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**The Sincerity Game:**  
**An Exploratory Study of Erving Goffman's Dramaturgical  
Framework in Relation to Interaction and Identity Construction  
Online**

A thesis  
submitted in fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree  
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## ABSTRACT

Self-construction is an intrinsically interactionist process (Leary & Tananey, 2005). The formation and maintenance of identity is socially reliant. Understanding the ways in which interaction changes is therefore vital for recognising how the individual maintains an identity. Contemporary forms of online interaction via social media are, therefore, inescapably implicated in these larger processes.

Interactionist theory and Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework are grounded in the observations of face-to-face social situations. Identity construction scholarship since the introduction of technologically mediated interaction has yielded contradictory and incohesive results. Online interaction specifically has received special attention from an identity construction point of view. Implicated theories in such studies include variations of symbolic interactionism, romantic conceptions of self, idealisation, and postmodernism.

Deductive reasoning through the tested application of a single identity construction theory has typically left alternative interaction theories unexplored. Online interaction has normally been considered "special, because it is technological mediated interaction" (Pinch, 2010, p. 412). And the unique treatment of online interaction has resulted in the general dismissal of Goffman's interactionist perspective.

This project attempted to re-evaluate the applicability of Goffman's framework to online interaction. Inductive reasoning allowed alternative identity construction theories to arise naturally from in-depth interviews. Ten in-depth interviews and two case studies were conducted with users of the website Facebook. Participants were asked to discuss the ways in which they used the website to interact, and why. Coding and analysis followed by a constantly comparative approach allowed theory to develop naturally from the interview material.

Goffman's dramaturgical framework found considerable applicability in this project's analysis of participants' use of Facebook. The five components of the framework, the actor, the performance, the stage, the team, and the audience were each identifiable in participants' articulation of their interaction on this social networking website. Limitations in applicability however, were found to be due to a lack of affordance recognition.

Prior studies, attempting to reanalyse Goffman's dramaturgical framework online, have found his perspective inapplicable. This reconceptualisation of identity formation has resulted in theorists exploring concepts of postmodernism and romantic idealism instead. Such stark perspectives were not articulated by this project's interviewees. Rather, the primary finding of this project was that interviewees sought sincerity. Neither a fluid and multiple, nor a static and grounded identity was identified in participants' Facebook selves. Interviewees instead took an approach to the social networking website best explained by adapting Giddens (1991).

This project found that interviewees created a self through a narrative. By creating a trajectory of self through Facebook's timeline and "maintaining constants of demeanor across varying settings of interaction" (Giddens, 1991, p. 100) interviewees sought perceived sincerity in their singular, evolving identity. As Facebook affords just one self to be portrayed to multiple audiences, unlike Goffman, Giddens' perspective provided a resolution to Facebook's lack of audience segregation and performance maintenance issues.

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## CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

*This chapter discusses the importance of an interactionist approach to understanding mediated environments. A review of prior online interaction studies is provided which suggests where further contributions are currently required. It also details the project's research questions and aims, and outlines the following chapters.*

### **1.1 - Background and Rationale**

The urgent need to theorise online identity construction has been acknowledged by numerous interactionists (Boon & Sinclair, 2009, Davis, 2010, Kennedy, 2006). As new technologies evolve and the ways in which people interact change, the requirement for further research is increased. The proneness of online research to become out-dated (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002, p. 34) requires researchers to understand prior research while looking to the future of online technologies, and most importantly, developing online interactionist theories of online 'life' which are informed by both the past and current state of mediated interactions.

Studies attempting to understand the self online have commonly been informed by a single identity theory. The application of identity theory, however, requires a "historically conscious understanding of socio-historical research data, [and] any account (theory, model) of previous social realities may be seriously misleading if applied uncritically to a different time or place" (Wengraf, 2006, p. 93). This project therefore allows an inductive methodology to progressively expose the potential applicability, or inapplicability, of the dramaturgical model for identity construction to online interactions, as set out in Goffman's (1959) work.

Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework, based on the enactment of everyday interactions, saw the body as the "critical site of identity performance" (Boyd, 2008, p. 11). A shift however, from face-to-face to mediated interaction requires a re-examination of identity theory's applicability as "today, the Internet and CMC can be seen as a prevalent means for creating and negotiating our identities" (Davis, 2010, p. 1106). What is needed now then, and what this project explores is

“an identification of, and engagement with, important debates about identity that can inform future new media studies” (Kennedy, 2006, p. 865).

This project in its attempt to better understand identity construction today accepts that the “Internet plays an important role in identity empowerment” (Zhao, Gradmuck, & Martin, 2008, p. 1818). To provide a current exploration of identity construction, this project has focused on social networking websites, which have recently found popularity and remain somewhat under-explored, despite arguments that “SNSs constitute an important research context for scholars investigating process of impression management, self-presentation and friendship performance” (Mehdizadeh, 2010, p. 2). Where online identity research has traditionally been based in anonymous websites, this project focuses on the nonymous. Nonymity being defined not simply by an acquaintanceship, but as “an anchored relationship” (Zhao, Gradmuck, & Martin, 2008, p. 1818) grounded in the offline self’s relationships. The chosen site of study is the most popular social networking website to date, Facebook, the nonymity of which provides “an ideal condition for examining identity construction in online environments where the relationships are anchored in offline communities” (Zhao, Gradmuck, & Martin, 2008, p. 1820).

### **1.1.1 - Identity and Interaction**

Self-identity construction and development are inseparable from social interaction as Leary and Tananay (2005) state: “self-construction is an intrinsically interactionist process: the theories of self are based on and modified by the experiences in the interpersonal world” (p. 30). Identity theories, whilst numerous and often conflicting, for the most part base their concepts in the notion of interaction. Identity theories developed by Goffman, dramaturgists, symbolic interactionists, postmodernists, idealists, and actor network theorists, while varying significantly in conclusions, all base their research on the results of interactions. Theories of self are inconsistent as to whether the self can be considered singular or multiple, and whether identity construction is shaped through purely human or artifact-orientated interaction; however no theory can avoid the premise that the self is a construct of collaboration/interaction.

