes the following statement:

> "My friends and I are compelled to be online constantly, because new news can become old in an instant. We fear that if we go offline we will miss out on what is being discussed between friends. It is almost impossible to put my BlackBerry down. I am on it constantly and this is regardless of where I am in our home. I believe most of my friends have the same problem, and the only time I am not online chatting to friends is when I am asleep."

According to an American psychology researcher at Carnegie Mellon University, participants justify the increasing time they spend online by saying that they need to stay in touch with more distant friends and relatives, while they increasingly ignore those with whom they are living (Kraut; 1998).

Opinion is divided between the youth: most admit that they do spend an unprecedented amount of time on SNSs which could perhaps impact negatively on family members. They said, however, that they did not feel that it was to such an extent that communication within the home had broken down. However, they admit that they are online even in the presence of family members, at the dinner table, and wherever they happen to be in the home.

Only about 30% of users insisted that they don't spend an unprecedented amount of time with friends online, and10% did not comment or said that they had no idea of the amount of time they spend online.

Although most of the users acknowledge that the sites have increased communication amongst family members, there were those who believe that communication has decreased remarkably, not through the youth spending so much time online, but also as a result of parents who are constantly busy with work or other activities, or are themselves glued to their computers and on SNSs with friends.

4.8.3 (b) Communication between friends

In conducting this research, the perspectives of Generation Y users on whether or not the sites had increased or decreased communication or conversation between them and their peers were examined. Almost 90% confirmed that the sites have indeed increased communication, and have even enhanced the ways in which they converse in quite unique ways. The views of a significant number of users seem to be that a short message shared amongst friends says more than a thousand words.

Cathy expressed her views as provided below:

> "While communication or conversation increased in many respects between myself and most of my peers, in some ways it has led to a breakdown in communication with my friends and in my home. The reality is that when my friends and I are out socialising, we are in the habit of keeping our phones close enough to chat to friends who are not with us. Although I often feel annoyed when I notice my friends chatting online to other friends in my presence, I often find myself doing the same. Hence, the truth is that we are not often present, and it results in not paying attention to what is being discussed. Sometimes the impact of this might be that we might leave a place earlier than we initially planned, and with some friends really upset. I guess the only time we really have fun is when we are at night clubs where the music is loud, or at social events where we are unable to chat or text."

Only 10% of users felt disciplined enough to switch off their cell phones or BlackBerries when socialising with friends. Tammy, who uses all the sites, said that:

> "It annoys me when friends are in a group and are simultaneously online. Hence, we have all come to an agreement that when we are out for a drink or lunch, the first thing we do the minute we are seated is ensure that our devices are off. Although this was a major problem at first, we have learned to appreciate the time we so rarely have available to spend with each other. And believe me, in the end we all have a fabulous outing."

Based on the research it was established that communication has been severely impacted amongst Generation Y users and their parents, but has improved amongst some friends, while negatively affecting those at a social event. Some users simply acknowledge that they do spend an extensive amount of time online which impacts negatively on family and friends.

4.8.4 Perspectives of Generation Y users in the ways in which they manage to find old friends and lost family

The majority of users in this age group believe that they never really had a problem searching for or finding friends with whom they had lost touch. For them, unlike older generations, there are various digital tools available to find old or long lost friends and family members. The fastest way of finding old friends and making new ones is via SNSs.

Almost 1 in 5 users believe that once they have reached the level of tertiary education or have commenced their first employment, they will have managed to find and keep in touch with friendships stretching as far back as the first grade.

They confirmed that it does not matter where in the world an old friend is, they can easily be found on facebook, twitter, Mxit and myspace. There is, for example, a feature on facebook that cross matches friends that users have in common, making it easy to look them up and send a friend request instantly. In most cases the recipient will, in turn, accept the request.

Most of the users interviewed appreciated the fact that, unlike older and Senior generations, they do not have to travel long distances or send letters which take months to reach a person, and which can often even turn out to be unsuccessful. Some told how they managed to assist older generations in searching for long lost friends and family members, and that they had been successful in doing so most of the time. They regretted that those they could not find were probably either not SNS users, or might have passed away. Some indicated that they could still find some profiles on facebook, and through those they could find surviving relatives with whom their families were often re-united.

Some users though, expressed the sentiment that some friends are better of lost, because they later found that although they had searched for them specifically, they had ended up being a hindrance.

Overall, it appears that while SNSs have increased communication in some cases between families they have also impacted negatively on the family.

4.9 Generations X users

4.9.1 Generation X users: traditional tools predominantly used for communication

The views of almost 4 000 Generations X individuals were examined for this paper. When asked which traditional methods they preferred to use in communicating with family and friends, almost 65% of them confirmed that they are a generation that has communicated predominantly via letters and landlines. None of the users mentioned in questionnaires or interviews that they had ever made use of telegraphs or telegrams.

Only 45% of the individuals interviewed acknowledged that they had minimal use for letter-writing because they were exposed earlier on to computers, the Internet and email. These were primarily the views of users who are based in first world and some developing countries. However, they commented that they did use fixed landlines and public phones to make short and long distance calls.

4.9.2 Users' perspectives on digital tools, and particularly social networking sites, and the ways in which the sites shaped communication

As far as this generation is concerned, they were exposed much earlier than older generations to digital tools such as cell phone devices, the Internet and email. They confirmed that much has changed regarding communication as a result of the tools that have been developed over the years, and which impacted directly on the ways in which they communicate.

Consequently, they feel that letters take too much effort to be written, and that getting to the post offices in order to mail the letters made it even more complicated. None of the users, it appeared, were happy to wait in long lines or buy stamps. Letters can also take days, weeks or even months sometimes, before they reach their destinations. It appears that the postal services are primarily used now by individuals residing in under developed environments, or in regions in which resources are lacking.

Many users feel that landlines (telephones) or public telephones are relatively expensive, and that calls made from these devices are best kept to a minimum over long distances, and rarely used at all over short distances.

The users were of the view that once computers and the Internet became readily available, emailing was much faster. Around 40% of these users advised that they did not have computers or access to the Internet, however, it was found that they could access email either through using the digital tools of family members, or through Internet cafés. However, users like Pumi advised that Internet cafés took too much time and effort, and were therefore used less often. Evidently, there are often long waits at the cafes. In addition to that, however, many were of the view that although they had access the effort required to write long messages often discouraged regular communication.

About 40% of the interviewed users revealed that they were exposed to digital tools very early in their lives, either at home, work, or through tertiary institutions, and were therefore able to contact relatives, family and friends more regularly. Users confirmed that once cell phones became available communication between family and friends over short distances improved

instantly, but the devices were rarely used to make calls over short distances or for long conversations.

According to Hartner (2010), the general view is that technology has evolved to make personal computing a little more personal. In the past, energy-efficient micro-processors, innovative software and fast wireless networks supplied information. These tools allowed for more than making calls, sending emails, taking photographs, accessing the Internet, and even playing movies. Hartner suggests that according to the market research firm Gartner Inc., by 2011, over 85% of the handsets sold worldwide would have included a Web browser. In 2010, Hartner estimated that the market for mobile devices with touch screen-technology had revolutionised the way people access and use information on the go, and would increase by 96.8% over 2009, with 362.7 million units projected. This seemed to be evident in late 2011 and the first half of 2012.

Almost 80% of these users were of the view that SNSs have transformed the methods by which they communicate in unprecedented ways. Additionally, they felt that communication amongst individuals, regardless of their geographical location, had increased remarkably over the last decade. These users can contact relatives and friends much more regularly than they did in the past.

In contrast, 20% of the users were of the view that the sites encourage too much communication and often distract people from doing work, or from focusing on crucial issues that require their attention.

Jane, a user interviewed for this paper, remarked that:

> "The advantages are much greater than the disadvantages and one is almost never quiet for too long. It always feels like you are surrounded by a group of people who are always willing and ready to converse. There is always someone ready and willing to talk from the many people we communicate with. We can also communicate through texting shorter notes, or chatting for a few minutes. The good thing is that

> long lines at postal offices and writing long letters are a thing of the past. We save time and say much in just a few words."

Some users on Mxit and twitter were of the same view as Bob who asserts that:

> "Over the years we went from communicating via long sentences, which took up much time and effort on email, to smsing from our cell phones and short messages on social networking sites like twitter, facebook and related sites. But twitter is very popular amongst my generation because we do not have to text many words, just a few. And my friends know what I am trying to say. With our busy lifestyles there is hardly time to write long text. But with twitter we manage to say much briefly. We are aware that communication tools will advance over time, but it can only get better, not worse."

Almost 80% of users suggested that SNSs improved both long and short distance communication, and particularly transformed the ways in which they conversed in unprecedented ways. While only 20% were of the view that communication had improved, the rate at which it occurs generally has consequences and as result they use the tools much less than their younger counterparts.

From the perspectives of Generation X users, and based on the various comments that they made, it was evident that the majority of users held the view that the advancement in communication tools had shaped communication remarkably.

4.9.3 Users views on whether or not social networking sites have increased communication in the home and between family and friends

4.9.3 (a) In the home

It seems that around 76% of users [generation x?] are of the view that social networking sites have impacted negatively on communication amongst family members in the home. Users feel that everyday talk in which family members discuss their daily experiences and find out about

each other's wellbeing has decreased severely, and has affected the relationships of married couples too.

According to Helpguide.org (2011) many people turn to the Internet to manage unpleasant feelings such as stress, anxiety and depression. When having a bad day, or perhaps an unpleasant moment with a spouse, the Internet can be an easily accessible outlet, reducing conversation considerably.

Users believe that the Internet has led to a severe communication breakdown between parents and their children, although they do also agree that there are some aspects that are positive. As with Generation Y users above, these individuals share the opinion that there are some advantages because parents can contact their children anytime, and can keep track of their whereabouts through observing their facebook or twitter pages. Consequently, SNSs seem to make it easy for the younger generations to withdraw from the family, locked in their bedrooms and spending an unprecedented amount of time on their computers and cell phone devices chatting to friends on the various sites, but during this process, siblings and parents become very isolated from the user.

4.9.3 (b) Communication between friends

The majority of Generation X users believe that social networking sites have indeed increased communication amongst friends. They indicate that the sites enable them to keep up with friends constantly in their daily activities, where they are, what they do, and with the photographs they post online. Users like Cindy, for example, demonstrate that within minutes of her having given birth to their baby twins, her husband had posted photos of them on facebook for all their friends to see.

The author of this paper was also able to follow a friend's wedding on facebook in Uganda while based in the United States.

The sites also provide users with deeper insight into happenings around the world, resulting in greater awareness of local and international social and political issues. Meeting diverse

individuals from different countries also provides a wider network of friends who speak different languages.

About 60% of Generation X users are of the opinion that communication increased remarkably between them and their friends. The remaining 40% believe that SNSs have led to a communication breakdown between friends, and that, generally, these users agree with their younger counterparts that the sites have led to a severe breakdown of communication in the home.

Clark, a user of many sites, says that;

> "If you want your friends to give you attention you must be away from them. They will speak only on facebook, twitter, Mxit or SNSs. It is the only time you will get their attention, otherwise if you are in their presence there is a 99% chance that they will be texting or chatting with someone else online. Social outings are not the same as they were and will never be, because I have to admit, it has affected all of us. Each one of us never fully gives our attention to those around us."

Overall, it seems that many users can see that less time is invested in offline friendships than in online.

The majority of Generation X users feel that SNSs have and are impacting negatively on communication between couples. They feel the sites have affected both parents and children who tend to be physically present, but mentally absent. It is apparent that communication increased between friends on the one hand, but decreased significantly on the other.

4. 9.4 Users' perspectives on the ways in which they manage to find the lost and reach the unreachable

Almost 85% of the Generation X users interviewed are of the opinion that, as a result of the sites, they have managed to search for and find old friends wherever they might be living. As already outlined, there are many ways to do this and to make new friends. facebook, for example, has a

feature that allows friends to see the friend lists of those with whom they are already linked. Alternatively, users can search by name, bringing up lists of various people with the same name which often include a photograph. From these users can select the person whose face they recognise. The majority of users suggested that they almost always find people in the same way.

Mxiter and facebooker Rics, states that he's always on Mxit with hundreds of friends, but since opening his facebook account he was surprised to see that he's received more than 500 friend requests, and that that number increases weekly. They are often friends from school, from university and from work, and he says that is amazing how easily one can be found these days. Because he communicated with one friend, he now has hundreds more.

Almost 80% of the users suggested that they had been successful in locating long lost friends, and are pleased that they are in touch once again. However, 15% of the viewers were of the view that they "never really search for friends per se because they are often found themselves.

Of the same users only 5% suggested that they had searched for and found family members on sites social networking sites.

4.10 Baby boomers

Top social networking sites which Baby boomers (Boomers) generally use to communicate with family and friends include *myboomerplace.com, boomersint.org, babyboomers.org, grandtimes.com, babyboomerpeoplemeet.com* and *e-seniors-village.com*. During this study the views of almost 3 500 Boomer users were explored, and includes input from both on and offline sources. It was found that a significant number of the Boomers also use, predominantly, sites like facebook, myspace and YouTube, while twitter and Mxit seem to the least used for communication with family and friends.

4.10.1 Boomer views on past offline methods of communication

During interviews, one of the key questions asked of the Boomers was what were their perspectives on traditional, or offline, methods of communication that were used in the past.

About 75% of these users confirmed that communication took place primarily via letters and landlines, but that in some instances postal services were non-existent or several towns away, which required that they either walk or drive long distances.

Users expressed similar sentiments to those of Thandeka, a myspacer and YouTuber, who suggested that:

> "The letters we sent often took ages to reach distant friends or family members, but we had no alternative. At least we were fortunate to be able to do that. Some peers and family members who lived in areas where postal services were non-existent often had to take several modes of transport to reach the nearest post office. Thus, if a crisis occurred and the message was urgent, the only way of sending it was via telegram to the nearest police station from which an officer would deliver it. Telegrams were not, however, for passing on ordinary messages."

From the users interviewed only 40% suggested that they communicated through fixed landlines in the past. They explained that back then telephones were also much larger and less compact then the current devices.

The Boomers have told how sending letters took was a much slower way of passing on messages. However, for a large majority, this was the only method available to them or their parents. Some were of the view that even though they often did not choose to write letters personally, their parents did, and they were often expected to walk long distances to a post office on behalf of their parents.

Amongst older users of the same generation many implied that writing letters became much easier when they were able to use typewriters; letter writing was effortless in comparison. Boomers who had access to fixed landlines or public telephones in the past agreed that they were used in the main to make short distance calls. Long distance calls were expensive and were rarely made, unless the individual had the resources to do so. Often Boomers explained that they did not have landlines in their homes and had to walk long distances to make calls from public

phones in order to pass on urgent messages. They described telephones that were much larger than the more compact devices currently available on the market.

For the Boomers, any other method of communication was slow. Only 15% said that apart from the letters that were posted through postal services, they could also communicate on landlines and cell phones, but that calls were often kept relatively short and to a minimum. However, they also said that when cell phones became widely available they became one of the key methods of communication, completely doing away with the delays that they had once had to endure.

Only 7% of Boomers remembered that, as young adults, they had never used any of the communication methods above. For them, passing messages onto relatives often involved walking long distances, or taking buses. This group only began communicating through letters and landlines when they moved into urban areas. From there they managed to get in touch with family members when postal services were established back home.

It was found that while some of the users generally had access to postal services and landlines, their peers in less developed countries had no access and only had access to these tools later in their lives. Access to these tools varied from some, to minimal to none; and long distance communication was either rare, in which case only short calls were made, or didn't exist at all.

4.10.2 The Baby boomer perspective on digital tools and social networking sites, and on how they shaped communication

Boomers were of the view that when digital tools like computers, the Internet, email and cell phones became available and accessible, they also became the primary methods through which they communicated with family and friends.

However, although the tools were available, it was not necessarily so that the Boomers could afford to use them. There were also cases where they might have had access to the necessary tools, and be able to afford to use them, but their friends and family were not so fortunate, thus, they had no alternative but to continue to communicate through letters and cards.

When computers and the Internet became available they also became widely used by the Boomers, and particularly by those who could access them from work. In fact, users who first started sending emails did so primarily from work. However, the majority of individuals still could not afford to access these tools. In most cases companies applied restrictions and employees were prevented from sending personal email. As a result, Internet access was often obtained from Internet cafe's where users had to pay a fee for a half an hour to send a few emails to family and friends.

The emergence of SNSs brought about the primary method by which the Boomers began to communicate with family and friends. Almost 55% of them took some time to learn how to access the sites, but through visiting them frequently and through the assistance of the younger generation, it became fairly easy for most of them.

Technology, particularly that relating to communication, has facilitated person to person interactions and the documentation of human societies since the beginning of recorded history. The evolution of communication between remote people has evolved from fabled Greek messengers who memorised and repeated spoken messages between heads of states, to the dedicated telephone lines available to heads of states, and now the Internet which facilitates written and, to a lesser extent, spoken interaction among people worldwide (Fozard & Kearns: 2008:1).

One of the comments that users made in their replies to the questionnaires was that the speed at which they could pass on or receive messages has influenced remarkably the ways in which they converse. The majority of the users also suggested that the sites have not only increased long and short distance communication, but have also resulted in information being passed on almost instantly, to friends and family.

Many users advised that technological tools had not been easy to use or become accustomed to, and that much time and effort was required to learn about them. These users were also users who had not previously accessed digital tools such as computers and the Internet, and only acquired them later in life. For the vast majority of the Boomers, it became evident that a drastic shift

from face to face communication to primarily conversing on a device through typing, is indicative of the ways in which the sites have shaped communication. However, Rodney acknowledged that once he and his peers had acquired the necessary skills it became fairly smooth sailing, particularly when they could eventually access the sites from home without complication.

The general notion is that younger generations, and particularly Generation Y users, seem to use the Internet and social networking sites much more frequently than their older counterparts. But, from a study conducted on Internet access amongst Generation Y users and Boomers, it appears they are embracing popular consumer technology applications nearly 20 times faster than younger generations.

According to this study, it is apparent that there is a common misperception that all the blogging, twittering, and facebooking is done by twenty and thirty somethings. This study suggests that, on the contrary, Boomers are the fastest growing users of SNSs, and are the readers of most blogs. Meanwhile, Generation Y users' interest in these services has plateaued. The study found that Boomers had; 1) Increased reading blogs and listening to podcasts by 60% year on year which is nearly 80 times faster than Generation Y users; 2) They posted a 69% increase in using social networking sites which is more than 30 times faster than Generation Y users; 3) Increased watching and posting videos on the Internet by 30%, while Generation Y use decreased slightly by 2%; 4) Accelerated play on video games via mobile devices increased by 52%, 20 times faster than Generation Y users, and; 5) Increased listening to music on the iPods or other portable music players by 49%, more than 4 times faster than Generation Y users. They suggest that meanwhile Generation Y 1) User participation has slipped in virtual worlds from 23% to 19%. 2) Consume no more video online than they did in 2008, and; 3) Reduced blog contributions to wiki from 35% to 33%.

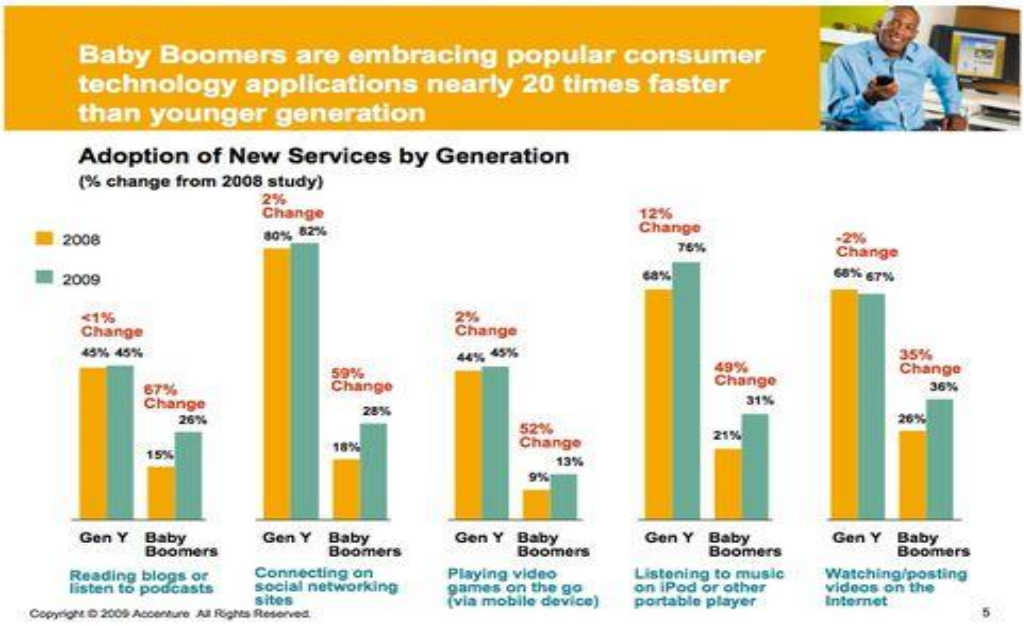


Figure 10 Baby Boomers embrace popular consumer technology

This argument is also supported in an article written by aging hipsters who quoted the *Associated Press* in New York (2003:1). They argued that long before teenagers and college students began downloading free music from the Internet and chatting via instant messaging, the Internet was the world of the Baby boomers, or yesterday's youth.

It is also suggested that the article should be of interest to Generations Y and X who are under the notion that they were the first to discover the Internet. The article states that we all know that Al Gore invented the Internet and that he is a Baby boomer. Based on this it appears evident that Baby boomers were not only the first to use digital tools that shaped conversation, but they also appeared to supersede Generations Y and X in the use of the Internet and social networking sites.

It appears that the rate at which the Boomers explore the Internet for personal use has increased remarkably. There user numbers are still small in comparison to younger users, however, the rates at which they seem to embrace the sites that were examined are increasing remarkably. From the Boomers studied it appears that those who are based in the United States, South Korea and in European countries, for example, began to use SNSs much more for online purchase and to search for various items which were only available on the Internet. However, for their

counterparts in developing countries the sites are primarily used to communicate with family and friends, and only in rare cases do users seem to purchase items on the sites, and then usually at the suggestion of a friend.

Rob, a Boomer facebooker, expressed the sentiments described above. He says that:

> "When my peers and I reflect back to the past, we acknowledge that communication has transformed rapidly. In comparison with the ways in which we conversed in the past via letters and with landlines, it appears that all we had was small talk because our conversations were very narrow. These days we have embraced the Internet and communicate our perspectives more broadly. We do not only discuss what is happening shortly and concisely, but also discuss family issues and what occurred in our immediate neighborhoods. But, we engage in persuasive discourse on different global issues with people from diverse backgrounds, and it gives us much more insight than when we only read about issues in newspapers viewed them from a distance."

The users say that trivial events and issues which occur and are discussed around the world keep them informed, and they are of the view that this occurs over a shorter period of time. In fact, some users feel that they can learn more online as a result of SNSs in a fairly short period of time. Some of the users suggested that they learn more from communicating with friends on the sites than they would by merely reading a newspaper or watching the news.

In a video on YouTube, Carlos Aponto Junior (2010) in his article *Make It Happen Network Video* asserts that older generations, whose communications enhance professional and broaden ordinary relationships online, can teach Generation Y users a great deal. In some African countries, such as South Africa for example, Generation Y users, particularly those who obtain access to SNSs such as facebook, myspace and Mxit from work or on their cell phones, participate in social networking. He eludes that this is unlike some of the arguments made that Generation Y users are taking over worldwide."

It appears that while the majority of Boomers seem to access the Internet frequently for various purposes like paying debts, purchasing items online etc., the reality is that the majority depend largely on younger users to assist or teach them to acquire digital skills to be more independent, and to communicate, reach and find lost friends.

It is evident that the number of older generation users, including Seniors and Boomers, has increased rapidly over the past few years. The Boomers that were interviewed indicated that they became such prominent users of the Internet and social networking sites because most of their friends began using them, which encouraged them to sign up and be connected. According to Nas Insights (2009) younger generations are the not the only Internet users. Internet use has spread across minorities and across generations. A recent study by Nielsen says that older generations use the Internet more than younger generations. Thus, those aged 35 and older logged in more sessions per month than younger generations, and spent more time online at home and at work.

However, in South Africa there are still debates on which generations use social networking sites the most. The mere fact that there is debate is an indication that the sites have increased communication or conversation amongst Boomer users in unique ways as indicated above.

4.10.3 What are user perspectives on the ways in which social networking sites have shaped communication

The rate at which communication amongst the Boomers increased in the past decade highlight the unique ways in which they can send and receive messages. Boomers who use social networking sites as primary communication tools provide different views on the ways in which the sites have shaped communication.

Larry, who utilises facebook and myspace to communicate and converse, says that:

> "A revolution in communication seems to have occurred with the emergence of social networking sites, and they are bound to transform the way we speak even further. This is unlike previous tools which we used to communicate or converse."

There also seems to be a common view that postal services through which letters, birthday cards and in some cases telegrams used to be sent, appear to have been engulfed by digital tools. These days it's easy to find free birthday and greeting cards online and send them immediately to the recipient.

With the advent of cell phones and email users say that communication and conversation has been enhanced in unprecedented ways, and that fixed telephones seem to have been substituted by SNSs. For the majority of users the emergence of the Internet and SNSs were, in reality, the end of the dark ages, and digital tools have had a major impact on communication. There is a feeling that if the Boomer generation does not make effective use of the tools, they will forever remain in the dark, oblivious to the immense ways in which communication and conversation is being transformed."

Boomers are also of the view that online social networking is the in thing, and they suggest that emailing, although still useful for professional and related purposes, has become almost redundant as a means of communication with family and friends. In spite of this however, email is still vital in enabling registration for and access to SNSs.

McAfee (2009:9), an expert on collaboration at Harvard University's Berkman Centre for Internet & Society, and author of *Internet 2.0*, affirms that "an email between more than a few people can quickly fill participants' inboxes with a deluge of messages, making the argument hard to follow." He asserts that "nobody is really happy with attachments." However, he also says that despite the recurrent complaints that e-mail is broken, neither of the instant messaging blogs and social networks such as facebook, myspace and twitter have managed to dethrone email, and he suggests that many of the services actually rely on email as an underlying signalling mechanism.

With the popularity of social networking, older generations are effectively making use of the SNSs as their primary method of communication. By February 2009, facebook had 462 million visitors. In March 2010, the site overtook Google to become America's most popular website. Figures for the week ending March 13th 2010 showed that the social networking site accounted

for 7.1% of the country's traffic, compared to Google's 7.0%; the first time it has had a weekly lead. However, with its revenues of US$ 23.7 billion in 2009, it remains easily the more profitable of the two (*The Economist*; 10:2010). It is therefore not surprising that the sites have attracted many of the Boomer who seem to use them as the primary means of communication between family and friends. According to Stamoulis (2009:1) the social communication behavior and methods used by people to interact are more like tangled-up power lines.

Boomers suggest that although traditional tools enable them to pass on information, they feel that since the launch of SNSs, communicating with large numbers of individuals—regardless of their geographical location—seems to be a million times easier than it was in the past.

Maria, a twitter and facebooker, together with the majority of her peers, expresses the sentiment that:

> "Communication in the past was never easy, and we were never certain if information had reached the recipient. This was a concern, particularly when no reply was received. But we are certain that now chances are that there is a higher possibility that the information has been received either instantly if the recipient was online, or within a relatively short space of time. With the launch of social networking sites, however, although it was difficult to adapt in the beginning, the advantage is that we can communicate instantly if a friend or family member is available to chat."

Astrow (2009) asserts that, according to stats Nielsen Online, by the end of 2008 social networking had overtaken emailing in terms of worldwide reach. According to the study 66.8% of Internet users across the globe accessed member communities in 2009, compared to 65.1% for email. Nielsen asserts that facebook saw growth of 566% in time spent on it by users worldwide. By 2011 this number had escalated.

John suggests that:

> "In the past it was easier for criminals to get away with a robbery through merely cutting a telephone line. But with cell phone devices and computers, and particularly with social networking sites, they are unable to do so. When a user is in a predicament, they can quickly let friends and families know either through tweets on twitter, facebook, YouTube or related sites, thereby getting an immediate response or reaction."

In fact, in some countries like South Africa for example, mobile devices are Ricared. This is an effort by officials to make it easier to track criminals, using digital tools to do so. It seems this function is still not available on BlackBerry.

Although SNSs have fundamentally enhanced the ways in which individuals communicate, it appears that emailing remains an essential tool for users. Social media like facebook sends messages to users' email inboxes to alert them every time friends make comments, post photographs send updates on almost every activity. According to Gibbs (2009: 1), it is perfectly logical that while people make connections through social media, they also maintain those connections outside of the specific platform and may even extend those connections to email, a phone conversion or even meetings in person. Tablets are also largely used by this generation.

For this generation digital tools and, particularly, SNSs have increased communication remarkably. These users were primarily of the view that communication has been transformed; from walking long distances or driving to postal offices in the past, to spending extended time on their computers or communicating either face to face or with their fingers over long distances instantly.

4.10.4 The Boomers' perspectives on whether or not social networking sites have increased or decreased communication

4.10.4. (a) Communication within the home

When the majority of Boomers interviewed for this study were asked whether or not they felt that SNSs had impacted on communication in the home and between immediate family

members, the majority answered that they had, but in the negative. The users stated that the sites had, in reality, decreased communication.

There were two key aspects for this response; 1) That communication had decreased in the home between parents and children; this was particularly prevalent amongst the users who have Generation X and particularly Generation Y users in their homes, and; 2) Amongst adults, particularly spouses, which is discussed more in-depth in the following paragraphs.

4.10.4 (b) Communication between parents and children

Boomer users are of the view that there are several reasons why there appears to be a communication breakdown between parents and children as a direct result of the excessive amount of time younger users spend on SNSs. They suggested that the severity in communication breakdown has particularly impacted on the younger users' listening abilities and attention span capabilities. A significant number of users felt that SNSs, as communication tools, have both negative and positive aspects on communication between them and their children.

Kevin suggests that one of the reasons for the communication breakdown between him and his children is as a direct consequence of the sites having isolated them. They are physically present, but mentally absent. He says that his children's hands appear to be permanently glued to their mobile devices and they are constantly in conversation with friends. When he attempts to speak to them their concentration levels are at zero and they never hear what Kevin tries to tell them. When he complains they argue that they are grown up and shouldn't be treated as children. As a result they spend as much time as possible in their bedrooms and away from their parents in an attempt to avoid confrontation, or communicating in general. Attempts to approach the children and start conversations often result in arguments, with the children claiming that they need their space. Kevin and his friends feel that they are facing a crisis because they all have similar problems. They fear for the type of parents their children will make as they see them living in a totally different world, and absent from reality.

Many Boomer users are quite adamant that family dinners are affected as there is very little opportunity to discuss how the day went with their children. They state that their children, who

are primarily Generation Y or X users, are constantly online, and that they hardly put their phones down, but sit at the dinner table with their eyes constantly focused on their cell phones.

In cases where interviews were conducted with Seniors, the author noticed that if Generation Y users were asked not to bring their devices to the dinner table they practically gulped down their dinners and dashed off to get back onto facebook or Mxit. Parents and grandparents also complained that if devices were not allowed at the dinner table, then users would stay away and avoid dinners, making various excuses to not turn up like doing homework or not feeling well.

Baby boomers also reveal that conversations with their children are often brief and to the point, and that if they do have the opportunity to speak, they feel pressured to keep it short. Most of the users were also of the view that they often have to rehearse what they want to say to their children to ensure that they get across the critical points within the time frame that their children will mentally present. They emphasise that their children are always in a hurry to get away.

Dr Rosen (2011), professor of psychology at California State University, wrote in *Science Daily* that teens who use facebook more often show more narcissistic tendencies, while young adults who have a strong facebook presence show signs of other psychological disorders, including antisocial behaviours, mania and aggressive tendencies.

On the other hand, it appears that there are some positive aspects regarding younger generations using social networking sites. For example, they have access to an enormous amount of information, and can form study groups.

These users see the benefit in these sites when they need to communicate briefly with their children from a distance. This is often necessary to see where and how they are when they are away from home, and to let them know if they will be delayed in picking them up from school or social activities. Many of the Boomers were of same perspective as Cynthia who asserts;

> "If I'm running late in picking up my daughter after a meeting, I often manage to reach her on facebook as I know she will be chatting with friends. It's much easier

> when you are also a "friend." As a result I can let her know that I'll be late. In that way she can stay with a teacher or with friends rather than waiting alone. The sites are particularly helpful if I do not know where my children are. I can always contact their friends on facebook or twitter and I usually receive an immediate response. To that end the sites are often life saving because, unlike my parents in an age when these tools were non-existent, I can reach my children instantly because there is always a friend of theirs who is available on facebook or twitter when they are offline."

4.10.4 (c) Communication breakdown between spouses

Almost 1 in 5 of the users interviewed in this age group suggested that social networking sites are directly responsible for a communication breakdown between spouses. The users were of the view that before the Internet and SNSs, communication between couples did not come naturally as television was as much a hindrance as anything else. The difference, however, was that couple's spent time together watching movies or shows, often providing them with the opportunity to discuss what they've watched. With SNSs though there is individuality, and agency is a major issue resulting in isolation of one form or another. Each person has their own profile, on the same or on different sites, which they often prefer to access in their own space and time without any interference.

It was very apparent that social networking sites often enhance mood swings in couples who know that when they have disagreements and perhaps feel irritated with a spouse, they can find refuge in their online friends, thus resulting in spouses having less make up conversation. They frequently end up being busy on their PCs and cell phones, chatting to friends whose conversations they tend to find delightful.

Peter, a facebooker, myspacer and twitter, suggests that:

> "It is often much more fun to spend hours speaking to people you don't know and whom you feel are your new friends, than it is with a spouse with whom you're fed-up. But the danger is that you hardly know the person that you're finding fascinating

> and exciting. The truth is that in our minds, we create a picture of the other person that is not grounded in any reality."

According to anthropologist Dr Pauline Wiesner of the University of Utah, "electronic relationships make it easy for people to misrepresent themselves, always showing their best side. Anonymity also allows darker sides to flourish" (Jarvis; 2009:1).

This form of misrepresentation of the self also seems to be common amongst couples befriending couples online—both male and female—whom they often find intriguing. This brings a negative impulse into their relationship. Chapter 7 below provides a detailed analysis of the impact of SNSs on intimate relationships.

4.10.4. (d) Communication with distant family and friends

When users were asked how the sites have impacted on communication between them and their distant family and friends, almost 85% confirmed that communication has increased dramatically between them and their distant family members with whom they had been unable to get in touch for years, sometimes even for decades. The sites have improved family ties that had been fractured in the past, and have mended relations.

These users also pointed out that, as a result of SNSs, they are able to find old friends and make new ones instantly, and they commented that they have been in regular contact with old and new friends.

Social networking sites have altered remarkably the ways in which users converse. They can speak to multiple friends simultaneously in chat rooms and on walls with the related tools already outlined in previous chapters. Conversations are much longer and occur more frequently than they used to. Users can also communicate instantly with friends regardless of where they are situated in the world.

Some of the users were concerned about friends who seem to communicate too frequently and in social circles.

Jardine a user on facebook, YouTube and myspace, suggests that:

> "My friends and I have made it clear that when we out socialising, we all switch off our cell phone devices. Engaging in conversation and chatting away with friends who are not in our presence is considered impolite and ignorant."

Regardless of the fact that users complained about friends who tend to over communicate on SNSs in the presence of others who intend to socialise offline, they were of the view that such behavior results in communication breakdowns between friends. I noticed that they were firm that it is unacceptable.

4.10.5 Baby boomer perspectives on the ways in which they have been able to find the lost and reach the unreachable

For most Boomers, methods of finding people with whom they had lost contact were restricted to radio stations and newspapers. However, through the Internet and SNSs finding friends and family members with whom one might have been out of contact for decades, and whose whereabouts are unknown, can be done instantly; literally through the mere click of a button.

It used to be, apparently, that finding long distance friends and family members through sites on the Internet required filling in the name of their school and their final year of study. Now, however, the social networking sites like myspace and facebook, for example, allow one to simply search for lost friends and family members.

Baby boomer Loren Form commented on YouTube (2009) that the minute he started to explore SNSs he immediately started to feel like a fish out of water. What he couldn't understand was how people could become pre-occupied with a person that they went to school with, but with whom they hadn't spoken for 20 years or more. To him the sudden interest in where they are and what they are doing with their lives remains a mystery. Neither could he comprehend that, as a result, facebook and myspace are paid millions to make this possible.

4.11 Seniors

During this study over 2 500 Seniors from diverse races, cultures, and ethnic groups were observed on the various sites, and their views on digital tools and social networking sites were analysed. The Seniors were randomly selected and their views were acquired through either questionnaires or surveys. These were mostly completed online, sometimes on their own, but often also with the assistance of members of younger generations. Some of these Seniors were even interviewed by younger users that had already completed their own questionnaires. A few Seniors preferred face to face interviews which were conducted offline.

4.11.1 User perspectives on offline methods of communication, digital tools and, particularly, social networking sites

In analysing the views of Seniors concerning digital tools and on and offline communication, it appears that around 60% feel that they are, in many respects, still old school and largely prefer using postal services, landlines and mobile phones to communicate with friends. However, it is important to note that these are the views of users who reside in developing countries.

Individual Seniors within a large sector of British society were stopped in the streets and were asked random questions regarding their views on digital tools. Some of these interviews were shown on YouTube (2009). The overriding view appears to be that, generally, digital tools are complicated, and become more so with each advancement.

They appeared to show a similar lack of interest in social networking sites, with almost 60% of Seniors interviewed expressing a complete lack of enthusiasm in using the sites as communication tools with family and friends. Some even felt that they are like complicated foreign monsters and they were adamant that they would not attempt to use them.

When the Seniors were asked if they owned cell phones and if they used them as communication tools, many admitted that they do. In most cases they expressed similar sentiments as Jacob's, a myspacer and facebooker who said:

> "My peers and I generally keep in touch through our cell phones. These are already complicated enough and the best that almost all of us can do is just make and receive calls. The rest of the features on the devices remain a mystery to me and my friends and we don't know how to use them."

One 1 in 5 Seniors interviewed repeated this view, and none suggested that they have or access the Internet from their devices.

When asked if they would use, or would consider accessing the Internet from their PCs or via SNSs, many stated similar views to Tim, who said that:

> "I am way too old to learn that, and learning how to operate a computer is already a challenge. Social networking sites appear to be even more complicated and it is too late. To learn to use them now would be a waste of time."

This sentiment of being too old to learn was expressed by the majority of Senior users interviewed, and many re-iterated that they had no interest and would not even attempt using the tools to communicate and/or converse.

Of all the seniors' interviewed on YouTube, only 10% said that they can send a sms and know how to open and read a message. Others confirmed that they were more than happy writing letters to recipients and sending them through postal services because digital tools are just too complicated and better left un-attempted.

If these users were asked if they would employ SNSs as communication tools, the majority, who were interviewed on YouTube, said no, and that they did not intend doing so. In fact, as some Seniors became more aware of the topic under discussion they showed resistance and simply answered, "too complicated."