It is important therefore for a study of identity, and to understand Goffman's relevance today, to focus on interactions. To understand self-conceptualisation "requires studying individuals with regard to their interpersonal behavior" (Leary & Tananay, 2005, p. 23) as "it is within those interactions that the individual's self theory is constructed, validated, and revealed." (Leary & Tananay, p. 23). This project, in attempting to understand Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework's applicability today, has chosen to focus on the interactions of individuals on the popular social media website Facebook where social context differs from Goffman's (1959) original interaction examples.

The definition of self and the definition of identity vary slightly between texts and theories. Leary and Tananay (2005) call attention to this disjunction stating "not only have we lacked a single, universally accepted definition of 'self,' but also many definitions clearly refer to distinctly different phenomena" (p. 6). This project does not attempt to distinguish the self from identity, nor speculate on the definitional biases of interaction theorists; rather it understands both identity and self as involving the "mental representation of oneself, including all that one knows about oneself" (Leary & Tananay, 2005, p. 63). A double definition of self is also used in this project, as it was by Goffman (1959), where the self is both the mental image of oneself and a "kind of player in a ritual game" (p. 31).

### **1.1.2 - Goffman and Technology**

The application of Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework to mediated interaction has been rare; this is due to the face-to-face nature of social interaction on which Goffman (1959) primarily concentrated. Those studying mediated interaction often disclaim any use of *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* stating that it is "the differences between face-to-face and mediated interaction that is the main constraint for using Goffman" (Aspling, 2011, p. 44). Goffman's (1959) own constraining necessitation of "immediate physical presence" (p. 15) however, cannot be misconstrued as a self-declaration of unsuitability to mediated environments, as his social theory was developed twelve years prior to the development of the networks now called the internet.

Technology was in fact, not a matter of avoidance for Goffman (1959). The face-to-face interactions studied and used as examples by Goffman (1959) were often mediated by everyday, invisible, technologies (Pinch, 2010). While less obvious than the internet, or the telephone, mediated interaction was still prevalent in Goffman's (1959) examples of face-to-face interaction. The "mundane technologies" (Pinch, 2010, p. 412) which are all so pervasive in everyday life that they are scarcely noticed were still vital to Goffman's (1959) staging of a role. The door was perhaps the most referenced and essential physical component of mediation allowing Goffman (1959) to define the stages on which he focused. Technology affordances were further referenced for their part in a performance when Goffman (1959) wrote about such things as the merry-go-round and how the "whole staging of the role follows from what the technologies permits" (Pinch, 2010, p. 410).

To question the dramaturgical theory's applicability to mediated interaction is to assume there is something exceptional about this communication system. In fact communication and interaction are often materially mediated in Goffman's (1959) interaction examples (Pinch, 2010, p. 412) and while the opposite is frequently assumed, "we should avoid the trap of declaring that online interaction is special because it is technological mediated interaction" (Pinch, 2010, p. 412). The application of Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework to mediated interaction should not therefore be abandoned on this premise and indeed "the reason Goffman is so evocative in this area is that the new media technologies have become part and parcel of everyday interaction" (Pinch, 2010, p. 409).

Goffman (1959) explains how we often presume that that which seems different requires retheorisation. He states (1959):

We are accustomed to assuming that the rules of decorum that prevail in sacred establishments, such as churches, will be much different from the ones that prevail in everyday places of work. We ought not to assume from this that the standards in sacred places are more numerous and more strict than those we find in work establishments. (p. 109)

Recognition of the various kinds of stage or of the different kinds of act, according to Goffman (1959), does not mean any performance is more or less legitimate. Environments which call attention to the act, such as social networking websites, require dramaturgical introspection in much the same way as our everyday lives.

None the less, interactionists' studies of online interaction have often been contradictory in their conclusions as we shall see. Goffman's (1959) framework has been applied, contradicted, criticised, altered, and dismissed by interactionists attempting to redefine the sociological perspective on online interaction. Early online interaction studies, however, were largely based on observations of communication on anonymous websites between strangers and therefore now require a re-examination from an embodied, anchored, and nonymous perspective which encompasses the interactions on current social media networks.

### **1.1.3 - Early Online Identity and Interaction Theories**

Interactionist research in online environments lagged behind the internet's development and quick utilisation (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002). From the internet's early development in 1971 as a means of communication for the United States military to 1995 when interactionists had begun to take an interest, the internet grew to be comprised of over 16 million users (Rheingold, 1995). Those in the forefront of online interactionist research were few and far between. It is the work of online identity theorists Rheingold (1995) and Turkle (1995) which best typify this early phase.

Many of the early online interaction studies were based on the communication taking place in the multiplayer virtual worlds of Multi User Dungeons, or later, Multi User Domains, here collectively referred to as MUDs. These virtual, text-based worlds inhabited during the early 1990s were the subject of several interaction and identity studies. One of the first and most renowned explorations of MUDs and online identity was conducted by Turkle (1995).

Kennedy (2006) declared, "A history of internet identity research has no better starting point than Turkle's *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*"

(p. 862). Turkle (1995) offers a unique perspective on online interaction and identity building in the online environments of MUDs. Interviews and participant observation of MUD users revealed for Turkle (1995) a postmodern, and what she determined to be a fractured, and multiple sense of identity construction online. MUD identity theorisation was readily applied by Turkle (1995) to all virtual reality environments:

Traditional ideas about identity have been tied to a notion of authenticity that such virtual experiences actively subvert. When each player can create many characters and participate in many games, the self is not only decentred but multiplied without limit. (p. 185)

Turkle (1995) felt internet users were freed from their embodied selves, liberated, and left to explore and develop numerous identities. Like many postmodernists before and after, Turkle (1995) believed the cyberself offered a transcendence from the corporeal self, while arguing that virtual reality liberated us “from Meadian socialization process” (Robinson, 2007, p. 97) whereby the self is shaped by the other.

Turkle’s (1995) exploration of this field generated controversial conclusions (Robinson, 2007). A MUD user, interviewed by Turkle (1995) declared “I’m not one thing I’m many things. Each part gets to be more fully expressed in MUDs than in the real world.” (Turkle, 1995, p. 185). Such findings led Turkle (1995) to believe the internet had altered our understanding of identity and interaction; the self, she argued, “is no longer simply playing different roles in different settings at different times... The life practice of windows is that of a decentred self that exists in many worlds and plays many roles at the same time” (Turkle, 1995, p. 14). Normally, when the community and relationships were “reliable, continuous, and face-to-face, a firm sense of self was favoured” (Gergen, 1991, p. 147). The introduction of the online virtual environments however, and the ability to manage many cyber-handles, names, or characters, led Turkle (1995) to hypothesise that a rapid alteration of identity construction where people can “cycle through different characters and genders” (Turkle, 1995, p. 174) was taking place.

Turkle's (1995) ideas about interaction and identity were criticised for their unquestioned utilisation in broader contexts (Kennedy, 2006; Robinson, 2007). The results of Turkle's (1995) analyses of MUD users' interactions and conversations were broadly applied to all users of cyberspace as Turkle (1995) likened the Internet to "a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self that characterize postmodern life" (p. 180). The social-psychological conclusions were even more widely applied to the everyday lives of individuals outside of cyberspace. Unbounded by even the online world Turkle (1995) encouraged individuals to think of themselves as "fluid, emergent, decentralized, multiplicitous, flexible, and ever in process" (Turkle, 1995, p. 264).

Rheingold (1995) offered an alternative point of view to Turkle during this period. Rheingold too explored the interactions of online communities during the early 1990s; however, he primarily concentrated on the Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link (WELL), an early network community which allowed internet users to carry out public conversations and email exchanges (Rheingold, 1995). Rheingold (1995) found authenticity in the communication on these networks. The ability to alter or manipulate self-presentation was understood as possible in such online environments, but recognition of this affordance in other environments meant that this potential was not viewed as medium-specific:

You can be fooled about people in cyberspace, behind the cloak of words. But that can be said about telephones or face-to-face communication as well computer-mediated communications provide new ways to fool people, and the most obvious identity swindles will die out only when enough people learn to use the medium critically. (p. 27)

Identity construction 'playfulness' online was therefore not given the same level of attention as Turkle (1995) allowed. The online self, for Rheingold (1995), was still implicitly linked to the real life self and situations. Rheingold (1995) further suggested that online identities could in fact be more 'true' to the self because online people are "thinkers and transmitters of ideas and feeling beings, not carnal vessels with a certain appearance and way of walking and talking" (p. 26).

Rheingold (1995) based his conclusions on the observed interactions of information seekers and providers. WELLS were designed to be nonymous websites and information collectives intended to aid people in their lives outside of the computer mediated environment. The ability to be anonymous or have multiple identities was not facilitated in Rheingold's (1995) primary site of study. On WELLS "Nobody is anonymous. Everybody is required to attach their real userid to their postings" (Rheingold, 1995, p. 49). Rheingold (1995) brought his own social experience with him into the online world, sometimes even meeting those within the community. WELLS were commonly used as an information gathering tool and community building environment, meaning that the interaction and identity theories of Turkle were clearly not the right fit for this other kind of online environment.

Rheingold (1995), influenced by Turkle (1995) and her student at the time, moved on from WELLS to consider MUDs, as he discussed the identity play occurring in these environments. What Rheingold found bore some similarities to Turkle's views. Rheingold began referring to these platforms as living laboratories and identity workshops which were changing people's perceptions of identity. But dissimilar identity theories were found to be applicable in different online environments. Rheingold's discussion of identity online was highly influenced by the platform and technology where the particular communication was taking place, much more so than Turkle's tendency to generalise. In other words, it was becoming apparent that the technological platform's *affordances* mattered.

Giddens (1991), while not specialising in identity theory online, offered a less stark and oppositional identity perspective than Rheingold and Turkle with his modernity identity theory. Giddens does not recognise a need for theory reconceptualisation specific to the internet, because "mediated experience, since the first experience of writing, has long influenced both self-identity and the basic organisation of social relations" (p. 4). Giddens' theory stipulates that lifestyle choices and self-identity are intrinsically linked, allowing the person to decide, through choice, how one *narrates* the self. Giddens (1991) stated that "one of the distinctive features of modernity, in fact, is an increasing interconnection between

the two ‘extremes’ of extensionality and intentionality” (p. 1), so while other theories may differ or be alike, either in method or result, this does not mean that they are entirely the same, nor entirely unlike. Giddens’ argument suggests that neither Turkle’s nor Rheingold’s somewhat stark and opposed theories provide sufficient insight into identity construction, and that a middle ground could offer a richer field for identity theorists to explore.

Rather than understanding the self as either bounded to the singular body offline, or as multiple and fluid, Giddens (1991) suggested that “the reflexivity of the self is continuous, as well as all-pervasive” (p. 76). The self online according to Giddens can be understood as both changing, yet singular. By forming a narrative of self through “a trajectory of development” (Giddens, 1991, p. 75) one can see identity development as coherent and reflexive as the single self matures. Giddens’ implicit critique of Turkle and Rheingold is closely aligned with Goffman’s (1959) understanding of self where the self develops and constructs itself through its roles and interactions in life.

#### **1.1.4 - 21<sup>st</sup> Century Online Identity and Interaction Theories: MUDS and WELLS**

As the uses of the internet expanded and developed so too did the interactionist studies of these online spaces. In the late 1990s interactionist researchers began to turn to the less anonymous websites provided for internet dating, to better understand the way in which individuals interact and present themselves in these online environments. Where MUDs allowed total anonymity, dating websites required further consideration of real world implications. Researchers found that identities created on these websites were often dissimilar to the identities performed in face-to-face situations (Zhao, Gradmuck, & Martin, 2008, p. 1819). Research participants were found to selectively disclose information, emphasise specific traits and even lie.

Online dating websites, however, still required a level of truthfulness from participants that MUDs did not. While MUD personas were sheltered by the realm within which they existed, dating websites required a level of real world applicability and perceived sincerity for the person to successfully utilise the

website for its intended purpose. Individuals recognised that “too large of a mismatch between their online self-presentation and reality may lead to negative outcomes” (McLaughlin, Vitak, & Crouse, 2011, p. 2). The reality of self can rarely compete with an idealised version presented online because “these exaggerated claims may damage the relationship as it moves off the computer screen to face-to-face” (McLaughlin, Vitak, & Crouse, 2011, p. 3). Users were therefore encouraged to utilise these sites in a more honest manner. The movement of online identity and interaction studies from the anonymous world of MUDs to the world of online dating provided the first step towards understanding the entwined online and offline self. This meshing of online and offline selves was further observed and studied as social networking websites became ever more popular.