On the other hand, about 40% of the senior users interviewed said that, although they had once held the same opinion as their peers, they had noticed that some of their acquaintances had

started using the sites to communicate with friends and family across the world, and they now intended to do the same. They did, however admit to finding it difficult to learn to use computers and to access the Internet and SNSs overnight.

Seniors were generally asked the same questions regarding using mobile phones. It was apparent that whether they live in the United Kingdom or whether they hail from some of the most remote areas in the world, they seem to have similar views: they all appear to be able to use digital devices to make and receive calls, but are all unable to access or send smses.

The primary complaint that Senior users have against accessing the Internet via their mobile phones was that they were small and unreadable. It was also found that, as with their counterparts in less affluent countries, the majority of Seniors still largely make use of postal services to communicate with friends and distant family, and children and grandchildren who live away from home. Postal services also enable them to send food parcels to family members in the military, for example, and birthday gifts and cards for special occasions such as Christmas and Thanksgiving.

Some of the interviewees admitted that once they had learned how to use computers and social networking sites, they superseded their own expectations and eventually managed to overcome their fears of communicating the digital way.

It should be noted that amongst the seniors interviewed both via YouTube and on the sites explored, it was found that almost 20% of the Seniors had acquired their digital skills during their working years. They communicated via email with colleagues' family and friends, and they were expected to sharpen their skills enough to be able to communicate on SNSs. There appeared to be two distinct groups within this sector; 1) Those who had been exposed to SNSs at home and had acquired the skills from family and friends, and; 2) Seniors who acquired formal training at learning or community centres.

4.11.2 Seniors who acquired digital skills from family members

Seniors who answered that they acquired digital skills from family members were generally exposed to digital tools within the home. The majority admitted that although they complained at first and did not understand why members of the younger generations were hooked on the sites, they were often encouraged to learn but did not really have an interest. What did seem to motivate them to learn was when they noticed how younger generations communicate with ease, and particularly the way they could find friends. Although these users were motivated to acquire the necessary skills by family members and peers, it was apparent that some did so to curb loneliness through engaging with peers, friends and distant family members.

Tom, a Senior user on myspace, says:

> "Although it is no secret that there are various advantages in using social networking sites, they had been a challenge to get accustomed to, and learning often required the assistance of children and grandchildren."

Of this group of users almost 80% expressed similar sentiments. Michelle is a senior user on facebook. She lives with her daughter and her daughter's husband, and their three children who are all in their early twenties and are therefore Generation Y users.

Michelle says:

> "Although I thought I could never really use or understand computers or the Internet per se, when I observed my children and grandchildren using them and accessing social networking sites in particular, I was amazed to see that from the click of a button, I could speak to a family member living in Australia whom I have not seen for years. I found it amazing! I could also see photos of their children and grandchildren, and sometimes even saw them face-to-face. I gave my grandchildren the name of an old friend whom I have also not been in touch with. I didn't know her whereabouts, but they simply typed her name in, and voila! There she was, I could still remember her face and could not believe that she was just a click away."

Many senior users agreed that they could now constantly speak to their children living in other states or countries, or grandchildren who live away from home or are at college. Some said that it is also much easier to keep in contact with children who travel on business trips. The frequency with which they can view photographs of family and friends, and find old friends and family appears to be an added benefit.

It seems that once seniors have been exposed to digital tools within their own environment, their perceptions on social media changes. Sandra, a senior user on facebook, myspace and YouTube, says:

> "When postal services were the only option, I often had to wait months to see a picture of a grandchild born in a faraway country. However, with digital tools one can almost instantly access their photos on facebook or myspace. It is such a relief lately. I can see my friends whom I have not seen in years. And the most amazing thing is that my friends and I can often share and prepare a recipe together, and even have dinner together, eating almost identical meals."

Almost 88% of senior users said that, in the past, after writing a letter, they still really felt lonely, however, since they began SNSs they never really feel that they are home alone because when they do need company they hop onto any of their favourite sites and chat to any friends and family who are available.

Viola, a senior who now uses both facebook and myspace, said:

> "Compared to traditional tools, social networking sites save much time that would otherwise have been wasted in writing letters and travelling to postal offices. One can travel almost instantly to another country while stationed in the comfort of one's home, and through a mere click of a button can chat or converse with friends over a social drink."

Overall, this group of users seem to be of the view that family, friends, and peers primarily influenced their interest in acquiring digital skills.

4.11.3 Senior users who acquired digital skills through learning or community centres

Seniors who acquired digital skills through community learning centres, it appears, previously had limited or no access to these tools earlier in their lives. Hence, they were compelled to begin foundation lessons in order to obtain computer skills. Some noticed that peers, whom they often came into contact with, seemed not to call too much on landlines anymore, and actually even discontinued their landline services which left them out in the cold, and lonely. Nancy said of this:

> "When I come across peers at church, at community activities or in stores they often confirm that they are connected and enjoy the advantages which are coupled with the current ways in which younger generations communicate. They told me that the ways in which younger users communicate have taken new directions and are much quicker. They said I could talk to friends and family, near or far, instantly from across the globe. They told me that I would be able to view their photographs, talk to them face to face, find old friends and find my heritage! I became eager to learn. I knew it wouldn't be easy, but I could not put it off any longer, and had to take the initiative or face isolation. Look at me now. I can use the sites, and it is amazing."

Some of the users observed on YouTube (2010) believe that it is imperative that they acquire digital skills. They feel that the sites have had a positive impact on their lives, and on those of their peers. They state that they are much happier and that they do not feel that they are behind the times, or that they have been left in the dark ages.

As more seniors begin using digital tools or become "wired" on either of the social networking sites, it becomes apparent there is much that they are searching for. During the study it was found that a growing number of 65 year olds and older were signing onto social networking sites such as facebook to look for friends, dating partners, or just people to socialise with in general. Because the Internet is global, it gives users a chance to meet people across the globe. The

number of seniors using the internet has risen by 6 million in the past 5 years according to data released by Amneris (2008:1).

An annual event is held on 21st May in the United Kingdom at which older people are offered a gentle introduction to using computers and to getting online in supportive and friendly settings like UK Online centres, libraries and age concern branches. The organisers of this event persuaded celebrity Dame Vera Lynn to record a video, which is also on YouTube, encouraging her peers to learn how to download music, while Terry Wogan has been telling everyone who will listen that "it's so easy that any old Janet and John could get online."

Bill Thompson (2010:1) affirms that this sort of familiarisation is vitally important because most people, particularly the elderly, who either think that computers and the Internet are too complicated for them to use or simply can't see why they are of any interest, should learn more. He asserts that it is important to show people what's possible and to explain how they can use the network to do things they want to do, like find songs they remember and send old photos to family members. Additionally", he says; "it is a great way to bring down barriers."

It appears that Seniors who live with family or friends or on their own, become aware that peers are connected on SNSs and it encourages them to do the same. It creates an interest in learning at home from family members, or results in them undergoing formal training and dramatically increasing the number of Seniors using SNSs.

According to a study conducted by media research giant, Nielsen, who released a report in 2009 saying that "in the past five years the number of people 65 years and older using the Internet increased by more than 55%, from 11.3 million active users in November 2004 to 17.9 million in November 2009." It is believed that by 2011 this number had increased even further. The study also found that seniors are not just using the Internet, but are spending more time on it.

Rob, a user on both myspace and facebook, was of the opinion that:

> "When friends and family opted for social networking sites and insisted they were fast and convenient for passing on information, we had no choice but to follow suit or face being left behind."

Users who expressed these sentiments also suggested that they had a choice to acquire the skills and stay in touch, or face "isolation and loneliness.

The users interviewed, and those who completed questionnaires or with whom face to face interviews were conducted, regardless of their destinations or the fact that access seems to be unequal, appear to have much in common. Each had to undergo some form of training or guidance in order to become connected digitally, unlike their counterparts who are eager to explore while learning in the interim.

4.11.4 The social networking sites Seniors generally use to communicate with family and friends

During interviews and in questionnaires Senior users were asked which SNSs they generally preferred to use to communicate with family and friends. Almost 80% preferred facebook, myspace and YouTube, as well as additional sites which are geared towards them. Only 10% suggested that they make use of twitter, while none, at the time of this study, indicated that they use Mxit. It appears that while they communicate on facebook and myspace, they tend to prefer YouTube for watching pre-recorded videos which show health programs, recipes, music, church sermons, music, etc.

Jenni-Lee is a Senior who uses facebook, YouTube and myspace to communicate. She says that:

> "There is so much information on the sites. This includes recipes, as well the views that people sometimes express on the site, and often religious sermons."

Almost 2 in 5 of the senior users advise that they are no longer able to attend church services regularly because of ill health. However, through YouTube and other sites they can attend church at home and no longer have to feel that they have missed their services. Although the users confessed that it is not the same as going to church physically, it is still often possible for them to

watch the same sermons as friends, and then when they get together at social gatherings, they have much to talk about and can almost speak with one voice.

Some sites are specifically geared towards Seniors, like Eons, for example. Here Seniors can meet peers, make friends and engage in various discussions which interest them. The site was started by Jeff Taylow, founder of the job site monster.com, and is much like myspace. Seniority is another site: a cross between myspace and facebook where music and videos can be added. Genkvetch from South Florida has a forum, as well as health and entertainment sections. Seniors looking to date can try a site called Senior Passion, which is mostly for seniors who perhaps have lost a spouse, or are perhaps divorced and are ready to try again with someone new.

Almost all Seniors confirm that the sites have transformed the ways in which they communicate in unprecedented ways. Grossman (2010:44) suggests that "Computers and the Internet have become such an everyday part of our lives that advanced technology has resulted in recommendation engines and software that suggest what we should watch or read or listen to next. They help us deal with the millions of choices of Web offers, but can a computer really have a good taste, or can we make these choices for ourselves?"

4.11.5 Senior views on the ways in which the Internet and social networking sites have shaped communication or conversation

When Seniors were asked how the Internet and particularly social networking sites had shaped communication, almost 90% of those interviewed felt that that SNSs have influenced the ways and the speed at which they communicate with family and friends in unprecedented ways. While the rest suggested that they still make use of postal services to pay bills, almost none said that they still do so to communicate with family and friends.

Users have confirmed that the ways in which they communicate have been transformed dramatically over the last few decades. They say that communication in their lifetimes has gone from smoke signals and drums to letters and telegrams, fixed landlines and public telephones, computers, emailing and cell phones and, more recently, SNSs which appeared particularly complicated in the beginning but are now invaluable. Still, some were of the view that although

they miss the intimacy which face to face communication brings, something of it can still be found in unique ways on the sites. They commented that the impact which the sites have had on their lives in general has led to much insight, and that much time has been saved.

Suzan, a facebooker and myspacer says:

> "I never thought that it would be so easy to invite distant family and friends to special occasions such as weddings, anniversaries or birthday parties. As a result of the sites it has become much easier. My family and I merely make a common invitation which we post on the various sites we use and we know they will be received by almost everyone immediately, or the minute they log on to the sites. Most of my friends are constantly online and I notice that they often RSVP or respond much quicker through this process."

Users also feel that they can communicate with almost everyone instantly without having to make an effort to call or travel only to find out that the person is unable to speak to them, or is not home. Tom, who uses mostly facebook and YouTube says:

> "In this era of social networking sites, my peers and I can communicate or converse online with almost everyone from pastors if we have a personal problem to hairdressers for an appointment; from motor vehicle repairs if we have a breakdown on the road to electricians who we know will respond shortly. It has also become much easier for them to respond in the same way to let us know when they will be available. Communication has become much easier and my friends and I all agree."

Seniors feel that although they can now contact friends over short and long distances telephonically it is much more affordable to use SNSs.

Senior also feel that SNSs have impacted much in the way they speak and form sentences, and on their language overall**.** Using the sites seems to have rapidly reduced the amount of words they would have otherwise have in a letter or in a telephonic conversation. Younger users have

taught them to send short messages and to include symbols such as ☺ which indicates that they are smiling or are happy. They have learnt phrases like as "lol", which means laugh out loud. This is in contrast to a study made by Open University (2010), which states that the growing use of the English language on SNSs is a threat to the learning of other languages. While it can't be disputed that SNSs have impacted on formal English, what seems to have resulted amongst all the generations is that a new type of online language is perhaps in the making, and this is a topic that will be explored in the near future.

Based on the overall analysis and the users' perspectives it appears that SNSs have increased communication for Senior users in unprecedented ways.

4.11.6 Senior perspectives on whether or not SNSs have increased or decreased communication between distant family and friends

While it may be argued that social networking sites have potentially enhanced communication between individuals there is, however, the possibility that they could have reduced communication amongst individuals and their immediate families within the home. Hence, one of the questions asked of Senior users was whether or not SNSs have increased or decreased communication in the home and between family and friends. The users provided their perspectives as outlined below.

4.11.6 (a) Communication in the home between family members

Informants advised that, while the sites had been convenient for communication, almost 1 in 3 users argued that they had, to a large extent, significantly decreased communication within the home. They also felt that SNSs have had a particularly negative effect on social norms within the home like, for example, family time at the dinner table where, traditionally, there were discussions on how the day went and on various issues that concern or make them happy. Many Seniors still believe in these values but are unable to restore them.

There is strong opinion that the sites have created barriers between spouses which appear to difficult to transcend. There are concerns that couples have lost the ability to truly communicate and to spend quality time together.

The majority of Seniors are also of the opinion that, as a result of digital tools within the home, spouses seem to be either constantly on their computers or cell phones chatting to friends or distant family. Seniors are convinced that it has become almost impossible to converse effectively at the dinner table as was customary during the early stages of their marriage. It appears as though either one or both spouses are constantly on their cell phones at the dinner table, or are in a hurry to return to their computers or mobile phones behind closed doors. They say that each person is often found in their own space where they do not want to be disturbed. It has resulted in an unhealthy environment and has created instability within families.

It seems that users are not biased in their view of this situation and blame both husbands and wives for the communication breakdown which they agree has impacted negatively on their children, and has created dysfunctional families.

Almost 80% of these users, particularly those living with children and grandchildren, or who visit them regularly for long periods of time, were also of the view that social networking sites have had a negative impact on younger married couples.

The above comments were not any different from a study which was conducted by Randall and Richards (2011) of *The TechJournal*. The researchers submit that "the number of divorces occurring because of facebook and other social networking sites has been on the rise since the sites became increasingly popular." They suggest that the sites are being used by more and more unhappy people who seek consolation and become disloyal. According to the study, lawyers have claimed that "facebook is being cited in almost 1 in 5 online divorce petitions".

This is indicative of the number of individuals who are constantly online, but absent from those around them. The number of people online worldwide is expected to increase from 1.5 billion today to 2.2 billion by 2013. This is not surprising. According to Forrester Research, San Francisco (2009:61), it is suggested that many of these networks will grow "topsy," and will affect the ways in which individuals communicate. They appear to have transcended the impact that television once had on conventional societies and the parameters in which they function.

Almost 95% of Senior users on the various sites held the same sentiment as John, a myspacer and YouTuber , who complained that although communication appeared to have been transformed in unique ways, it had also negatively affected communication between older and younger generations. He says:

> "The sites have led to a breakdown in communication between older and younger generations, and amongst their peers. And the time that younger generations, particularly Generation Y users, spend online has resulted in increased communication breakdown, thereby impacting negatively on their behaviour. This has also resulted in younger users creating a wall around them which is inaccessible to those who are in their midst."

However, it should also be noted that in the event of SNSs increasing and shaping communication, they appear to have affected communication negatively in traditional society. Larsen (2008:1) confirms that "the online way of communication has affected offline communication."

Seniors expressed their concern regarding the obsession that Generation Y users seem to have with the sites. They believe that younger generations appear to spend an excessive amount of time online with friends, and appear to be absent from traditional society.

Many Seniors feel that younger users are focused on social networking sites 24/7, and hardly know how to hold a proper conversation in groups or with family. In addition they constantly complain that they do not have time to stop and listen to what they are being told.

Tina, a 76 year old Senior who is a user on YouTube and facebook, complains:

> "I have a grandson who is constantly on his phone at the dinner table with earphones in his ears. He also spends much time in the restroom – sometimes more than an hour while the rest of us have to wait or continue dinner without him. The reality is that the only time we get to speak to him is when he lifts up his head from the device for a minute or two when he his forced to eat dinner, which he does not have much of these

> days. As a result we say as much as we can at that time. And in return he complains that we overwhelm him with all the information and drive him insane. Hence, he spends very little time in our presence and we almost never get to spend quality time with him, or have a proper conversation with him. I believe that the sites have not only led to a breakdown in communication, but they appear to have impacted negatively on his personality: he is no longer the little boy who was constantly talking and asking questions and was eager to be listened to all the time. When he is signed in online, he is completely signed off offline. It's a major concern."

The majority of Seniors expressed similar views to Tina, and only 1 in 8 argued to the contrary. They were of the view that the sites have resulted in increased communication amongst couples who are able to contact each other constantly during the day or when they are off on business trips. Similarly, they were of the sentiment that the sites have had a positive impact amongst children and their parents, who are constantly aware of their whereabouts.

4.11.6 (b) Communication between distant family and friends

When users were asked whether or not communication had increased amongst distant family and friends, almost all those asked were of the view that the sites have increased communication remarkably.

The amount of time users spend online, which results in various discourses with is indicative in Arthur (2009:1) during an SXSW interview held by Sarah Lacy with facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg in March, observed by an audience dissatisfied with her interviewing style. The whole interview spills into silent, but powerful discourse, and which viewers referred to as a "train wreck." This is evident of the unprecedented ways in which users can be connected and communicate.

By and large, while Seniors held the opinion on one hand that SNSs have increased communication in some respects between family members and in the home, on the other hand they argued that the sites have led directly to a total breakdown in communication in the home, amongst spouses and their children, and between siblings.

4.11.6 (c) Senior views of the ways in which they manage to find the lost and reach the unreachable.
Seniors were asked how SNSs have enabled them to find lost family and friends, and how they have been assisted in reaching the unreachable. Many of the users suggested that, as a result of social networking sites, they have been able to find and contact friends with whom they have lost touch for a long time. They said that in the past such tools were unavailable and they felt that when persons were unreachable and their whereabouts unknown, chances were that they remained so, unless you ran into them by chance.

According to these Seniors they are able to enter the name of old school friends or family members with whom they have not been in touch for years, and manage to find instantly. They also manage to find friends either through peers or family members. A vast majority of the users expressed similar sentiments as Jacob, who said:

> "Some of my old school friends and I had not seen each other in decades, and I did not know where they were at all. We had literally lost touch and I guess had not even considered finding each other because with postal services, landlines or emailing, it was impossible to even consider searching. I tried several times but ran into dead ends. However, I simply inserted a few of my old friends' names in the Find Friends section in facebook, and to my amazement, there they were right in front of me. I immediately contacted them and the rest is history."

Seniors are finding their college roommates, best friends from the block and elementary school crushes. Grandparents are friends with college aged grandkids and keeping up with their accomplishments (Kommein.com; 2010).

Jonah, a facebooker, myspacer and YouTuber said:

> "I had been searching for my long lost cousins in England for a long time and had failed dismally, but when I went onto myspace, I managed to find them. My family and I are reunited and I was so grateful. They recently came to visit us and we had a happy reunion. Now we are constantly in touch, all thanks to facebook and myspace."

They all agree that although radio stations, newspapers and even television stations used to assist with locating friends in the past, the results were often poor. With SNSs, they said, the searches are almost effortless.

Some of the users also described how the sites had been effective in tracing their heritage. Overall, in terms of users finding the lost and reaching the unreachable, it seems that all the users interviewed, including those who filled out questionnaires, were pleased and successful in relocating long lost family and friends.

4.11.7 What impact do social networking sites have on the overall communication of Seniors

One of the questions which Senior users initiated and insisted be included in this study, is the impact that SNSs have had on their health. Almost 90% of the Seniors interviewed stated that since they began using SNSs, their health had improved dramatically. They feel that this is attributed to the fact that they are no longer lonely because they interact and socialise with friends, children and grandchildren more frequently than they did in the past.

Some of the users also said that they no longer feel isolated or deserted by younger family members because they constantly keep in touch through leaving messages or by spending time chatting online. They were generally of the view that SNSs have curbed their loneliness**,** particularly after the death of a spouse, and the loss of children to marriage. Catherine a facebooker, myspacer and YouTuber says:

> "As a result of the sites my family, friends and I are constantly in touch. I no longer feel isolated or deserted. And we are also able to make friends all over the world. Through viewing diverse videos on YouTube my peers and I feel like part of an audience. And honestly speaking, we live much fuller lives in our golden days."

Some of the users said that talking with a group of friends often feels like a walk in the park and it is really good for their health. According to Kommein.com (2009), "to say that social media revolutionised the way families connect is an understatement."

Those living on their own say that the sites have enabled them to communicate instantly, and have been extremely affective in times when they needed assistance and in cases of emergency. By simply posting "help!" on either of the sites family and friends immediately respond.

And some of the users humorously said:

> "Social networking sites have increased our life span in general; my peers and I always discuss this. We are excited about the features on the sites which enable us to view photos of our grandchildren, friends and family. The reality is that, for most of us, when the sites came in loneliness went out the window."

In contrast, Sigman (2009:1) in *The Biologist*, the journal of *Britain's Institute of Biology*, concludes in her findings that; "the evidence is mounting that too much facebooking, twittering and other social networking sites could kill you. And by taking the place of face to face communication, they up your chances of being felled by cancer, dementia, heart disease, stroke diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis and lupus." Sigman further states that the average amount of time a Briton spends directly with other people has plunged dramatically from six hours a day in 1987, to just two hours twenty years later. Additionally, the study suggests that the huge reduction in direct interaction results in physiological changes with unhealthy consequences.

It is apparent to the author that excessive use of SNSs as an indication of addictive behaviour is more prevalent amongst younger users which could impact negatively on them. However, there was no evidence of whether or not the sites post a health risk to Senior users as advocated by Sigman (2001:1) in those interviewed for this paper. Instead what became evident was quite the opposite. Contrary to Sigman's argument, Seniors largely believe that the sites have impacted positively on their health. Similarly, they are of the view that the loneliness and isolation that they experienced prior to using SNSs impacted more negatively on their health because they were extremely lonely most of the time.

4.12 Conclusion

This chapter provided an analysis of users' views regarding offline methods of communication and current digital tools. Also described are the users' views on how SNSs, specifically facebook, myspace, YouTube, Mxit and twitter, have shaped communication amongst users of all generations. The history of offline methods of communication predominantly used in the era prior to digital tools is presented briefly. A brief analysis of the history of the sites, together with a discussion of the tools users employ to access SNSs is also discussed, together with a picture of which sites they generally use to communicate with family and friends.

An in-depth analysis was conducted on the different demographic of users on the ways in which SNSs have shaped communication in the home between spouses, between older and younger generations, between parents and children, and between users and their friends.

Also conveyed are the users' views on the ways in which they manage to find lost or distant relatives and friends and Senior users provide their perspectives on the impact which the sites have had on them personally.

The final conclusion is that, based on the overall observations and findings, SNSs have indeed transformed communication in unprecedented ways and have increased the rate and speed at which users from all generations converse, find the lost and reach the unreachable instantly, regardless of their locations, merely through typing a few words or through clicking away to observe what they post online. It is evident that the sites have indeed provided avenues that redefine communication, language, and the ways in which the unreachable can be reached.

Chapter 5 "Shall We Dance?" Showing and sharing culture on social networking sites

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter is discussed the perspectives of more than 4 000 Generation Y users on facebook, twitter, Mxit, YouTube and myspace. They originate from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Seniors were also interviewed in some cases where it was felt that their perspectives were relevant to this section of the paper.

One of the key questions asked during fieldwork was how is culture shared and/or shown on SNSs. The chapter examines the ways in which the users share and/or show culture or cultural experience through things like art and garments, for example, accessories, traditional dishes and social drinks as cultural phenomena, rituals, music and dance, all through interaction on the social networking sites. Further questions asked in this regard are outlined in the subsections below

However, firstly, the terms dance and culture are defined for the context of this paper. Next is presented the impact which social networking sites have had on the ways in which differences, or the "other", is viewed and whether or not users perhaps embrace their friends' cultural differences.

In his article *Time and the Other* Fabian (1965) effectively identifies the rhetorical elements of temporal distancing such as ethnographic depictions of the other as primitive or traditional, or as part and parcel of a (neo) colonial project. Thirdly, whether or not acculturation or enculturation has ensued, as defined in Chapter 1, is discussed. Briefly explored are users' views on instances where they encountered cultural barriers or misinterpretation and how, as a result of SNSs, they have perhaps learned to overcome or reaffirm these. Furthermore, also discussed are users' views on whether or not as a result of cross-cultural interaction the birth of a new global virtual culture is emerging in which differences have, in the interim, possibly become irrelevant and the notion or (assumption) of the other, as stated above, can possibly be embraced.

5.2 Defining "dance"

In the context of this study, the ideal term for dance as defined in *Dictionary.com* is to produce or to take part. Other descriptions of dance include the movement of one's feet or body, both rhythmically and in a pattern of steps, especially to the accompaniment of music. In the context of this chapter, users from diverse cultural backgrounds invite each other to "dance" (establish friendships) cross-culturally and through social interaction, while simultaneously showing and sharing culture.

5.3 Defining the term culture

Culture is learned (actively or passively) and is transmitted cross-generationally, through formal and informal social interaction (Tharp; 2009:3).

Geertz (1973) defines culture as the fabric of meaning in which human beings interpret their experience and guide their interactions. According to the web dictionary the term is defined as shared beliefs and values of group; the beliefs, customs, practices and social behaviour of a particular nation or people.

5.4. Observations

During fieldwork it was noticed how friends from distinct ethnic groups and backgrounds interact socially. What became evident was that cultures—once embedded within certain societies and restricted by borders, and in some cases frowned upon—became visible to friends on the various SNSs. This was not the case for individuals from previous generations who, without access to digital tools, could not explore or observe foreign cultures first-hand. Scholars were primarily granted access, and at times after much resistance or initiation into a particular society before they were accepted.

Geertz (1975: 2) confirms this and describes a time that he and his wife visited a Balinese village in 1958. There was resistance towards them. He explains that they were intruders, professional ones, and the villagers dealt with them as the Balinese always seem to deal with people who are not part of their lives and who yet press themselves upon them: as though they were not there.

For them, and to a degree for Geertz and his wife, they were non-persons, spectres or invisible men. As they wondered around uncertain, wistful, eager to please, people seem to look right through them with a gaze focused several yards behind them on a stone or a tree.

Social networking sites appear to have unveiled what could be considered a cultural breakthrough in which friends observe first-hand the cultures of friends through online social interaction. The reality is that it appears on the one hand as though SNSs have perhaps enhanced new ways in which culture and cultural experience is shown, shared, learned and/or embraced. On the other hand, it could perhaps be argued that the sites have instead actualised stronger influences of westernisation, or, perhaps further led to the incomprehension of each of the users' rich and unique cultures. Or, it could arguably be an authentic approach in which cultures can be learned, understood and/or exchanged? Perhaps the answers to these questions are in the perspectives of the users presented below.

The ways in which friends interact and engage cross-culturally became discernible during the fieldwork. By viewing user profiles it becomes apparent how some users display aspects of their cultures through the photos they paste on their photo albums on the sites. Rituals, art, traditional garments, accessories, food and drinks, music and dance are all shown and shared for friends. It was essential to explore in an in-depth manner the ways in which the users manage to share, show, and in return perhaps learn and embrace friends' cultures.

The key objective was to provide an in-depth analysis of the ways in which cross-cultural interactions or exchanges ensue. From the observations it appears that SNSs comprise of platforms where differences or diversity appear to be non-issues. However, the reality is that it is often difficult to comprehend what values users place from a distance. This is primarily because their different personalities could perhaps be characteristic of their cultures. Havilland (1983:2) suggests that it is difficult to characterise cultures in terms of particular personalities.

During interaction with friends, it was constantly recognisable that visible cultural influences appeared to frame and guide habitual ways of thinking. In addition, friends manage to navigate their differences and turn them into opportunities for constructive relationship-building. What

seemed to emerge is that the notion of the other perhaps falls away. However, it could be that the eye through which the users were observed has merely amplified the actuality of the dimensions of the social interaction, and/or cultural exchanges which occur amongst friends and their friends.

5.5 Users' perspectives on the ways through which they share or show culture

Almost 55% of the users interviewed suggested that they had, at some point or another, shown or shared aspects of their culture and beliefs either through posting photographs on their albums in their profiles, through their speech, through traditional dishes, or through displaying garments which belong to their cultural dress. They also encouraged their friends do the same, and Informants pointed out various ways through which they managed to do so.

It was found that 30% of users were unaware that they were sharing or showing cultural and traditional practices and only realised that they had done so during interviews. They were, however, able to confirm that they did recall sharing or showing friends. Just over 15% suggested that they never shared or showed aspects of their culture with friends online, and decided to keep what is personal out of SNSs, but the same users suggested that they observed their friends, either intentionally or unintentionally. As a result they became interested and discussed what they observed both on and offline.

5.5.1 Traditional art, garments and accessories

Traditional art, garments and accessories are some of the most common cultural indicators that users show to their friends on SNSs. Almost 50% of the users observed on the sites suggested that they do show traditional art and accessories to their friends who hail from diverse cultural backgrounds. They feel that it is imperative that they share and show traditional art and the accessories that they are proud of. YouTubers show these items through pre-recorded movies which include music, African beads or garments either of themselves or those of others cultures. For example Afro-Hifi (2011) shows a pre-recorded video on Uganda Discovery, Traditional Art and Craft, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NQoZxPWk1rk, while facebookers, twitters, etc., show their cultures through photographs which display the insides of their homes decorated either with African or western décor. Their art is also shown through photographs of their homes.

It became apparent that in the showing of some aspects of their culture, some users actually do keep to old traditions that are observed and practiced within their families. Some users from the same group confirmed that although they find themselves on a global westernised platform, they do not necessarily lose their identities, and still remain who they are.
Art is also a key feature which users share with friends online. Its significance and relevance is often stated. However, it did become apparent that most of the users who do post certain forms of art on their online photo albums, are often unaware of what it represents culturally.

Nosi, a Mxiter, twitter, facebooker and YouTuber says:

> "Art, and particularly traditional garments or dresses together with the accessories, are coupled with the pride of the women in our family. We often dress up at our families' traditional ceremonies, and although I am young, when I do wear my garments I feel special and like a lady. I do not feel the same way when I wear jeans and a T-shirt. Therefore, when we have weddings or traditional ceremonies where I need to dress up, I ensure that I take pictures of myself and my family and post them on my facebook album so all my friends can see. I particularly intend to impress friends of other cultures whom I notice do the same."

She continued to say that when she posts pictures of herself online wearing jeans, they go unnoticed. What they are then actually interested in is the social event that is being attended. When she wears western or ordinary clothing it is a non issue and is hardly discussed.

According to Price (1988: 127) who describes Saramaka's social life and the gender difference in art in which she states the relevance of the full understanding of their arts. She indicates that "just as husbands are scarcer than wives, so are male-made wooden carvings scarcer than female-made decorative textiles. But in the case of textiles it is a totally different matter because men have more than three wives, as well as a large number of lovers who also offer decorative textiles as gifts. Women's carved calabashes are also intended for use in the context of marriage, but unlike woodcarvings and textiles, they are never conjugal gifts." Woodcarvings, decorative

sowings, and calabash carving—the three main artistic media in Samarika villages—thus play complimentary roles in the social life, and are important. What art and textiles mean for users and their friends on SNSs remains to be explored in a more in-depth manner in a later study.

Nadia, a facebooker, advised me to view a video on YouTube showing the traditional garments, jewellery and accessories that the women in her family wear. She only had one picture of herself on facebook where she was dressed in a garment similar to those displayed in pre-recorded videos on YouTube that depict Indian embroidered saris, jewellery and accessories (Designer Export; 2010), http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5En8owT5npE.

Particularly striking during this study was the observation that while users are willing to share and show personal photos on the various sites and discuss aspects of their cultures either in questionnaires or face to face, they did insist on anonymity as they prefer to make these items accessible and visible only to friends.

Nadia says that a video that she posted caused a stir amongst her facebook friends, as she only wear jeans at college. She says:

> "Our accessories, which I sometimes wear on my fingers and arms regardless of the clothes I'm wearing, often spark interest and comments from friends. Some of the pictures I post online consist only of the variety of beads I make in my spare time, and have resulted in my friends, local and foreign, asking me to make some for them. Can you believe it—I am in business on facebook and YouTube! Merely because I began showing some of our own African accessories online ... . It is amazing what social networking sites did for my life."

Many of the users display pre-recorded videos of garments, jewellery and accessories on YouTube. Several users from the same ethnic groups as Soyi a facebooker, twitter and YouTuber made more or less similar remarks:

"In our culture we use a general term for traditional clothing. All our clothing, and particularly the garments and everything that accompanies them, result in a fairy tale which most women want to share with friends online. Regardless of the fact that our marriages are arranged and that couples meet each other for the first time at their weddings, what is worn on the day remains special. Much time and money is put in to it. Our wedding rings are kept as treasures. That is why I do not wear a wedding ring. You can see from the pictures that I posted online."



Figure 12 Example of the Korean Hanbok (asianinfo.org; 2000:1)

According to AsianInfo.org (2000:1) traditional Korean clothing and adornments are called "hanbok"- an abbreviation of the term Han-guk polshik, (Korean attire). Figure 11 (which was, incidentally, found on YouTube), depicts a traditional wedding garment that is the pride of the Korean people. Apparel plays a vital role in the preservation and expression of cultural identity.

This is not any different from the photos posted by friends on social networking sites, which viewers from different cultures and researches can see. Some users display their garments on the SNSs which were previously exclusively accessible or visible only to scholars during fieldwork.

Also visible on YouTube for example, are videos on some of the most remote traditional garments and accessories of the Nuer's - Naath culture which is displayed for viewers and users to see as illustrated in Figure 12. Pictures are also posted on facebook, Mxit, and myspace and on twitter, by users for friends to see.

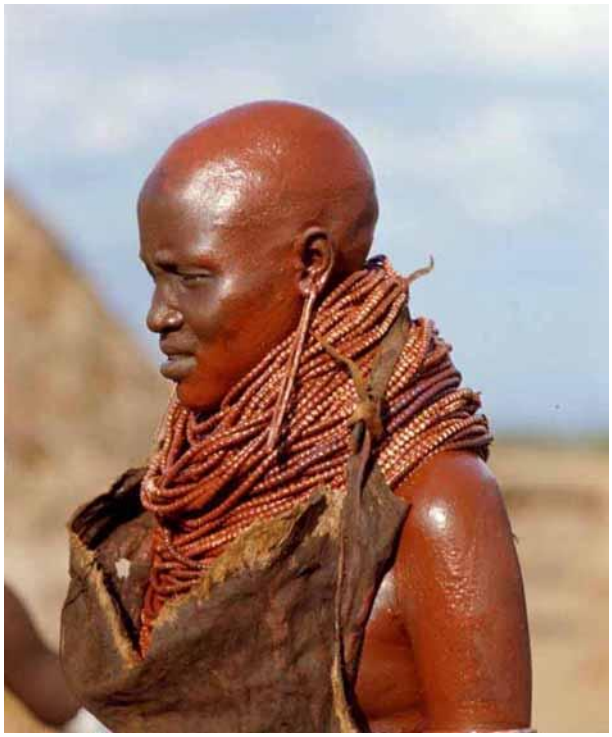


Figure 13 Example of a Nuer woman in traditional attire (downloaded; 2011)

Some users say that they deliberately place pictures or videos on YouTube so that the wider public can make comments on their garments. Observers also have an interest in knowing what a particular cultural event is all about and show intense curiosity, for example, in the meaning or significance of African beads and garments. Most of the African informants interviewed suggested that cultural dress is extremely important.

Soma, a user on facebook suggests that:

> "African cultural dress transforms the personality which I display on a daily basis. Although I am a western girl most of the time, when I am in my traditional dress at a family gathering or at a function out with friends, I feel like a princess, and I want all my friends to see, regardless of their cultures. I love it because my friends always comment on how pretty I look. It makes me feel good because I am not only the centre of attraction and referred to as an African Queen, but my foreign friends love the garments and ask me to explain each of the pieces I wear. I had even sent two of my friends, who live in Korea, each a garment which they loved, wore and posted pictures of on facebook to show to the rest of my friends. Therefore, my culture is very import and I am proudly African."

Monde, a myspacer, suggested that as a male he does not have much to display to his friends as far as dress is concerned. However, some of his friends from cultures other than his own asked him of *Umoja*, a popular South African play which they saw on YouTube, and on Africa Channel in the US.

Monde continued to say:

> "I posted pictures on myspace wearing my traditional African shirt and a hat, just for fun. The gear belonged to my uncle. It drew the attention of my European friends who said that they always wanted to travel to Africa and personally see and feel, and perhaps buy African garments. My friends wanted me to be specific on what my culture is. When I told them I am Zulu, they urged me to wear Zulu attire. Some told me that they had seen people dressed in Zulu attire on YouTube on the popular South African show, *Umoja*, and they insisted that it would be great to see me in the attire. I was in a predicament because I had been brought up in a western way and never really considered my own culture. But it turned out to be a wake-up call because I was not only expected to wear the attire, but they requested me to describe what each piece I wear signifies. I was taken aback because I had never worn the attire and did not know what I would look like, but I did it anyway and did not regret it.

Monde was of the opinion that it was important for him to show his culture to foreign friends who posted pictures of themselves too, and dressed up in their own traditional garments. He felt that it was an indication of how proud they are of their culture and wanted the same.

> "I actually felt like a man for the first time and it reminded me of the stick fights we had on the Natal Mountains in my country when I was a young boy. It is the only way that one can understand why friends or family members in the pictures which they post online are all about, lest I get confused."

Thousands of users made more or less similar remarks, indicative of the ways in which they share and show culture. It was important to discuss some of the key comments they made in order to provide an in-depth analysis on what users are willing to, or end up showing their friends.

Vuyani, who is of both Zulu and Xhosa descent and a user of facebook, Mxit and YouTube, says:

> "When my friends asked me to post pictures of some of our most popular traditional Zulu and Xhosa garments, at first I thought not in this lifetime! But I decided to be brave and wear the attire with pride. I asked a family member to take a picture; I did not want any of my friends to do so. I knew that they would laugh at me and I would get cold feet. But, once I posted the pictures online, it did not matter anymore."

Almost 1 in 9 of the Informants interviewed on facebook and myspace, and those who commented on culture on YouTube, suggested that they never post pictures of themselves dressed in traditional garments on social networking sites. They suggested that they are too westernised and would feel embarrassed.

Tabi, a facebooker, myspacer and YouTuber was of the view that showing off traditional garments should be left to parents and grandparents offline. However, some friends do post pictures either of themselves or family members in which they display some of the most

exquisite garments that friends look at with awe. Garments range from Asian countries such as Tipei, Taxes gear and African garments, casual American dress, and the Muslim veil.