Social media’s popularity and widespread utilisation became most prevalent at the turn of the twenty first century, alongside the development of Web 2.0. The collaborative nature of Web 2.0 focuses on user generated content and interaction. Its development has brought about an explosion of online communication channels and social media. One such social media platform is blogs.

Rettberg (2009) in her book *Bloggging: Digital media and society* discusses identity and community construction in online communication media. What she found was that these communication platforms were both facilitating the real world sense of self and community and also *shaping* them by allowing and expecting certain kinds of communication and connections to occur. Rettberg discusses the technologies’ affordances and suggests their development is significantly impacting our ability to convey our sense of self. Similarly to Giddens, Rettberg describes blogging “as a form of narrative and as a form of self-representation” (p. 111). This emerging recognition of the importance of narratives of self identity will remain significant to what follows here.

Moving on from blogs, many early social media networking websites, including Bebo and Myspace attracted attention from interaction theorists. These early social media interaction studies often concluded that an idealised sense of self was at play. A study of Second Life and early Facebook users by Sinclair and Boon

(2009) in *A world I don't inhabit: Disquiet and identity in Second Life and Facebook* found that most people were creating “idealistic virtual re/presentations of our real world selves” (p. 103). The postmodern identity theory was no longer such an appropriate lens for studying these platforms as the online self was representationally connected to the embodied self, not cut adrift from it. A kind of transition could be identified, where identity was no longer to be considered so plural and fluid, but instead was recognisably connected to the offline self, yet not so much so that it could not still be idealistically constructed.

Cargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons (2002) explored this transition in *Can you see the real me? Activation and expression of the “true self” on the Internet*. From Turkle's (1995) moment of relative anonymity online which “afforded individuals a kind of virtual laboratory for exploring and experimenting with different versions of self” (Cargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002, p. 33) through the internet's facilitation of real world connections, they too deployed another change in identity theorisation. Their study found that internet users could better communicate their narratively ‘true’ selves online, and their ‘actual’ selves in face-to-face interactions. This true self closely resembled the idealised self, as Cargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons state that the internet “fosters *idealization* of the other in the absence of information to the contrary” (p. 45). Unexpressed qualities that are difficult to portray in real life, were better able to be portrayed online as part of the story about themselves that people were constructing.

McLaughlin, Vitak, and Crouse (2011) investigated this phenomenon further in their article *Online identity construction and expectation of future interaction*. They found that a lack of anonymity online and an expectation of future face-to-face contact resulted in an attempt at a ‘true’ representation of self. The fluidity and multiplicity of self was even distrusted on emerging social media networking sites. Some idealisation was considered inevitable in reduced cues environments as “people have the ability to develop relationships that are “more socially desirable than we tend to experience parallel face-to-face interaction” [p. 17] due to selective self-presentation and the subsequent highlighting of certain characteristics while masking others” (McLaughlin, Vitak, & Crouse, 2011, p. 1). But looking forward to social networking websites that necessitate real world

identification, such as Facebook, McLaughlin, Vitak, and Crouse (2011) state “because SNSs connect existing friends, these self-presentations tend more toward accuracy than idealization” (p. 8). A new phase of identity theorisation, focusing on degrees of accuracy, singularity, and truth was beginning to emerge as “individuals acknowledge that too large of a mismatch between their online self-presentation and reality may lead to negative outcomes” (McLaughlin, Vitak, & Crouse, 2011, p. 3). Another moment of transition, from idealisation to singular, grounded, and intended to-be-true representations of self seemed to be identified by some theorists investigating online interaction and identity during this time. But Westlake (2008) offers a key reminder, stating that on Facebook:

Along with idealization, the users enjoy playfully destabilizing and adjusting their online performances. While Facebook operates as a forum for establishing social norms, the continual reinvention of Facebook by independent developers and users creates an opening through which Generation Y can push the boundaries of their online performance of self. (p. 38).

This combination of idealisation and dramaturgical action (performance of self) is according to Westlake typical of social networking websites during this formative phase of the new technologies.

### **1.1.5 - Identity and Interaction Theories Today**

Today the internet, computer mediated communication and social networking websites “can be seen as a prevalent means for creating and negotiating our identities” (Davis, 2010, p. 1106). These online technologies are continually evolving and identity theorists and interactionists constantly have new technology to focus on. A lag between technologies and research seems inevitable.

Facebook is currently the most widely utilised social networking website, with over 900 million active users (Facebook, 2012) and while very few studies have tested Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical framework for social media website application, the conditions these websites afford are ideal for such a study. “The nonymity of Facebook is an ideal condition for examining identity construction in

online environments where the relationships are anchored in offline communities” (Zhao, Gradmuch, & Martin, 2008, p. 1818). In the past, factors such as anonymity or lack of synchronicity have significantly impacted online communication. By studying interactions on Facebook, however, the lack of synchronicity and anonymity which have hindered past researchers can not deter this project’s application of the dramaturgical framework.

Studies of social media websites have utilised Goffman’s (1959) framework sparingly and primarily as a means for explaining the *impression management* techniques being undertaken. Theorists’ conflicting opinions about the relevance and applicability of Goffman’s (1959) framework are common. Some argue Goffman is “better suited for synchronous mediums” (Rettie, 2009, p. 425), some utilise aspects of Goffman’s framework but consider other aspects to be of limited applicability, others have replaced his framework entirely, considering online interaction to be more like a “library and a gallery” (Hogan, 2010, p. 377) than a stage.