It became obvious that many of the facebookers, myspacers, Mxiters, etc., were of the view that understanding and observing diverse cultures provides knowledge, and that when one is uninformed in this regard, it often results in cultural misinterpretation. Maria, a facebooker, twitter and YouTuber says:

> "I was driving out of the city one sunny afternoon, and when I looked into the mirror I saw a red BMW driving behind me. At first I did not take an interest in the driver and passenger. I was more interested in the car because I looked forward to buying one someday. But it soon occurred to me that most BMW owners on the road would have flown passed in seconds. I thought it could be an old couple and watched more closely."

She continued and said that she felt shocked when she noticed that the pair was clothed in black and that only their eyes were visible. She became afraid and her heart began beating fast. When she looked at the sides of the road she noticed that there was only bush around and only one car driving in the opposite direction.

Maria continued:

> "My first thought was that they were robbers following me. I began to sweat and drove as fast as I could, and could hardly hold on to the steering wheel. But, I had no choice and needed to get away. For almost five minutes I panicked and decided to turn at the first off ramp which became visible to me, regardless of where I was heading. When I did, I noticed that they drove on and did not follow me."

Maria, like many individuals, was unaware of the Muslim cultural veil. She panicked when she saw women dressed in them, and became afraid. When she arrived home and told what happened, both her and her family became concerned about the road as she normally travelled on

it. She said that none of her family members could truly say why the people were dressed in that manner.

It was through facebook and other SNSs that she finally learned from her friends, some of whom were Muslim, that the passenger and driver in the car behind her were merely two Muslim women who were both dressed in traditional Muslim veils as illustrated in Figure 13. It is a tradition in strict Muslim societies that women appear in public wearing this veil, and only have their faces visible to their families. Maria said she felt foolish and uninformed once she saw photos of her facebook friends and those on YouTube wearing similar garments. Since then, she had been eager to know and learn about her friends' diverse cultures.



Figure 14 Islamic woman in traditional veil (Christopher Forlong Images and Islamic Clothing Glossary; 2011)

One of the primary benefits of using SNSs can be that of making new friends who are ethnically diverse. Such exposure, though, can lead to cultural misinterpretation and misunderstandings, but can also create awareness of foreign cultures as indicative in Maria's story above. As a result, the sites enable users to learn, understand and perhaps embrace the cultures of friends with whom

they interact. If Maria had been aware of the Muslim traditions, she certainly would not have experienced such fear on the road, nor the subsequent embarrassment she later felt.

About 20% of the same users were oblivious to the fact that through interacting on SNSs they are, in reality, simultaneously showing and sharing aspects of their culture with friends, and some only became aware of this when they actually filled out questionnaires or during interviews. They realise that they do through chats, through pictures that are posted online, and by the comments they make while engaging with their friends on the various sites.

5.5.2 Traditional dishes

Food is often is regarded as a key aspect of people's culture. Delaney (2011:259) claims that "food categories also correlate with social categories." For example, in Jewish and Islamic cultures pork is forbidden, but it is celebrated in many Asian cuisines. Ethnic, religious or subculture groups distinguish themselves from others by eating or not eating different types of food. Vegetarianism functions as an ethics of consumption and a way of creating an identity that is different from others.

Culture seems often to become a topic for discussion on the SNSs, and those discussions regularly include various traditional dishes. Of the approximately 1 500 users interviewed, about 60% of them, which included friends and friends of friends, agreed that food is discussed almost on a daily basis on each of the sites, and is considered to be one of the hot topics.

Kunene, a user, commented that his most favourite dishes are discussed on facebook, YouTube and twitter on a daily basis. He often plans his meals way ahead based on discussions regarding what his friends had and how it tasted. Apparently each morning just before lunch, and then again towards the end of the day, his friends go into such detail regarding the dishes they have had or are going to have that they often leave his mouth watering and his appetite boosted. It appears that many users cannot wait to hear suggestions regarding which is the best dish to have for the day.

For most individuals, visiting a foreign country for the first time and being exposed to completely different traditions often result in creating an interest in the type of food or dishes they encounter. Friends on SNSs often suggest to each other what to look out for in certain food places and what to avoid, or which countries to visit where the best dishes can be found.

Nadine, a Mxiter and facebooker suggests:

> "I regularly suggest lunch with family and friends at Jabu's Inn in Soweto where true African dishes are served. Going to this place has become my family's favourite outing. I can only say thanks again to my facebook and Mxit friends who suggested the place. I must admit that social networking sites have taught me a lot; not only about other people's cultures but now I enjoy meals that I would not have known about otherwise. When you network on the sites it makes you wise. I am also exploring and tasting Korean, Italian and other dishes suggested by friends and having great fun doing so."

Discussing meals on facebook and related sites seems to have become common amongst users. I found that almost 60% of the users tell their friends what they had for breakfast when they sign in, what they will be having for lunch and what they will prepare for dinner. Although social and political issues are widely discussed on the sites, food tends to make the top of the list of discussions between friends. Users often suggest Italian, Vietnamese, Chinese, soul food (in the United States) and Sub-Saharan African dishes.

Discussing food often seems to eventually lead to users photographing and videoing food that they've prepared, and showing it to their friends online. As a result various traditional dishes ranging from Korean, Chinese, European and western are displayed on sites like YouTube for all viewers to see, and on the personal albums of users on facebook and other SNSs which they make available for their friends to see, thereby expressing their cultural selves.

5.5.3 Social drinks as a cultural phenomena

Social drinks are also shared online via the SNSs. The vast majority of individuals on facebook and myspace for example, tend to discuss social drinks while interacting socially. Drinks are

discussed on comment blogs where friends suggest what the best drinks are, and discussions often result in persuasive discourse. Through sites like YouTube brands are discussed and tried, and what is outdated and what's in is shared between friends. Through these exchanges friends in Taiwan or China, for example, can share with friends of the same or different cultures what's in, or what's the most tasty drink. For most of the users interviewed, sharing a cultural drink, whether soft or alcohol, it is a cause for celebration.

Jane, a facebooker and YouTuber, commented on her families' age old tradition of not taking a drink without sharing it with a friend, even though they may live thousands of miles apart. Therefore, although she has been living in South Africa for more twenty years, it has always been tradition to not have a drink on her own.

In a twitter she said:

> "In the past, when I was in the mood and felt like celebrating a successful week or achievement I would call up a friend and we would each open up a bottle of traditional tasty English wine that we would always keep in our homes. We'd get together across the seas. Even though we could not see each other we'd share a bottle of wine and talk until we were done. After all, it was so much better because she also lives on her own and was just as lonely as I was. It made both of us feel much better, but it was quite costly. However, over the last few years with social networking sites it is much easier and cheaper. These days both my family and friends can get online much more frequently and share a drink together. It makes me feel much more English. My facebook friends go out of their way to find the wine, share a toast and enjoy it with me. And at times, when we're not having a bottle of wine, friends and I living in different parts of the world, share a cup of tea while we chat, sometimes, even face to face online.

Jane tells how she is so grateful, and that she no longer feels lonely. She says that she and her friends can now socialise as if they were in the same room. And surely that can only make for a great afternoon or evening!

Jane's sentiments were very similar to many other users interviewed for this paper. They are interested in a variety of drinks which are either from their own traditions, or from those of friends. When friends visit foreign countries, they often discuss some of the favourite drinks which they have tasted, and post a picture of themselves on either facebook, Mxit, myspace, etc., for others to see. They often describe in detail what the drink is made of, and suggest to friends where to find it when they visit the country, or alternatively search for it in their own country.

Jack, a facebooker of African descent, whose employment requires that he visits foreign countries often, posted a comment on his facebook page. He told his friends:

> "I miss home so much and although there are various drinks here that some of my colleagues and I can choose from and have after work, it does not help much. I am homesick and really look forward to going home and having a good old South African Lion Lager beer. I am so thirsty and can almost taste it in my mouth. I must be hallucinating!"

Several of the users discuss the importance and cultural significance of a particular drink. It is clear on facebook and Mxit, for example, how users debate the traditional African beer which is what the African people drink when a dowry or *lobola* is paid for a bride. They also drink it at weddings, unveilings and other ceremonies, which captures the interest of friends from other cultures who want to know what the drink is made of. Interestingly on quiet days when no ceremonies take place, the drink loses its status or cultural connotation and is consumed by the poorest of the poor in most African societies, as it is cheap and easy to buy.

It seems that friends from other cultures have tried to brew the beer, but it is often difficult to find some of the ingredients in their own countries. Users really seem to be fascinated by the drinks suggested by friends of diverse cultural backgrounds on the various SNSs. Users equally indicate their eagerness to share or discuss a particular drink and how each drink has a different meaning in diverse cultures.

5.5.4 Rituals

Many users upload photographs that show rituals which are practiced in their various traditions. Photo albums on their SNS profiles often show some of the rituals they and their families traditionally celebrate. Some of these traditions include things like initiation ceremonies, perhaps Jewish or African, which celebrate the coming of age of teenage boys.

In South Africa for example, in certain traditions like the Zulu or Xhosa culture, male initiation is essential for when boys leave boyhood and enter adulthood as illustrated in Figure 13. Baby showers are get togethers that women have to prepare for the birth of a baby; kitchen teas are organised by friends to celebrate the last days of a new bride's freedom, and "*lobola*", or dowry, is the traditional African payment made from the groom to the bride's family before marriage.



Figure 15 Example of Zulu and Xhosa initiation rituals (Afrilux, Google downloaded; 2011)

User Thando had a different view and argued that:

> "Traditional ceremonies are private, not public, and should remain that way. There are many other ceremonies which I would not mind showing my friends, but initiation ceremonies are strictly hands-off and should not be made into movies or public jokes."

In fact, these ceremonies are so significant that those who do not undergo the traditional ritual, regardless of how old they are, remain labelled as “boys”. These are some of the issues users debate on the sites.

Some scholars ensure that they study and make rituals available to the wider public. They seem to agree with those who record and display initiation ceremonies, or in this context, “coming off age” rituals.

In Jewish culture, a boy is circumcised just after birth as illustrated in Figure 15. The Jews also celebrate coming off age rituals for young adults and according to Spencer (1990: 58), during his Bar Mitzvah one of the boy’s main tasks is to chant in Hebrew both concluding parts of the portion of the Law (Torah) for that particular Sabbath, and also the reading of the Prophets (haftora). Depending on the boy’s ability he may do less than the customary amount. If a boy does not have a pleasant voice, he may recite rather than chant his piece.



Figure 16 Jewish circumcision ceremony (Josi Apterkar; 2007)

The boy would have been thoroughly prepared for this occasion by his teacher, but, to perform it in public before a large congregation composed of family, friends and congregants is an ordeal for most boys.

Around 1 500 users were asked their opinion regarding *lobola*. Approximately 80%, more than half of females and almost one third males, felt that they are against it. They say that they cannot understand why a person should be bought. Most of the females argued that they believe that this tradition is outdated (although that is not necessarily the case in offline African societies where the tradition seems to be very much alive). Women feel that, unlike their ancestors, they are now educated and can take care of themselves. They do not want to be bound by a dowry in a relationship.

The manner in which marriages occur in some customs and traditions seems to be a hot topic for discussion amongst many users. The discussions cover subjects like Indian brides who are too young for marriage, the dowry system in African cultures, arranged marriages, and in some cases the broom in Korean culture.

Toko, a facebooker and Mxiter, says:

> "The rules of marriage in our culture make it complicated or almost impossible for a woman to walk out if she feels abused, or when she realises that the marriage is not going to work out. *Lobola* is an issue that should really be done away with. It is ancient and not part of our current culture. And after all, we get into relationships with individuals from other cultures. My friend, a Zulu woman is married to a German who is well off and takes care of her. She is educated and she and her family saw no need for dowry. Even our parents no longer stick to these traditions as they are so westernised. I have not seen any traditional rituals in my family since the day I was born, or maybe so I think. It might be that when I do get married my family would want to revert to tradition. I will wait and see. I am educated and a liberal; it is going to be hard to deal with the issue. Alternatively, my best bet would be to marry someone who hails from a western culture. It might be easier."

The rest of the users were 30% males who argued against *lobola*.

Tobi, was of the view that:

> "My friends and I always discuss the *lobola* issue online, and at times fiercely debate it, which results in some of our foreign friends commenting and giving their own perspectives. Most of our Asian friends often insist that we stick to tradition, but even they have, to a certain extent, adapted to our new online culture in which everything is simple and straightforward, and nothing is complicated."

Age old rituals in different countries symbolise cultural beliefs, however, within those same societies cultural practices can be both upheld and rejected. This does not appear to be any different on SNSs. For example, Korean users, regardless of where they live, continue to adhere to the rituals of arranged marriages which result in massive wedding ceremonies

5.5.6 Music and dance

Dance and poetry is common in most African cultures and is a means by which people celebrate and express joy and sorrow as illustrated in Figure 15 which shows young African boys seen singing and dancing. Through these mediums people also express social and political views. Amongst the *Basotho* for example, particularly those who live in Lesotho, poetry, music and dance are a key method through which individuals express their feelings and/or social, political and daily issues. Coplan and Zantzinger (2000:1) quote Clifford (1997) who suggested that "It was this world of work and wandering, of roots and routes that the songs of the adventurers – male and female – poeticized and are reflected upon,and celebrated through *sefela*."

According to Coplan and Zantzinger, Moletsane (1982:2) suggests that sefela originally referred to self-praises recited by initiates as solo passages within the choral songs they performed upon their graduation from initiation lodges. Scholars indicate that the poetic songs often performed by the Basotho, *Difela*, or songs, represent a kind of expressive realisation of the imaginative projection of experience in initiation songs and praises through the aesthetic construction of a

man's actual experience at the mines. It seems that users from diverse cultures appear to either just show these cultural practices on YouTube and related sites with the intention to share them with friends from other cultures.

During the study it was found that almost 80% of those interviewed or filled out questionnaires had, at some point shown, discussed or suggested to friends that they listen to a particular genre of music, or that they watch a particular cultural dance. These events are described to friends with an explanation of what the dance signifies, or what is being expressed through it, thus sparking conversations.

Some of the users discussed the importance of music and dance in their different cultures. Patel, a facebooker and YouTube, described what appeared to be from his own observations and from the photos posted by friends, that Africans in countries like South Africa and Lesotho, for example, sing and dance and smile amidst the poverty that they face; even when in some cases they go to bed with an empty stomach. It always amazes him and his friends that they continue to sing and dance amidst sad or rough times. Some often suggest that music somehow soothes the soul, even in cultures where they rarely dance.



Figure 17 Illusion of African boys singing traditional songs and dancing (Google Images, downloaded: 2011)

Friends and Informants that were interviewed were of the opinion that their love for music includes those of other cultures. During interviews what stood out particularly was the fact that while older generations appear to uphold and understand the significance of music and dance in their own cultures, younger generations have different perspectives. Some feel that the music and

dance they identify with, and is mostly commonly discussed on the SNSs, is primarily western, and very little—or none really— of their own cultures.

From the users interviewed, and from those who provided their perspectives either via questionnaires or on comment blogs, the majority view seems to be that they identify more particularly with American music and dance, over and above that of their own culture. This appears to be a common phenomenon amongst users on social networking sites.

User Sam says:

> "We cannot help but love American music and dance in our generation, unlike that of our parents. It is widespread on SNSs I guess, and it is the most popular. It is unavoidable and all over the place; on TV, radio and almost everywhere you look. Therefore, we know what is new and although we live in South Africa, we often have access to the latest videos before they are sold in our local stores. Honestly speaking, I cannot tell you much about South African artists, but ask me about American singers and the first thoughts that come to my mind—and which my friends and I often follow and discuss on social networking sites—are American artists such as the Jonah Brothers, Beyoncé, R Kelly, JZ, and the like. These are the most popular music and dance techniques as far as I am concerned and I have their names at my fingertips, but ask me about musicians who sing our traditional music; there are less than a handful and I don't know their names."

Almost 9 out of 10 of the users interviewed express similar views as Jomo, a facebooker, who suggests that:

> "My friends and I only listen and dance to American music. We also listen to a few British artists like Seal, whose music really stands out. Please do not ask me what my friends and I share and listen to on social networking sites because it is not any different. Local music is being promoted by South African DJ's such as Cleo, but my friends and I only identify with American music."

These users reiterate that they do not know or understand the traditional music and dance that their parents or grandparents listen to.

Informants' views on music and dance were explored and it was found that while some users do share aspects of their traditional music, some have no idea of what it entails. Western and, particularly, American music and dance appear to be popularly discussed amongst most users. This seems to be primarily as a result of their western lifestyle and choices of music and dance rather than their own familial or societal traditions. This is also a popular topic amongst most friends on the various SNSs.

From some of the users' perspective age old family traditions are not part of their own identity. They feel that they cannot be held accountable as their family's music is foreign to them. What they seem to identify with is American culture, which is so accessible to them through the media. Having said that though, the music and dance of diverse cultural groups is shown extensively on YouTube.

5.6 Users' views on their families' ancient traditions, and cultural barriers which they encounter

In any social circle or society individuals often come across cultural barriers, and the same is true of social networking sites. About 50% of users interviewed confirmed that, at one point or another, they have come across some cultural barriers or shocks while interacting with foreign friends online. They say that there have been times where they have either been misunderstood or in turn have misinterpreted what is meant in conversation, often resulting in apologies from both sides.

There are often various debates on cultural misinterpretation on many of the social networking sites like Mxit, myspace, facebook and, particularly, twitter. Users often also let friends know of various incidences in which they misunderstood or misinterpreted comments or suggestions friends made as a result of their different cultural upbringing.

An example is that make by a Sandy, a Mxiter and YouTuber, who says that:

> "A group of students from diverse races and cultures came together, to attend a seminar concerning a particular subject that they all study. After a few hours of listening, some of which was probably tedious for some of the students, the teacher pointed a large table at the back of the hall bearing various delicacies and told the students to help themselves to a snack. Most of the Caucasian students stood up and took a snack or two. The rest of the students remained seated and took a while before they understand what was meant. By the time they realised that they could actually also have a snack; the first group had been for their second and third helpings. It was clear that the students did not understand what was being said."

Examples of mistaking alcoholic drinks for soft ones demonstrate the difference or the lack of knowledge of a particular cultural group or country. Users often debate which cultural practices they find acceptable or unacceptable, regardless of the fact that they may be considered acceptable amongst the cultural groups in which they occur. As already mentioned initiations, dowry or *lobola* ceremonies, music, dance and dress are some of the key issues constantly being debated amongst users and their friends. This is primarily as a result of friends showing or sharing cultural practices online for others to see, which they can either observe, learn from and even embrace.

5.7 Users' perspectives on whether or not enculturation or acculturation has ensued

That most users share or show aspects of their culture to friends, and are also, at times, oblivious to culture, may have resulted in either enculturation or acculturation. Users were asked whether or not enculturation or acculturation had ensued as a result of their interaction with diverse friends on the sites explored.

Users seem to feel that they went to the extent of posting pictures of themselves in traditional garments which they clearly did not own, and which were often either too big or too small. More than half of the same users confirmed that they borrowed garments or shirts from family members of previous generations, who uphold their traditions. They clearly did not want to be

outshone by our loyal counterparts who do wear their own traditional gear. The same group said that although they felt appreciated by their foreign friends, it actually resulted in much laughter amongst locals, and gave rise to much debate on how their generation regard ancient cultural practices and the beliefs of older family members. Others were serious and suggested that it resulted in them being the centre of attraction and that it led to interesting debates about traditional dress for days, and sometimes weeks at a time.

During interviews users revealed that they are often obliged to ask older family members, who are much wiser and closer to the old traditions, to give insight into the cultural significance of these traditions so that they can explain more accurately and in more detail to their friends.

Laura, Mxiter, facebooker and YouTuber, explains:

> "The reality is that old traditions that have been practiced in our families for decades will become redundant if we remain ignorant. In addition, sometimes we are caught off guard and asked about our cultures and we often feel embarrassed when foreign friends seems to have a better understanding of them than we do. Then we are compelled to do our own research to avoid such incidents from being repeated. Although we all have busy lifestyles, the reality is that we spend a great deal of time chatting with friends online, and we should make time to either do our own research or ask older generations who know and understand our traditions much better, and this would prepare us if aspects of our cultures do come up."

About 30% of the users interviewed suggested that they were unaware that they were showing and sharing culture online, however, it is clear that through speech, behaviour, suggestions, art, and just through their identities, that is exactly what is happening.

facebooker Samantha said:

> "I am Mexican, and although I did not mention it in my profile per se, I was surprised when some of my friends on myspace commented on photos which I posted on my

facebook album. One of the photos included one in which my dad had on a Mexican hat, which is a traditional symbol in our society. It resulted in a huge debate and my foreign friends wanted to know more about my family's traditions. From my perspective it started as just a normal online communication with friends, but it got me thinking and resulted in me asking my parents what the significance of the wide hats we wear is."



Figure 18 The Sombrero - traditional Mexican hat (Informant; 2011)

The word Sombrero directly translates to hat, and is illustrated in Figure 16. According to Schmitt (1996:1), who wrote on the history of the hats, the first people to wear the sombrero hats were apparently Mestizo workers in Mexico and the Southern United States. It should be noted that Generation Y users seem not to know about or comply with ancient traditions practiced by family members for decades. The mere fact that individuals interact online on a global level appears to either incite an interest or much debate on users' cultural heritage. It also reinforces the perception that such traditions are becoming either redundant, or re-enlivened on SNSs as a result of the immense cultural diversity of the users.

A user Marshall, a Mxiter and facebooker, asserted:

> "We never really listen to traditional music of parents and grandparents. I do not know any of it, nothing at all, and therefore I cannot give you any explanation in that regard. Folks from my generation and I had adopted primarily British or American culture in music and dance, even in the way we socialise speak and dress. It's the most popular thing currently. It is promoted even further on social networking sites and in our local radio stations."

Schmitt contends that today sombreros are used as gag gift at parties and celebrations. He suggests that they are not taken seriously anymore and no longer carry the message of the true hard-working Mestizos. It is a shame, but he says that all traditions follow the path to doom.

According to Haviland, (1983:132) the process of transmission is known as enculturation, and in his statement he confirms that it begins soon after birth, Can it be implied then that it is perhaps not different on SNSs. In the case of users who are practically born into a social networking society, the first agents of enculturation are friends who become members of their family once they sign up. Online friends of friends also end up playing a role in the process.

Almost 8 out of 10 the users interviewed suggested that enculturation and acculturation do indeed take place. The vast majority of the users engage in social and/or cross-cultural interaction with friends, thus resulting in them becoming more aware of their own cultures, and that of their friends, which have probably been adhered to within their families for decades. They also suggested that when friends know something about their cultures, which they had previously been unaware of, it awakens in them the desire to research either on their own or through consulting older generations.

5.8 Users views on the manner in which they regard friends on social networking sites who differ ethnically and their perspectives on the notion of the "other."

From the users interviewed, 58% implied that social networking sites have reinforced the awareness of the significant other, and have, to a large extent, done away with the notion of the other. The same group, which primarily included Generation Y users, are generally of the opinion that cultural differences have not really been an issue, but are rather celebrated and

embraced. Unlike previous generations, it has been much easier to interact with friends and friends of friends from other cultural backgrounds. They all appear to have adopted common social behaviours and have therefore done away with the notion of the other. The majority confirm that they actually identify more with the online common cultures which they and their friends appear to have adopted, regardless of the fact that they are largely western or European.

It is apparent that Muslim users who might consider themselves liberated from the strict edicts of Islam, for example, have no problem conforming to the common cultures which appear to have emerged online; however, they still resist anything that appears to be American. The same group says that they never really know what their own traditions are all about as they have never been practised or discussed in the home. The reality is that they have been westernised since birth. Hence, their taste in dress, music, dance and behaviour identifies more closely with established online norms, which they consider to be unique in comparison to those in traditional societies.

For this group of users it appears that race and cultural differences have become a non-issue, and therefore the notion of the other, they feel, is irrelevant. But perhaps the greater argument could be that cultural differences are both a non-issue or reinforced. Bunzil (2002) with a new forward on *Fabians' Time and the Other* suggests that; "in the objectifying discourse of a scientific anthropology, "Others" thus never appear as immediate partners in a cultural exchange, but as spatially and more importantly temporarily distant groups."

On the other hand, almost 30% of the users interviewed expressed the opinion that although they interact with friends of diverse ethnic groups on SNSs that does not imply that they have lost their sense of self and identity. They feel strongly that they strictly observe the traditions of their cultures and experience difficulty interacting with those whose views of their culture differ. Similarly, they suggested that cultural differences should not be regarded as otherness. But that their primary aim was to interact with any of their friends regardless of the fact that they observe diverse cultural beliefs and rituals. They were also of the view that they do stick to old family traditions and respect those of friends with whom they interact online.

It could also be the case that some individuals often do not present their cultural attributes in public, or portray their ethnicity to the wider audience with whom they engage, making it impossible to know who they really are. According to Goffman (1959: 1), when an individual enters the presence of others, they commonly seem to acquire information about him, to bring into play information about him already possessed. They would be interested in the socio-economic status of his conception of self, his attitude toward them, his competence his trustworthiness, etc."

Similarly they were of the view that they respect and embrace cultural diversity. In addition, users were found to be eager to share and/or show aspects of their culture to friends and vice versa. They suggested that they therefore respect the otherness in the friends with whom we interact.

What particularly stood out was the comment made by Shady, a user of twitter, facebook and YouTube, who says:

> "I love the difference and "otherness" in the friends with whom I interact on social networking sites. It is just fascinating. And therefore, there is nothing wrong in having an interest in exploring the significant other."

Users who expressed similar sentiments implied that they would gladly interact with those who are different, but that they do prefer interacting with those of their own traditions. They say that it is easy to believe that SNSs have indeed impacted on their overall views of foreign friends' traditions. They admitted to adapting to some aspects of the online cultures that appear to have been formed.

Nearly 12% of users interviewed stated that they had no idea of what the term "other" implies in the context of interacting with their friends on SNSs. For this group of users, all that they have an interest in is interacting with friends online, and they said that they hardly share or show culture online. Hence, they did acknowledge that they are aware that their friends are from diverse races and cultures, but that it is beside the point and does not matter much.

5.9 User views on whether or not a new online global culture has emerged

At the birth of a new country, a state or a society, certain practices become accepted as the norm, and generally people adapt and conform. Certain behavioural patterns are often a symbol of what is considered socially acceptable. This has happened on social networking sites.

The ways in which users socialise is publicly visible to friends and family, and in some cases also to parents if they are part of the child's friend list. Users post photographs of themselves at social events where they might be consuming alcohol, for example, or partaking in activities that were previously restricted.

The majority of Seniors, like Todd, are of the opinion that:

> "The visibility with which younger generations socialise today is very different from our day when socialising took place in our own private spaces, and our parents were unaware of what we did. These days, knowing what your children are up to and what substances they might be using as a means to having "fun" will truly shock you. It is totally the opposite from what we did. You might be unaware that your child consumes alcohol or related substances, but all you need do is get access to twitter, Mxit, facebook or other SNSs. The youth post photos of themselves in which all sorts of substances are being abused and are visible for all to see. This was quite opposite behaviour of the youth from a few decades ago. Binge drinking or smoking is publicly displayed and appears to be the norm because friends almost compete in "daring" behaviour that will grab the attention of friends. In addition, users also tend to discuss their emotions with friends, resulting in parents being the last to know."

It could be that as a result of new practices, online cultures are being formed which are entirely different from old family traditions. The end result seems to be that the rich old family traditions which have been practiced by previous generations are no longer attractive to the younger ones.

Nudity appears to be very common on most of the sites, and is blatant in some of the photographs that users post of themselves online. Although some nudity is traditional in some

African countries, it is a state which few admitted they would want to be seen in. They would not post any photos online, but would at the request of friends from other cultures who ask them to.

And while some cultures completely cover the body, in the case of Muslims for example, others use less covering. But in everyday life, when no traditional ceremonies occur, the same individuals are dressed in clothing that covers up the body almost entirely. It seems that the users conform to what they learn and observe on the various sites, which perhaps at times they do to portray a different self in order to become part of others or their social group.

According to Deborah Patter of *Third Degree*, the type of exposure which users post on their profiles for their friends to see is shameful and embarrassing to parents when they discover that their children have been posting nude pictures of themselves to boyfriends only when there is a crisis and the relationship has ended.

According to Goffman (1959:9) "when we allow that the individual projects a definition of the situation when he appears before others, we must also see that the others, however passive their role may seem to be, will themselves effectively project a definition of the situation by virtue of their response to the individual and by virtue of any lines of action they initiate to him. Ordinarily the definitions of the situation projected by the different participants are sufficiently attuned to one another so that open contradictions could not occur.

Sharing traditional dishes appears to be important, and users let friends know almost instantly what they had for lunch or dinner when they were out on a date. They also suggest which restaurants friends should go to, and suggest, Italian, Korean, African and related dishes. Special dinners with friends and family are also discussed with friends, and some often say exactly what was cooked, while some respond and ask for the recipes which they often give for the community to see. While some share what dishes they are actually cooking for lunch, those who live near ask if they could come over and have the lunch or dinner with them.

Although sharing is common in most cultures offline, it appears that what seems to have emerged amongst users on the various sites is a culture of sharing and showing. That which was once considered private seems to have become public and acceptable.

Drinks, regardless of whether they are fruit juices or alcoholic, have become a major part of the users' everyday discussions. They discuss what flavours they can mix together which results in something unique, and apart from that they suggest what the best juices, wines and other drinks are should they visit foreign countries.

While older users said that they only shared with their family and friends how their day went and the challenges they might have encountered, this appears to be the opposite on SNSs. It appears that users' friends, although in some cases it includes some family, had become family to whom they could tell almost anything.

What appears to be noticeable on SNSs is a particular trend of openness or agency in the ways users express their views or present themselves before friends. There appears to be various complaints in the manner in which Millenniums expressed themselves to the wider public and particularly online.

There was also a group of users who said that cultural differences are not really an issue. Sibongile, a user on both YouTube and facebook, said:

> "Our generation is so westernised. Some of us hardly know what the beliefs and practices are all about. Most of us grew up in the suburbs and have never seen a cow being slaughtered, as is custom in most African societies. Our parents are westernised too. I say so, because they decorate our homes in western or European ways. We have no African art in our home. I see some from friends at school or on facebook, and we only see some of what my mom said is part of our traditional practices are when there is an event in the township."

"Girl," she said;

> "You have no idea, I grew up English and hardly understand my African tongue. I cannot really say I am an African girl. Because I am black some refer to girls like me as "coconuts". Boys get the title of "cheese boys." Therefore, I am more American than African, I would say, and I gladly share and show this unique culture online, which my friends and I had adapted to."

From the Informants interviewed, 85% argued that it is safe to share information, personal information and photos with friends online who, in most cases, live far from away, than with those in their own societies where gossip on SNSs could potentially make the "neighbourhood" unpleasant to "live in". On SNSs friends, while they might perhaps gossip on a friend's wall, for example, instead share when they go on leave and where they intend to spend their holidays. This is something which they would not necessarily share with the same number of people in their neighbourhood.

Users also share which are the best places to live in and which are the most difficult countries as far as acquiring a visa is concerned, particularly so for business trips or holidays. One of the users who lives in an African country shared his frustration in the community on his difficulties in acquiring a visa for a business trip. Comments were made in which friends actually encouraged him, and he was given advice by some who responded on how to get through the process.

When he finally went to the United Kingdom, he shared his experiences there on a daily basis which included photographs as well as the cultural shocks he encountered. Some of the men he socialises with both on facebook and at home over the weekends, cheered him with a glass of his favourite wine, until eventually he felt homesick. When he was finally home he told his community what a relief it was to be back home.

It seems clear that SNSs have had a profound effect on American culture in recent years. Users behave in particular ways that are acceptable amongst friends, and which have become the norm.

However, there are some expectations between users and friends, which include the following; 1) SNSs provide encouragement and support; 2) They establish an identity with others and fulfill the need to be included; 3) They fulfill the need for recognition and social status, control and leadership; 4) They control aspects of life of those who don't want to be leaders; 5) SNSs help to establish friendships, relationships and the opportunity to interact with others.

And because SNSs capitalise on these needs and allow people to fulfill them, they have been able to permeate and permanently shape and alter users' cultures. However, what seems to have emerged is a global online culture. Social networking sites such as facebook and myspace cater for and contribute to a specific social need in the growing Internet-centric American culture. But it is argued that for each positive change there are also negative repercussions.

Thus, it is essential for researchers and scholars to continue to explore the impact that social networking sites have on users globally, with particular emphasis on the ways in which cultural exchange occurs. In Eriksen (2001:44), Malinowski suggests that since the very beginning of the subject, anthropologists have been aware of tendencies towards what may be called cultural entropy (deterioration) – that historical process which today is intermittently described as global cultural hybridisation. However, it was noticed that invisible cultural influences frame and guide habitual ways of thinking, and Generation Y and X users appear to have contributed to cultural practices that are different from those of older generations.

From the users interviewed, it was found that, culturally, there appears to be a new trend of openness in terms of what they share with each other. This appears to be profoundly different from the cultural backgrounds from which some of the users hail. This has amazed family and friends who still strictly observe their traditions, and who considers their societies to be closely knit.

In conducting this study it became clear that the majority of users interviewed suggested that what was once considered taboo in certain traditions has become acceptable and the norm on SNSs. Equally important is that they considered that private culture has either become public or irrelevant and foreign to them. On YouTube, for example, users post photographs displaying the

insides of their homes, not only for their friends to see, but also in a manner that makes them visible to the public, although they do not provide details per se. The pictures user's posts on facebook are, in most instances, those that show the inside of their homes which are only accessible to friends and exclude perfect strangers.

In traditional society, an individual is identified not only by their race, but also by their cultural practices and beliefs. Hence, for counterparts cultural practices are either strange or foreign and therefore are regarded as the other. According to Erikson (1995:41) "It is dogma in modern social and cultural anthropology that culture is the fundamental human diacritic, shared by all humans, and that it would be nonsense to claim that some people have more culture than others.

It should also be noted that merely observing from a distance does not necessarily reflect the reality on the ground. The reality is that some individuals often do not present their cultural attributes to the wider public (as some of the Informants stated above) or portray their ethnicity. Although some of the information which is visible and seems to be sought almost as an end in itself, there are usually quite practical reasons for acquiring it. It appears that in most cases information about an individual assists one in defining a particular situation, and enables others to be aware what to expect of them and what is expected of him or her in return. This seems not to be any different on social networking sites.

Consequently, if one is informed as a participant, those with whom one interacts or observes, will best know how to act in order to call forth a desired response. This is the primary reason why cross-cultural interaction on the sites was observed before conducting the study, i.e., so that friends would portray their true selves, rather than putting on appearances when they are aware that they are being studied.

5.10 Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear that almost 8 out of 10 SNS users do share or show aspects of their cultures to friends on the various SNSs, and vice versa. However, in some cases users do so inadvertently. Some of the key ways through which users share and/or show culture or cultural experience are through art, garments and accessories, food and the manner in which it is either

suggested or displayed, social drinks, music and dance through which users' ethnicity is revealed to friends, whether it be African or western. Also presented is the impact which social networking sites have had on the ways in which differences or the "other" are perceived, and how users embrace cultural differences.

Also briefly described are users' views on cultural barriers, shock or misinterpretation which the users encounter, and how as a result of SNSs they manage to learn about and overcome these. Also conveyed are their views on whether or not acculturation or enculturation has ensued. Furthermore, the Informant's countenance on whether or not, as a result of cross-cultural interaction on the sites, it has perhaps resulted in the birth or emergence of a global, virtual or online culture, in which difference is perhaps irrelevant, and the notion or assumption of the other, as stated above, is perhaps reinforced or has become obsolete, redundant or where cultural difference is learned, understood and/or embraced.

Chapter 6 An analysis of friendships on social networking sites: Who are users' friends? How do they manage or maintain the unprecedented number of friendships?

Song;

Oh, the more we get together,
together, together,
Oh , the more we get together,
The happier we'll be.
For your friends are my friends
And my friends Are your friends.
Oh, the more we get together,
The happier we'll be!

Jim Rule (Lyrics)

6.1 Introduction

It appears that the more friends users seem to have on social networking sites, the happier they seem to be. In order to establish the truth of this statement, the chapter provides an in-depth analysis on friends. The perspectives of friends and their friends will be provided in the views of more than 4 500 Generation Y and X users on facebook, Mxit, myspace, YouTube and twitter. The chapter commences with a list of key words used in this section.

The concept of friendship has been thrown into serious question as a result of social networking sites, so the chapter firstly addresses user perspectives on how they understand and define the term "friend". Secondly, an analysis of the number of friends users have, together with an overview of who their friends really are is presented. Thirdly, the chapter describes the friendships that users choose to make in terms of gender, race, age ethnicity, geography and socio-economic background. Fourthly, the users' views on the differences between consulting a friend in the flesh or online are examined. Fifthly, the users' views on the advantages or potential consequences of keeping a substantial number of friends are presented. The chapter ends with a

discussion of the users' perspectives on the ways in which they manage and/or maintain such an unprecedented number of friends. Also conveyed are their overall perspectives on whether or not they invest their involvement with values and qualities they do not really offer, and how as a result this might impact on friendships.

6.1. List of key words:

Social networking sites

Users

Friends

Friendships

Observations

De-friending

Online

Offline

6.2 Theoretical definitions of the term friend

The terms friends or friendships appear to have been transformed drastically over the last few decades, and particularly so since the launch of social networking sites. However, in many instances the term is used with its more traditional, or offline, meaning. The term friend is defined as; 1) Someone with whom one is emotionally close and whom one trusts and is fond of; 2) An acquaintance: someone who thinks well of one, or who is on good terms with somebody else, and; 3) an ally: or somebody who is not an enemy" (Bing Web Dictionary: 2010).

In the *Oxford Dictionary* (2003:441) a friend is defined as; 1) a person with whom one has a bond of personal and mutual affection; 2) A familiar and helpful person; 3) Someone who supports a particular cause or organisation; 4) A friend in need is a friend indeed, and; 5) A person who helps at a difficult time and can be relied upon in time of need.

In examining the views of SNS users it was clear that there are two ways in which they understand the term friend; the traditional or offline way, and the digital way.

6.3 Users who define the term friend in the offline way

Approximately 35% of users interviewed defined friend in the singular rather than plural. Paul defined the term as:

> "Friends are supposed to make each other happy, be there for one another when they need someone to talk to or when they need a shoulder to cry on. This is not any different for a group of friends conversing on SNSs."

Further definitions of the term friend are; 1) A person that one can confide in and trust; 2) A person who can lift one's spirits; 3) A person who is like family and with whom one has ties that cannot be broken, but instead grow stronger and stronger over time; 4) A person that understands you, and is someone you can rely on in times of need and when you face challenges, and; 5) A friend is someone who walks in when the rest of the world walks out.

It was clear though that not all users considered all friends to be best friends. They preferred to categorise most as friends, and they admitted that they would not necessarily discuss certain issues with all of them per se. Less than half of the users felt that they consider all those listed in their friends or follower lists (in the case of twitter) as equal friends.

What was particularly interesting was that around 40% of these users have hundreds, and in some cases thousands of friends. They tend to use the term friend in the offline way, which primarily indicates that they refer to an individual rather than a group of people.

On the other hand, almost 65% of the users provided what could be considered a digital definition which is indicative of the social networking era. These users use the term both in a singular and in a plural way in a single sentence to indicate what the term means to them personally.

6.4 The perspectives of users who define the term "friend" the theoretical, online, or digital way.

Almost 70% of the users interviewed on the different sites appeared to define the term friend in the digital way. While conducting this study some of the key definitions the users provided to define the term became apparent:

Persons or people with whom we associate and communicate with on a regular basis for various social purposes; b) A person or a group of people you can talk to and/or socialise with; c) Persons who are there for you when you need them; d) A person or people who are always ready to and available to speak to you; e) A person or people whom you do not have to wait days to hear from, but who speak to you on a daily basis, or several times a day, regardless of the fact that they are at work; f) A person or persons who one always looks to hear from, and who cares to find out where you are if they have not heard from you in a while, and who would contact you to express their concerns and find out how and where you are; g) A friend is someone or some people whom you can rely on who will immediately be available when you need someone to talk to, and or need emotional support; h) A person or people who are there for you almost any time of the day and whom one has access to instantly."



Figure 19 Illustration of a group of friends (Debrah Ronka; 2011)

Many users feel like Ronda, who says that:

> "True friends come in many ways. We might not only have one friend, or a large number, but all these people come together and meet on social networking sites, and we form one strong bond and relate to each other as brothers and sisters. We share our stories, debate issues—both social and political—and we laugh and cry together; no matter how far apart we are our friendships bind us together in our hearts and minds. Nothing is as important to us as love and loyalty to one another which nurtures and strengthens our friendships, and this is regardless of the fact that we are hundreds or thousands of friends."

Darryl is a facebooker, YouTuber and twitter, and defines friendship in the plural, saying that:

> "Friends are people who stand by your side even when the weirdest of things happen to you. They never hesitate or wait for other people to step in when a crisis occurs even if it is financial, like my facebook friends who assisted me when I found myself in a predicament. They all contributed, and my problems were solved so quickly. That never happens in traditional society. Therefore, I believe that each of my friends is extremely valuable to me. I know I can always count on them, and they, equally, can count on me in return. I will always help out friends who find themselves in a similar situation. Viva facebook friends! Viva!"

Viva is a popular political term which is widely used by most South Africans to show praise, or to express their approval of any political party, leader or social group.

Users appear to have a common understanding of the term friend. Fono and Reynes (2006:3), who wrote an article called *Hyper Friends and Beyond* on *Live Journal* advocate that there are multiple understandings of the term friendship, not just amongst users but amongst individuals as well. The authors suggest that due to a lack of built-in mechanisms on *LiveJournal* it is often difficult to distinguish between the many definitions of friendship, because it is often difficult for two users who call each other friend to know if they are talking about the same thing."

However, the author of this document found that the vast majority of the users interviewed, regardless of whether they defined friendship in either the conventional or digital way, appear to share the same understanding of the term friend. What became particularly evident is the impact that the sites have had on friendships, which is reflected not only in the number of friends users have, but in the manner in which these friendships are formed.

6.5 An analysis of the number of friend's users have and their understanding of who their friends really are

6.5.1 The number of friend's users have

During interviewing and observing the Informants, one of the most interesting aspects that came to light was the unprecedented number of friends they seem to have, however, it should be noted that these numbers not only include users' friends, but their friends too, In offline society around 15 friends would be considered many friendships, however, this number would pale in comparison to the substantial number of friends users have online.

This reinforces the sense that the dynamics of friendship have been transformed in the 21st century. This dynamic warranted a more in-depth exploration in order to provide, as Geertz (1975) suggests, a deep description of what appears to be the explosion or revolution of a new era of friends.

The swiftness with which user friend lists increase is surprising. Almost all the users suggested that they have hundreds, and in some cases, thousands of friends. The minimum friends the users had ranged from between 90 to a 100, but the rest seemed to be substantial.

Brendan said that he has about 2 200 friends on facebook and Mxit combined. He says that:

> "Most of my friends are from school, but some are colleagues, and their friends also became my friends. Some are from church and social or community clubs. They are the ones who feature on my profile lists and make up the total, but the majority are those whom I had met on social networking sites."

He and other male users on myspace, twitter and Mxit confirm that all the faces or names that feature on their sites are indeed their friends.

Dunbar (2011:1) disputes the suggestion that users can have such an unprecedented number of friends and argues that "our brains aren't big enough to allow us to have deeply meaningful relationships with more than a handful of people. There is a general relationship between the brain size and social group size in monkeys and apes, and relationships predict a natural group size of just 150 for us human beings." He demarcated a boundary between those with whom you have relationships of trust, obligation and reciprocity, and those you don't know.

In contrast to this theory it is evident from this research the majority of users interviewed have friends vastly exceeding the 150 suggested by Dunbar, and in most cases the friends they have exceeded by hundreds and, in some cases, thousands more.

Hence, it became relevant to discuss the number of friends that users say they have, and to simultaneously convey their views on whom they believe their friends really are, together with the reasons why they keep such an enormous number of friends.

René, a user on almost all the sites explored for this paper, confirmed that she has 432 friends on facebook alone; this excludes the number of friends that she has on alternative SN sites. René says that half of her friends are people that she attended school with. Not all of these were necessarily friends at first, but became friends later on facebook and related sites. Only about 10% of these friends are people that she doesn't see socially offline, but the rest she met through mutual friends on the sites. She insists that all of them are her friends.

Some of the users have what is considered to be a minimum number of friends. Moseki, for example, has 100 friends on both facebook and YouTube. He said that 20 of his friends are from school, 15 are friends with whom he went to school, but who became his best friends on SNSs. Forty of his friends are colleagues, and 5 are those he met on the sites. He said; "I like having so many friends because they keep me grounded and informed, and it motivates me when I realise that my friends are succeeding in life, and then they encourage me to do the same."

Kate says: “There are many people who are listed as friends on my facebook and Mxit profiles. Although I make general comments to many of them, I only chat to the close friends with whom I went to school and spend time with.” This is similar to the arguments scholars like Dunbar makes.

Suzy says: “I have approximately 400 friends on YouTube, myspace, and twitter. Forty of my friends are from school, another 40 I simply attended school with, but we became friends on online. Of the remaining balance, 20 are colleagues and 300 are friends that I made primarily on social networking sites.”

Suzy says that she prefers having a large number of friends because she learns about her own and other diverse cultures. According to Suzy, her friends often have excellent ideas which often guide her life in the right direction. She says she can follow what her friends do throughout the day and know, for example, what they would have for dinner. It often gives her an idea of what to prepare for dinner too. Her friends also give her information about various issues which she is unaware of.”

Mark has 369 friends on facebook, and says: “Eighty nine of my friends are those with whom I went to school, and many with whom I resided in my community for years. The rest of my friendships I made on SNSs. Through the comments they make on sites like facebook, they make me aware of what is happening.”

Karabo, a facebooker, twitter, YouTuber and Mxiter remarked that he has 1 000 friends. Six hundred of those are from high school, and from the same group 200 are individuals with whom he simply attended school but became friends on social networking sites. About 98 of his friends were made on social networking sites, and the rest are either from his church, from social clubs or from within his community.

However, it should be noted that Dunbar’s (2011) theory that any number of friends above his 150 number being impossible to manage, is in contradiction to the findings of the author. His

hypothesis resulted in much debate amongst peers, users and other scholars in diverse fields of study.

Alex Krostoski, who echoes Dunbar, says that; "The way in which our social world is constructed is part and parcel of our biological inheritance. Together with apes and monkeys, we're members of the primate family – and within the primates there is a general relationship between the size of the brain and the size of the social group. We fit in the pattern. There are social circles beyond it and layers within – but there is a natural grouping of 150. This is the number of people you can have a relationship with involving trust and obligation – there's some personal history, not just names and faces." This is illustrated in Figure 18.

Silberman G. (2011:1) argues that "Dunbar's number of 150 doesn't seem theoretically based. It's more a matter of conjecture and hand waving than actual science." She continues, saying that the number of friends a person can have, according to facebook, is 5 000. She emphasises that "we do not distinguish our telephone friends from our real friends."

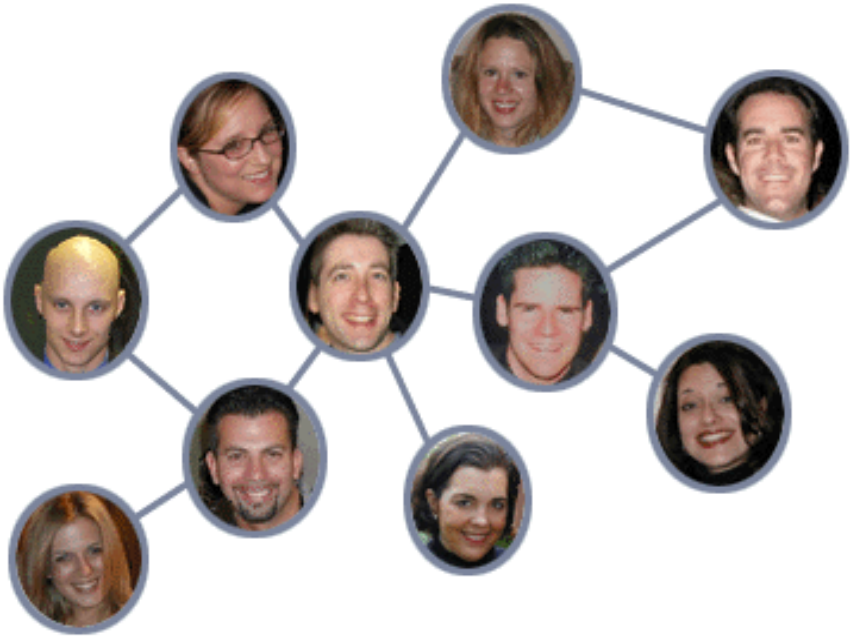


Figure 20 Illustration of diverse relationships on facebook (2010)

Larry King, a prominent talk show host in the United States, has more than one million followers one-way via twitter. When he was asked about his followers in an interview on a local television station in the United States, and whether or not the relationships are stable, his response was "they are what they are." He questioned, "What's the definition of a stable relationship?"

6.5.2 Users' countenance of the number of friends they have

It was essential to learn and demonstrate the users' perspective on the reasons they why they have so many friends:

Ted, a user on facebook and Mxit, says:

> "I have so many friends, and they are indeed all my friends. They help me learn different views about diverse subjects. It also makes me realise my potential and theirs, which I have come to know over the years. I want to keep in touch with my old friends and peers who became friends online. I also know where they are at in their lives career-wise, and about their plans for the future. And in return it encourages me to work harder."

Nina says of having so many friends that:

> "I love to observe and explore the cultural uniqueness in the friends that I have. This is mainly because I am eager to learn about the different cultures and how things are done in different countries."

Jamaal, a bubbly and talkative extrovert, says:

> "It makes me feel important and as a result I just accept whoever sends me a friendship request. I am also eager to learn about other peoples' lifestyles: they appear to be fascinating. Therefore, viewing their photos teaches me much about friends who live in different countries. And the more friends one has, the merrier! It allows me to reach a greater virtual audience. Having so many friends actually boosts my ego"

Kitti says: “It is fun socialising with so many friends and with people who live in different countries. And it is indeed fun. It is better to have a large number of friends than no friends at all. As a result when you are lonely there is always someone to talk to. And whenever I need support I know I can count on my friends to be there for me.”

Shade, who primarily uses facebook and skype to communicate with friends says:

> “Having many friends enables me to communicate with different people who all contribute equally to my life. It is, primarily, about always feeling loved and cared for, and when one friend is not available, there are hundreds or thousands who are ready to share a thought or a joke, and with whom I can share one too. There never appears unwillingness in my friends to spend a bit or much time chatting to me, unless they are in meetings, but otherwise they chat between work, and none of us feel that we are alone. This is particularly the case when we are equally lonely, and need someone to talk to, or make us feel good in one way or another.”

Some of the users suggested that it is a blessing to have so many friends, unlike our parents and grandparents in the past who only had a few. We live our lives to the fullest, and are having much fun. The users say that although they do not often all hang out offline all the time, they influence each other socially, politically and otherwise, and that it could, in reality, be argued that they are all always together, regardless of the fact that they are in different homes, places or countries across the world.

The number of friends users have could also be attributed to some of the features which are available on the various sites and which encourage them to increase their friendships. Several debates in the media suggested that the find a friend features are the primary reason why users have hundreds or thousands of friends, particularly since the features appeared to increase on sites since July 2011. Evidently facebook doesn't think that users have enough friends!

Dunbar (2010:3) argues that the volume of the neo-cortex region of our brain used for language and thought limits the number of friends we can maintain as illustrated in Figure 19**.** He advocates that this number has not changed much throughout history, referring to the hunter and gatherer societies, as well as the average village society which he refers to in his *Domesday Book*.

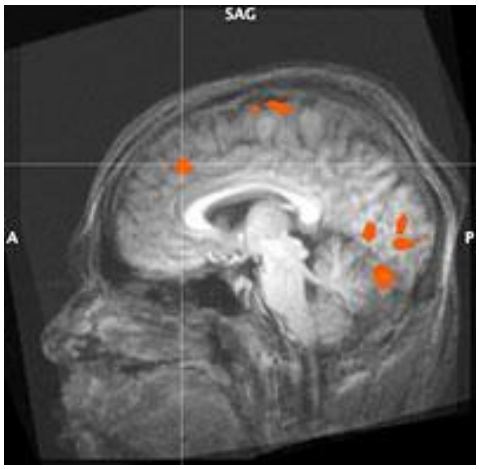


Figure 21 Illustration of the brain indicating human capacity for friendships (Ushma Patel; 2011)

The question of whether or not all the individuals on the user profile lists are indeed friends was asked of the Informants several times. Although it was possible that they did not understand the question, the majority insisted that, regardless of the number of friends they have on their friend lists, they are indeed all friends, and that although the users admitted that at first only a few were friends, and that the majority were merely people they knew either from school, church, social or community clubs, work or SNSs, but that over time they became real friends through talking to each other on comment blogs daily, and sharing experiences and challenges. They also advise each other on choices they make and keep track in most cases of how their days are going. Hence, the majority were not amused when it appeared that their friendships are questioned. This severely disputes Dunbar's number of only 150 friends.

One user, Josh, suggests on YouTube that it doesn't matter how many friends one has on YouTube, which is a site who's users are generally subscribers, but it does matter how many friends a user has on other SNSs like facebook, myspace, Second life etc."

Some of the users appeared to disagree with his argument and suggest that if someone doesn't have any uploaded videos on YouTube it makes better sense to befriend them instead of subscribing, to them. The most important thing on YouTube appears to be how many views users' videos get. How many users subscribe to them appears to be secondary, provided they need professional advice on their hair, skin, etc. There were many channels with hundreds of subscribers and only a handful of views. When your subscriber count and your view count match, your videos must be worth watching.

Dr Reader (2010) of Sheffield Hallam University, says that although the number of friends people have on these sites can be massive, the actual number of close friends is approximately the same as in the face to face real world. However, he and his team later found that social networking sites do allow users to exaggerate the figure, often significantly.

Rainer Romero-Canyas (2010), a psychology research scientist at Columbia University, confirms that facebook makes it easier for people to take that first step in finding someone again, and that people can reach out to one another without fear of rejection. Note, however, that users can choose to accept or to ignore an invitation for friendship.

SNSs also enable users to find friends as far back as when they began their first year at school, and with whom they have not been in touch for a lengthy period of time. This is simply through searching for them on sites like facebook, Mxit, and skype, etc. The ease with which one can find friends increases user urges to search even further, affirming the arguments made above. Additionally, friends whom users have in common are visible the minute they sign into a site like facebook for example, make the search easier. The perspectives of the users interviewed or those who filled out questionnaires were not any different than the arguments users make themselves that it is much easier for one to find old or new friends.

Some SNSs have restrictions on the number of friends that users can have. facebook, for example, limits friends to 5 000+10 friends. twitter does not appear to limit the number of friends that users have, however, they do seem to aggressively monitor users who follow other users. On myspace there appears to be no limit, but the number of requests users can make per day is 400.

Mxit has no limit on the number of friends that users can have, although, for some reason, it appears that the number of friends users have is much less than those they have on facebook or myspace, for example. On YouTube the number of views is unlimited. It appears that the number of friend requests is restricted to 500 per day, which generally is also impossible for an individual user to reach in a day. Unlike individual users, organisations or businesses are only allowed a limited number of friends.

6.5.3 A microscopic analysis of who users' friends are

Although users call all the individuals they interact with on the sites friends, there are in reality different groups that include the following; 1) Peers or Buddies are friends of diverse generations, often from school, work, church, etc.; 2) Male or female; 3) Users who make friendships only with individuals from a particular gender; 4) Friends from different cultures and races**;** 5) Family members who are also listed as friends, e.g., siblings, parents or children, and; 5) Friends also include various organisations.

Costella (2011) says that it is possible to create worthwhile relations online. If they are meaningful they will probably move into the real world. He is of the view that it is possible to have a modern version of the pen pal arrangement using facebook or skype to talk to someone that you will probably never meet in the flesh. However, the reality is that nearly half of those listed as friends on user profiles are either friends, family or those with whom they went to school or work. The balance could actually perhaps be considered pen pals.

Some businesses also seek to increase their friend lists in order to increase their sales. One firm pays US$ 727 for each 5,000 users who accept its friend requests, or 0.15 cent each. Petersen (2009:77) of the Kenan-Flagger Business School at the University of North Carolina urges that purchasing friends or fans does not establish business loyalty and may actually hurt a firm's image by making it seem desperate. However, some users said that they do not mind becoming a friend if they can make a little money from it.

Oscar Wilde said that “friendships mixed with human nature can be a prickly business, anyone can sympathise with a suffering friend, but it requires a fine nature to sympathise with a friends’ success, or for that matter their choice of breakfast.

Costella (2010) implies that he is in favor of Google’s take on who friends and acquaintances are. He says that family and friends are quite insulated groups from each other that one would relate to in different ways. He agrees with Dunbar that the number of people is made up of intimates, family members and friends. He refers to the latter as nodding acquaintances. However, users clearly distinguish between family and friends. And almost 65% of the users interviewed feel that they do not have parents or siblings as friends because they communicate in different ways: parents and siblings don’t understand the language used in SNS communication, which they also feel provides them with agency to interact with friends freely and equally.

Users’ friends include close friends or buddies, people they know, friends, from school, work, church, other social clubs within communities, as well as family members. It was found that certain organisations also make friends with a vast majority of users, at a small cost for their own benefit. Finally it became apparent that the majority prefer not to make friends with parents or siblings.

6.6 Friendships users make in terms of gender, ethnic group, race and class.

During fieldwork, it was established that users’ friends are diverse in terms of ethnicity, gender, race, sexual orientation and temperament, but they were more or less in their personal capacity of a similar class in terms of access and resources to be able to use the social networking sites.
It appears that in many countries nuances of languages and culture make homegrown networks, such as China's Baidu Space and Russia's Vkontakte, stronger than imports. Japan's top social networking site, Mxit, provides blood type as part of member profiles, therefore catering to the local belief that knowing that titbit can predict compatibility.

Jordan, a user on most of the sites explored, suggested that aside from health issues, he values interesting, diverse and long-standing friendships. He says that users should immerse themselves in a diverse grouping of friends. And be diverse, he says. Don't just hang with one race. Some of

my best friends online are from college and from different races. He does not discriminate when it comes to choosing friends online.

Phara, a twitter and facebooker, says that a friend of his was shocked when she learnt that he has friends from diverse races. He said in response to her surprised look “yeah and I have white friends from any background and love them. I love friends from diverse upbringings, gal, and like them from Main Street to San Pedro.” He said; “My brother in law is white and his best friends are black and Asian, and together they make a diverse sitcom and are really good friends.”

Oso, a user both on facebook and twitter suggested that if you surround yourself with well-rounded people they will be called friends. Benjamin, a user on the different sites studied, was of the same view and commented that the asset he most values, aside from health, is interesting, diverse, long-standing friends. Sam commented that he always looks out for Gemini friends: they have the most diverse friends from distinct cultural backgrounds. And finally Mac suggested that if they couldn't disagree, he wouldn't have a lot of diverse twitter friends. He said that he seems to take positions that people disagree with.

It appears that some users tend to prefer friends of a specific gender. Some female users confirm that they don’t accept too many male friendship requests. They say that once males have access to photo albums they soon start to pursue females with a different intention than friendship. This seems to happen frequently, so many females don’t accept male friend requests unless they are already known by other friends.
And additional perspective is that of Susan, a user on facebook, YouTube and Mxit who says:

> “I had many male requests at first and accepted them all the time. But, over time I learned to say no when I realised how many of the guys, who were supposed to be friends, began to pursue me which resulted in me wasting much time that would have been spent more wisely with those who genuinely have an interest in engaging in insightful discussions.”

Ami, who is of the same view, says that:

> "Although I have many male friends from school, university and work who are my facebook friends, I just don't believe in accepting new friendship requests from the opposite sex."

Male users appear to feel quite differently, and gladly make and accept female friend requests. I also found that users who make friends based on sexual orientation generally tend to do so only with females, however, this is not exclusively so. What does seem to be true is that the vast majority prefer making friends with users from all spheres of life regardless of their race, ethnic group, social status, or gender.

In terms of class it was obvious that the users were potentially from families of different statuses. But, as far as their own individual status was concerned, the mere fact that they have equal access to SNSs either from home, on their own personal cell phones, and/or from work indicates that they could be considered the same class or has similar status, as far as accessing the resources in their own unique way is concerned.

The majority of the users made similar remarks to Todd, a facebooker, twitter and YouTuber, who says that:

> "Class is irrelevant as far as our friends are concerned. I live in the United States and can be considered relatively wealthy, but I also have friends in the Congo and Zambia and in some of the poorest areas of China who come from disadvantaged families. What we share online enriches us all and we learn much from and encourage each other."

So it appears that users are of the view that when they choose to accept friendship requests class is the least of their concerns. While it is true that some user friendships include those made at school, tertiary institutions or work places, etc., some choices are made on the basis of class, and

opinions are formed according to the personalities that are displayed on the individual profiles and walls.

Overall, users' friends on SNSs are from diverse races, or cultures, and while some females chose friends across genders, others reject requests. From the users interviewed the males tend to make and accept female requests more frequently than their female counterparts. However, choosing friends in terms of class, occupation, ethnicity, appears to be irrelevant in the majority of cases.

It appears that ethnicity, occupation and class are important in real life and that SNSs have transformed social interaction and brought people of different identities, races, gender, sexual orientation and unique cultural backgrounds together on an equal platform or stage.

6.7 The advantages and potential consequences of the number of friend's users have

6.7.1 Advantages

Almost 65% of the users interviewed believe that there are many advantages in having a large number of friends and followers. A twitter, Shakes, who has literally thousands of friends and followers was asked how many of his followers actually listen to what he says. He feels that they listen all the time. This immense following often engages in debate which he considers exciting and informative.

The numbers of celebrity followers by far outnumbers normal users. Popular musicians, artists, prominent figures—both in the media and on the sites—have followers who worship the ground they walk on and follow their every move. This increases their popularity even more.

Friendships on twitter are generally mostly not reciprocal but there are the exceptions that tweet each other daily and discuss various personal, social or political issues. However, on facebook, skype, myspace and Mxit, relationships do appear more reciprocal. The users interviewed suggested that they benefit immensely from the sites, and, that they have become educated in

many ways. Many of them feel that if it was not for the sites they would have remained uniformed and would have little knowledge about people and countries around the world.

While he argues to the contrary on the number of friends individual users can have, Dunbar (2011: 5) recently acknowledged that an abundant social network provides individuals with the ability to reason about the intentions of others. He says that friends are better able to understand the perspectives of others. This is contrary to his argument on the 150 number of friends users can have or manage.

Having a large number of friends certainly seems to boost the egos of users. *facebook Connect* makes social networking easier and saves visitors from having to fill out tedious registration forms. The sites have find a friend features which enable users to find friends from school, college, previous colleagues. In addition the site has a friend suggestions feature enabling users to make friends with those whom they and their friends have in common.

Some of the key advantages for users on SNSs are how much users can learn from friends, not only socially or politically, but equally through interacting with friends and acquiring knowledge about their own medical conditions.

According to health magazine *Life after a Traumatic Brain Injury* (2010:1), thousands of users are learning much more from each other online than they do from their doctors. Friends also discuss which hospitals, restaurants and clinical trials show promise and which experimental treatments are defunct.

Roughly 9 out of 10 of the users interviewed say that using SNSs as a means of communication surpasses all previous methods. And for some of the users, the financial advantages are better than anything. The users suggested that facebook, Mxit and related sites enable them to communicate instantly with friends around the world without any cost per se, except for the Internet service whose bills are either serviced by themselves or by family members. They were of the view that without the sites it would have been almost impossible to communicate at the rate they do.

6.7.2 Consequences

Generally most societies consider that more than two friends are considered a crowd and that loyalties shared appear to diminish. This is totally the opposite on SNSs where users seem to make more friends each time they log on. Perhaps it could be the primary reason why scholars like Dunbar suggest that users can handle only a certain number of friends.

Friends experience difficulties and often frustrate each other, sometimes resulting in the termination of friendships. Online friendships often have consequences which can be harmful to the individual user. These can include; 1) That users discover that the person they considered a friend is not really one, and portrays a false self in front of his audience; 2) When friends provide too much information to each other which can backfire and be harmful; 3) That there is no privacy per se when one engages with ones friends and too much information is made available to those who have different agendas; 4) SNS relationships can become obsessive, and watching friends' lives unfold throughout the day can dilute the focus that individuals need to put into achieving their own goals, and give a false sense of reality. Obsessions can result in being drawn to the wrong kinds of friends, and; 5) When users are unaware whom they befriend.

Rosemary Hattersly (2010:1) warned users sternly about some of the people that users consider to be friends. She speaks out on the dangers of users posting their full addresses, phone numbers and other private details in the public arena. She says that it's great to share, but it's even better to check first who you're sharing with.

According to a study conducted by the Edinburgh Napier University (2011:1) it appears that users with large numbers of friends on facebook tend to suffer considerable stress and anxiety. The researchers suggested some users suffer considerable facebook related stresses whereby they feel anxious, and a number said they feel guilty about rejecting friend requests. The study also found that 12% of the users questioned revealed that they disliked receiving friend requests, and 65% said that they often delay replying to friend requests.

According to Dr Kathy Charles of the same university, users with the most friends, who have invested much time on the site, are likely to be the most stressed. What is reflected in Rabeka's

(2010) example in Figure 20 below shows some of the annoyances which she suggests users encounter on social networks. The figure defines some of the frustrations brought about by friends, however, the majority of users suggested that they appreciate that friends keep them informed of the exciting experiences they see friends encounter, and commented that they do the same, and that it does not frustrate them but it reassures them that they are an important part of their friends' lives and the reason why they keep them informed.

While users tend to make a vast number of friends on SNSs, some become a hindrance to users, and result in friendships being terminated. It should however be noted that the challenges which friends often encounter are not any different than those offline. They are equally coupled with impediments which results in distress and often lead to the friendships being terminated.

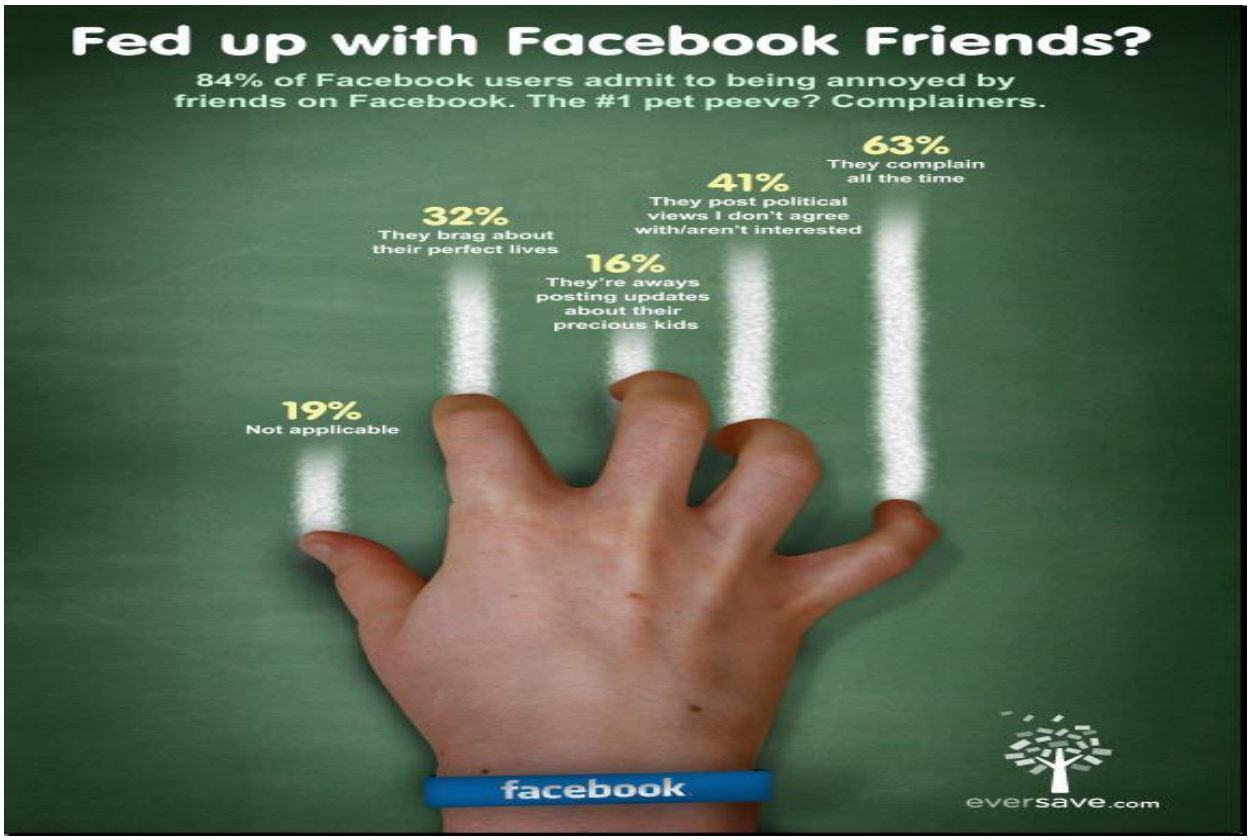


Figure 22 Some disadvantages of social networking sites (University of Tennessee project; Rebekah 2011)

According to a study conducted by Rabekah, a graduate at the University of Tennessee (2011:1), we all have friends that are constantly annoying people with their professions of love for their significant other, hate for their chemistry exams, or some other continual tangent that is totally irrelevant to your friendship with that person."
Rebekah asks if users will consider de-friending frustrating individuals, or if users just continue being annoyed by their posts.

During the research for this paper, the author did find similar frustrations were expressed by the users interviewed, however, only about 30% expressed annoyance as opposed to the 84% suggested by Rebekah. In fact, very few of the users interviewed for this study felt that friends complain all the time, About 80% proposed that friends face different political situations offline in different countries, and that disagreeing with decisions made by political leaders encourages persuasive discourse, thereby broadening their understanding on wider social or political issues around the world. Users who face similar political frustrations exhorted that it encourages them to come up with common solutions on how to protest against what they disagree with.

According to the *McMillan Dictionary Thesaurus* (2011), the term "de-friending" is the recognizable term used to terminate an online friendship. When a user is de-friended, that person is removed from the friend list and is blocked from accessing the ex-friend's profile. Users seem to find it easy to simply delete friends when they are not pleased with their behavior or the attitudes they display. It takes very little effort to do so and can be accomplished with the click of a button.

Apart from the de-friended user, the de-friender can also simply make themselves invisible to the unsuspecting friend, who only becomes aware that the friendship is terminated when they have no access to that profile. The ex-friend's profile becomes invisible and the de-friended friend is no longer able to initiate communication. These features are easily accessible on all SN sites.

During this study the majority of users interviewed stated that they had never had disputes with friends to the extent that they were terminated. Only about 30% of the users suggested that they had at some point or another experienced situations of distress in friendships in which they

reconsidered the friendship, or eventually terminated it. Evidently this was mainly due to misunderstandings or disagreements which resulted in disputes.

User Toeks, and many of her peers, expressed similar sentiments. She suggested that she had, on several occasions, either made a comment or read one made by friends online that resulted in disputes and eventual terminations. She says that at times comments can offend people if interpreted in the wrong way.

Terminating online friendships appears to be much easier than ending offline relationships. Once an online friendship is ended, it is usually unlikely that the two parties will come face to face with each other again. This seems to make terminating online friendships much less complicated, and it appears as though once a user is blocked they seem to be totally erased from the user's memory.

There seem to be various reasons why friendships are terminated. Some users suggest that online friendships are not always easy or smooth sailing, and that some friends can become hindrances, as reflected in Rebekah's study, which drives users to remove them either for a while or permanently from their friend list.

The statuses which the individuals ascribe to themselves often "enchant" the viewer. Eriksen (2001:51) suggests that "the philosophical description of role enactment as sociologists and anthropologists describes them, is the ability of actors to manipulate their statuses. Actors may thus regard their status from a distance; they decide, within limits, which expression they show, in order to give their co-actors a certain impression of who they are." These roles which are played out give the actor an opportunity to be self-consciously aware of the impression he or she makes on others, and portray an admirable appearance.

Davis (2009:1) says that in anthropology it is very clear that the environment which individuals create influences their perceptions and the manner in which they behave. People will come into an environment and behave in ways that they probably don't think about. The same applies to the environments created by social media. Close observation as a participant observer would

hopefully reveal the patterning of the relationships which occur and the results they eventually produce.

Almost 70% of users suggested that, while they occasionally come across friends who make ill comments and those who often intend only their perspectives to be heard, it can be irritating." Apart from the latter, the users were of the view that they have never really broken up with friends online per se, as they have in many instances offline.

According to Sowa, a twitter and facebooker, misunderstandings are inevitable due to misconceptions and miscommunications which are more common than one would think, and it is easier to apologise and reconcile where there is no facial confrontation.

Toeks, who confirmed that she had terminated a friendship, suggested that in order for her friends and her to solve their differences it was essential that they saw each other face to face on or skype, a different social networking site. They had to ensure that their apologies were genuine before their friendships could be restored.
Gintajali (2011:1), who had had a serious break-up with her friend after a major dispute reveals that after 4 years, 3 months and 21 days when she saw his friendship request she did not hesitate to accept it. It pleased her to see that he remembered her and extended to her once again the hand of friendship as he done before. A "yes" from her and they were back to how they had been before sharp words pierced them.

In contrast to the argument made by Dr Charles that users with the most friends are likely to be the most stressed, the author of this paper found that the majority of friends suggested quite the opposite, and argued that they are the least stressed because of the number of friends that they do have. They confirmed that when they face challenges and frustrations offline, they find solace in the hundreds of friends they have online and that it relaxes them simply to know that there are hundreds more who care, or who would say something that would make them feel better.

The users confirmed that they do guard against accepting requests from strangers who appear suspicious, although it is not easy to know whom you accept as a friend. Users with views such

as Ketty's agree that having someone to chat to each time one logs onto facebook, or other sites, after a long day of hard work, can actually be therapeutic and relaxing, rather than stressful. Some users simply acknowledged that it can sometimes be time-consuming searching a person's profile before accepting their friendship request, but that does not make the numbers stressful.

6.7.3. Frustrations for the Informants

6.7.3.1 Multiple friendship requests, and when these are ignored

From the users studied for this paper about 15% revealed that they often ignore friendship requests, but, this is primarily because they prefer to keep to a certain number of friends. The Informants were of the view that it is easier to communicate and give all friends equal or some attention, rather than totally ignoring them.

6.7.3.2 Do users compete for friendships or friendship time in the mix of real and virtual encounters?

One of the key issues explored while conducting this study was how users compete for friendships or friendship time in the mix of real and virtual encounters. The users were of the following perspectives:

Almost 85% agree that online friendships tend to interfere with and impact negatively on friends in traditional social encounters, and this is primarily because of the amount of time they tend to spend conversing with friends online. One twitter, facebooker and Mxiter says that:

> "My friendships online I notice, impact negatively on family in traditional society. My family often complains that they feel neglected and unimportant. The amount of time I spend online results in my friends thinking that I am unsociable because when I am at home I am always busy chatting to my friends either on facebook, twitter or Mxit and it frustrates them when I laugh and they are unable to be part of the jokes that my friends and I share online."

The users were of the view that in traditional society there never seems to be enough time, because they are all always in a hurry to go elsewhere or too busy with one task or another, but there's always time for a quick chat in the interim."

Users confirm that online friends are always available during the most challenging times: they listen to each other's problems, make time for each other, care and are there in time of need. Users see that when they are in the same physical space with others, there seems to be no interest and they never talk because they are equally occupied with other friends online or hooked to television sets, computers or laptops. They believe that if they give attention to friends they will remain friends for a very long time.

Larno says that it is difficult, no matter how hard he tries, to spend time with some of his friends in traditional society. He always seems to concentrate on his phone, chatting to other friends on facebook. What is surprising is that he often gets annoyed if his friends do the same.
Further to the information provided in Chapter 4, older generations express their disapproval of the amount of time users spend chatting to friends online, and they suggest that the youth are addicted to their cell phones and spend an incredible amount of valuable time on them. That affects their outlook on life, and results in a loss of focus on important issues that really matter. Delaney (2011: 64) illustrates it well when he says that we can walk down the road and text people a world away, while ignoring the ones right in front of us.

There are often various justifications that users make regarding why they need digital friends. In most cases the justification appears to be that it is the norm; everyone does it – even the friends who often feel neglected. They also believe that if an individual doesn't have digital friends, he will be left in the dark and be out of touch. Having digital friends enables one to keep abreast of knowledge and events, and the advanced ways in which we can communicate and socialise.

Some users say that they improvise and try to keep a balance between online and traditional friends, but that it is not always easy because they find themselves spending twice the amount of time with friends on social networking sites.

Margie says that she works all the time, and being constantly on social networking sites can be nurturing. This seems to be the same for friends in traditional societies.

Some of the users reveal that they only socialise fully with friends in traditional society when their cell phones are off. Otherwise, the result is often that either one or all friends spend time on the sites in the presence of friends, thereby jeopardizing what could have been a great evening or afternoon out. The users confirm that they are all guilty. Not a single one of them is innocent in this regard. They are hooked and it is often difficult not to be online when you know your friends are waiting to chat online, and one misses out on a lot.

If one observes individuals today in traditional society at various social events, one notices that, particularly amongst Generation Y users, while they do converse with friends within the group, they are simultaneously seen to be chatting with other friends online. While it appears for a moment as if friends within the group are focused on their circle of friends, it is actually not the case. If one observes closely it becomes clear that each of them, at some point, will occasionally pick up a phone from the table, out of a pocket or bag and reply to a chat or comment on what other friends are discussing online.

Often some friends appear abandoned within a group while others invest much time in conversation with users online. Those who seem to be neglected are often the same friends who often receive attention when they are online, and their friends are socialising offline with others. Hence, this results in friends competing for friendship time in the mix of real life encounters.