Synchronicity, or lack thereof has been a central issue of concern for interaction studies attempting to utilise Goffman’s framework online (Aspling, 2011; Boyd, 2008; Hogan, 2010; Rettie, 2009; Tufekci, 2008a; Westlake, 2008). Rettie (2009) argues that “Goffman is better suited for synchronous mediums as it is more likely that there is mutual monitoring in real-time similar to face-to-face situations” (Aspling, 2011, p. 9). Rettie (2009) and Aspling (2011) are not alone in this requirement of synchronism of course, increased network speeds and frequency of use are tending to collapse the distinction between synchronous and asynchronous with reduced time lags between communications. Attempts to expand Goffman’s applicability outside of synchronous interactions have been attempted, but are still often considered somehow inappropriate. A study of self presentations on Facebook, and others’ interactions with these presentations, found that while impression management was identifiable and “many of the same strategies used in face-to-face communication carry over to computer-mediated communication (CMC), their applications differ in two important ways” reduced communication cues and potentially asynchronous communication (Smock, 2010, p. 10). These two factors were considered a fundamental limitation in Goffman’s relevance.

The other primary issue which theorists have not been able to overcome in Goffman's framework has been the lack of face-to-face contact (Aspling, 2011; Boyd, 2008; Hogan, 2010; Zarghooni, 2007). Aspling's (1959) attempt to utilise Goffman's framework was unsuccessful due to the internet's intrinsic creation of an uncertainty as to "what it means to "enter the presence of other" which is essential for face-to-face interaction and self-presentations in a Goffman sense" (p. 9). The lack of face-to-face contact was therefore considered "the main constraint for using Goffman" (Aspling, 2011, p. 44) to understand Facebook. A study by Hogan (2010) also found a need for re-theorisation due to Goffman's perceived reliance on face-to-face interaction. A change in terminology was considered necessary, as Hogan (2010) re-termed presentations as *exhibits*, and the stage as a *gallery*. Hogan (2010) defends these alterations stating:

extending presentation of self by considering an exhibition approach alongside a dramaturgical one is meant to be a step toward a clearer articulation of both the potentials and the perils of self-presentation in an age of digital reproduction. (p. 384)

Boyd is one of the few theorists to utilise Goffman's framework in a largely unaltered manner, in spite of the interaction differences. Boyd (2008) emphasises these differences:

Social network sites are a type of networked public with four properties that are not typically present in face-to-face public life; persistence, searchability, exact copyability, and invisible audiences. These properties fundamentally alter social dynamics, complicating the ways in which people interact. (p. 2)

But these differences do not sway Boyd's application of Goffman's framework, or provoke her to over-defend its application. Her unashamed utilisation of Goffman's framework, whilst useful for this project, does not actually offer a justification per se for its application. Boyd's use of the framework does not address the relevance of alternative interaction theories, nor investigate why

symbolic interactionism is applied in spite of her acknowledgement that online communication environments and interactions taking place within them, are changing.

This project suggests that consideration of Goffman's relevance to online mediated interaction is a *useful first* step before developing more specific research into contemporary online identity formation.

What the forgoing discussion means for this project is as follows:

- Investigation into how users conceptualise self online is important for this project. Prior theorists have concluded that the self is multiple and fluid like Turkle's postmodernist perspective, as singular and static like Robinson's embodied viewpoint, and as a narrative based self as argued by Giddens. Allowing users to articulate their own self construction in interview may help distinguish between the more extreme views.
- Consideration of technological affordances may aid this project's interactionist perspective. Prior studies have come to utilise differing theories which are entirely dependent upon the online environments in which they are based. This project will therefore attempt to understand Facebook's own affordances.
- Theories of self identity formation online have developed alongside the technology facilitating the identity. Studies have looked to what they consider the unique nature of online interaction and attempted to reconceptualise identity construction in these environments. The mediated nature of Goffman's own interaction examples, however, means this project will attempt to look beyond the supposedly unique nature of online interaction, and understand how Goffman's more general framework may be applied.

## **1.2 - Aim and Research Questions**

Prior interactionist studies and theorists' constant reiteration of the importance of understanding identity in mediated environments sparked the conceptualisation of this project. Motivations behind undertaking this study were tightly linked to the need to better understand Goffman's dramaturgical framework in the modern,

digitally mediated, and nymous environments. Due to the inductive nature of this project, the aim and research questions were acquired during the gathering of data and theoretical analysis.

A hypothesis and research questions were developed following the completion of the first ten, in-depth interviews. While the more holistic premise of this project was kept constant, the specific ways in which it was tested were entirely inductive. In writing research questions, there is an attempt to “translate the proposal’s rationale and conceptualization into broad empirical goals” (Lindlof, 2011, p. 130).

### **1.3 - Project Structure**

Background information, including an investigation of prior online identity theory, has been provided to illustrate the relevance of this project to future social psychological and sociological interactionist studies.

Chapter Two provides background information about the popular social networking website Facebook. A detailed look at Facebook’s history and growth is presented alongside a discussion of Facebook’s plans and future social media networks. The chapter includes an in-depth discussion as to why Facebook was chosen as the site of study and the importance of this medium to our interaction and identity concepts. The chapter ends with a discussion of Facebook’s fit within Winston’s (1998) technological development model and how this can aid our understanding of technologies’ relation to identity theory development.

Chapter Three concentrates on the work of Erving Goffman. The chapter begins by introducing the famous sociologist more fully. Chapter Three goes on to further present Goffman’s most cited publication, and the focal point for this study, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Following this, an introduction to some of Goffman’s later works is offered.

The fourth chapter is comprised of this project’s methodology. The methodology chapter consists of two parts, the methodological approach and the method proper.

The methodological approach outlines the decisions behind the method choices. The method itself gives a step by step guide to this project's data collection.

Chapter Five includes a review of prior interactionist literature. It begins by introducing symbolic interactionism, its conception, and its connection to Erving Goffman's dramaturgical framework. A review of theorists' application of symbolic interaction to mediated environments is then provided. Finally the chapter provides an overview of alternative interaction theories, including postmodernism, actor network theory, and affordance theory.

Chapter Six is the results chapter. This chapter provides a detailed outline of the in-depth interviews and case study participants' results. The interview transcripts coding and analysis allowed three key themes to develop which are provided and broken down into smaller sub themes. The research chapter provides a broad overview of the key research results.

The final chapter, Chapter Seven, is the discussion. The discussion analyses the three key research themes and provides connections between them and this project's key literature. Research results and corresponding interaction theory are discussed in detail, leading to the project's conclusion, suggestions for future research and discussion of limitations.