Interestingly, some Generation X and Y users become annoyed with friends who constantly chat with others online in their presence, but seem not to behave any differently themselves. Very few of these users seem to value an outing with friends in the same way as the majority of the Seniors and Boomers who consider such behavior impolite and disrespectful. When these users meet with friends they ensure that they switch off their cell phone devices in order to spend quality time together. This is unlike their younger counterparts who seem to invest their involvement with values and qualities they seem not to really offer.

6.8 Users' perspectives on the reasons why they talk and act in this manner in the presence of friends offline.

One of the key issues explored during fieldwork was why users talk and act in the manner that they do while they are in the presence of friends in traditional society.

It was found that most of the users, particularly Generation X and Y users, as indicated above, are of the view that this behaviour is habitual, and is almost impossible to change or unlearn. We have become so accustomed to that it is difficult to resist.

Users are also of the view that there is a great deal of information to keep track of. Andy confirms that missing out on what is being said for only a few minutes could result in losing valuable information, news and gossip which becomes old news in an instant.

Some users confirm that, unlike previous generations, they can chat with hundreds of friends instantly from wherever they are. The difference is that they are digital natives, and because of that they communicate, converse and behave differently, and their friends understand why they talk and act this way. Therefore, they do not mind. Not all the users, however, share this perspective. For some it appears to matter that friends value their presence and consider the way in which they behave.

6.9 Users' views on the ways through which they manage and maintain friendships

> "If a man does not make new acquaintances as he advances through life, he will soon find himself left alone," said Samuel Johnson. "A man should keep his friendships in constant repair."
>
> **Samuel Johnson**

During the exploration of friendships, one of the key aims was to examine how users manage or maintain the unprecedented number of friendships that they have. This is with particular reference to arguments made by various scholars, like Dunbar for example, who states that it is impossible for a single individual to sustain more than a 150 friends. Hence Figure 21 illustrates

how the more friends a user has, the more distant a friend they are to users. The image shows the closest friends in the darker shade, but the lighter shades depict friends that are further away from the user.

This could also illustrate that while a user gives much time and attention to friends who are close it appears to be impossible to give those who are further away equal attention. Therefore, it elevates the question regarding how users maintain their friendships.

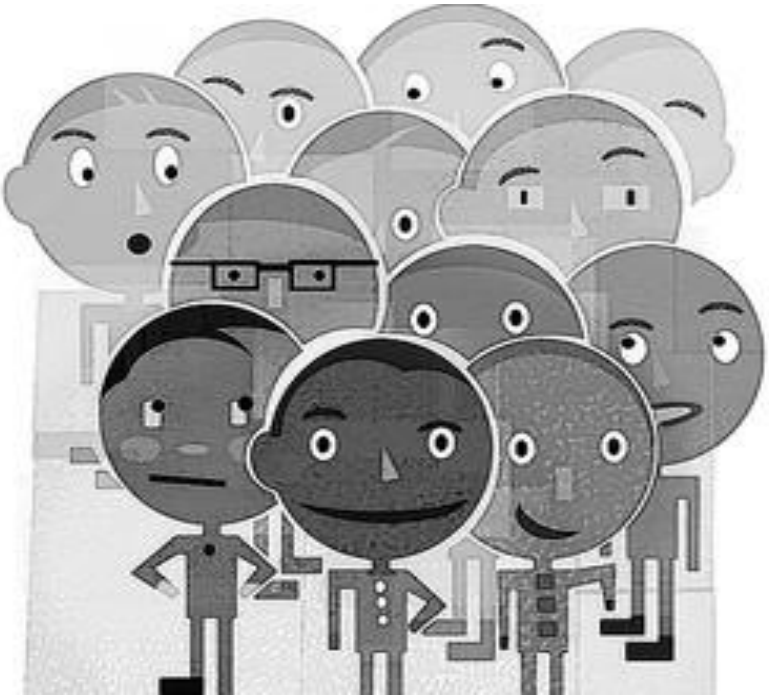


Figure 23 Illustration indicating the more friends, the less close the relationships (Social Networks; Google Images downloaded. 2010)

Dunbar (2010:1) states that "beyond lies the many people whose facial features you recognise by sight, with whom you are happy to have a passing conversation, but whom you don't really count as your personal friends."

facebook has a feature called a wall. Users can post messages and pictures on these walls which are only visible to the intended receiver, and not to other friends or their friends. Walls can considered confidential by the user.

Comment blogs are different. Users can post their comments regarding how their day is going, or they can express frustration or happiness. This often brings the awareness that a user is not alone, and that each time they do make an effort to speak to friends there is usually some who are "listening," and responding. This makes users feel that they are cared for and surrounded by friends who tend to be there all the time. This is despite the fact that they do not necessarily directly speak to each other individually, but they do so collectively through sharing a line or a thought to let friends know that they are there and thinking of them.

6.9.1 Regular comments and chatting

During interviews and in questionnaires almost 80% of the users interviewed confirmed that they try to ensure that they chat with friends as often as they can. They constantly let them know what they are doing and their whereabouts, etc., and vice versa. The sites themselves facilitate this by sending notifications via email whenever a friend has tried to contact them, or has updated their own profiles. It is almost impossible for users to remain unaware. According to Ronca (2011:1) "Staying in touch online is easy. With a few strokes of the keyboard and a few clicks of the mouse, you're connected."

Some users confirmed that they maintain their friendships through socialising with friends both online and offline, and thereby making an effort to meet.

Rochelle, a user both on twitter and facebook, asserts that friendships in traditional society require much more effort. If that effort is not made, it can result in friends feeling left out in the cold and often causes friction. Somehow, social networking sites allow all friends to be treated equally. None of Rochelle's friends feel that she gives more attention to others. When a thought is posted on her facebook comment blog, it is for everyone, and they always respond, reinforcing the fact that they do care and are there for her. Thus, she almost never feels lonely.

10% of those interviewed confirmed that sometimes they are unable to maintain their friendships on social networking sites because there is simply not enough time.

Tweeting grew significantly between January 2007 and 2010, and users seem to send an enormous volume of tweets every day. Some numbers range from a few hundred in a day, to users who tweet constantly throughout the whole day. In the 12 months of 2010, a female identifying herself as "Thirteen" appears to have sent 2,042,493 tweets, making it the highest number of tweets sent by one individual at that time. Since then, user Itoh, has the highest number of individual tweets, averaging 270.6 per day. During the interview process it became apparent that users were unaware of the amount of tweets that they send within the twitter community.

Some users seem to announce practically every detail of their lives to their friends throughout every day. This includes things like what they are having for lunch or breakfast, what movies they are watching, what they do at work, in the gym and so on throughout the day. They discuss their animals, what they are wearing and where they intend to eat out. Sam, a user, expressed similar sentiments to those of the majority of users both on twitter and facebook, and says:

> "My friends and I practically watch each other's lives unfold on a daily basis, and chatting is like watching a movie in one's mind on what ones friends are up to and vice versa. From the bathroom early in the morning to bed at night, I watch their movie and they watch mine. It is fascinating."

6.9.2 Encouragements

Sending messages of encouragement and optimism seems to be one of the key methods through which online friendships are maintained. Following are some thoughts that users have posted to friends as a way of encouraging them in their daily lives.

Chelsea posted this comment on her facebook comment blog:

> "Smile and laugh more—it will keep energy vampires away. And don't take yourself too seriously; no one does. Realise that life is a school and you are here to learn and pass all your tests. Problems are part of the curriculum that appear and fade away like an algebra class, but the lessons you learn will last a lifetime."

Susan, says that she often posts a thought on a Monday morning when she is aware that her friends do not really look forward to the day, or rather to the start of a long week. Each Monday morning she posts the thought "When you wake up in the morning complete the fig statement, my purpose to..... Today and remember that you are too blessed to be stressed. No matter how you feel, dress up and show up, the best is yet to come. BELIEVE."

Elana, a myspacer, posts this message if she becomes aware that friends might be having personal relationship problems. She often encourages them with one of her favorite lines: "Marriage is bed of roses with a few thorns on the stems, but with every day that passes, we learn to de-thorn the stems and focus more on the beautiful petals."

Simon, who is a user of twitter, Mxit and YouTube, says that he often reminds his friends of the importance of health and friendship. As a result he often posts this thought when his friends least expect it: "Your job won't take care of you when you are sick. Your friends will. Stay in touch." He also reminds his friends that "no one is in charge of your happiness except you. Life is too short for hating anyone. Spend more time with people who really care about you and with people over the age of 70 and under 6."

Many of the users confirm that the encouraging messages friends sent during difficult times or when they face an exam or challenging moments in their lives, often make them feel that they are not alone and help them learn to overcome or defeat the challenge. Knowing that friends will help carry them through it is also very comforting.

6.9.3 Humour

Sometimes humour is used to cheer friends up and some of it could be considered ridiculous or weird. One of the users called out to his friends, through a comment on facebook, and said; "HELP! I'm at a police station I've been caught drinking and driving. The Urine sample was positive, so I stole the sample. Now, I'm being charged for taking it!"

Lamba, a YouTuber, Mxiter and twitter said she often remind her friends how short life is and that they should live it to the fullest through interacting regularly when they could. Her thoughts to friends were;

> "Burn the candles, use the nice sheets. Don't save them for special occasions. Today is special. Make peace with your past so it doesn't mess up the present. No matter how good or bad a situation, it will change. Just hang in there."

Tom, a myspacer, posts this thought to friends when he feels proud to be part of such a colorful, vibrant, diverse and accepting society. He often wishes all his friends "Happy Pride!"
Users seem to be very appreciative of the various senses of humour shared by friends. It encourages them to provide the same in return with the realisation of the impact that it has on their own lives.

6.9.4 Spending time and socialising with friends regularly

From the users it was found that most spend an exceptional amount of time with friends on social networking sites. And when they were asked how much time they spend on the site, the majority said that it was incomprehensible.

twitter and facebooker, Sana, who appears to spend almost all her time on social networking sites, regardless of the fact that she works full time, said: "I can sometimes spend 24 hours on social networking sites, and at times can stay up throughout the night. This means that I spend as much time as I possibly can, unless I am asleep."

While observing social networking sites, I noticed that the impact which the sites have on family and friends in traditional society was they often feel neglected or left out. Many of the users said that they spend an unprecedented amount of time online communicating with friends and that it impacts negatively on family and offline friends who are in their presence, and who constantly complain that they are addicted, to social networking.

It appears that Web surfers like to socialise while they browse the internet, but many prefer to do so only with their friends rather than with perfect strangers, San Francisco (2009:84).

Another group of users suggested that they spend no less than five hours a day chatting to and engaging with friends. facebooker and Mxiter, Thuli says:

> "I cannot really say the precise amount of time, but it is often almost half a day, and this is regardless of the fact that I am at work. It is actually during those times that I get to chat with my friends because they are also online. When they do not see me online they often sms me and asked me to sign in, particularly when there are interesting debates or hot topics being discussed which they want me to be a part of."

Overall, it was found that SNS relationships are managed and maintained in a couple of ways. Regular communication, making comments on comment blogs and regular chats all help. Some users keep in touch by posting comments or pictures to remind friends that they are still there. In addition, friendships are nurtured by sending positive thoughts which are visible to all friends. Almost 75% of users confirmed that, through the features available on the sites, they are able to manage and/or maintain the enormous number of friends that they have.

6.9.5 Users' perspectives on the conceivability of providing friends with equal attention

When users were asked whether or not they feel it is possible to give all their friends equal attention, the majority suggested that it is possible do so by merely posting a public comment; others suggested that it is impossible to do so. The following different perspectives were all provided:

Around 69% of the users expressed the sentiment it is possible to give all friends equal attention, particularly on Mxit, as it is possible to chat to hundreds of users at the same time.

Todd feels that he spends quality time with his online friends all the time. And he defines quality time as there is bonding, having intense conversations be they on emotional topics or discussing opinions about various subjects which entail getting to know each other on a personal level.

Jo, a user on facebook and twitter, confirmed that he spends about two to three hours a day chatting to friends online.

Paul believes that providing friends with equal attention is practically the norm on facebook and Mxit.

Mari says:

> "My friends and I are all eager to get online, particularly after there has been some kind of social event. We are always eager to view photos of different events, and therefore we constantly get online to see the pictures of the different parties we had and make comments, jokes or criticisms on what we did."

There is a general belief that if users are not constantly online socialising or interacting they lose because there is always something new going on. Those that are not online end up receiving news that is old and stale. Evidently persuasive discourse is critical for this group of users, and through it they simultaneously provide friends with attention.

Users are of the view that one fits all. When they share a comment on facebook, myspace, twitter or Mxit they consider that they speak to each friend individually, and that they provide equal attention to friends.

A significant number of users are of the view that this is not plausible, and one can only speak to friends on facebook where comments are visible for all friends to see and all can reply instantly, or when they sign in. Evidently time is of the essence for these users. They expressed similar views as Yalu, who asserts that:

> "While I ensure that I interact regularly with my friends, time management is vital, and taking real life obligations into consideration such as work, varsity, etc. it is almost impossible. Most of my friends prefer facebook or Mxit. A comment here and there on facebook lets them know that I am still there and care though."

For this group of users, time seemed to be an issue. Many suggested that there is not always enough time when their friends need them while they are at work, but when the opportunity arises they will always try to share a thought that will make their friends aware that they do care. However, individual attention is impossible because they just have too many friends.

This group seems to agree with Dunbar (2010:1) when he said that if you need evidence that relationships are hard work, this is surely it. Relationships (friendships) require time and effort and a lot of brain work.
Users revealed that they are not always aware when a friend might need attention, and it is often only when other friends make them aware that they are able to offer comfort. However, it is almost impossible to ensure that you give them all equal attention. They suggested that it is only possible through sending comments on facebook to friends who can view the messages.

However, that there are users who regularly keep in touch with friends online either through posting messages on their Walls, or through sharing a comment which all their friends can see, or through chatting regularly on sites like myspace, twitter and Mxit.

6.10 Views on the differences between consulting a friend in the flesh (in traditional society) and consulting a friend online

During this study it became apparent that most of the younger generation users feel that there is a vast difference between socialising with friends in the flesh and meeting them online. They say that when they socialise in traditional ways, they tend to run out of conversation much more quickly in spite of the fact that there are various opinions. Users say that conversing online provides so many different issues, and information just pours in from hundreds of friends so you never run out of topics to talk about. They say that as a result boredom is not an option. Users confirm that the information they receive is overwhelming and results in them spending much more time with friends online.

In addition, it was found that in the flesh users enjoy interacting with friends at various functions where they are unable to access their digital tools. And the majority admitted that they are often

so distracted by the beep of a phone or other devices that it is almost impossible to spend quality time. But they also say that when they interact online with friends, they do so in their own time and space, that there are hardly distractions and that friends have no reason to feel neglected.

The majority of the users interviewed suggested that they seem to focus better when they speak with friends online than they do with friends in traditional settings because in those settings they often become distracted by their online friends. They also say that they speak much better with friends online in the absence of face to face communication. This seems to be primarily because they can say almost any and everything without really feeling embarrassed about what they say, especially on comment blogs, where other friends are quick to respond and turn what could be serious issues into humorous ones with much laughter."

6.11The impact which online friendships have on users personally

Many of the users feel that social networking sites have impacted on them significantly on a personal level. Almost 80% suggest that the sites have had a positive effect on them, and that they have broadened their outlooks on the diverse friends that they have. According to the users interviewed social networking sites have provided much insight into the uniqueness and similarities of different countries, and those of the individuals with whom they engage on global platforms.

Puti says that:

> "Social networking sites have kept my mind from wondering. I am always busy and have so much to do, either fulfilling a promise to a foreign friend, engaging in persuasive discourse with friends, or exploring, my friends' cultures, life styles and the goals which they have set for themselves which motivate me to work on my own. I can only say that the impact which social networking sites have had on my life has been positive and has changed it for the better. When my friends do well, I want to do well too. I can say that it lifted my status from where it was previously to where I am now. Now I am goal-orientated."

The users confirm that they have learned a great deal, and they say that not only have the sites cured them of boredom, but that the different perspectives of friends have brought much insight into their thinking, and have transformed the way in which they view the world in general.

Todd, a user on facebook, suggests that his friends have impacted positively on his life and have changed his life in ways that were least expected. He and his friends often discuss religious, political, social and sometimes academic issues.
So, the majority of users interviewed believe that their friends on social networking sites impact positively on their lives personally, although they also simultaneously agree that they do, however, impact negatively on friends and family in conventional society.

6.12 User perspectives on the duration of online friendships.

Almost 80% of the same users confirm that, unlike some of the friendships they have had in traditional societies which are coupled with various complications, online friendships can be long-lasting. Some have lasted from the time they first signed up on each of the sites and have endured for more than four or five years depending on when each of the sites was launched, and when they first started using them as key communication and socialising tools. However, it also seems to be true that while friendships can be long-lasting, they can also become stale. Many users suggest that friendships change in the long run because people mature, tend to lose interest and move on.

Suzy confirms that her friendships began in the very first few months of the launch of the sites. She says that the relationships between her and her friends were tight from the beginning and have indeed been long-lasting.

According to Shaddy, a user on facebook, YouTube and twitter, online friendships can be long-lasting provided that one constantly keeps in touch and chats regularly.

Other users tell that most of their friendships began in school or tertiary institutions. They continued on social networking sites and have lasted for quite a long time. Shaun believes that as long as one keeps in touch with one's online friends, the friendships could last indefinitely.

Tom feels that:

> "My friends and I still have such strong bonds, but they did not come automatically. Although some were close friends at school, the majority were merely people whom I knew because we went to the same school. But we really became close friends when they or I sent friendship requests. The amazing thing is that we motivate and encourage one another. Most of us went to study at college and then began our careers. Some of us got married and much changed along the way. Our friendships grew, but did not change.

Many users expressed similar sentiments and were of the view that:

> "In order for friendships to last they have to be worked on. What you give is what you get. And if one invests in relationships through constantly considering the perspectives of your friends, and through guarding against deliberately hurting their feelings, friendships will last."

While some users were of the view that online friendships cannot be lasting because people change and move on, the majority were generally of the view that they can be lasting, but that users should invest in them in order to make them stand the test of time.

According to Dr Reader (2007), "to develop a real friendship we need to see that the other person is trustworthy because we invest time and effort with the hope that sometime they will help us out." He suggests that "what we need is to be absolutely sure that a person is going to invest in us, and is really going to be there when we need them." And he warns that it is easy to be deceptive on the internet.

The majority of the users interviewed were of the view that they can rely on their friends and that they can be depended on in times of need. Friends were primarily of the view that in order for friendships to endure they need to invest in them.

6.13 Conclusion

This chapter provides an in-depth analysis on friends explored on facebook, myspace, twitter and Mxit. The diversity of friendships is described, as are users' perspectives regarding the measures through which they manage or maintain their friendships. Also conveyed are user perspectives regarding who they really consider to be friends, together with an analysis of the reasons why they keep such an unprecedented number of friends.
User perspectives on the advantages and/or potential consequences of online friendships were discussed, together with the impact that online friendships have on those in traditional societies and on users personally. Friendships with their problems and sustainability were explored, as was the question of whether or not online friendships can endure for an extended period of time.

The old notion of three being a crowd seems to have been transcended, and overall findings were that, in contrast to the findings of Dunbar, more than 50% of the users interviewed felt that it was absolutely possible to have and maintain more than 150 friends, and they strongly believe that the individuals that they call friends are not simply ornaments, but are indeed all friends.

None of the users felt that they were unable to handle the amount of friends they have on the SNS lists, but quite a few revealed that they don't have the free time to constantly converse with friends.

Users are of the opinion that online friendships, regardless of the numbers involved, have impacted on them positively, and that the friendships can, and have, endured for years.

Chapter 7 A match made in the clouds? Exploring intimate relationships on social networking sites

7.1 Introduction

Chapter 7 discusses intimate relationships that form on social networking sites, together with the opinions of those who are against forming intimate online relationships. Also discussed is the impact that these relationships have on users and friends, together with a description of how these relationships differ from those formed in traditional society. The cross-cultural and interracial preferences that users tend to choose in intimate online relationships are also presented here.

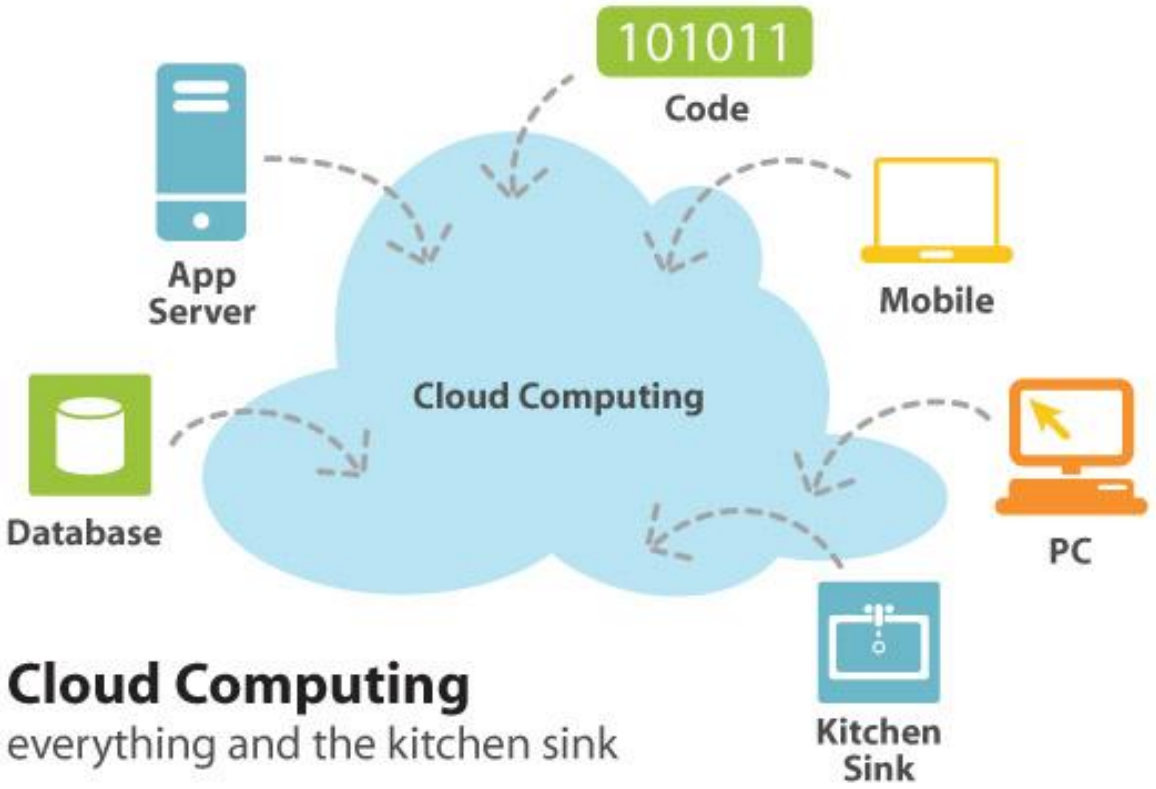


Figure 24 Illustration of relationships forming over the airwaves (Blue Mile Cloud; 2010)

Relationships with scam artists and the predatory nature of paedophiles are also covered in this chapter, together with an analysis of the consequences of these relationships on those who are vulnerable. Finally, how social networking sites provide a platform from which intimate relationships can be formed, and how they can jeopardise existing relationships are discussed.

Firstly though, the concepts of "cloud" and "intimate relationships" as used in this chapter will be defined.

7.3 Definition of an intimate relationship

An intimate relationship is a particularly close interpersonal relationship as illustrated in Figure 23. It can be defined by the characteristics of enduring behavioural interdependence, repeated interactions, emotional attachment (Ask; 2010).



Figure 25 Image of a couple who seem to be in an intimate relationship (Wiki pictures; 2011)

During the exploration of the social networking sites, thousands of users were observed. To provide an in-depth analysis on the forming of intimate relationships a further 1 500 friends were interviewed and questioned. These friends were individuals who engaged with each other via the same platform of social networking sites, but were based in different countries around the world. Some of the users interviewed interact on twitter and skype through chats and discussions, however, the vast majority were facebook users. The interview formats were structured and

unstructured interviews, direct – sometimes through skype when necessary, and through questionnaires.

7.4 The views or perspectives of users

7.4.1 A brief analysis of racial, ethnic and cultural choices that users make in terms of pursuing an intimate relationship online

Users on social networking sites often date their peers. Some of the users often express how they met the person of their dreams on social networking sites. However, what appears to be particularly interesting is the choice of racial groups that they prefer to date. This is not only apparent from their profile pictures, but in fact users make it clear what their racial preferences are and seem to have no reticence in mentioning it on their facebook profiles. Profile pictures obviously show the colour of a user, but do racial preferences amount to racism? Or is looking at ethnicity as innocuous as filtering out a red head or people under a certain height? Dr Coleman, a psychology professor at the University of Houston, states that just because an individual might take race into consideration in his dating preferences, and is aware of race, it doesn't mean that he is a racist.

7.4.2 Observations including an analysis on user perspectives regarding interracial or cross-cultural relationships which are formed online

Although race is often a controversial issue, it was observed during the fieldwork for this paper that while some users only form intimate relationships within their own racial or cultural circles, for others it was not necessarily an issue. Some users form intimate relationships cross-culturally or inter or bi-racially, and although the issue was raised only briefly during the interview process it was surprising to see that users were eager to delve deeper into the subject.

Almost 80% of those interviewed were explicit about their racial preferences. Around 45% of the users confirmed that they would date interracially or cross- culturally. About 35% stated that they only date within their own racial or cultural circles, and 15% refrained from discussing their racial preferences at all.

The overall perspectives of the users who confirm that they form intimate online relationships either interracially or cross-culturally were analysed. Although the users were based in different countries around the globe, on the whole, their views seem to be almost identical in that although their sentiments were expressed in different words, the general stance is that they refuse to continue to promote colonial brainwashing through stigmatisation and perception of different races in terms of behavior and outlook, They feel it was all about the fact that one either connects or is compatible with a person, and that race is not an issue.

When discussing forming intimate relations users firstly talked about their racial or cultural preferences in choosing a partner. User Karen Schoolman, a Bostonian, writes in *Time Magazine* (2010: 35) that she tend to have a negative reaction towards any man who indicated race preferences whether that preference included her as a white women or not. When she sees evidence online of what she regards as narrow-mindedness in what could have been a prospective partner, she skips right to the next profile.

Shama said in her interview:

> "I am amazed at the desperation my friends show in the men they want to have a relationship with when they are from a particular race. I often feel sorry for them when they miss out on the nicest guys, whom they might have married and lived happily ever after with. Unfortunately, they often ignore nice guys because they are of a particular race, regardless of the fact that they are successful and/or good-looking. It often amazes me to see how blunt they are in this regard. It is actually shameful and a complete, no, no, as far as I am concerned."

There seemed to be a balance in the choices made by users in terms of dating interracially. Almost 48% confirmed that they date races other than their own. All the users interviewed belonged to different race groups, and it included many who suggested that they preferred dating Asians, African or African Americans or other races. Many white males prefer dating Asians as they like the fact that they are petite and they love their culture. The popularity of Asian women seemed to be confirmed in a recent episode of Oprah (2010) in which white males confirmed that

they only date Asians, and never any other race. Although they suggested that they had dated other races previously, they found Asian females "safe and humble."

When white females were interviewed and asked to voice their opinions on the comments made by these men, they felt that most Asian women actually "throw tantrums" more than females from other races. They found the comments made by the men on these panels to be insulting, implying that white women are insecure and dependent. White women, however, believe that they know what they want and they make their own rational choices. Most of them seem to feel that they don't behave in conventional society the way the media tend to portray them to the world. One of the users, Sanu, revealed that Asian women are actually some of the most argumentative women because they often want their own way and know when to speak up for themselves."
An Asian male who was later interviewed on the same show said that if white males want the type of female that they described they should get dog, as women like that don't exist.

Desmond-Harris (2010:1) believes that more users will be looking for love online. What was of particular interest was her remark that relatively few white women would respond to overtures from men of Asian descent. Likewise, black women are disproportionately snubbed by men from all races. Although America has been flirting intensely with a post-racial label for some time, color blindness is not upheld as an ideal in the realm of online romance. On some sites it is not even an option. The sites request users to disclose their ethnicity. Racial preferences or biases are easier to observe on online sites, she suggests, than in offline settings.

Users from Black, African American or other races actually confirmed that they tend to prefer white females and vice versa. The same users provided various reasons for these preferences.

On the other hand, 45% of users, both male and female, revealed that they preferred dating only within their own racial or ethnic groups. These users feel that there are already complications dating a person from your own race, and having to deal with cultural differences too makes it even worse.

Toko is of the same sentiment. He says that it is very complicated dating a person from a different race or culture. He said:

> "My uncle met his ex-wife, who is a different race, on facebook. Her cultural beliefs were totally different from his: as different as north and south. They argued about almost everything. In her culture men take out the rubbish bin, but in his it was the duty of the wife to do so, and this often results in heated arguments. They also argued about the traditional rituals which my family often held for our ancestors. She often broke down and cried, and said that his family was cruel to animals. They eventually separated and later divorced."

Many users believe that cultural and racial differences often result in conflict so they feel safer dating within their own race.

Only about 7% decided to withhold their comments on their racial preferences and stated "other," or "no comment," indicating that they did not want to discuss or make the issue known regardless of the fact that they are aware that they would remain anonymous.

Desmond-Harris (2009:11) suggests that in a social science research examination, 1,558 profiles that white daters living in or near big U.S. cities advertised on Yahoo Personals, which is much like Match, and lists 10 racial and ethnic groups from which users can select preferred dates. Among the women, 73% stated a racial preference. Of these 64% selected whites while fewer than 10% included East Indians, Middle Easterners, Asians and Blacks. Of the men 59% of whom selected a racial preference. Of these nearly half selected Asians, but fewer than 7% selected black women.

Consequently, what was found was that while some users prefer dating only amongst certain races others don't. They preferred strictly dating those within their own racial and cultural circles. Only a few either preferred to withhold their comments or did not want to make known what their racial preferences are as far as engaging in intimate relationships online.

7.5 The perspectives of users on friends who formed intimate relationship online

The impact that intimate relationships formed online had on users was noted during the research. Some of the relationships were successful, some weren't, and some were even considered horrific, thus garnering much attention from the media, and drawing out persuasive discourse on television, online, and in conventional society.

Almost 50% of the users interviewed said that they had previously formed, or were currently in an intimate relationship which they had formed on social networking sites. The same users also confirmed that they know friends who had previously formed or been in intimate relationships on facebook, myspace, Mxit and related sites. Although the primary intention of some of these users had initially been to form friendships online, it appears that in almost half the cases, the friendships developed into intimate relationships.

Some of the users expressed the opinion that relationships formed online were either healthy or fascinating. Others, of course, did not concur, but Boty, a user on facebook and Mxit, said that he formed an intimate relationship on facebook, which felt good because, unlike relationships formed in traditional society, one tends to get much better social interaction and mutual understanding of the other person.

The majority of users believe that they can reach the person they are involved with almost instantly and do not have to be stressed, or concerned about their whereabouts. The users also suggested that the time they spend speaking to each other results in much better communication than they otherwise would have had. They say that they never get bored with each other, and that they experience much less pressure than they would do otherwise in traditional society. They also find that when they do meet in traditional society or visit each other at home, they often pick up where they left off on their last online conversation.

One example of an intimate relationship that was formed online was that of Kelly Hilderbrandt. Living in Florida, she decided to search facebook to see if there was any person who had a similar first and last name as herself. She was amazed to discover that there was only one other person on the site who had an identical first and last name. She contacted him. He responded,

they met within a couple of weeks, got engaged and married in October 2009. The relationship made headlines in the United States (2009) and appeared on news channels like as CNN, Fox, and MNSBC.

Some users suggested that they get into online relationships merely to explore and to see what would be the outcome. There seemed to be various reasons why these users would choose to date online rather than someone whom they would meet face to face in traditional society. However, some appear to form relationships online based on the fact that friends or friends of friends appear fortunate and seem to have found true love and happiness.

Some users said that they have evidence of friends who have been in long term relationship; these are friends that she knows could hardly stay in a relationship for more than three months. These users say that forming an intimate relationship on facebook has totally transformed some of their friends, and even their perception of love appears to have changed dramatically.

Some users use SNSs to search for new love, old flames, or high school sweethearts. According to Suddath (2009:80), the *Boston Phoenix* coined the term retrosexuals for people who take the plunge into recycled love. However, the outcomes are not necessarily always happy ever after and some old flames are often better of lost, but some, as seen through observing more than a thousand friends, and friends of friends—for years—some do seem to succeed and do find true love.

Nat, a user based in Johannesburg, described how he entered into a relationship via Mxit and went to visit the girl in her home town. He revealed how excited he was to meet her because he knew that she was the girl of his dreams. He told how his girlfriend booked him a ticket and insisted that he come to meet her. They spent hours speaking with each other every day, often until midnight, and with all that they looked forward to seeing each other. Nat caught a bus to the Cape to see his girl.

Those users who start off seeking merely friendship are often amazed when they find a person with whom they truly connect in what they consider to be unprecedented relationships. Such

users often regard these relationships as fairy tales and believe that it is unlike any relationship experienced before in traditional society. I found that this is the view of users that are in relationships that are a few months to a year old and appear to materialise. Searching for ones' old school friends or an old flame, can at times be advantageous and can possibly result in a happy reunion that often develops into a rekindling of an intimate relationship.

And although the majority of users, regardless of a previous intimate relationship having gone wrong, suggested that they would not mind pursuing another, and that they have hope that they would someday find Mr or Mrs Right.

Some users are adamant that they will not get involved in intimate online relationships. This the next focus in this chapter. Related consequences will be discussed later.

7.6 The perspectives of users who are against or have not yet formed intimate relationships online

Almost 50% of the users interviewed, including those who replied through questionnaires, and those who preferred face to face intimate relationships which are formed on social networking sites suggested that they had not done so for various reasons. The users interviewed were from tertiary institutions or had recently graduated, and those who are in the first five years of their employment. This could be regarded as a global perspective because the users were from diverse countries throughout the world, Western, Sub-Saharan Africa and Asian, etc. These are their perspectives;

Marianne, a user on both facebook and skype, says she has had many male users send friendship requests. She does not believe that they really want to be friends per se though. Although the vast majority of female users admitted that they do not really mind the attention they receive, they did also suggest that it can be annoying at times. Many of the users interviewed said that they are often pursued within the first few weeks of having accepted the friendship request. Marianne also said that she became aware that her profile picture attracted a lot of attention, but she changed the picture several times in the hope that she would not receive an overflow of friendship requests but she failed and gave up.

Many of the users whose views were explored confirmed that the attention they receive is not necessarily as a result of the photos they display on their profile pictures, but could be as a result of their photo albums on the sites, which are not only visible to their friends but also to friends of friends. Once they became aware of this, though, they restricted the viewing of their profile and pictures to only friends.

It became apparent during the study that users of both genders tend to be pursued in similar ways. Male user Josh says:

> "I have never been pursued as much by women in traditional society as I am on facebook and twitter. My primary intention was to form friendships because I am very social and wanted to have friends from both genders and all races and cultures. I wanted an intimate relationship with only one girl with whom I can truly connect, but when some female users are online they seem to forget their sense of self or dignity. They are not shy and say almost anything just to get me. At times I feel flattered, but sometimes it angers me and I lose interest."

It became apparent during research that some users, particularly females, believe that online relationships never work out and that it is one of the key reasons why they never pursue them. They are aware of friends and family members who have had to block users who harass or nag them about forming intimate relationships. Some say that they have even been stalked by users whom they were forced to block and/or report.

These users also believe that those who do form intimate relationships online live in a fantasy. Kyle, a user on facebook, together with several other users shared the opinion that one of these days those users who believe that they are truly in love with someone they hardly know in person, will experience a rude awakening, and what they consider to be a sweet dream will turn into a nightmare.

In Suddath (2009:79), Drew Petersen, a former IT worker from Long Island, New York, warns against finding recycled love and stated that it was like opening a time capsule. Petersen's retro-sexual experience, he says, occurred a few years ago when he found his high school girlfriend on myspace before it became the "cyber ghetto" of the Internet. He says that some of the users also distort their identities which is terribly destructive, and leaves potential spouses or fiancées emotionally bankrupt. These and related consequences will be discussed later on in the chapter.

Informants tell that when a relationship has gone bad it results in much difficulty for the one affected. When some users are in an intimate relationship online, they appear to be totally smitten by the other person. In many cases females send nude pictures of themselves to their "lovers" while engaging in conversations in spaces that they consider to be private, but which are, in reality, public. These users are often taken aback or shocked when they realise after a break up that the photos are made public, and they are then despised or rejected by friends and members of their communities. They often end up living in isolation. Sometimes, users then seek out various talk shows such as Dr Phil or Oprah to rectify their mistake and to restore their dignity. It also causes much pain and is often very harmful to the person affected. Talk show hosts often advise users not to make the same mistakes, but it appears that they continue to occur because users consider their communication to be confidential.

Some users like Kahn believe that such relationships are merely for those who are bored and do not have much to do with their time. He says that, in fact, they need to get a life and face the reality that such relationships are fake and do not work out. A couple of the Informants suggested that when a user is bored they are often blinded from the reality and can easily be deceived because they appear to live in their own world of insanity, where obstructive behaviour is ignored or the norm.

Marco, a user on facebook and myspace, and a few of his contemporaries expressed a different view, and said that intimate relationships formed online are primarily to keep people busy and entertained during their spare time. Some of the users interviewed expressed strong views against forming relationships online. They were of the view that some are just for social reasons and to

pass time. They say that there is nothing serious about them. Tima feels that users often spend very little time getting to know the person they are involved with and become easily infatuated.

Shelm, who uses facebook and twitter, warns that:

> "Intimate relationships formed online are not good at all, because you converse with a stranger whom you hardly know. Some of the people you come into contact with online are psychotic and not at all who you think they are."

There is strong opinion from many of the users that online relationships are all about lying purely to impress the other person. Evidently, a number of these relationships end in rape or murder. Many users described incidents in which friends or friends of friends which went to meet a person they encountered on facebook, myspace or related sites and found themselves either raped or sexually abused. The people they meet often turn out to be completely different from what was indicated on their profiles, and they can become nasty when the other party says that they want out.

Tiny says that intimate relationships formed online are not healthy, and that she knows of several of her friends who went out of their way to meet a person offline. Evidently the meetings were disastrously dangerous. Salma explained that two of her friends were raped and dumped in an unknown place, after they met people whose profiles disappeared after the incidents. They were actually fortunate that they made it back home and were not killed.

Some users warn that often the only reason that men form online relationships with females is for one purpose only: to become sexually intimate. Female users who have been fooled by this tactic confirm that once men have achieved their intention they do not pursue the relationship any further, but even prohibit further communication and block access to their profile, thus spelling out that relationship has been terminated.

Some users have not, and will not, engage in intimate relationships with any of their friends online simply because they have not yet met someone. Ellka says that she has nothing against

dating online, and the only problem is that she has not yet been pursued by any of the male friends, and she has not yet found a person who seeks her friendship. Her personal view is that she would like to experience forming an intimate online relationship for herself and see what it is like before she makes any negative or positive comments.

In summary, it was noticed that on the one hand some users are not against engaging in intimate relationships online because they have seen some that turned out positively and developed into stable unions that eventually resulted in marriage. Almost 51% suggested that they are not against forming intimate relationships online provided that both parties are genuine and remain honest with each other.

Other users suggested that online relationships are risky and have been severely harmful to friends, some of whom even lost their lives. Hence, they warn that forming intimate relationships online is unhealthy, risky and they never work out.

7.7. An Analysis of the ways in which users compared and contrasted intimate relationships formed online, to those offline

As per the preceding section it was established that users have various opinions regarding intimate relationships being formed online and in traditional societies.

Users on sites like facebook and twitter, for example, suggest that with relationships made in traditional society, what you see is what you get. In intimate relationships that are formed online, however, people get excited about something that is perhaps not genuine. By the time you get to meet the person you realise that you were living a fantasy and had a false image of the person you thought you had bonded with psychologically.

Todi says:

> "With online relationships you are often taken for a ride because the person paints a picture of themselves which is non-existent. In traditional society the person you are

> pursing is generally known and your family and friends can always give their opinions, which is impossible with relationships that are formed online.

Lerato warns:

> "I personally think that forming an intimate relationship online is a risk because you do not know whether or not you put yourself in danger. In most cases people fall victim to abductors and end up being raped or killed. This is not necessarily so in most cases in traditional society because we are often surrounded by people we know, and tend to guard against meeting people in isolated places. Therefore for me it is a definite no, no. My conclusion is that forming an intimate relationship in traditional society would be making a much wiser choice."

A significant number of users expressed their fears with regard to forming intimate relationships with strangers. They warn against being intimate with people you have not met and do not know. Additionally, they believe that when you are online you often have unrealistic expectations, and engage with people in a passive rather than an objective way. In traditional society you or your family are likely to know the person you intend to, or actually form, an intimate relationship with.

In contrast, there was also a fairly large number of users who suggested that they prefer online relationships to those formed in traditional society. Some of the key comments made by users that prefer online relationships were that they spend much more time conversing with each other and often do not have to look for, or become concerned about reaching the person they are in a relationship with. They asserted that there are also additional advantages in online relationships.

Some of the advantages, according to the users were that they get to know the person much better because they tend to communicate regularly. They were also of the view that it was much easier to find a person with whom one truly is compatible. This can be done, they asserted, through merely viewing their profile, their characteristics, career choices, and through "studying

what the person is all about and shows you pictures of and introduces you to his family, who you have spoken to or met offline.

They suggested that unlike relationships which only exist in traditional society, if you have an intimate relationship online, you can reach a person on the spur of the moment, be more relaxed, less worried and therefore less stressful and have peace of mind. The person in traditional society is almost always chatting with someone else only chances are you never know who.

7.8 User perspectives of intimate relationships formed online which are coupled with severe consequences

The fact that intimate online relationships can sometimes result in severe consequences has already been discussed in the preceding pages. Additional problems in online relationships can be faking them for financial gain, often from users who falsify their identities. Nigerians seem to be at the forefront of this type of scam. Another terrible risk is the predator who forms intimate relationships with underage children, and, finally, we will discuss those individuals that are primarily concerned with ruining existing relationships.

7.8.1. Fraudulent relationships or scam artists

7.8.1 (a) Defining the terms fraudulent and scam

According to *Websters Standard Thesaurus* (2006:118), synonyms for the word fraudulent are dishonest, deceitful and tricky. Synonyms for scam *(Synonym.com 2001-2007)* are victimise, swindle, defraud, cheat, rip-off etc. Although different in some ways the words have similar connotations.

Of the users interviewed in this regard, almost 40% suggested that they had encountered fraudulent or fake relationships which were coupled with severe consequences. Some users display false identities online in order to form what could be described as intimate relationships. Users suggest that it is under the guise of defrauding them of large sums of money on social networking sites such as facebook, myspace, skype or twitter. In fact from the interviews conducted and the feedback provided in questionnaires and face to face discourse, it appears that

they were gender specific. All users who appeared to have come into contact with fraudulent schemers or scam artists were females from diverse races. None of the male users interviewed had encountered fraudulent relationships, but they knew of female friends who had had firsthand experience with what they described as culprits or perpetrators.

User Neloa, revealed that she received a request from what she considered a very handsome man. She tells that he was the most handsome man that she had ever seen, at least according to his profile. He looked perfect and she thought to herself that she had finally found the man of her dreams. After speaking for almost two months with her lover she was overjoyed and smitten. When he finally proposed marriage she could not refuse

Tiara, a facebooker and twitter living in the United States, asserted that she was fascinated by a man that she thought looked like an Italian model. And although her friends and family cautioned her about the fact that she hardly knew him, their advice fell on deaf ears. She had had no luck in previous relationships and it appeared that was finally going to change. An added bonus was that he appeared to be very wealthy and sent her pictures of two homes he that owned and a car.

After a short while the man told her that he intended to visit her because although they were engaged he wanted to put the ring on her finger in person. She told her family and eventually they gave their blessing and said that they would welcome him.

As she was waiting for him to arrive she received a call from his “doctor” who advised that he had been in a serious accident and that he urgently needed finances in order to conduct an emergency operation. The message was that his own funds were tied up in a bank and according to their records she was the sole beneficiary. She was devastated and cried all night long. The following morning she immediately sent a large sum of money and a week later more cash was needed to finalise the operation. Eventually, obviously, she found out too late that the whole set up was a scam. The incident impacted severely on her trust of strangers and she was not likely to form an intimate relationship on the sites ever again.

Prof Monica Witty (2009:1) and her team at Leicester University found that more than 200 000 people in the UK may have fallen victim to criminals online who woo them and steal their money. In the study *Bad Romance Hurts Thousands of Net Singles*, it is confirmed that criminals who carry out romance scams typically use online dating sites or social networking sites to identify targets. They devote time and effort to grooming them according to Serious Organised Crime Agency (Soca). Investigations by Soca have found that people can hand over to criminals anything from between £50 to £240 000. According to Mr. Woodcock, in cases where the perpetrators fail to get money they ask them to accept money into their account as part of a wider money laundering operation.

Clearly, a significant number of women have found themselves in relationships that turned out to be either scams or even terribly dangerous. The reality of this situation spreads much wider than the users interviewed for this paper, as demonstrated in the television show, Dr Phil (2010), in which a number of women revealed the emotional and financial losses they had suffered as a result of entering into intimate online relationships.

The incidents described between these women and those interviewed for this paper bore striking similarities. Although the women on the Dr. Phil show strongly urged other women from falling into the same traps, the reality is that the end results were equally devastating. The Nigerians seemed to feature as a strong presence behind many of the scams, and always specifically targeted women. It should be noted that there were cases which were similar to those of the users made above on their perspectives of intimate relationships which are formed online.

7.9 Predators and paedophiles

7.9.1 Defining the term Predator or Paedophile

According to *Thesaurus.com* (2010) a predator is defined as a hunter or killer. Some of the synonyms used are, “animal of prey” and “beast of prey.” *Dictionary.com* (2011) defines a predator as a predatory person, or any organism that exists by preying on other organisms, or any carnivorous animal.

7.9.2 Defining the term paedophile

Dictionary.com defines a paedophile as an adult who is sexually attracted to young children. This term appears to be appropriately defined in the context of this particular study. And according to the *Medical Dictionary* (2011) one affected with paedophilia is called a paedophiliac.

A key focus of this research was predators and paedophiles – those who prey on the innocence of underage children. These children have no idea who they are getting involved with online, and it is clearly evident that predators and paedophiles are often men who, on the surface, masquerade behind their success, their marriages and their own families, while being drawn to young girls and boys whom they identify as targets from their online profiles.

The NBC television channel in the US attempted to expose a number of paedophiles and actually managed to catch some of them by luring them into a false meeting with children.

7.9.3 Users' definitions of predators

Some users define a predator as; 1) An adult who posts a false identification of him or herself, and who pursues and lures underage children and takes advantage of them; 2) Someone dangerous pretending to be kind; 3) A person who is pathetic and pretends to be lonely so that they can molest children; 4) A person who lacks confidence and boosts their self-esteem through children; 5) An adult going for underage children; 6) A person who deceives others for their own benefit; 7) A person who is not sure of him or herself; 8) A person who does not have a life and seeks alteration and finds happiness in the misery of others; 9) Someone who has low self-esteem and is desperate to be "hanged", and; 10) A hungry Lion."

It is clear from user comments that there is a sense of panic surrounding the issue of predators and paedophiles. According to Wilgoren (2011:1) in an article written in the *New York Times*, Prof Harris Mirkin from the department of Political Science at the University of Missouri Kansas states that the "moral panic" surrounding paedophilia to the outrage of previous generations over feminism and homosexuality. And now Prof. Mirkin finds the panic swirling around him."

More than 50% of the users interviewed confirmed that they know of or are related to users who have been lured into intimate relationships by predators. There are attempts to protect children

through parental controls on computers, Rochman (2010:51), however, parents trying to monitor the relationships which their underage children are forming with friends, must remain vigilant to the fact that predators are everywhere and their children are vulnerable in other areas of their lives too.

7.10 Users who tend to display psychotic tendencies in relationships

Despite the fact that underage children and teenage users often encounter predators and pedophiles who are largely considered deliberately psychotic, there also appears to be a large number of adults who do too. There are some sites that seem to actively encourage predatory behaviors, but there are others like facebook, for example, which appear to support the goal of enabling social interaction.

A user referring to himself as His Royal Flyness also appeared on the Dr Phil show. His Royal Flyness stated that it is so much easier to get into a relationship online, and that people always want to look inviting in their profiles, even if they don't measure up in reality. He uses facebook, myspace and YouTube to hook up with women. His goal, he says, is to sleep with as many women as he can, and thus far he has managed to sleep with thousands who seem to find him very attractive. He has not yet, however, attained his goal of sleeping with 13 000 women.

On the other hand, one of the users who appeared on the Oprah Winfrey show encountered severe physical and emotional harm when a picture of her appeared on a particular advertisement on one of the social networking sites. The advertisement stated that the users pursued a male who was eager to cause severe physical harm to give her pleasure.

After disfiguring the users, the perpetrator, a married man with two young children, was later convicted and sentenced to several life sentences. In court his key argument against his victims was that "they asked for it." The extent of his insanity indicated that he found pleasure in causing harm and he thought that his victim was of the same mind frame. The victim suggested from the moment she found the perpetrator on her doorstep, that it changed her life almost instantly. She felt that the psychopath tried to rob her off her person, and regardless of the fact that she almost lost her life in the interim, asserted that he had failed.

The incidents stated above regarding intimate relationships that are coupled with severe consequences, indicate the risks in which female users often find themselves when they form intimate relationships with strangers who tend to cause them severe psychological and physical harm. These and other relationships which often receive media attention correctly manifest the weirdness thereof. This is often the case when an unsuspecting user finds her/or himself intimately involved with a user or psychopath whose intention is either to gain financially or whose purpose is to induce sever emotional and physical harm.

7.11 Users' perspectives of the impact which social networking sites have on existing relationships both online and offline

While social networking sites appear to provide an environment in which intimate relationships seem to develop amongst some users, they serve other purposes too: they are also regarded as the primary reason why relationships do not work out and are terminated. And although some relationships turn out to be successful and long lasting, with a positive impact on the users, the reality is that some relationships formed online impact severely negatively on the users. Distrust caused in the home amongst spouses often severely impacts on their entire family.

Social networking sites definitely do seem to provide a platform for weird and malicious behaviour. One of things it facilitates are extramarital affairs. Extra marital affairs have been happening since time immemorial in traditional societies, and don't seem to be much different in online societies.

Enriquez (2011) emphasises this when she stipulates in her article, *Blame Networking Sites for your Break-Up.* She says that many break-ups nowadays are caused by abuse but we can also blame the web and all the social networking sites. The cool new networking sites are a big reason why couples might be having relationship problems. Your partner can communicate with his ex, whom he might still have feelings for. Worse still, he is looking for someone better than you.

The sentiments of the users interviewed seem to be similar to the argument made by Enriquez. Almost 55% and 60% of users interviewed believed that their relationships ended as a direct result of social networking sites.

Conflict can also occur on social networking sites. Some individuals use the sites as a means of expressing how they feel, and some find that they are able to use the sites for cheating on their partners. Ken describes how his fiancé cheated online under the guise that she was either working or speaking to a girlfriend. What had once been a happy relationship ended as a direct result. Many users expressed heartache and emotional distress which affected not only them, but their extended families too.



Figure 26 Illustration of a couple in dispute (Fotolia; 2004-2011)

Shana reveals how her father formed an intimate online relationship which almost resulted in divorce, and therefore affected the whole family. Shana and her siblings knew that they would find themselves left out in the cold, fortunately their parents' marriage was saved. Shana, however, was unaware that her boyfriend was also cheating on her with a girl he had met on facebook.

Users who experienced infidelity firsthand felt strongly that it was inevitable, and would have happened anyway, even in conventional society.

7.12 A brief analysis on how intimate relationships are terminated on social networking sites

While social networking sites tend, to a large extent, to encourage online interaction and intimate relationships, they are, on the other hand, the ideal place in which to end relationships. A website called IdumpYou.Com (2010) is social networking site which users use to end relationships.

According to the administrators of the site, there is an enormous number of users who want to terminate their relationships. Statistics indicate that 50% of the desired terminations are divorces, 20% are those who wish to end an engagement, and 10% wish to end relationships in which users are not necessarily permanently tied.

Evidently some of the relationships are ended for relatively minor reasons which could, in reality, probably be rectified. However, it appears that users who want to end their relationships seldom turn back, and the reasons are often because a user has met another person online.

The vast majority of the users who have terminated relationships online believe that once the person with whom you intend to break up gets the message from the break-up website or on facebook etc, there is usually no further discussion or explanation required. There is often no confrontation because the breakup takes place in a public space, however, the person who instigates the breakup is often blocked and their name removed from the friendship list. Evidently, that person often then mysteriously disappears.

Many relationships end because of cheating. Adultery 2.0, for example, is a site which adds mobile apps which suspicious spouses can't trace. The site now boasts slick iphone and BlackBerry versions aimed at tech-savvy adulterers who are wary of leaving tracks on work or home computers. Because the apps are loaded from phone browsers they leave no electronic trial that suspicious spouses can trace (Jeremy Caplan; 2009:59). It would be important to explore the dimensions that show what makes these new and unique societies similar or different than traditional or conventional societies.

Andrews Gordon (2010:1) and his colleagues at the University of California's Institute for Creative Technologies in Los Angeles have been trying for years to teach computers about cause and effect. They were of the sentiment that computers are not good at dealing with causality. They can identify particular events but working out relationships is more difficult. This is particularly true when it comes to using computers to analyse the human experience. But, it turns out that computers can learn a lot about casualties by reading personal blogs.

7.13 Users who found solace on social networking sites

Once a relationship has ended many users seem to find refuge by going back onto the social networking sites. After the breakup they seem to spend much of their time on the internet searching for new love. From the perspectives of users who had personally experienced the infidelity of a partner is a clear indication that they are also likely to come across those who, unbeknown to them, often tend to display psychotic tendencies which leave users confused and devastated. Users become aware of the person they are involved with often too late, and it impacts on them both physically and psychologically.

For some, SNSs are used as a form of refuge or healing when they feel they have been betrayed by a cheating spouse or partner. Some also find comfort when they feel lonely and ignored by a spouse who spends most of his or her time working. A female user who was interviewed on an episode of Dr Phil early in 2010 said she and her husband never communicate, and that they sat silently in the same room without talking. She indicated that she and her husband would pass each other in the hallway, like strangers, without greeting. She found solace in speaking to friends on facebook, and claimed that she felt cared for because her friends made time to spend with her. Her husband on the other hand, said that his wife lost herself in facebook. It actually angered her husband and almost resulted in a divorce. Fortunately they approached Dr Phil for assistance in an attempt to repair their relationship.

Of the users interviewed, 50% confirmed that they would not seek refuge in pursuing another online relationship if the previous one ended. They felt, primarily, that its a risk because users do not know what the person you have broken up with is capable of, and he could be instigating that

a friend of his—whom you might not know—pursues a relationship with you. This group of users claims that females are unaware of whether or not they are putting themselves in danger. The users, particularly females, suggested that they are not certain of the intentions of the pursuers, and it is possible to fall victim to abductions, rapists or murderers. These users believe that looking for solace online is risky.

On the other hand, however, many users feel that they will not let anyone prevent them from pursuing happiness once more despite the fact that they experienced a painful breakup online. They claim that all that it signified was that the relationship was not meant to be, that the right person will come along and that they will probably only be found online.

Although some of the information which is visible, and seems to be sought almost as an end in itself, there are usually quite practical reasons for acquiring it. It appears that in most cases information about an individual assists one in defining a particular situation, and enables others to become aware of what to expect of them and what is expected of him or her in return. This appears not to be any different on social networking sites. Consequently, if one is informed as a participant, those with whom one interacts or observes, will best know how to act in order to call forth a desired response.

Users believe they need to move from one person to another in order to find the person they are destined to be with. They feel that finding the perfect partner is an adventure and one is supposed to meet various people, roam the clouds and discover that lasting relationships can indeed be found and formed online. They believe that in the "clouds" there is the possibility to find love, trust, respect, transparency, friendship and, most of all, unconditional love, just as they do in traditional society. Users feel that, as in traditional society, they should keep on trying to find refuge and perhaps love again online, and that they will keep trying.

7.14 Conclusion

Chapter 7 provided an in-depth analysis of the intimate relationships which users form on social networking sites. In it were discussed the perspectives of users who are in favour of, and those who are against, online relationships. The chapter further describes the advantages and potential

consequences of intimate relationships formed online, together with the dangers of predatory individuals and the paedophiles who target children. Also presented were the views of users regarding fraudulent or scam relationships, and the consequences thereof. The contrasts between relationships formed online and those formed in traditional society were explored, as were the ways in which SNSs are used as tools to terminate relationships. Finally the chapter looks at how the sites are used by individuals seeking solace and refuge.

Many users feel that offline relationships are not any different from those of online relationships, and that they bring similar risks and challenges. They see that there are some positive aspects to forming intimate relationships on SNSs, and that some online relationships have turned out to be happy and long-lasting and should not be regarded any differently than those formed in traditional society.

Chapter 8 A new country? Have social networking sites created new online societies with unique social norms? What are the visible features?"

8.1 Introduction

This chapter describes whether or not social networking sites have indeed created virtual societies, communities, or perhaps countries: facebook is often referred to as the largest country in the world with unique social norms. Also presented are some of the key features within these societies or countries which are similar to those in conventional societies, and which reinforce the arguments made that social networking sites have indeed resulted in the emergence of new, unique online societies and whether or not they impact on their lives in general.

Some of the key features which appear to be similar or different to those in offline societies, and are discussed in this chapter, include governance, migration, policing and security, privacy issues, education and/or addictions etc. Also explored is whether or not unique social norms have emerged.

It is, however, essential to firstly define the following concepts; virtual, societies, and communities, which are referred to frequently in this chapter.

8. 2 Defining concepts

8.2.1 Virtual

Virtual is defined as "existing or resulting in essence or effect though not a fact, form, or name." It is also defined as "existing in the mind, and particularly as a product of the imagination". (Farlex; 2011).

8.2.2 Society

In the *Etymology Dictionary* (2010), society is defined as "an organised group of persons associated together for religious, benevolent, cultural, scientific, political, patriotic, or other purposes.

In addition, society can be defined as; 1) A body of individuals living as members of a community, and; 2) a body of human beings generally associated or viewed as members of a community: the evolution of human society.

8.2.3 Communities

A community is defined as "a way of relating to other persons as brothers and sisters who share a common origin, a common dignity, and a common destiny. It involves learning to live in terms of an interconnected 'we' rather than an isolated 'I'. It involves making choices which reinforce the experience of relatedness and foster the sense of belonging and interdependence. Community begins, but does not end, in our face to face relationships with the persons who are closest to us, (Betz; 2004).

8.3 Brief observations of the various societies in which social interaction ensue, that ascribes users' social lives

During the observation of social networking sites, it became apparent that apart from communication and social interaction amongst the users, there are diverse features which are identical, similar, or different to those in conventional societies. It appears that virtual societies or communities have emerged which enable users to live online, and users often refer to the sites as their own world or private space in which they interact or socialise with friends throughout the globe.

The factors that make or exempt sites from being considered societies or countries in their own right were analysed. Each society has unique social norms which users conform to, and unique features which impact on their overall online social lives. It was essential, as stated above, to examine what these features are and how they impact on the users' social interaction. Some form of disconnection emerges owing to the lack of established cultural or experiential basis for interaction. The Internet provides instant sociability.

Eriksen (2001:87) states that "societies can be delineated through existing systems of interaction and through the presence of shared social interaction and political systems with certain

continuity through time, but that neither perimeters nor continuance are ever absolute." A related aspect of integration that emphasises the cultural rather than the social norms concerns knowledge and acquired skills. Although it was assumed to be a common belief that members of a society shared the same basic outlook and values, detailed ethnographies conclude that knowledge was unevenly distributed and that members of a society do not necessarily have shared representation. The question is whether or not this is the case in societies created through social-networking sites.

For example, while communication and social interaction are some of the key features on the sites which are, in many respects, similar to those in traditional society, the extent to which Generation Y users, in particular, converse with friends online is indicative as they often argue that they practically live in the different virtual societies.

It is apparent that Generation Y users spend an insurmountable amount of time in virtual societies, particularly on Mxit, facebook and twitter and the additional sites explored for this paper. Older individuals who frequent the sites less tend to feel that the younger generations appear to live in a world of their own, and in which they disappear most of the time, thereby neglecting crucial issues in life. These older members believe that social networking sites have given rise to addictive behaviour in Generation Y users. Peers of these Generation Y users who spend time with them only occasionally seemed to share similar sentiments and often expressed frustration that users chat and socialise with online friends in their presence.

In observing facebook, twitter, myspace, YouTube and Mxit, it was not surprising to notice that some of the key features within online societies are the visible features that seem to be indisputably similar. Social networking sites have allowed the transcendence of borders that previously surrounded some of the remotest traditional societies which were only ever explored by researchers and scholars. All the sites, but particularly YouTube, enables users to view the diverse cultures and art of various countries, as well as various social activities which include music and religion, etc., almost firsthand. One would also note the remarkable population growth of online societies which also mimics the population growth of traditional societies.

Figure 25 provides an illustration of the number of facebook societies which have emerged in various countries around most of the globe during the last decade. The increase in the number of users globally on the sites appears to have transcended the population of most countries. According to Monstyn (2010:1) facebook's population is considered to be equivalent to the third largest country in the world (between India's 1.18 billion and the United States' 308 million. The majority of users seem to live in North and South American countries and Europe, with the minimum living in Sub Saharan Africa. This is indicative of the fact that poorer countries have less users and fewer societies appear to have emerged.



Figure 27 Illustration of the extent of facebook users (Monstyn; 2011)

Larson (2008:2) confirms the growth in online societies when he states that the internet grew "amazingly fast into a global information network linking millions of people and millions of pages together." Social networking sites began to emerge which made visible the number of virtual societies throughout the world. They appeared to have created a unique platform from which social interactions ensue, thus redefining the dynamics of user social lives and societies as they were once known.

It was essential to explore user perspectives on whether or not online societies have indeed emerged, and the impact of those societies on the social lives of users. Thus, the following sections discuss the various features of virtual societies that appear to have redefined communities, and which enable users to interact in unprecedented ways. Also discussed are the significant impacts on everyday lives of users.

8.4 User perspectives on the notion that social networking sites have created virtual communities or societies

Social networking sites have indeed created new and unique online societies which impact directly on their social lives. This indicates that the sites have redefined the dimensions in which social interaction takes place. The users suggest that these online societies enable them to live their lives online, learn a great deal, and stay informed on global political or social issues (which result in almost instant debates).

Evidently users feel that there are various advantages to online societies which include reducing to a minimum the amount of time spent travelling from one destination to another in order to reach a friend or to socialise. Time and cost, they suggest, are one of the key advantages. The ability to communicate and socialise with friends and distant family in their own time and space seems to be significantly beneficial.

Seniors and some Baby boomers also believe that online societies are beneficial, but they do express concern for Generation Y users in that they waste valuable time online which could have been better used elsewhere. They feel that young users have lost focus on some of the most essential things in life like family and friends, and they ignore parental advice and the beneficial influences of conventional society. They express concern that younger users are primarily influenced by friends with whom they interact and socialise, and that they appear to conform to the overall behaviours of online societies.

Davis (2009:1) states that in anthropology it is very clear that the environment that is created influences people and the manner in which they behave. People will enter an environment and behave according to what has been built, probably in ways that have not been considered.

Likewise, the environment which was created for users largely appears to have shaped the ways in which they communicate, socialise and live.

Users believe that it is inconceivable to survive in an age without virtual societies when they practically live online 24/7.

What is essential to note is that users make friends in virtual societies in a similar fashion to individuals in traditional society. However, what is unique in virtual societies is that the vast majority of users have or compete to have an enormous number of friends. While users tend to believe that virtual societies enable them to be themselves, it appears that the ways in which they interact are largely influenced by the environment in which they find themselves. Hence, they tend to conform to the standards of those with whom they interact (Eriksen; 2001).

Almost 70% of users in different countries suggest that they reside primarily on facebook, although they occasionally visit sites like YouTube, twitter and myspace. In South Africa an equal number of users reveal that they use Mxit and or facebook. Other users say they reside primarily in societies like myspace and YouTube. Quite a few users also listed skype as a site which they pointed out is useful for communicating with friends and family despite the fact that skype is not necessarily a social networking site per se.

Younger users opposed the statements made by some older generation users that they appear to have lost touch with the real world. They do agree, however, that they tend to live in virtual societies which are not any different from traditional ones. In these societies they manage to not only socialise, but they learn and live too. This is evident in the unparalleled amount of time spent online. Members of traditional societies tend to consider that users are addicted to virtual societies because of the amount of time they tend to spend focusing either on their BlackBerry cell phones or PCs. This often results in them becoming strangers to those who are in their presence in traditional society.



Figure 28 Illustration of "living" in a social networking sites or societies (Weiss C. 2010)

During fieldwork when users were asked whether or not social networking sites have created virtual communities or societies in their own right, the majority were of the view that they did.

Figure 26 indicates the views of the majority of users, particularly those of digital natives who admitted that they spend an unprecedented amount of time online. Almost 68% of the users expressed similar sentiments as that of Fred who says that:

> "Once I sign on to facebook or twitter I am in my own world in which my friends and I communicate and socialise. Often our parents tell us that although we are actually at home we are absent. They are actually correct because if they often shout and ask me in which world I live I tell them 'honestly speaking, facebook', and I travel between countries when I visit twitter, YouTube, myspace or facebook. It is difficult sharing ourselves between our own world and that of traditional society. But except for eating, and physically sleeping in our own beds, we would choose to permanently reside in

> facebook because it is a country in which things happen, like in the United States because almost everyone wishes to live there."

There are also social networking sites for children. Colier (2009:1) describes how an avatar anthropologist and mom, Sharon Duke Estroff, describes her role in child virtual worlds through experiencing ClubPenguin's igloos, icy games and penguin pizzeria first-hand. Estroff's intention was to give parents an understanding of what it means to be a child in the digital age. She intends to help bridge the gap between digital natives and their parents with insights into the subtleties and complexities of digital childhood—not from the point of view of the media which is perpetually hyper focused on the dangers of Internet predators and online porn—but through the eyes of a fellow engaged parent focused on the well being of the whole child.

Generation Y users feel that this is unlike the age in which previous generations grew up: the age in which children played in the streets, or in which the where-abouts of youngsters was often unknown because it was generally assumed that they were safe; that although they tend to disappear into their own world, that in reality, they are only physically present.

Don says:

> "The era in which we live has, as a matter of fact, created online societies to which we constantly escape while we remain in the presence of our parents. This increases their panic in searching for us, and perhaps failing dismally to bring us back to reality. We are often far away with our global friends."

The users made further comments to affirm their arguments; that new and unique societies have indeed been created. These are some of the additional comments the users made:

User Sylvia, and the majority of her peers on almost all the sites explored, were of the same view, and they believe that social networking sites have created societies or communities in which they and their friends practically live. They are always socialising, exchanging ideas, etc.

What appears to be a major factor when analysing the views of the users appears to be the representation of the self in everyday life?

Tom says that he likes to call it “cyber space”. It has a universe of its own, similar to conventional societies. And it is the same as when you physically meet and chat. There is no difference in the way they chat online and he and his friends prefer this private space. This also appears to result from pre-existing social relations with friends with whom they socialise in traditional society, which appears to be maintained on virtual societies. And according to Choi (2004:181) the users’ approach is also interrelated with their offline social network.

John a twitter, Mxiter and facebooker suggests that they should note that the dictionary defines societies as “mankind considered as a whole.” This means that the sites are similar to traditional societies or perhaps some countries. They suggested each society or country consist of people from various races, ages, cultures, genders and religions. Hence, no one should dispute the fact that they are not.

Many of the users confirm that they are able to do almost anything online that can be done in traditional society. facebook and Mxit users who filled out questionnaires said that it is difficult not to be online because of the fear of missing out on the vast quantities of information that friends pass on to each other, and because of the activities that take place almost every second. Some of the users suggested that when they are offline for even a short period of time it feels like they have relocated. It results in them feeling like they have lost touch with members of their communities and have lost out on much of the news going around.

The users suggested that it is often difficult to catch up, because “if one misses out on what had been discussed for a short time it often turns out to be old news almost instantaneously.” The majority of users said they would not be found without their cell phone devices, without their eyes, attention and fingers glued to the online societies. In addition they therefore acknowledge that they spend much more of their time in virtual societies than they do in traditional society.

What appeared also to have been repeated often amongst the users is that facebook is developing as one of the key online countries with the largest population not only online, but in the world. This is unprecedented, not only in its own scale, but also in its ability to blur boundaries, between the real and the virtual world.

Foxy, a user on facebook says that the reality is that she is part of various online communities and facebook is the biggest country, where she lives, interacts and socialises with friends. In actual fact she is a citizen of facebook and there is no doubt that she lives there.

Some of the users like Pam said that:

> "Social networking sites have their own value systems where it is possible to socialise, meet and make friends or talk to anyone, anytime. There are also ways in which one can advertise a business or attempt to sell a product. This is very similar to traditional society and therefore seems to justify the view that societies have been created in their own right."

Some users expressed similar views to Jeff, who said:

> "Everyone in my family is on facebook, and we discuss practically everything on line. My mom asks us what we would like to have for dinner on facebook, and lets my sister know what time she will pick her up from her soccer training. My dad asks my mom what to bring home on facebook. We all know that we will find each other only on facebook. And if anyone tries to get hold of us in any other way they won't reach us because we only live in facebook. It's the same with my friends and their families. The sites are like the United States, or perhaps China: one big country."

This last statement reinforces Coleman's (2009:1) assertion that "facebook has almost colonised Europe and it is extending its domination with more than 200 million users."

There is a general feeling amongst users that various facets of virtual societies are similar to conventional ones and should not be regarded any differently. They feel that of course they are societies in their own right because they consist of users from different races, cultures and religions etc., and therefore there are no visible differences at all. The users also confirm that much social interaction takes place on the sites, like meeting and making new friends, and socialising all night long. Where we find ourselves is secondary.

Only about 10% of users share Tony's view that SNSs are not societies, but rather virtual communication platforms. He says that one hardly sees the people that one speaks to, and that's the reason why he and a few of his friends do not really spend much time on the sites. What was evident with this same group of users, however, was that they do agree that the sites have aspects that resemble conventional societies, and they do find them very useful.

Acquisti and Gross (2006) reported their findings on user perspectives on facebook usage. The authors found that users denied finding the site useful for dating and self-promotion, and denied any usefulness for other social activities. From the study we conducted, this ranked very low. When users were asked to rate their friends in learning about classmates and on the convenience factor of staying in contact, it ranked very high. Showing information about themselves, and advertising themselves, increasing their popularity and finding dates ranked suddenly very high.

8.5 Some visible features on the sites that are similar or different to conventional societies, observations and user perspectives

Some of the key features which are similar to or different from SNSs that reinforce the author's observations, as well as arguments made by seniors and users that they are indeed societies in their own right.

8.5.1 Governance

Leadership in any society is key, as is governance in any country. *The Oxford Dictionary* (2011) defines governance as the action or manner of governing a state or organisation, etc. Hence, the need for governance of online societies appears not to be any different from that of social

networking sites or online communities or societies as they will largely be referred to in this chapter.

On facebook, for example, some of the key features appear to be similar and in some cases identical to those in traditional society, and the probability of governance appears to be eminent. Sites aim to guide the development of their online economies almost in the way that governments seek to influence economic activity in the real world through fiscal and monetary policy.

facebook's virtual currency, known as facebook credits, was created in the interests of its users who no longer have to use different currencies for different applications. In May of 2010, after lengthy negotiations, both firms agreed that facebook Credits, the social network's currency, would be accepted in Zynga's games.

Thompson (2009:1) re-emphasises the latter and suggests that the recently concluded Internet governance forum in Egypt reflects the net's continuing mutuality principles, while its organising power has been demonstrated many times in the last nine years. He also suggests that this public space like public parks or common land is precious and valuable but is constantly under attack from those who would regulate it, control it or seek to use it to promote their own commercial or political interests."

But these infuriated developers resent the fact that facebook takes a 30% cut. Perhaps this can be compared to government taxes paid in traditional society, on every transaction involving credits. Benedict Anderson (2010:59), a political scientist, suggests that such policies are imagined communities in which each person feels a bond with millions of anonymous fellow-citizens. He also suggests that in centuries past, people looked more to kings or bishops, but in this age of mass literacy and printing in vernacular languages, so Mr. Anderson argued, horizontal ties matter more.

Another feature that indicates that facebook is not only a society but appears to take on the aspects of a country, is that its users rely on the consent of the ruled. The site seeks advice from

its members on questions of governance because they interact horizontally and debate issues, as happens in any democracy in which the members have rights.

The site allows users to vote on proposed changes to its terms of service, and it holds online forums to solicit views on future policies. It is, however, subject to making blunders, as is any well-intended politico. For instance, its members were infuriated in 2010 as a result of changes to its policy that made public some previously private information. Hence, the users protested to insist that facebook grant them a mandate like a constitution.

Many users share the view that without governance there would be no civilisation. Every society needs some form of authority. They don't see facebook as being any different. They see it as a country, and Zugerburg is the president. He rules.

Could it be, however, that facebook and similar social networking sites have leadership that resembles a dictatorial governance similar to some African or Middle Eastern countries? Or can they be compared to mining towns, and apart from certain basic infrastructure is it a democracy or will its phenomena come and go? Will it survive or eventually die? What became eminent lately is that facebook is hardly a democracy and perhaps qualifies more as a country in which the elite rule, regardless of the fact that many users often complain and some appear to simply not care.

Many of the users who do seem to care and immediately find discrepancies in the system appear to engage in discourses on matters that affect them often. They feel that living online enables them to become instantly aware of what those who govern them are up to, and who they really are.

Sahara says that she would have agreed that social networking sites are not societies if there was no form of governance, because everything could go wrong, for example, child or female abductions; there would be confusion.

Some users see twitter as a bit of a liberal polity: a space in which people air their opinions, rally support and right wrongs. What about the view from the top? Is facebook a place that needs governing, just as a country does? Brad Burnham of Union Square Ventures Capital Firm (2010:59) argues that the answer is yes. In the spirit of liberal politics he is of the view that the job of facebook's managers is to create a space in which citizens and firms feel comfortable investing their time and money to create things.

Many of the users interviewed hold that governance is good because they do not want just anyone to know their private business. During interviews it was noted that the majority of users expressed the same sentiments as Todd, who suggests that social networking sites are indeed countries or communities in which they live, and they need governance. He asserts that governance prevents people from simply doing as they please, and stops some users from becoming problematic and a hindrance to those with whom they “reside” in the same community. Governance simultaneously enables users to guard those who govern the sites from exploiting user information.

Users also understand that if their needs are not met in the virtual communities in which they live, they have the choice to relocate or migrate to any other virtual societies or countries of their choice, as is possible in traditional societies.

Less than 10% of users were of the view that, although there does appear to be a form of governance, it does not necessarily qualify the sites to be societies in their own right, and individual users should really make their own decisions.

The overall perspective of the users seems to be that governance is required in virtual societies as a vast number of individuals are constantly on the sites in which they appear to reside. Governance in traditional societies and leadership in virtual societies appears not to be any different.

8.5.2 Relocation or migration

Migration tends to occur in traditional societies where individuals or groups emigrate from one country, community, society or state to another. The *Oxford Dictionary* (2011) defines the term migration in two ways; 1) Departing from one's own native land to another, and; 2) The movement of people from one place to another, usually from one country to another, for various reasons.

Again, it appears not to be any different in virtual societies. Migration appears to be a common activity amongst users who tend to migrate from one social networking site or one online community to another, either temporarily or permanently, as and when they choose. facebook for example, is holding its own jamboree for developers, f8, at which it is expected to unveil rich new data sources that users can use in their apps. It is likely to make it even easier for people to establish connections with other websites and pull information from elsewhere back into facebook. With such a formidable foe, twitter needs all the friends and advertisers it can get (Williams; 2010: 71).

Before facebook, myspace was considered to be the most popular social networking site with an exceptionally large number of users. Users had, over the years, experienced the advantages of communicating with friends, connecting to media, making news available, receiving feedback from users and observing current debates. Unfortunately, the increased popularity of facebook and its unprecedented growth resulted in a troubling bargaining power for the site, with thousands of users abandoning the site and expressing their dissatisfaction.

A key reason was that myspace appeared to have followed in the footsteps of Netflix, who used real user data which was supposed to be anonymous, as a price contest. Consequently, as it is with most data, although site owners assured users that their information is confidential, it was not really the case.

User Dan, for example was extremely upset when he began to experience difficulties on the site. He says that the primary reason that he started using the site initially was to be able to communicate with friends, peers and long distance family members. He did not anticipate that

the site would make his private information public. He became extremely unhappy and said that he simply deleted his myspace account, and relocated permanently to facebook. In the space they left for comments or reasons, he gave them a piece of his mind.

As a matter of fact, according to Pierce (2011:1), it is indicated that myspace lost millions of users in a few weeks. This affected many of its leaders. Pierce confirms that around 500 of the sites staff are going worldwide, because sites like facebook have changed the face of social networking. Perhaps this made it much easier for users to live in. There were 63 million users on myspace in February 2011, down from more than 73 million, and that in spite of the fact that many changes were made to the myspace site in an attempt to keep users.
Sam, a user on facebook, had mixed views and said:

> "Let's be fair, myspace is public, therefore the information on it is also. If myspace only sells public info and someone is stupid enough to actually buy the same information that they could get for free anyway, then I suppose both myspace and the person who bought the information deserve to be sued and lose just for the mere stupidity, and the waste of resources they cost our court system."