## CHAPTER 2 – FACEBOOK AND THE RESTABILISATION OF THE VIRTUAL SELF

*This chapter gives a short overview of Facebook's history, its growth, and its usership today. It goes on to discuss in more detail the importance of studying interaction and identity construction in this medium and where Facebook and other social networking websites may be heading, especially in light of a particular model of media development.*

### **2.1 – History of Facebook**

The social networking website Facebook was launched in February of 2004 (Kirkpatrick, 2010). Founded by Mark Zuckerberg, the primary purpose of Facebook was to create a social platform for Harvard students to communicate with their fellow classmates (ibid). Facebook expanded to include other colleges, both in and outside the United States (ibid). Growth and demand were unmitigated and finally, in 2006, with just under 12 million users (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2012), Zuckerberg made Facebook available to everyone 13 years of age and above (Kirkpatrick, 2010). Facebook's now famed success has led to its acquirement of over 900 million active users, and their personal information (Facebook, 2012).

Zuckerberg understood and identified with people's latent desire to connect with their peers. In seeing this need and the growing interest in sites that catered to it, Zuckerberg decided to meet this demand. The success of Facebook can be seen to stem from this demand and its incremental expansion of user access. The initially exclusive access by Harvard students roused demand from other top American college students all wanting to become a part of this seemingly elite social networking site. Further expansion incited further demand, as more students wanted to be able to connect with those who already had access (Kirkpatrick).

Users evidently spent great amounts of time building their friend base and developing a profile, and this user investment ensured Facebook's success as it opened itself up to high school students, and then everyone else. The initial feedback from college students was not entirely positive, students did not want to

open the door of this world to their younger siblings and older family members (Kirkpatrick), yet with such a well established user base most people continued to use Facebook as their primary networking website.

Facebook was not the first website dedicated to social networking. Sites such as MySpace and Bebo had been offering ways for individuals to network online for several years prior to Facebook. Facebook however, established a key point of difference. Facebook required authenticity of identity and demonstrable real world connections. Research into the use of Facebook compared to prior networking sites reinforced Zuckerberg's belief that users wanted some control over access to their network, as they were "more likely to restrict the viewing of their profiles only to their friends in Facebook compared to Myspace" (Tufekci, 2008a, p. 26). Initially, Facebook users were required to provide verified, academic email addresses to ensure all users were who they said they were. Studies of Facebook users found that most users complied with this requirement, as "94.9% of Facebook users reported using their real names" (Tufekci, *ibid*). Today, Facebook users must verify their accounts with their cell-phone number, public figures are contacted by Facebook directly for certification, and business pages require authentication. This has all positioned Facebook in a particular way in relation to 'virtual' identities.

## **2.2 – Facebook's Importance Today**

With over 900 million active users from around the world converging and communicating on the one platform, it seems prudent to ask about the sociological implications. Prior conceptions of online identity as multifarious and fragmented no longer seem to work when the largest networking site in the world demands a degree of supposed authenticity. Zuckerberg understands this, and in a very active way is constructing Facebook to avoid any obviously postmodernist unreliability of self. Instead Zuckerberg believes he is bringing "back the dynamics of small-town life, where everybody knows your business" (Kirkpatrick, 2010, p. 204). With the founder and the technological design asserting such values, it is necessary to ask whether users, too, understand their online identity in similar terms.

Zuckerberg's influence on the way we understand identity and interaction on Facebook is important for the reasons suggested. His belief in how Facebook should be used is impacting not only upon the millions of subscribers, but, potentially, the way in which we understand identity and interaction on the internet as a whole. Zuckerberg's beliefs about online identity are uncomplicated by any postmodern doubt and his power over Facebook's design directly impacts the user. Zuckerberg believes online identity should be grounded, singular and in effect true. He says "you have one identity" (Kirkpatrick, 2010, p. 199) and "the days of you having a different image for your work friends or co-workers and for the other people you know are probably coming to an end pretty quickly" (ibid, p. 199). Such core beliefs are clearly impacting upon the platform design, the user experience, and thereby the way in which identity is understood in this kind of environment.

Zuckerberg's identity beliefs and platform designs are based on a perceived cultural shift online. While Facebook has been somewhat innovative in allowing only a singular, verified, and grounded identity, this requirement has come only in the aftermath of a larger shift in perceptions about the nature of virtual life in the era after that described by Turkle. Segregating aspects of life, and the identities associated with them, is considered simply not possible, as "the level of transparency the world has now won't support having two identities for a person" (Kirkpatrick, 2010, p. 199). Zuckerberg defends his technological choices and corresponding values by pointing out that information proliferates but brings less not more uncertainty and ambiguity as a result. Gardiner (2001) demonstrated foresight which corresponds with Zuckerberg's view today when he stated "to have a multiplicity of facets to the self is singularly human; nevertheless, if virtual communities are to be sustainable they must allow and encourage holistic projection of the self into the virtual landscape" (p. 41). It is better therefore, according to Zuckerberg, to accept that increasing information makes identities more transparent and less fluid.

### **2.3 – Future of Facebook and Social Networking**

Zuckerberg's appeal for absolute transparency and the claim of authenticity is manifested in the technological capabilities provided to the Facebook user.

Zuckerberg understands it is “Facebook’s identity-based nature that differentiated it from the beginning from most other social networks and enabled it to become a unique global phenomenon” (Kirkpatrick, 2010, p. 276) and this trend is set to continue. Zuckerberg’s goal to make society more open (ibid) is, he believes, only hindered by the users. Users’ demand for privacy is considered a “stepping-stone” (ibid, p. 203), a thing that should only be offered until people get over the need for it. We have all perhaps been a little slow to recognise the scale and direction implied in that belief.

More recent online social networking enterprises, however, have been quick to identify a gap between Facebook’s technological capabilities and users’ requirements. Google+ was established in late 2011 (Levy, 2011) to contend with Facebook and provide a new form of identity-authenticated online networking. Understanding Facebook users’ issues around context collapse, lack of audience segregation, and anxiety over complete transparency, Google+ sought to provide a remedy which would rival Facebook.