Privacy issues have resulted in rising tension between guardians of privacy and internet firms and have made Canada's privacy commissioner, Jennifer Stoddard, furious with facebook. There is concern among web users about how private data is made public. Several prominent Internet personalities like Cory Doctorow, a science-fiction author, and Leoporte (2010) a podcaster, abandoned facebook. Sites such as QuitfacebookDay.com are urging other users to do so.

Jo, a user on multiples sites also argued against users who emigrated from one site to another for privacy reasons, and he says that:

> "Users who migrate from the site should have thought about it before they signed up. I am certain that everyone who clicked the little, 'I agree' box when they signed up for a myspace account gave the administrators full legal rights to do this. I'd be doubtful

> that they're opening themselves up for law suits. It sounds more like a last-ditch effort to wring some money out of a dying platform."

Foxy, a facebooker and twitter, made comments regarding myspace's predicaments entitled the whole ordeal "Down the Drain." He advocated that if the site owns any patents, look for a lawsuit soon. "They've lost in the market, and are losing their talent, and are now burning any residual goodwill they had for cash."

Fisher a myspacer and twitter, was of the same view and argued:

> "If myspace did indeed sell user information, it will actually and effectively kill the site. I never used the sight much really, but from now on I'll never use it again. And should I delete the account? What for? I'm already sold. Let them delete it themselves when they kill the site, and please, the last one to leave, turn off the lights!"

Poniewozik (2011:18) suggests that twitter is a danger zone, especially for its most adept users. His article describes the impact that a tweet can have on person's life if it is sent to audiences for whom it is not meant. The article defines the very qualities that make someone popular on twitter or facebook—mischievous, authenticity and a quick wit—as in the case of Anthony Weiner, and can backfire when taken to the extreme.

Unfortunately it seems apparent that users do not always find what they are looking for when they move to other sites. Evidently similar issues emerge from within the new societies into which they migrate. This is confirmed by Goldman (2010) who says that our primary concern is to provide users with a safe and secure experience, and we work aggressively to develop technical and human solutions to keep them in control of their information. He says that facebook has a habit of shooting itself in the foot when it comes to dealing with privacy concerns.

What appears to have happened is similar to what Cock suggests is occurring in South African societies. Zola Skweyiya, in an article written by Cock (2005:333) in the State of the Nation

attests that South Africa is sitting on a time bomb of poverty and social integration. He appeals for full understanding on the extent of the social crisis. Both myspace and, in some instances, facebook appeared not to take the grievances of users seriously, and the social crisis resulted in unprecedented losses. He was startled (1983: xiii) when he discovered in many of the notices of Imagined Communities that Eurocentric provincialism remained undisturbed.

What is evident is that although users and informants appear eager to express dissatisfaction with the sites, and even relocate, they continue to communicate and debate issues on other sites. Anderson (1983) suggests that national communities were imagined and maintained in response to shared routes of political migrations. This is similar to individuals who migrated from their home countries for political reasons. But who continue to debate against their governments in the diasporas, where they can team up through social groups, or local and international radio channels to express their grievances. Users who navigate among social media sites appear to have shared routes of migration.

However, migration is often dependent on a site's popularity, on the emergence of a new site where users feel at ease, or where users believe that their personal information is safe, although in some cases this is not so much an issue as users tend to feel comfortable where they socialise with friends. Users also tend to migrate to the sites which their friends use. According to Anderson (1983:6), the Javanese always knew that they were connected to people they have never seen, but these ties were imagined particularistic ally – as indefinitely stretchable nets of kinship and klintship. Habitus plays a major role in this form of migration. Habitus can be described as embodied culture, and being prior to self-conscious reflection, it sets limits to thought and chosen action. Through habitus the socially created world appears as natural and is taken for granted (Ericksen; 2001:91).

Sometimes, it seems that there is no real benefit in moving from one online society to another. Users have suggested that the same situations seem to arise wherever they go. Having said that, though, it became apparent during interview processes that almost 40% of users interviewed, had already relocated from one site to another for various reasons. Most of the relocations seem to be from sites like myspace to facebook and twitter.

The remaining 60% were reasonably happy with the sites that they use. They seem to be of the view that each society has its own complications, that users will become aware of them, and that there is not much difference between them.

8.5.3 Friends, intimate relationships and marriage

As indicated in some of the previous chapters on friends and intimate relationships, these are some of the key scopes of social interactions which occur amongst users' lives. Also provided is an analysis of the ways in which the relationships are formed. However, although similar relationships are formed in traditional societies, they appear to be unique. But they also project advantages and, or potential consequences.

The number of friends that users have in virtual societies is worth noting. Friendships are formed in peculiar ways. Users choose friends based on profile pictures, ethnicity, race, culture, gender, age and, in a general sense, those who appear to have similar interests either career wise or socially. These friendships seemed to be formed primarily on facebook, twitter and Mxit, but it seems that users also often visit friends in other online societies.

Mxiter Nathan says that the bottom line is that he is not certain how well he knows all the individuals whom he calls his friends. About 40% of the users interviewed revealed that their social worlds are actually small considering the fact that they cannot ask for assistance from some of their friends in time of need. Sam says that with the increase in Nigerian scams, it had become difficult to ask for financial assistance from a friend when facing a crisis.

Almost 60% of the users were of the view that they regard all of their friends equally, and are aware where they live and work and would not mind. But they revealed that they would not necessarily lay down their lives for any of them.

When the users were asked whether or not, the friendships they make impact on their social lives, they argued that virtual societies are not any different from traditional societies. They described how this form of social interaction is similar or unique to those in traditional society.

Sofi a user both on facebook, twitter and YouTube declares:

> "There is indeed not any difference between virtual and conventional societies. The ways in which my friends and I socialise in offline societies are often hindered by various distractions. In virtual societies, one remains focused and socialises with hundreds of friends simultaneously through merely commenting on facebook or twitter. In fact, most of my friends and I believe that we actually reside or live more in virtual communities. The only time when we really feel that where we are not there is when we go to bed."

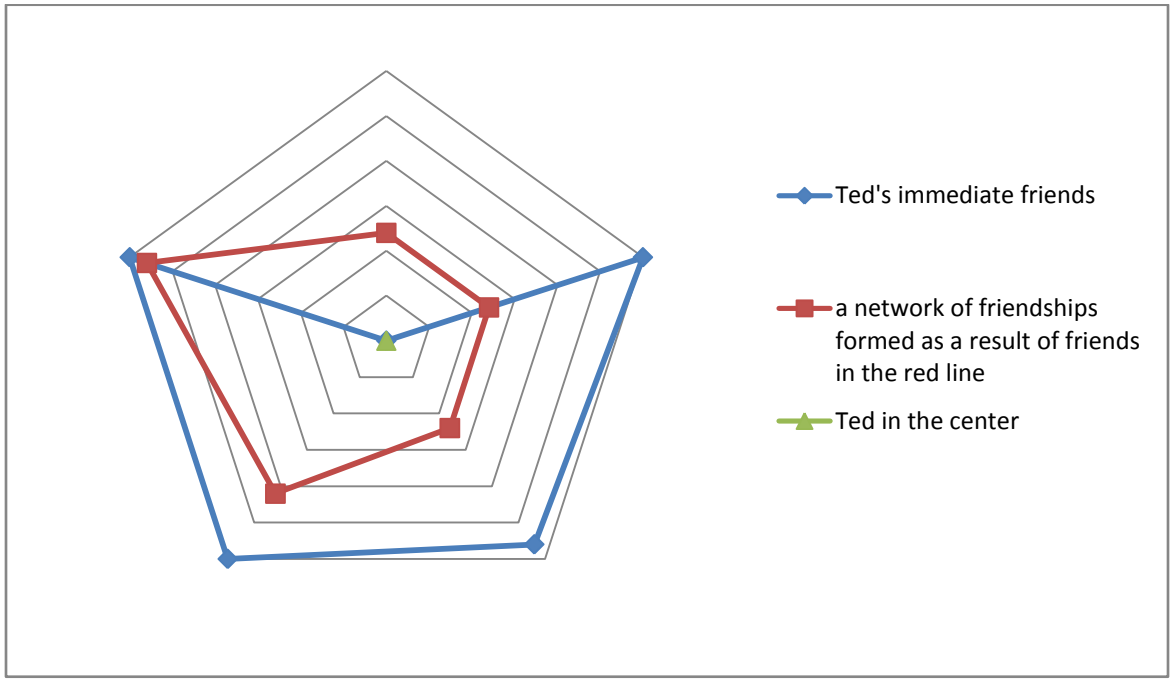


Figure 29 An illustration on the Network of friends from the dot in the middle, and discussed furtherin the graph

An example is that indicated in Figure 28 which illustrated a user Ted in the center. The blue line showcases some of his immediate friends. And the red line in the graph showcases the friendships Ted formed as a result of friends. These friendships though uniquely formed online are not formed any differently from those formed offline. Friendships are often also formed through mutual friends.

Sociologists distinguish between a person's wider social network, as described in the Dunbar number. Peter Marsden (2010:1) of Harvard found that Americans tend to discuss important

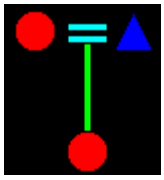
matters with only a handful of individuals, even if they socialise with many others. A subsequent study found that this number is on a downward trend, which appears to be a widespread concern.

User Kenti says:

> "In virtual societies I am able to choose friends and people I want to associate with and chat to. I decide whom I prefer to get into an intimate relationship with. The fact is that most of my friends literally do, but I do not see any difference between virtual and traditional societies. In fact it is like migrating from one country to another almost instantly, although most of my time is spent on facebook which is practically a country and twitter a society. Hence, they are indisputably collective or individual societies in their own right."

Susana, a facebooker suggested, and many of the users expressed similar sentiments, that as far as intimate relationships and marriage are concerned, she was of the perspective that some users, including friends that she knows, find their future husband or wife online, and they witnessed some of the relationships resulting in marriage. Hence, many of the users suggested that they do interact normally as in any conventional society. So there is no difference. But the advantage is that you almost always have access to the person whom you have an intimate relationship with. The users suggested that them and some of their friends were fortunate to find soul mates online, which they failed to find in traditional society.

While observing online societies, it became apparent that as in intimate relationships formed in traditional societies, there are advantages and potential consequences. Some of the key advantages can be identified similar to relationships offline, as those who result into an engagement or a marriage. In fact quite a few of the users indicated, and I equally observed that they know of a friends or a friends' sibling whose friendship formed online resulted in a long term relationships which they eventually marry. Hence, as a result, similar to those offline, kinship ties are formed as indicative in the example of the kinship diagram in *figure 29*.



Note in the diagrams;

A circle represents a female

A triangle represents a male

An equal sign represents a marriage

A vertical line represents descent of parentage.

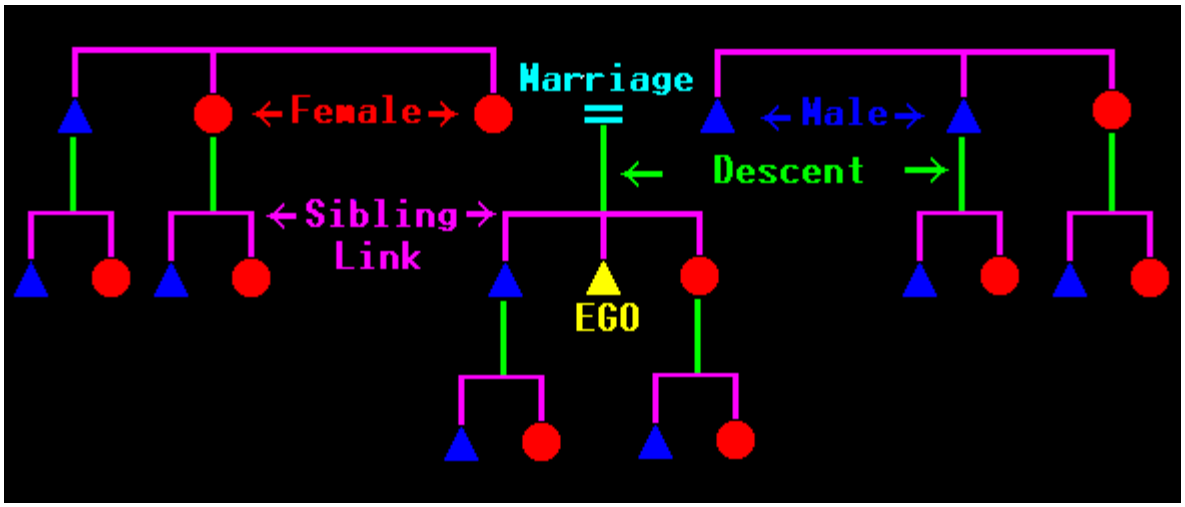


Figure 30 Image of a kinship diagram indicating how marriage spreads from generation to generation, University of Manatoba (Schwimmer; 1995)

But, what appear not to be any different but similar to relationships formed on virtual societies are users who encounter "intimate strangers" whom they hardly know or have ever seen face to face. This is often also the case with those whom individuals think they know in conventional societies.

A few case studies were conducted on female users, and it was found that some had established relationships which they only at a later stage realised were hoaxes. The men involved in these hoax relationships posted innocent-looking pictures of themselves, portraying someone who looks successful, loving, and handsome with a strong personality. Once they realise that the woman has fallen in love, they go to the extent of an online engagement and promise that the

marriage ceremony will be held. Within a matter of months the person would suggest that they like to meet their in-laws."

The stories were almost identical and continued when I interviewed Sharon a user on facebook and myspace. She suggested that once a person established that he would visit soon to meet the family, a major accident happened during which a robbery occurs. The person is hospitalised and robbed and needs funds urgently for surgery. A legitimate-sounding, but entirely false, medical practitioner calls the expectant spouse personally, and describes the seriousness of the accident and the amount required to save the person's life and work towards full recovery. But in the end is only a disappointed fiancé left who realises too late that they have been robbed.

When I listened to and read some of the comments the users made in this regard, I recalled similar incidences which were discussed on the Dr. Phil and Oprah shows in 2008 and 2009. Many of the users suggested that the intimate relationships which are formed online, are hence not any different than those formed in traditional society, although they appear to develop in unique ways."

Only 10% of the users had contrary views, which were similar to that of Ted's, who was of the view that social networking sites are all about having fun and not about relationships. He suggests that they can hence not be regarded as societies.

Less than 5% appeared to be neutral. On the one hand, they were of the view that users' social lives online are not necessarily an indication that they are societies. On the other hand, they agreed that the relationships formed online are not any different than those formed in traditional society.

Overall, almost 85% of the users suggested that all relationships are formed. To that end they implied that the relationships formed through social interaction, are not any different than those formed in traditional societies, and that the outcomes are not any different. The users were of the view that all relationships face challenges regardless of where they are formed. They were firm that they indeed live in these societies in which they interact and socialise with others. This is in

contrast to 10% of the users who suggested that the sites are primarily for fun with friends. About 5% of the users were of the view that they are not certain and could not decide whether the relationships formed online are necessarily an indication that they are societies.

8.5.4 Privacy issues

The question of privacy on social networking sites has caused major outcries in the media and amongst users which resulted in persuasive discourses between them on facebook. The site was criticised for making information about its users available by default, thereby creating fear in users that their privacy is being trampled underfoot as Internet behemoths race to grab as much data as possible.

The issue provoked calls for tougher action by regulators and governments to prevent web firms from abusing the mountains of personal data they now hold. Dana Boyd (2010:16) holds that facebook, with its hordes of members around the world, is now so embedded in people's lives that it should be regulated as a utility.

User rights in this regard have become of key concern, prompting facebook to advise its users to; 1) Avoid weak passwords made from simple words that would be easily found in a dictionary; 2) Avoid making their full birth dates visible as the information can be used by thieves to obtain personal data that would give access to bank accounts etc., and; 3) Take cognizance of useful privacy controls which limit access only to friends and friends of friends.

This is not any different in conventional society where individuals are stringently protective of what they consider to be their private information, property and movable or immovable assets that are within their own space. People are also advised to keep their personal documents or banking details safe to prevent themselves from falling victim to financial losses.

While conducting this study, the Privacy Guard used in virtual societies was compared with those in traditional societies and it was found that they appear to have similar objectives. Law enforcement in conventional society ensures that the privacy of individuals is protected. Both

appear to have similar characteristics to Section 2 of the Bill of Rights in the South African constitution for example, which views privacy as a fundamental right (Bill of Rights 2007).

The majority of users view privacy as an issue in every society. All users interviewed on the various sites explored for this paper were of the view that there are flaws regarding privacy in the system. Identity theft occurs both in online and conventional societies, and it impacts equally on those affected.

Commandant Chavez stated that he intends to open his twitter account soon to wage the battle on privacy further online (Cabello; 2010: 280).

A Mxiter, Thando, says that:

> "My mom's friend found herself married to a perfect stranger when she went for a personal business transaction, which caused her major problems. Why is privacy such an issue in virtual societies? There are risks everywhere, and the risks in virtual societies appear to be such a major issue as if it is not any different in conventional societies?

Morrow (1980:1), the head of CSI identity theft, paints a grim picture. He explains that perhaps several hundred people a year would be unlucky enough to have their identities stolen. Last year, it happened to perhaps 10 million people. He advocates that it takes so long that it may take crooks as long as a year or two to get around to draining your bank account.
Some of the users state that they are very careful in revealing personal details regarding their locations, educational backgrounds, births dates, etc., but facebooker Sam says:

> "It appears to be the norm in virtual societies. We have to know everything about our friends; we have remember their birthdates, and we have to know what they do and what their achievements are. But we have no control over our friends' friends who also has access to this information."

It seems almost impossible to limit what the sites make available for the public to see, but it does also appear that privacy issues seem not to be much of a concern for some users. Morrow (1980:1) advises that in the face of such facts, the most usual prophylactic measures can seem comically low-tech and suggests that users should update their virus-protection software. He also suggests that users don't save their passwords in a document called "passwords" and if a "friend" sends you a facebook message asking you to wire money to Wales, be sceptical. Equally, in traditional society, individuals are to ensure that their private property or documentation is protected and to be careful who they share this space or information with.

Baby boomer Ben, who is both a twitter and myspacer, says:

> "I am always on guard with the details I make available online. Only my close friends, who know me really well, have access to my private details. Unfortunately it seems that, regardless of the fact that my friends and I are strict about online privacy, the reality is that none of the users appear to have control over what we assume to be private."

Many of the older users from the same generation as Ben expressed similar sentiments, and they feel that in comparison to members of younger generations they are careful with the type of information they make visible for friends to see. Similarly, in offline societies, older individuals tend to more careful than their younger counterparts and guard against making personal information too visible.

It is apparent that privacy seems to be a major issue for individuals both online and in conventional society, hence, there is not much of a difference in what individuals consider to be private in both.

8.5.5 Online policing or safety measures

In conventional society police are often there to ensure that all is well in different communities, and to guard against and investigate criminals and criminal activities. This appears not to be any different in virtual societies. Watchdogs are growling at the web giants, and sometimes even

"biting" them. In May of 2010, European data protection agencies wrote to Google, Microsoft and Yahoo demanding independent proof that they were making promising changes to protect the privacy of user search histories. They also urged Google to store sensitive search data for only six months instead of nine (*San Francisco/Economist*; 2010:63).

Privacy issues also resulted in major debates amongst watchdogs, forcing social networking sites such as facebook to protect users' personal data. While some users do not mind being watched online to ensure that they are protected, the majority, particularly members of older generations are not comfortable with it at all.

In his article, Jim Finkle (2009:1), describes ways in which cyber-crimes have begun to spread, and the impact they are having on facebook users. Hackers prey on users who are under the impression that the world's top social networking site is a safe place. Finkle notes that, according to security experts, cybercrime costs the United States and individuals billions of dollars every year. Hackers appeared originally to be targeting myspace, but as facebook has grown in popularity, hackers seem to be following individuals there.

Pierce (2011:1) confirms this when he suggests that year and year on, the site has lost almost 50 million users, down from close to 110 million in February 2010.

Generation Y user, Mxiter and facebooker Tebogo, feels that:

> "Virtual societies are the only places in which we feel like adults and where we do not want to be constantly watched by parents who try to monitor our every move. Knowing that we are being watched by police too would simply take the fun out of living in our own real world where we can express ourselves freely.

On the other hand users are aware that they are being watched in one way or another, but do not seem to be concerned with the way in which they socialise, or in what they show or share with friends.

The mere fact that the police appear to be effective in guarding users' social lives in online societies is visible in a BBC article (2009:1) in which four teenagers were arrested and later bailed out over a facebook party. A hundred people were involved in a street clash near a house party advertised on the facebook website. The argument amongst these teenagers, it appears, escalated into a riot, and disturbed the peace of neighbors. However, police from Hampshire and Surrey responded swiftly and effectively to prevent a large public disorder situation from escalating within the community. This shows the vast impact which online societies could have in contemporary societies. And online policing appears to be similar to that of stopping traditional individuals from breaking laws in traditional societies.

8.5.7 Education

The primary intention of users appears to be to communicate or engage in social interaction with friends online. Education appears to be an additional feature which implies that unique societies have emerged. It has also had a major impact on Generation Y users. In terms of education they seem to be referred to as the Net Generation Unplugged.

Berg (2011) suggests that the proper definition of education is "the process of becoming an educated person." He says that "education is a process of cognitive cartography, mapping your experiences and finding a variety of reliable routes to optimal states when you find yourself in a non-optimal state." Hence, this seems to be similar to users who not only appear to acquire a formal education, but simultaneously educate themselves through interacting with friends online or through online institutions on the various sites or through the various societies.

Almost all of the users interviewed appear to educate themselves in one way or another online. This occurs either through social, legal, political means, through persuasive discourse or via the information that users have access to. It was found that a number of users seem to acquire formal education through institutions that are found on facebook and related sites.

Regarding users born particularly between 1980 and 2000, there is widespread consensus among educators, marketers and policymakers that digital technologies have given rise to a new generation of students, consumers, and citizens who see the world in a different way. Growing

up with the Internet age, it seems, has transformed user approaches to education, work and politics.

As far as education is concerned, academics are increasingly making use of sites like twitter for research and tutoring. Dr. Priego (2011:1) of the University of Venus discusses how twitter will revolutionise academic research. In addition, he states that thousands of scholars and higher education institutions are participating in social media like twitter as an important aspect of their research and teaching work.

Some of the users interviewed revealed that they can remain online almost indefinitely if they choose to do so. They can access their universities through the sites too. Open University, which also airs on a South African television channel, is an example of some of the institutions users can access on sites like facebook or twitter for example, where users "attend lectures", and where they can also chat to friends, and view profiles of potential friends when they take breaks. Most of the users feel that it makes learning fun.

According to Waldrop in *Scientific America* (2008:69), more recent attributes such as blogging, tagging, and social networking—dubbed Web 2.0—have just as quickly expanded peoples' ability to not just consume online information but to publish it as well. They can edit it and collaborate on it, forcing such old-line institutions as journalism, marketing and even politicking to adopt new ways of thinking and operating. This shows the impact which the Internet has had on the lives of people in the twenty first century.

Users interviewed confirm that they form online study groups on social networking sites. Almost 40% suggested that they form study groups on Mxit too, where they discusses their subject matters and study in chat rooms where they come together.

Marc Prensky (2001), states that our students have changed radically. Today's students are no longer the people our educational systems were designed to teach. In his book *Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants*, published in 2001, management gurus weighed in to explain how employers

should cope with this new generation's preference for collaborative working, rather than traditional command and control, and their need for constant feedback about themselves.

Almost all users interviewed confirmed that it is much easier to study these days because they can access so much information on the sites, and they can simultaneously Google online dictionaries for free. They don't have to leave their homes much, but they can travel without spending a cent on fuel.

Dr Math is a live tutorial tool that uses volunteers to help math learners with their homework or studies via Mxit. They say that the CSIR has used used it too, Butgereit (2010).

Many users are very excited about the fact that when they do leave home, they do not leave their friends or learning institutions behind because they can access almost everything from wherever they are via their mobile phones. This makes it much easier to be able to learn and educate and socialise with friends from almost anywhere. They feel that the social networking sites really are an adventure.

Siva Vaidhyanathan (2010) who teaches media studies at the University of Virginia disagrees with Prensky, and feels that this is essentially a wrongheaded argument which assumes that kids have something that teachers don't, and teachers have to catch up with them. Michael Welsh, who pioneered the use of new media in his cultural anthropology classes at Kansas State University, is also skeptical and suggests that most of his incoming students have only a superficial familiarity with the digital tools that they use regularly, especially when it comes to the social and political potential (The Net G U; 2010:10).

In essence, it appears that in addition to social interaction on virtual societies, education plays a major role, as in traditional society. While it seems that education extends beyond social interaction, the rationale is that for users, it includes the acquiring of knowledge. For most of the users it appears to be similar to the level of knowledge which they would have otherwise have acquired in traditional society.

8.5.8 Politics

Social networking sites also appear to play a major role in everyday politics. Through sites like facebook, myspace and YouTube etc., users are able to partake in, learn about, debate and express their political views. They also have access to politicians via the sites. It simultaneously enables political leaders to let users know what their objectives are, the methods through which they intend to fulfill user expectations, and point out opposition leaders' mistakes.

Hence, as a result of sites like twitter for example, it is easier for users to send information quickly and for politicians to react to that information (or at least some pretend to do so). At the height of Obama's presidential campaign (@barackobama), he employed 100 staff working on social media such as twitter, facebook and YouTube in order to win supporters, to the disadvantage of some of his key counterparts who appeared to have limited use for digital tools. Obama managed to gain the attention of millions of users and was elected 44th president of the United States. As a result he managed to change the face of politics and inspired many politicians who are catching up elsewhere.

Tanya says that as a result of online societies, she and her friends are able to engage in political discourse where they previously had no interest in such issues in traditional societies. Many users say that as a result of online societies they are able to share in politics and help make a difference in their countries, but more so in virtual societies.

Tosi holds that engaging in politics is healthy and it stretches ones thoughts and gives one a better understanding of important issues.

In July of 2009 four of the world's top 20 cities for twitter usage were outside of America according to marketing firm HubSpot. By January 2010, the number of countries had increased to eight. Country leaders like Hugo Chavez tweets too, *Economist* (2010:61). This appears to have become a trend in elections held by countries throughout the world, including African countries.

twitter, for example appears to have been very effective in creating a platform for politicians, and for users who want their voices to be heard. The users send twitter messages, or tweets, which are like public telegrams. Tweets are no more than 140 characters in length, and can be sent from any computer or mobile phone. Anyone with a twitter account can send a public message to anyone else. twitter has also improved the ways in which users pass on information quickly, and express their views. It appears that in the era of social networking sites, or virtual communities, the choices users make are often influenced by the friends with whom they interact, and are primarily as a result of the online discourses that they engage in.

During the Iranian 12 presidential elections, twitter became one of the most important tools available to Iranian users when they protested the outcome of the elections. It is a service that broadcasts short (140 characters or less) missives, or tweets, over the Web via text message. Although twitter was originally intended to allow people to flirt and tell others of the activities in their lives, it has become one of the Internet's great "Velveteen Rabbit" moments. twitter is fast and appears to have brought individual protesters together in a powerful way. The twitter verse exploded with tweets in both English and Farsi¸ *Time* (2010:53).

Unlike the newspapers that had blank spaces where censors had to whiten out stories, twitter was delivering information from street level in real time. This tool appears to have had a major impact on the manner in which social networking impacts on activities, social lives and politics that take place in traditional societies (Grossman: 2009:9).

Many users suggested that it is not any different passing on or debating political issues online as it is in traditional society. Or engaging in the various discourses. But, they were also of the view that it enables them to pass information instantly and that through these societies, they are able to let their voices be heard.

Although social websites might have several social benefits, there also appear to be flaws in what is considered to be acceptable methods by which users can communicate. According to technology reporter, Emery (2009:1) of BBC News, the Simon Wiesenthal Center, the number of hate and terrorist websites has increased by a third over the past year, and social networking sites

continue to push controversial messages. facebook became embroiled in a row after a number of holocaust denial groups were set up on the site. Critics argue that facebook was propagating anti-Semitism, while others say that free speech is a cornerstone of society and facebook should "keep its hands off".

Users hold that engaging in political debates broadens their understanding of both local and international politics, and that the mere fact that they can argue that social networking sites are societies in their own right is reflected in the way they engage in political discourse and manage to make changes in traditional society.

8.5.9 Virtual law

As in traditional societies, individuals are subject to certain laws that they should adhere to and which apply in conflicting situations. Often laws apply either vertically between the individuals and the state, or, horizontally between users. Real life legal battles occur on Second Life which requires governments to implement laws to protect users. Tennesen (2009:27) provides several examples, outlined below, which make legal action essential.

During fieldwork it was found that only about 15% of users said that they either had or were aware of family members who had relationships that ended up in legal battles. Individuals pursued legal actions online against those that they felt either offended them or robbed them during social interaction.

Congruent to battles in traditional societies conflicting incidences occur on social-networking sites, which impact negatively on the lives of users. Although legal battles tend to occur in traditional society an interesting dynamic is that online societies have virtual lawyers who are in the process of developing. But social mishaps in the virtual world are similar to those that occur in traditional societies between spouses and friends.

Tennesen (2009:27) asserts that with the average player spending 20 hours a week in these environments, they often put more weight in the virtual affairs than lawmakers do. Hence, virtual societies are not exempt from legal incidents.

BBC News (2009:1) aired the story of a Missouri-based myspacer female who was seen as a suicide bully. She was acquitted by a US Judge over her role in a computer hoax which was directed at a 13 year old neighbor who later killed herself. The judge, however, concluded that if she had been convicted for breaking the social networking site's terms of service pretty much anyone who violated the terms of service could also be prosecuted. Such decisions make it difficult for users to rely on the protection they assume exists while using social networking sites.

There were various incidents as a result of users' engaging socially with friends online that ended up in legal battles. There were several examples of such cases and two are briefly discussed here:

In the first incident a male was dumped by his girlfriend on facebook. He deliberately made very personal visible comments and posted them on his comment blog where all his friends and others could see them. Although the case was eventually debated in civil courts in traditional society, the incident stemmed from a virtual society.

The second example in the virtual world was that of Chinese gamer Qiu Chengwei acquired a virtual sword in the online game Legend of Mir3, only to have his friend borrow it and sell it for US$ 800.00. Upon approaching the police Qiu Chengwei was advised that there were no laws to protect virtual property. Qui killed the thief.
Greg Lastowka, a professor of law at Rugters University who is writing a book called *Virtual Law*, states that if someone dies and someone else is going to spend the rest of his life in jail for a virtual crime, then we better take it seriously. Social networking sites have societies in which normal interactions appear to take place. These can be compared to everyday social interactions and incidents.

They are of the notion that the Internet might have reduced people's horizons. Based on the results of their research on the geographic effect in the spread of new names, they suggest that "the relationship between the numbers of private e-mails sent in America and the distance between sender and recipient falls off far more steeply then they expected". They however found that between 1995 and 2005, as a result of the Internet, common names in any given state and its immediate neighbors became 30% higher than would have been expected.

Social networking sites themselves appear to be in conflict with the law at times. BBC (2009:1) highlights the way in which facebook bridges Canadian law by holding on to users' personal information indefinitely. It appears that facebook was also criticised for failing to adequately restrict access to users' personal details to some of the 950,000 developers in 180 countries who provide applications, such as games, for the site."

On the other hand the site has been a major tool for users personally. A couple whose son was prosecuted for a crime in the United States, managed to prove their son's innocence through facebook. They asked friends who were online with their son at the same time that the incident occurred to pass the information onto his attorney who used it to prove his innocence in court. As a result of the time they all spent communicating on facebook, they could prove that he did not commit the crime.

The vast majority of users interviewed have not experienced any legal issues. Some did say that they were on the verge of pursuing legal action, but they were of the opinion that such incidents are common in traditional societies, and that there is really not any difference.

8.5.10 Retailers and business

Purchasing groceries and related items online has also become very popular amongst users who practically live in online societies like facebook, etc. The same users also make use of the online shopping through eBay and Amazon. Internet groceries are more popular in countries like Britain and those who live in the Diaspora and buy groceries online, and which are then delivered to families in countries like Zimbabwe, for example. In the Unites States, consumer goods are often

purchased online through retailers and businesses who advertise their products on social networking sites.

Reducing fuel consumption and indulging in the pleasure of shopping in ones' own space are also advantages of online purchasing. A Harvard Business School study revealed that people ordering goods for delivery in a few days time were less likely to succumb to temptations like ice cream (*The Economist*:2010:70).

It was found that many users who reside in western countries tend to make use of the options available from retailers and industries that can be found on sites like facebook. Unfortunately, users who reside in some Sub-Saharan regions, where access is more limited, tend to make less use of the services.

facebook is used by adults and children. Much of twitter's power, influence and longevity derive from the fact it has become a professional tool, rather than an online outlet for gossip posted by its users.

Almost 67% of users confirm that they often also do their shopping with friends online, and they say that it is just as fitting that one also shops while out with friends. This is not any different online, and reinforces the argument that they are indeed societies in which friends interact and live their lives.

Digital Sky Technologies, which accounts for more than 70% of page view on Russian Internet, emerging internet investments. Now these firms are increasingly making their presence felt beyond their home markets. Beyond that they have invested in dozens of internet firms around the globe. The most adventurous of the three DSTs, has already moved west and paid top dollar for stakes in fast-growing American companies or societies, notably facebook's emerging online giants.

An illustration is that of a woman who takes a long time to list all the items she has bought on-line in recent months: She bought an iPod, a blender, a lamp, a rice cooker, a mobile phone,

credit, a coffee-maker, coffee, Levi's jeans (both genuine and not), powder milk, snacks, toilet paper etc., on sites like facebook, twitter and YouTube. The women said that she also bought a few electric bicycles and resold them at a profit to Americans via EBay. But she faces stiff competition on this from other on-line entrepreneurs who are also found on social networking sites (Shanghai; 2010:1).

What is fascinating is the manner in which she managed to do her shopping. And from the users interviewed in this regard, about 78% who reside in western countries also confirmed that they purchase products on social networking sites. About 22% of the users suggested that they prefer doing their shopping in traditional society. Evidently they need to feel the product that they want to purchase to ensure that it is the expected quality, rather than to be disappointed when an item is delivered to their homes.

On April 13th twitter unveiled a long-awaited advertising scheme that claims it could mint money for the company. If needs be, twitter is to become a commercial hit. twitter has long concentrated on scooping up users for its service. Some social-marketing experts claim that the nature of twitter's service, which involves communicating via 140 characters "tweets," makes it tricky to monetise. Many users are alarmed at the prospect of twitter polluting their thoughts with advertisements and have threatened to leave if it does. This appears not to matter because twitter rivals have built powerful ecosystems of their own.

Shanghai (2010:1) also suggests that some consumers in the Unites States have been slow to use the Internet to make everyday purchases such as groceries. Surveys also suggest that more 10% of baby gear is now sold online, along with a growing share of cosmetics.

Users seem to be of the view that there are various items available online which they can purchase. They asserted that this is similar to traditional societies. They suggested that apart from communicating or socialising with friends in virtual societies, they can in reality simultaneously window shop and purchase items in the "company of friends," if they decide to do so. Not surprisingly, in June 2009, facebook launched a store-credit system that allows users to pay

easily for digital goods and services on the site, which pockets a small commission on each transaction (*San Francisco*; 2009:62).

Some of the users suggested that this a clear indication that social networking sites are indeed societies because friends assist each other in advertising and they suggest that that is what communities are all about. The users assert that the products are similar to and not any different from than those sold in traditional societies and they said "that if it can safe us on gas, the product is much cheaper and easier to buy."

It became evident that the Internet and Social Networking has created "societies" in which users can do various activities which they normally do in traditional or conventional societies and does not have to leave the comfort of their homes in order to do so.

Almost 13% of the users interviewed have never shopped online, and they do not necessarily see that doing so would indicate that social networking sites have indeed created societies in their own right. They also point out that the fact that these resources are made available to users is not so much for the convenience of the users, but is more about businesses maximising their exposure to the target market that they intend to reach.

8.5.11 Customer service

Online customer service seems to indicate that social networking sites resemble or are indeed societies or communities in their own right. Snyder (2010:56) comments on how customer service complaints used to be made in traditional societies prior to the digital age. He remembers that back in the dark ages, if customers were unhappy with the way they were treated by employees in a business they would phone the manager or write a letter and send it through the post office. Today, however, with the advancement of digital, Snyder says that tech savvy users have learned that the quickest, easiest, and surest way for consumers and users to not only get their complaints heard, but resolved too, is to make them known on twitter. Businesses respond quickly to avoid negative publicity.

Customer service experts say that it's the instant public humiliation that sets twitter grievances apart. An example of this is film maker Kevin Smith's twitter tantrum in February of 2010 after he was booted from a flight, allegedly for being too overweight to fit in a single seat. The incident caused a stir in the media and resulted in debates and arguments about discriminations leveled against overweight individuals. Airline officials believed that Smith should pay for two seats. The outcome of these debates was not resolved at the time of writing this paper.

This leads us to the marketing advantages associated with social networking sites. According to an article in the *Economist*, entitled *Friends for Sale*, it is submitted that online social networks are not just useful as a means of communication, but are also regarded as a business tool. Marketers are eager to use fast growing networks to tout their products.

8.5.12 Parties

Parties are common in both traditional and online societies, and apparently it is possible to have some of the largest parties by announcing them facebook. Evidently, though, once an individual actually announces a party, friends seem to believe that they are automatically part of the guest list, sometimes resulting in overcrowding. According to Day (2011:1) authorities are sometimes called in advance to stop parties that have been promoted on social networking sites if it is believed that they will threaten law and order.

In June 2011, 100 police officers were called to the birthday party of a 16 year old girl where 11 arrests made. Apparently about 1 600 people gate crashed the party as she forgot to switch on her facebook privacy settings when inviting friends to the celebration. After several such incidents Schٷneman (2011:1) said that in order to prevent this type of occurrence young people using facebook should qualify for an “Internet driver’s licence” so that they become aware of the potential dangers of using the sites.

8.5.13 Gifts

It appears that the giving of gifts amongst friends has become a regular activity. For most of the users it was previously difficult to send gifts to friends in virtual communities as there were no features that supported the concept. However, in August of 2009, facebook started rolling out the

ability to send real life gifts by going to the same digital wall on which members would jot a note to a friend.

First time users have to input credit or debit card info to obtain facebook credits, and once the notification is complete, the recipient receives a notification on their wall. The recipient provides their address to the third-party vendor, and the gift is delivered a few days later. Sending gifts is not new on facebook. Analysts estimate that since 2007, users have spent more than US$50 million in sending virtual presents that are basically online stickers to put on profile pages. The expansion into tangible gifts was the brain child of Real Gifts, a start-up that three Web developers launched with a US$ 25,000 grant from facebook (*Economist*; 2010:53).

Almost 55% of the users interviewed have, one point or another sent birthday, valentine, thanksgiving or seasonal greetings gifts to friends and family members via facebook or related sites. Some of the users say that they found it easy to send gifts to friends which they can purchase from any country, and which they know their friends will appreciate.

Fletcher (2010:54) confirms that these are not cartoonish images of roses. They were the real deal. These flowers come complete with glass vases, petals and thorny connotations. The whole gift cost precisely 534 facebook credits – or US $ 53.40. It took him about 30 seconds to complete the whole transaction. Unlike Internet users, however, who purchase flowers online and ship them off, sending flowers on facebook, for example, required no shopping cart and no checkout. He did not even have to put in the woman's shipping address, which was a good thing because the woman had refused to give him her address. Through sending flowers he made a friend, but by using your profile to send real gifts that are paid for with facebook's alternative currency might be the biggest leap of faith.

Therefore, the fact that users send gifts to friends indicates that they intend to maintain friendships, and shows that they care for family and friends while making the social networking sites pleasant environments in which to interact; another indication that SNSs are not really any different from conventional societies.

8.5.14 Addictive behavior in virtual societies

Addictions and addictive behaviour are often significant ills that tend to exist in almost every society, including virtual societies, and are often associated with the online social lives of users.

Addictions are often referred to as the persistent use of one substance or another in conventional societies, but they present slightly differently online. Spending an excessive amount of time online is considered an addiction, and members of the older generations often complain that Generation Y users exhibit addictive behaviour in the time they spend online.

In exploring this aspect of the thesis, it was particularly interesting to learn which behaviour patterns result in users being labelled as addicted. A preacher spoke about the dangers of social networking sites on You Tube (2010:1), following which some users did agree that they had had a negative impact on their lives. Tyron, twitter and YouTuber, agreed with Apostle Bednar who noticed that he had became addicted to games to the games he was playing online, and that the addiction nearly cost him his marriage.

Herman Heunis, the creator of Mxit, argues that parents should take responsibility for their children using the sites. The *Cape Argus* printed a report regarding pupils who are addicted to the service and spend hours on Mxit. One school began a support group for pupils hooked on Mxit, while others banned cell phones. Heunis said he knew of children who spent many hours on Mxit and he agreed that it was not healthy. He states, however, that Mxit does not advocate or condone the use of cell phones during school hours or when children should be doing homework. Heunis said that parents should talk to their children about their use of Mxit.

He also said that Mxit is a positive service because it provides a cost-effective way for people to communicate. He said the program could not control what people chatted about, but there are warnings on the website about inappropriate discussions with children, and users have to register on the site so that there is an identification record of who spoke to the children, (Keating; 2011:1).

There are three distinct groups of users that display significantly addictive behavioural patterns. The first group are those who spend an unprecedented amount of time communicating with friends and other users in one form or another. The second group spends an enormous amount of time following what friends are saying and responding continuously, while the third group literally watches the lives of their friends as they unfold throughout any given day. These users always seem to be seated next to PCs and often appear to be hooked on their mobile phones. It is commonly known that we all seem to have some form of additive behaviour to one extent or another, but while some are beneficial, most are not. The amount of money that users spend on SNSs could also be considered symptomatic of addiction.

During the study some Generation Y users themselves acknowledged that they know friends whom they believe are addicted to social networking sites. Many users pointed that the majority of their peers are no doubt addicted to Mxit. This could be a reflection of the fact users might have a secretive second life or need to get a life. Thus, in order to understand user perspectives in this regard the views of seniors and baby boomers were explored.

Almost 50% of the seniors and baby boomers were of the view that they do not spend much time online. They only do so when they are bored or lonely, or when they intend to get in touch with or pass on information to family members or friends. The most time that seniors seem to spend online is between 4 and 5 hours a day, and often much less. Baby boomers seem to spend a minimum of 1 hour, and a maximum of 6 to 7 hours.

When Katie Courie of CBS News in the United States reported on Internet addiction, Kaylim, a facebooker and twitter commented that he is considered addicted because he often spends 89 hours per week on his computer. He feels, however, that SNSs are societies in which we live and there is nothing addictive about socialising with friends." He reiterated further by saying that he has simply chosen to live his life in cyber space rather than real space.

Tami, a Mxiter said;

> "I spend almost 24 hours online, or in virtual societies, as I like to call them. The only time I am not online really is when I try to get some sleep, otherwise, in the midst of family and friends, whether it is breakfast, dinner or lunch time, or at any social event, I am constantly online speaking to other friends. My parents suggested that the only solution would be rehab. Honestly speaking I am totally hooked and so are most of my friends."

Addictive behaviour can also encompass spending money, compulsive shopping and other habits which appear to be obsessive. The majority of Informants interviewed admitted that they are, to an extent addicted to facebook, twitter, myspace and related sites. The percentage of those who appeared to be addicted to YouTube was much smaller in comparison.

Many users say that they are addicted because it seems to be much easier to be in conversation with friends chatting on their cell phones or computers. Some of the Informants admitted to spending several hours a day on sites like facebook. They feel obliged to let their friends know how their day is unfolding to such an extent that they let them know what they do and eat throughout the day.

Users feel that talking to friends almost every second of every day is actually therapeutic, and they feel fortunate to know that they can count on their friends who respond when they need to share their joy and pain. Some say that the access that social networking sites give them to friends is almost similar to those who seek help from psychiatrists.

Professor Colin Blakemore, neuroscientist at Oxford University, suggests that more research on facebook is needed before it can be concluded that this is indeed the case. He suggests, however, that young people who use social networking sites and blogs seem to be happier than those who don't. They are constantly in contact with a diverse group of people who have different opinions, which tends to take their focus away from their surrounding and engages them in persuasive discourse about one issue or another. They become aware through posts and comment blogs that some friends faced and overcame challenges, thus giving them hope and encouragement in their own lives.

There is usually always a friends they can talk to instantly who can console them in times of need, and exposure to the challenges that their friends face puts into perspective their own problems.

twitter users demonstrate apparent addictions through the sending of hundreds of tweets a day to friends, and through partaking in various issues. Between January and February 2010 Shaun had sent 3 650 tweets. To many this would be a certain sign that he is a serious twitter addict considering the amount of time he would have needed to spend on the site in order to achieve those volumes of tweets.

Aroukva, a twitter acknowledged that she was amazed to see that she actually sends an average of 135 tweets per day. Nicholas Carr (2010:88), author of *What the Internet is doing to our Brains*, expresses how worried he is about the Internet and wants to raise the alarm about its dangers to human thought and creativity. He says that the impact of Internet browsing is even more disturbing than he originally thought.

According to Carr humans like to believe they control the tools which they use, and he suggests that every new technology has profoundly altered the way in which we humans think. He warns, though, that the digital gadgets on which we now depend have already begun rewiring our brains. Neurological research has demolished the myth of the static brain. Carr draws some chilling inferences and suggests that there is evidence that digital technology is already damaging the long-term memory consolidation that is the basis for true intelligence.

Therefore, in an attempt to deal with addictions in a therapeutic manner that mimics conventional offline methods, it appears that technological institutions like Apple recently overtook Microsoft in coming up with various features to keep users from being distracted while thy work. Many word processors now have special full-screen modes, so that all unnecessary and distracting menus, pallets and so on are disabled or hidden. Rather than fiddling with font size or checking e-mail, users are encouraged to get on with their writing. If the temptation to have a

quick look at facebook proves too much, there are programs that will disable access to particular websites at specified times of the day.

And if that is not draconian enough, there are programmes that will block Internet access altogether. A computer with limited features or a cell phone may actually be more useful if one is trying to get things done (*The Economist*, 2010:14).

While users appear to spend an unprecedented amount of time on SNSs chatting, commenting, and socialising with friends, they feel quite strongly that they are not necessarily addicted. Almost 68% of users interviewed stress that all they are doing is simply communicating and socialising with friends in societies in which they prefer to live in. This differs from those who are labeled addicts in traditional society.

On the other hand, almost 20% of users admitted that they are compulsive social networkers who never seem to get offline for fear of missing out on what is being discussed or said. They know where friends are all the time, and what they do and say. This group could perhaps be categorised as addicts and are similar to those who require rehabilitation in traditional society. Just over 11% of the users say that they use the sites moderately.

8.5.15 Culture, race and religion

What became evident while observing social networking sites, and is discussed in more depth in chapter 5, is the issue of culture. The chapter discusses ways in which users from diverse cultures interact cross-culturally and manage to show and share culture or experiences with friends and their friends.

Almost 70% of the users interviewed suggested that virtual societies facilitate them following their religions, and provides them with access to their pastors, priest and spiritual leaders when they need spiritual help. Many leaders from various denominations make themselves available on sites like facebook, twitter and YouTube where users can watch pre-recorded sermons and gospel music without having to leave their homes to attend a church service. Recently, a choir

was formed by SNS users who are based in different geographical locations, but who meet on social networking sites to practice and make music.

Based on my analysis it became evident that the sites have had a remarkable impact on the ways in which people worship. While some appear to worship the offline way, through religious services with friends and family, other prefer to do so online, through watching a pre-recorded sermon and listening to gospel music on YouTube for example. Race and culture appears to remain determining factor in terms of the friendships users make. While some users tend to be selective on whom they make friends with, in terms of race and cultures, others don't. Only a few restrict friendships to their own races and cultures.

8.5.16 The media

Media seems to have infiltrated into social networking sites and impacting severely on the users' social lives. Radio and televisions channels can be found on various social networking sites. Social networking sites also impacted severely on major newspapers in some of the most prominent countries. In the United States, for example, in 2010 newspapers such as the Daily Mail and the New York Times were delivered for free to homes to encourage families to subscribe in an attempt to revitalise their flagging readership.

The pressures that newspapers faced arose directly from the stiff competition they of social networking sites. They began to realise, however, that individuals do not want to be coerced into purchasing newspapers, and that they will resist paying a fee to receive their papers online. It very soon became apparent to news agencies around the globe that if they want to remain relevant they have to ensure that they can be reached on the sites. Evidently, the reality is that it is not the subscription revenues that the newspapers have lost, but more their advertising revenues as people are more interested in reading the news online. The issues discussed on local and international news tend also to be discussed or debated amongst users and their friends on the sites.

Almost 58% of users confirm that they follow what the media on social networking sites. User Sil says that it is much easier to follow the news online because the reality is that he never had

any interest in sitting in front of a television or spending time reading newspaper articles. It is simply much easier to flip through pages online.

A recent alert made by Moskowits (2010:50) on how news is shared on the sites describes that Michelle McLellan, a fellow at the Reynolds Journalism Institute at the University of Missouri—who spent a year studying nearly 70 of the popular local sites—suggests that we spend too much time on craft and not enough time on community. She goes on to say that many of the new sites which include facebook, twitter and YouTube, etc., tend to attract the attention of users, even if they don't have the most polished reports.

Kenti, Mxiter and facebooker, is of the view that:

> "Reading a paper online and listening to our friends discuss news on the media broadens my overall knowledge, and keeps me up to date with current issues. It also assists me in my studies which I continue to pursue in spite of the fact that I am currently employed."

What had become noticeable on social networking sites is that major newspapers and talk shows throughout the world often assure their listeners that they can be found on sites like facebook, twitter, etc.

Social networking sites also reveal what it means to be a media star today. Poniewozik (2010:51) wanted to know whether it is about household viewers or twitter followers? Breadth or depth? Mass appeal or cult appeal? Canon O'Brien, who hosts his own TV Show on PBS, asserts that it is better to have a smaller group of fans who care intensely about what you do, than a bigger number who care just enough to not change the channel.

There is also a general feeling that online media and offline newspapers often print news that is not accurate, so users prefer to listen to what people have to say about happenings in their societies and communities which are much more genuine and accurate than what they often feel is exaggerated news.

While people can skim a newspaper article online and do not necessarily have to pay for the news, people interested in reading an article are obliged to purchase the whole newspaper, which is not always read completely either. It seems that users do tend to follow news much more closely online than conventional societies because friends constantly engage in persuasive discourse regarding social and political issues. If users lack knowledge it is impossible to take part and understand what is being debated.

8.6 Users show compassion and mourn late family and friends

Users seem to mourn and show compassion to friends or families who have lost a loved one in very much the same way as conventional societies. Memorials are also often held in remembrance of people who have died, and friends express their loss. It also appears that different cultures mourn the death of a loved one in different ways, but the messages of condolences users send are often not different.

Since 2010 more and more individuals have started to send condolences or mourn the loss of users who are friends on the sites. And through facebook, for example, users suggest that special features that would imply the erection of memorial columns should be made available.

When Pam Weiss lost her daughter, a UCLA student, in her grief she turned to facebook to look for photographs. She found what she was looking for and more. She communicated with her daughter's friends, shared memories and even pieced together bits of her life (Faure; 2009:53-54). A number of grieving relatives tapped into one of the most powerful conglomeration of memories available; a loved one's online presence. facebook established a memorial wall for deceased users where friends and family can remember their loved ones. However, private messages are not revealed and are kept confidential.

Obviously, every society has social interaction, as do virtual societies, so they should be considered as societies in their own right.

And Faure (2009:51) questions the confidentiality policy in his article, Managing Your Online Afterlife in the TIME, and the amount of access families should get to a users account in their

afterlife. He provides a description on what happens to an individual's account after they "die", and describes it as a legacy.

There are many examples of how critical these friendships are, and how they impact on the lives of individuals in their most difficult times. It became very clear during the interview process that most friends who had lost a loved one had the support of their friends, not only on the day of the loss, but also throughout their recovery process, and months after the funeral. And messages will remain indefinitely on the memorial walls made available where remaining friends and family members can post what is in their hearts.

Almost 70% of users expressed the importance of mourning friends online. As stated above they were generally of the view that it reinforces the fact that new and unique online societies have indeed been established.

8.7 Users' perspectives on whether or not social networking sites have created unique social norms

While examining uses views on whether or not social networking sites have created unique social norms, it became clear that users do view social networking sites as having indeed resulted in the emergence of new and unique social norms. Friends, privacy issues, ways in which intimate relationships are formed, education and more, all appear to be some of the unique social norms that are formed.

Certain dynamics in online societies appear to have transformed and redefined traditional society, and what appears to be unacceptable in traditional societies in general, seems to be the norm in virtual societies.

Grossman (2010:48) suggests that the web has transformed the ways in which we purchase goods. Now it's transforming our social lives too, and recommendation engines are coming along for the ride. Apart from online dating sites, facebook gives users the option of switching between a straight feed, which shows all friends ' news in chronological order, and an algorithmically

curate selection of the updates facebook's recommendation engine thinks they'd most like to see. In the right-hand column, facebook uses a different set of algorithms to recommend new friends.

When the users were asked during interviews and in questionnaires whether or not social networking sites have indeed created unique social norms, some believe that, to a certain extent, they have. There seem to be certain behavioural patterns **t**hat are more acceptable online, but which older generations would frown upon.

Some of these social norms seem to include communication, privacy issues, addictions and memorial services. However, I will briefly discuss users' perspectives in this regard.

Social networking sites also benefit pregnant mothers. According to Rochman (2010:54) Johnson & Johnson and Phizer are signing up expectant mothers and sending them three texts a week, each with a tip timed to their baby's development. Since its debut in February, text4baby has enrolled more than 30,000 users by getting them to text BABY to 511411 with their due dates. Texts messages are then sent to the mother until the baby's first birthday, and provide tips on topics like good nutrition, immunisation and safe sleeping.

According to the *Time* (2009:84) it is suggested that facebook, twitter and other online social networks will increase the size of human social groups**,** thereby changing the dimension of social networks as they were once observed and studied by anthropologists and other scholars.

What seems to have changed is that these societies appear to have reduced much friction and cost involved in trying to interact or socialise with other people. Once a person joins they can share in the lives of others as recorded by photographs, status updates and other tidbits and, with your permission, they can share in yours. Additional friends appear to be free and the attitude is the more the merrier.

The statuses which the individuals ascribe to themselves often enchant the viewer. Erikson (2001:51) suggests that the philosophical description of role enactment, as sociologists and anthropologists describe them, is the ability of actors to manipulate their statuses. Actors may

thus regard their status from a distance; they decide, within limits, which expression they give to it in order to give their co-actors a specific impression of who they are. These roles, which are played out, give the actor an opportunity to be "self-consciously" aware of the impression he or she makes on others, and portray an admirable appearance.

8.8 The quality of digital social life

Some of the users concluded that although social networks have impacted negatively on their friends in traditional society, to an extent they have resulted in all of them making an effort to communicate more effectively when they are together. But it not always easy to resist reaching out for their mobile phones to pass on a quick message or see if they have messages from friends on social networking sites.

It was found that for most users, socialising with friends of diverse cultures from which users can observe and learn much, appears to have enhanced the quality of digital social life. Friendships are essential in every society, and they are formed in unique ways in virtual ones, which results in users socialising in unique ways. The friendships made are not only unprecedented, based on the number of friend's user have, but the ways in which they are formed and develop are key to the users' digital social lives.

Users are able to practically live their lives online, while forming intimate relationships of their choices in their own time and space and in the society in which they choose to do so.

8.9 Conclusion

In this chapter was discussed whether or not social networking sites have indeed created virtual societies or countries with unique social norms. In addition, I demonstrate the ways in which SNSs have emerged, and the impact that they have on the online social lives of users. The overall argument and conclusion is that SNSs have indeed created new and/or unique online societies with unique social norms.

Chapter 9 Conclusions and findings

9.1 Summary and findings

Based on the overall analysis and findings regarding SNSs, it seems clear that the sites have certainly enabled users to communicate in unique ways.

The sites enable users to share and/or show culture, and observe and learn about their friends' cultures**.** Acculturation and enculturation appear to have become a major factor in user social interaction across cultures. They have also resulted in users uncovering and learning about the cultures of their friends, as well as their own cultures, and have perhaps gone some way towards dismissing the notion of the "other."

It became clear that friendships are made in unprecedented ways, in most cases cross-culturally. The ways in which users manage and/or maintain the number of friendships they have were explored, as were who users' friends actually are, and how friendships are formed.

Intimate relationships were discussed in some detail, and it was found that while some users prefer to form intimate relationships online, others do not as they consider it risky. It was found that the user skepticism is based on friends whom they know about that were either severely harmed, or, in some cases, even lost their lives.

9.2 Overall conclusions

Based on the analysis of social networking sites and the ways in which they have enabled users from diverse generations to communicate and find lost friends and family, it was found that the sites have transformed communication remarkably. However, the sites seem to have led to communication breakdowns in the home between spouses, and between parents and their children.

Similarly, the sites appear to have had some positive aspects by keeping parents in touch with their children's whereabouts. And while it seems that communication has increased amongst

friends, evidently, the reality is that the sites appear to have led to communication breakdown amongst friends in traditional society.

SNSs enable users from diverse cultures to interact cross-culturally, while they simultaneously share and/or show aspects of their culture through traditional art, garments and accessories, rituals, music, dance and food, etc. Cross-cultural interaction amongst the users seems to have resulted in enculturation and acculturation.

Users also seem to cultivate an interest in their friends' cultures and while the notion of the "other" seems to have slipped away, it does seem that through the sites users appear to have learned about, accepted and embraced the cultures of their friends. In conclusion it seems that a new and unique culture has emerged, and what was once considered "taboo" appears to be acceptable amongst the users.

Of equal importance was the necessity of examining the unprecedented numbers of friends that users have. These friendships seem to be formed in diverse places which include schools, colleges, churches, communities, etc., and it was noted that while users have hundreds, and in some cases thousands, of friends they prefer not to establish friendships with individuals from certain ethnic groups.

Generally friends tend to include family members. It seems that there are various ways through which users manage and maintain friendships which include chatting constantly, commenting on blogs, humor, encouragements, condolences, etc. Overall, it was found that while there appear to be advantages and potential disadvantages in the numbers of friends that users have, the term friend has certainly been redefined.

Some users prefer forming intimate relationships online, while others appear to guard against them for various reasons. While some relationships appear to yield positive results, others seem to be coupled with severe consequences. In addition, social networking sites can be contributory factors in relationships falling apart. Also apparent was that users tend to prefer forming intimate

relationships primarily amongst certain ethnic and racial groups, while others tend to prefer to remain within their own ethnic circles.

Finally, it appears that sites have resulted in the emergence of new and unique societies with unique social norms.

9.3 Further research

Research should be conducted on the impact of social networking sites on education, and whether or not sites have become a help or a hindrance towards advanced education for high schools, colleges, university students, academics and /or scholars.

Further research should be conducted on whether or not Generation Y users are merely obsessed with social networking sites, or if their extensive presence on the sites is as a result of the availability of the vast amount of digital tools which encourage communication.

Research should also be conducted on the ways in which social networking sites encourages seniors to live fuller lives, improve their health and lead to the impediment of loneliness.

Research should also be conducted the ways in which social networking sites perhaps creates early adulthood in teenagers, or whether or not they have retarded their growth and knowledge.

Further research should also be conducted on the impact which social networking sites have on the duration or break-up of marriages.

Research should also be conducted on the role which social networking sites play in the improvement of education amongst teenagers?

Further research which will be essential to conduct is to examine how the internet reaffirms cultural stereotypes along cultural sharing.

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Appendix

Research Questions Chapter 5

Finding the Lost and Reaching the Unreachable: How has the Internet and social networking sites Shaped Conversation in the 21'st Century?

NB: Your answers are strictly anonymous. Include only your name and not your surname; it is entirely your own choice if you wish to do so.

1. Questions for Seniors and Baby Boomers in your family.

1. Which of the following communication tools did you use in the past to converse with family and friends who lived either within your neighborhood or at a long distance?

1. Postal Services?
2. Land lines?
3. Cell phones?
4. Email?
5. Other

Answer -

2. How would you rate the above communication tools?

1. Excellent
2. Good
3. Fair
4. Poor

Comment

Answer -

3. Which of the current digital tools do you use the most to communicate with family and friends?

1. Email
2. social networking sites
3. landlines
4. Cell-phone?

Answer -

4. Which social networking sites do you make use of the most to communicate and/or converse with friends, family, etc.

1. facebook.
2. myspace
3. twitter
4. Second Life.
5. You Tube?

Answer -

5. How would you rate the above tools in terms of convenience and efficiency?

1. Excellent
2. Good
3. Fair
4. Poor

Answer -

6. From your own perspective has the above tools improve the quality of local and long distance conversations?

1. Yes
2. No
3. Not really
4. Don't know
5. Other

Please Comment

7. Has digital tools, and particularly social networking sites;

1. increased, or
2. decreased communication;

a). **in the home**

1. yes

2. No

Comment

Answer -

b) with close, and long distance family and friends?

1. Yes

2. No

Comment?

Answer -

8. Has current digital tools encouraged more frequent conversations?

1. Yes

2. No

Comment?

Answer-

9. How has these tools impacted on your conversations with friends over time?

1. positively.

2. negatively

Comment

Answer -

10. How would they rate ways in which the Internet and Social Networking have shaped conversation overall?

1. Excellent.

2. Good

3. Fair

4. Poor?

Comment

Answer -

11. Do you believe that current communication tools would continue to develop and be replaced with more advanced tools in the future?

1. Yes
2. No
3. Other

Please Comment.

Answer -

12. Questions for Generation – X

What were the primary communication tools you used for conversing in the past?

1. Postal Services
2. Email
3. Land lines
4. Cell phones

Comment

Answer -

13. Which Social Networking Site/s do you make use of the most to socialize and communicate with friends?

1. facebook
2. myspace
3. twitter
4. You Tube
5. Second Life. Or
6. skype
7. All of the above.

Answer –

14. How often do you communicate and converse using the above tools?

1. Much frequently

2. Daily

3. Weekly,

4. Occasionally

5. Other

Comment

Answer –

15 What is your perspective on finding "lost" family, friends and old school friends and colleagues?

1. A good idea

2. Reasonable

3. Bad idea

Comment

Answer -

16. How has finding or being found by family and friends as a result of digital tools impacted on your life personally?

1. Positively

2. Negatively

3. Other

Comment

Answer

17. Do you believe social networking sites has;

1. Increased or

2. Decreased, communication

a). in the home

1. Yes

2. No

Please Comment

Answer -

b). amongst friends who live nearby and extended family?

1. Yes
2. No

Comment

Answer -

18. Has these tools allowed you to express yourself much better in the absence, of face to face communication, in some cases?

1. Yes
2. No
3. Not certain

Comment

Answer -

19. How would you measure privacy issues online while conversing with friends and family?

1. Acceptable
2. Reasonably safe
3. Not safe at all

Comment

Answer -

20. How has conversing on social networking sites with family and friends impacted on your employment?

1. Excellent
2. Good
3. Fair
4. Poor

Comment

Answer -

21. How convenient do you think digital tools are to converse.

1. Excellent
2. Good
3. Fair
4. Poor

Please Comment

Answer -

22. In the absence of face to face communication, how do you believe the Internet and social networking sites shaped conversation overall?

1. Excellent
2. Good
3. Fair
4. Poor

Please Comment?

Answer -

3. Questions to the Millennium or Generation – X

23. Born in the Digital Age Era, do you consider yourself to be a" Digital Native?

1. Yes
2. No

Please Comment

Answer -

24. Do you make use of Postal services and email which was primarily used by the previous generation to communicate or converse with friends?

1. Yes
2. Rarely
3. No

Please Comment

Answer -

25. Which digital tools do you make use of the most to communicate or converse with family and friends, etc?

1. Email
2. social networking sites
3. Land line
4. Cell phones (texting)

Comment

Answer -

26. Which social networking sites do they make use of the most to converse?

1. facebook
2. myspace
3. twitter
4. You Tube
5. Second Life, or
6. skype

Comment

Answer -

27. To what extend has the Internet and social networking sites increased yourconversations with family and friends?

1. a lot
2. Moderately
3. Not Much

Comment

Answer -

28. How much time do you spend conversing and socializing with friends on social networking sites per day?

1. Most frequently (hourly or more)

2. Less frequently

3. Moderately

Please Comment

Answer -

29. Has the controversy on privacy issues;

1. Increased

2. Decreased the times you spend online, or has it;

3. Remained the same?

Comment

Answer -

30. Do you communicate or converse with on social networking sites with individuals from previous generations?

1. Yes

2. Occasionally

3. No

Please Comment

Answer -

31. How would you rate the convenience of digital tools as a way to converse with family, etc.?

1. Excellent

2. Good

3. Fair

4. Poor

Answer -

32. How would you rate the Internet and social networking sites in terms of finding friends and be found and reaching the unreachable?

1. Excellent

2. Good

3. Fair

4 Poor

5. Comment?

Answer -

33. How has the Internet and social networking sites impacted on your daily activities and life in general?

1. Positively

2. fairly

3. Negatively

4. Comment?

Answer -

34. From your own perspective how has the Internet and Social Networking Sites, shaped conversation overall?

1. It Advanced Communication

2. Impacted fairly

3. Broke down communication in some respects

4. Not at all

5. Comment**?**

Answer -

35. Do you believe that current social networking sites and related tools which is used to converse should be replaced with more advanced tools in the future?

1. Yes

2. No

3. Don't know

4. Comment

36. Or, are you perfectly comfortable and satisfied with current digital tools?

1. Yes
2. No
3. Not really
4. Don't know
5. Comment?

Research Questions Chapter 6

"Shall We Dance?" How Users Show and/or share culture or Cultural Experiences on social networking sites?

NB: Your answers are strictly anonymous, do not put your name on, or you can only put your first name one if you choose to do so.

1. Which of the following social networking sites are you a user of?

1. facebook
2. myspace
3. twitter
4. You Tube
5. Second Life, or
6. skype

Comments

2. How wide are your friendship circles on social networking sites in terms of diverse cultural groups?

1. Wide include most groups
2. fair some
3. One or two
4. None

Comment

Answer -

3. Do your friends' cultures become more visible to you as a result of online social interaction?

1. Yes
2. Not aware
3. No

Comment

Answer -

4. Has there been incidences while interacting with friends on social networking sites, where they were eager to explicitly shared aspects of their culture with you?

1. Yes
2. No
3. Other

Comment

Answer -

5. Have you ever shared aspects of your culture with friends online?

1. Yes, some
2. No, never
3. Other.

Comment

Answer -

6. Have you and any of your friends shared or shown some cultural practices, eg. weddings ceremonies or other celebrations with each other?

1. Yes
2. Maybe some

3 No

Comment

7. Have you inadvertently shared culture with friends online merely through discussing, food, drinks, art, music and /or dance and unaware that you did so indirectly?

1.Yes, often

2.Rarely

3. No never

Comment

Answer -

8. Have your friends ever shared the above with you which you were personally interested to explore further?

1. Yes,often

2. Rarely

3. No never

Comment

Answer -

9. Have cultural practices ever been shared with friends through the photos posted online which you intended your friends to see?

1. Yes, a lot

2. Sometimes

3. No never

Comment

Answer -

10.Have you shared art, showed traditional garments, either of your own culture or those of foreign countries you visited, for your friends to see and vice versa?

1. Yes, almost always

2. Sometimes

3. No never.

Comment

Answer

11.Has any cultural dishes or and/or favorite restaurants been shared or suggested to each other by you and your friends of a different culture which curbed your interest to explore?

1. Yes
2. Sometimes
3. No

Answer

12. What aspects of your culture have you been eager to share with friend or to learn about from friends hail from a culture other than your own? If yes explain

1. Quite a few
2. Some
3. None

Comment

Answer.

13. Has music been shared amongst you and your friends from different cultural heritages on Social Networking sites which resulted in an interest to listen more and explore further either way?

1. Yes, always
2. Rarely
3. No Never

Comment

Answer

14. Have you ever had an interest in the traditional dances eminent amongst some cultural groups and friends?

1. Yes, several times
2. Rarely
3. No never

Comments

Answer -

15. Have you ever experienced cultural barriers which made you to question the cultural ways in which some of your friend interact or in what they tend to share online?

1. Yes
2. Some
3. No none.

Please comment

Answer

16. Do you accept and embrace the cultures or cultural practices of your friends, and particularly the manner in which they tend to express themselves?

1. Yes, always
2. Some aspects
3. Not really
4. No never

Comment

Answer

17. Through what mediums are cultures of friend most visible?

1. Music
2. Dance
3. Art
4. The manner in which they express themselves
5. Other

Comment

Answer

18.How has foreign cultures or cultural practices of friends impacted on you personally?

1. Positively
2. Negatively

3. Don't really know

Please Comment

Answer

19.Has cultural differences and the awareness thereof done away with the notion of the "Other" and particularly the myth that one culture is superior and another superior while interacting with friends?

1. Yes
2. Don't know
3. No

Comment

Answer

20.Does knowing and understanding one's friend cultures give bring a better understanding of who they are and where they came from?

1. Yes,
2. Maybe
3. I don' think so
4. Don't really know

Comment

Answer

21.Do you believe that while friends socialize on social networking sites that they indeed share and show cultural experience?

1. Yes
2. No
3. Don't really think so per se

Comment

Answer

22.Do you believe that social networking sites has potentially created a new and unique culture or cultural experience online?

1. Yes
2. Maybe
3. Don't think so.

Comment

Answer -

Research Questions Chapter 7

An analysis of Friendships on social networking sites: How do users manage and Maintain the Unprecedented number of Friendships online?

NB: Your answers are strictly anonymous, do not put your name on, or you can only put your first name one if you choose to do so.

1. How would you define the term friend?

Answer

2. On which social networking sites are you a user?

1. facebook
2. myspace
3. twitter
4. You Tube
5. Second Life, ot
6. skype
7. Other

Answer

3. How many friends do you have on social networking sites?

Comment

Answer

4. How many of your friends are;

1. Those who were your friends from school

2. Those who merely went to school with you but became friends online?

3. Colleagues

4. New friend primarily made on social networking sites.

5. Other

Comment

Answer

5. How diverse are your friendship circles.

1. Multicultural (friends across the Globe).

a). Yes

b). No

Comment

2. Only local

a). Yes

b). No

2. Multi-racial

a). Yes

b). No

Comment

3. All Genders

a). Yes

b). No

Comment

6. Why do you think users prefer to have such an unprecedented number of friends on social networking sites?

Answer

7. Why do you prefer to have so many friends?

Answer

8. How do you and your friends manage keep and maintain the number of friendships?

Answer

9. Are there any advantages or benefits in keeping such a large number of friendships?

Answer

10. Are their any consequences or disadvantages keeping such a large number of friendships?

1. Yes, Please comment
2. No, Please comment

11. Is it possible to give all your friends equal attention?

1. Yes, Please comment

No, Please comment

12. Do you socialize with the same friends in traditional society?

1. Yes
2. Occasionally
3. No, never

Answer

13. How much time to you spend socializing or talking to your friends online?

Answer

14. Are local and international politics often discussed and/or debated and a part of your social pass time?

1. Yes, (Please comment)

2. Occasionally

3. No Never

4. No comment

Answer

15. Is it possible to spend quality time with your friends online?

1. Yes

2. No

3. Other

Please Comment

Answer

16. How has socializing with friends online, in the presence of family and friends in traditional or conventional society impacted on your relationships with them?

1. Positively, they do not mind

2. Negatively, they complain constantly

3. Other

Comment

Answer

17. How long have you managed to nurture and keep friendships online?

Answer

18. Has any of your friendships on social networking sites ended as a result of a misunderstanding or dispute?

1. Yes

2. No

Comment

Answer

19. Has broken friendships ever been resolved and made up?

1. Yes, Please Comment
2. No, Please Comment

20. From your own observation how have your friends managed to nurture and maintain friendships online?

Answer

21. What impact have your friends on social networking sites had on your life personally?

1. Positive
2. Negative
3. Other

Please Comment

22. Do you believe online friendships can last indefinitely?

1. Yes
2. No
3. No Comment
4. Other

Answer

Research Questions Chapter 8

A Match made in the Clouds? Exploring Intimate Relationships on social networking sites; How has these relationships impact on Users' lives?

NB: Your answers are strictly anonymous, do not put your name on, or you can only put your first name one if you choose to do so.

1. From your own perspective, do you believe intimate relationships formed online are any different than those formed face to face in traditional or conventional society?

1. Yes

2. No

3. No Comment.

4. Other

Answer:

2. Have you ever had an intimate relationship online?

1. Yes

2. No

3. No Comment

4.Other

Answer:

3. Do you know of any of your friends who have or had an intimate?

1. Yes

2. No

3. Othe**r**

4. If yes, have any of these relationships resulted in engagements or marriages?

1. Yes.

2. No

3.Other

Answer:

5. What is your perspective of intimate relationships formed on social networking Sites?

1. Positive

2. Negative

3. Other

Answer:

6. Do you belief that a specific time frame should elapse before an intimate relationship is formed online to ensure that it is indeed legitimate?

1. Yes, Please comment
2. No
5 Other
Answer:

7. From your own observations of friends who did form intimate relationships online, do they tend to be;
1. Bi-racial
2. Inter-Racial
3. Other.
Answer:

8. Have you, any of your friends, or anyone you know or heard about, ever formed an intimate relationship on social networking sites which turned out to be a scam?
1. Yes,
2. No,
3. Other
Answer:

9. What is your perspective of predators who tend to form "intimate" relationships with underage children online?

1. Comment
2. No Comment
3. Other

10. Do you, any of your friends, or anyone you know had a sibling or niece who had been lured by predators on social networking sites at any time?
1. Yes
2. No
3. Other

Answer

11. How would you define a predator from your own perspective?

Answer

12. Are you aware of any advantages forming intimate relationships online?

1. Yes
2. No
3. No Comment
4. Other

Answer

13. From your perspective, are there any disadvantages or Consequences?

1. Yes
2. No
3. Other

Answer

14. Do you believe intimate relationships formed on social Networking Sites can be nurtured and/or kept long term?

1. Yes
2. No
3. Don't think so/No Comment
4. Other

Comment

Answer

15. Do you think relationships formed online are any different than those formed in conventional Societies.

1. Yes

2. No

3. Other

Answer

16. Do you know of any relationship formed online which you would acknowledge turned out to be a "match made in heaven?"

1. Yes

2. No

3. Other

Answer

17. What is your perspective on an intimate relationship formed "in the clouds?" or on Social

Networking Sites?

Approve

Don't Approve

No Comment

Answer

Research Questions Article/Chapter 5

New "Countries? Has social networking sites Created Virtual "Societies" which can be regarded as communities in their own right, with Unique Social Norms?

NB: Your answers are strictly anonymous, do not put your name on, or you can only put your first name one if you choose to do so.

1. Which Social Networking sites, or online "societies" are you a user or "resident of?"

1. facebook

2. myspace

3. twitter

4. You Tube

5. Second Life

6, Other

Answer

2. From you own perspective do you consider social networking sites "societies" or "communities" in which users interact and socialize?

1. Yes

2. No

Comment

Answer

3. What aspects on social networking sites do you belief qualifies them to be regarded as "societies" or communities in their own right?

Answer

4. Do you agree with Mark Zuckerberg co-founder and CEO of facebook, that social Networking Sites need to be governed?

1. Yes

2. No

3. Other

Answer

5.Do you think that privacy issues on social networking sites, is of an equal concern as individuals are of their identities or properties in traditional, or conventional societies?

1. Yes

2. No

3. Maybe

4. Comment

Answer

6. There are various advertisements on social networking sites which aim to "target" users, could this be an indication that they are indeed communities, are you a consumer?

1. Yes
2. No,

No Comment

Answer

7. The Media appear to play a major role on social networking sites, allowing users to instantly comment on various social and/or political issues, how does this trend impact on you and what is your perspective regarding issues discussed and knowledge?

1. I comment and debate issues
2. I have no interest in commenting or debating issues
3. Other

Answer

8. Some users appear to form intimate relationships on these sites, what is your perspective in this regard and does this indicate that they are indeed "societies" or "communities?"

1. Yes
2. No
3. Other

Answer

9. Does issues such as Marriage, Religion, Politics and social issues discussed on social networking sites indicate that they are more similar, rather than different than Traditional or conventional societies?

1. Yes
2. No
3. Other

Answer

10. Do you believe that Privacy Guard on social networking sites ascribe the same role played by Law enforcement in traditional societies in ensuring the "safety" of users.

1. Yes
2. No
3, Don't think so,

Answer

11. In recent months some social networking sites have created a memorial where users can mourn their deceased friends through posting messages one a Memorial wall set out for this purpose, does this reinforce the fact that they are "societies?"

1. Yes
2. No
3. Maybe
4. Other

Answer

12. How much time do you spend socializing with friends on social networking sites?

Much Time
Minimal Time
No Time at All
No Comment

Answer

13. What is your perspective on the notion that some users are "addicted" to social networking sites, is this a legitimate argument or are they merely "societies" in which you and other users interact normally

1. Yes, of course
2. Maybe
3. Not Really

Other

Answer

14. Do you believe social networking sites has created new and unique social norms?

1. Yes,

2. No

3.Maybe

Other

Answer

If yes, What are these norms?

Answer

15. Hence, as a result of the visible traditional aspects which are eminent on Social . Networking Sites, do you believe that they qualify to be called 'societies" or communities in their own right?

1. Yes

2. No

3. Don't know

Comment

Answer

16. facebook is considered to be one of the largest "country" in the world, do you agree?

1. Yes

2. No

3. Am not certain

4. Maybe

Comment

Answer

17. Are there any unique social norms which you belief had been formed on social networking sites?

1. Yes,

2. Maybe

3. No

4, Other

Comment

Answer

18. From your overall perspective on social networking sites have they created new societies with unique social norms?

1. Yes

2. No

3. I don't know

4. Other

Please Comment

Answer