Google+ was inspired by this perceived cultural disjunction between the lack of technological capabilities and the user’s desired experience. Vice president of products at Google+ Bradley Horowitz said “we’ve found there is actually twice as much private sharing as there is sharing that’s visible to everyone on the Internet” (Levy, 2011, p. 160), the cause of which is thought to be a lack of adequate audience segregation on some platforms. This disjunction between social network users’ wants and their mediated experience is reiterated by interactionist theorists:

It appears that part of many users’ experience on such sites is a perceived loss of control over performance as they address broad, unknown audiences that may include peers, supervisors, subordinates, parents and--especially in the case of academic communities--professors and mentors. (Hewitt & Forte, 2006, p. 2)

To meet a perceived demand of this sort, Google+ attempted to differentiate itself from the likes of Facebook and Twitter (Levy, 2011) where updates are shared

with everyone in a network. Google+'s remedy is to make it "easy to direct messages to specific groups of people" (ibid, p. 159). Google+ established 'circles' a feature which would let users ring-fence groups of people, allowing for segregated audiences when desired.

In April 2012 however, Google+ reported having over 100 million active users (Yahoo, 2012), well below the usership of Facebook or Twitter. Those speculating on the slow take off of Google+ have come to several conclusions. The established network of Facebook puts Google+ at a distinct disadvantage. Furthermore, the technology proficiency, time, and energy required by users to not only create a Google+ account but segregate audiences, has led many to say they would not invest that level of time in the service (Interviewee 2; Interviewee 4; Case Study 2). Google however, is not giving up. Google and Facebook, alongside Apple and Amazon have inescapably come to dominate the internet in every facet, the internet Giants, as explained by Manjoo (2011) "that have come to define 21<sup>st</sup>-century information technology and entertainment are on the verge of a war" (p. 108). So it remained to be seen whether Google's belief that social networks want less open exposure will be vindicated in the longer term.

#### **2.4 – Facebook and Society**

The invention and subsequent development of social media and Facebook, like many prior technological innovations, has often been considered revolutionary and unique. Facebook's progress however, fits within Winston's (1998) model for technological development in general, demonstrating that the pattern of this specific technological advancement is still grounded in the past. Winston's model of communication technology starts with a prototype, then, when combined with social requirement it becomes an invention, and finally the push and pull effect between necessity and suppression of its more radical potential leads to technological diffusion.

Winston points out that technology and science, keys to new technological creation, are capable only of what the social sphere, in which they are based, and the "supervening social necessities" (p. 6) allow. Such necessities, for instance safe train travel led to the invention of the telegraph, and then the requirement of

communication between multiple remote nodes, even if one node failed during war, led to the development of the internet, as a network of networks. Winston demonstrates that for a prototype to be successful, social requirements must be in place. Winston's (1998) powerful model dismisses the technological determinism theory, whereby technology is seen to 'make' culture. However his viewpoint is also not wholly from a social determinist perspective either. Instead, Winston does not approach the model from "the lens of one-way temporal sequencing, as either artifact "determines" belief, or belief "shapes" artifact" (Farai, Kwon, & Watts, 2004, p. 187) rather a co-construction perspective where "mutual dependencies between technology and culture" (Rettberg, 2009, p. 53) are evident.

Facebook can therefore be seen to fit within Winston's "*Parallel* prototype" category (p. 8) as social media websites were already in existence upon its development. Facebook however, like Winston's recipe for a successful parallel prototype, offers a secondary purpose over and above prior websites, allowing for real world relationships to be its focus as increased social necessity required. Social necessity, Winston suggests, means it is likely "that such creations will occur in a number of places synchronously" (p. 9) which may account for the alignment of Connectu's and Facebook's development and rivalry for the spot as Harvard's top social networking site.

Facebook's advancement into the market place also developed according to Winston's invention model. Constraints, Winston says, "operate to slow the rate of diffusion so the social fabric in general can absorb the new machine" (p. 11). Facebook's incremental user access can therefore be understood as less a unique feature of Facebook's success, than as a demonstration of the model's descriptive accuracy.

Winston's basic model for describing the evolution, rather than the revolution, of new technologies is based firmly in "the social sphere" (p. 3). Supervening social necessity is considered an important factor in the invention of all new technology. Rather than understanding technical artifacts as able to freely shape beliefs and 'revolutionise' the social, Winston argues that "social forces both push and hinder

these developments, forcing a social ‘fit’ upon them in the process” (p. 341). Understanding the social as “suppressing the disruptive power of the technology to impact radically on pre-existing social formations” (Winston, 1998, p. 342) Winston argues that the social cushions the most potentially disruptive aspects of any new medium.

Winston’s model for technological development is important for consideration of both future and past communication technology based studies. By understanding the common patterns in technological development, we can begin to better understand how interaction and identity factors in the use of these platforms may correspond with this model. Winston’s understanding of technological development as fitting within a repeatable model, allows for potential insight into a general pattern of social demand, utilisation and constraint. In other words as we proceed with this project, we will seek to identify features of social media use that become more explicable in light of these ideas.

## **2.5 – Chapter Summary**

Interactionists, idealists, and postmodernist theorists have all conceptualised a self which is impacted by the other, albeit in very different ways. What is important now is to understand not just the influence of others on our understanding of self, but how technology which facilitates such communication is influencing this conception formed through relationships. The impact technology has, not only in facilitating certain types of communication, but in creating a language which describes the way in which we interact, is important to further understand. Metaphorical language which is used in, and to describe, Facebook is proliferating, and potentially impacting the ways in which we understand the self (Strate, Jacobson, & Gibson, 2003). Broadly metaphorical notions about ‘virtual’ selves may need to be replaced by more precise descriptions, based in specific interactions.

The technological influence on identity conceptions remains an important consideration for all interactionists. It is vital that theorists question the technological designs and study the impact they have on participants’ conceptions of self. Prior identity theories, both online and off, have concentrated primarily on

the interactions between people and left the technology unexplored. But before we attempt a more detailed exploration of interaction in actual instances of Facebook-mediated communication, we still have some work to do on the term 'interaction' itself.

## CHAPTER 3 – ERVING GOFFMAN AND THE SELF AS ‘DRAMATIC EFFECT’

*This chapter provides background information and a short summary detailing the conceptual framework upon which Erving Goffman’s (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* is based. A short overview of Goffman’s later work is also provided, where this expands on his most influential text.*

### **3.1 – About Goffman**

Sociologist and writer, Erving Goffman was born in 1922 in Manville, Alberta, Canada and died in 1982 (Burns, 1992). His contributions to the field of the humanities and social sciences were well recognised during his lifetime, and are still today. Renowned American anthropologist Clifford Geertz praised Goffman as “perhaps the most celebrated American sociologist right now, and certainly the most ingenious” (Burns, 1992, p. 3). Goffman produced eleven major published works, the first of which is his most famous and the basis for this study, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.

Goffman was honoured with numerous awards for his works, including the Mead-Cooley Award in Social Psychology (Burns, 1992). Goffman also received the distinguished American Sociological Association’s Maclver Award for *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* and its “contributing in an outstanding degree to the progress of sociology” (Trevino, 2003, p. 35). More recently, in 2007 The Times Higher Education Guide listed Goffman as the sixth most cited intellectual in the humanities and social sciences (Times Higher Education, 2011).

Goffman’s (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* has significantly contributed to making him “probably the most widely read sociologist in the history of the discipline” (Scheff, 2003, p. 50). His widespread influence is profound as “our vision of the world, and even of ourselves, is transformed by reading Goffman” (ibid, p. 52). Because Goffman’s works continue today to influence his readers’ sociological perspectives on the world around them (Lemert, 1997), it seems prudent to acknowledge the basis of so much of his work. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* was largely based on the face-to-

face, interactional observations of *fifty three years ago*. This project will therefore ask how much of this work will translate into the contemporary context being considered.

### **3.2 – The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life**

Despite its age, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* is still “the classic locus for a powerful framework for understanding the presentation of self” (Wengraf, 2006, p. 115). We need to identify why this is the case.

#### **3.2.1 - Introduction**

The origins of the dramaturgical world view presented in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* can be traced back to Shakespearean times, and certainly Shakespeare’s work was influential in Goffman’s language. Goffman (1959) quotes “All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players: They have their exits and their entrances; And one man in his time plays many parts” (p. 377). Goffman does, however, recognise that this is largely an enabling metaphor.

Foregrounded in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* are a set of dramaturgical principles central to Goffman’s sociological perspective. The framework employed consists of five key components; the actor, the performance, the audience, the team, and the stage. These features comprise what Goffman believes to be characteristic of social interaction (p. 239). In detailing his perspective Goffman hoped to provide “the student with a guide worth testing in case-studies of institutional social life” (Preface). This project seeks to test this expectation and to utilise Goffman’s ‘theatrical’ perspective for precisely that reason.

#### **3.2.2 – The Actor**

The actor is the central component of *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*’s conceptual framework; it is the individual upon which Goffman’s theatrical metaphor is based. By observing people in everyday situations Goffman concluded that every person can be viewed as an actor who, in a social situation, can take a line and become a performer. The actor, according to Goffman and by

virtue of his or her metaphorical definition, is primarily concerned with appropriately projecting a definition of him or herself and of the interactional situation given their current role.

The interactional situations upon which Goffman based this framework are, today, limited. Interaction in fact has been roughly defined by Goffman (1959) as “the reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another’s action when in one another’s immediate physical presence” (1959, p. 15). The actor, faced with an interaction transforms into a performer, “a harried fabricator of impressions involved in the all-too human task of staging a performance” (ibid, p. 252). It is only then upon the commencement of a face-to-face encounter that Goffman considers a performance as such to arise.

The actor’s performance and the actor’s self are therefore “somewhat equated” (ibid, p. 252). In fact when defining the self, Goffman offers a rather unique view of the individual, stating:

the self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited. (p. 252, 253)

Even upon withdrawing from a performance, an actor may retain these dynamic qualities of being his/her own performer and audience. The actor therefore is the central component which gives rise to the four other basic components of Goffman’s dramaturgical framework; the performance, the audience, the team and the stage. We will come back in due course to the notion of the ‘dramatic effect’ and its (dis)crediting.

### **3.2.3 – The Performance**

The performance is defined as “all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants” (Goffman, 1959, p. 15). The enactment of a part or routine will therefore occur

when any two or more individuals interact. The reason Goffman believes individuals *perform* is to guide and control the impressions that others form of them (ibid, Preface). The performer will seek to influence the definition of him or herself, mobilising his or her activity “so that it will convey an impression to others which it is in his [sic] interests to convey” (ibid, p. 4).

While the performance terminology of the dramaturgical metaphor connotes some degree of inauthenticity, this in fact is not necessarily the case. Goffman suggests that a performance may be cynical, whereby the individual, in full awareness, attempts to foster a specific impression, but it may be sincere whereby the individual is taken in by his own act and is convinced “that the impression of reality which he states is the real reality” (ibid, p. 17) or, more typically it will lie someplace in-between.

The ability to manage impressions, perform in a certain way or take on a specific role is not unconstrained or subject to the whims of the actor. In fact “a performance is “socialized,” molded, and modified to fit into the understandings and expectations of the society in which it is presented” (ibid, p. 35). A social role is therefore selected, not created. This, Goffman (1959) believes is a “natural development in social organization” (p. 26). The performance, the role and the lines of a given actor, are consequently shaped by their social circumstances and audience.

### **3.2.4 – The Audience**

The audience consists of the others, the observers, the co-participants or “those who contribute” (Goffman, 1959, p. 15). It is the presence of an audience which provides the actor with a reason to perform. The audience is thereby comprised of all those to whom a performance is given, and with a change of perspective, the audience too can be viewed as actors.

The presence of a certain audience will command a particular role to be employed by an actor. Because “upward mobility involves the presentation of proper performances” (ibid, p. 36), an actor will attempt to idealise his performance routine for the present audience. Audiences are typically segregated, allowing an

actor to tailor a performance and employ the appropriate role. By segregating an audience “the individual ensures that those before whom he plays one of his parts [sic] will not be the same individuals before whom he plays a different part in another setting” (ibid, p. 49). Failure to segregate audiences can result in the embarrassment of the misdirected performances. While a performer may on occasion attempt to transcend such segregations, such attempts are typically limited as “the audience can see a great saving of time and emotional energy in the right to treat the performer at occupational face value, as if the performer were all and only what his uniform claimed him to be” (ibid, p. 49). In other words, it is often the audience that stabilises a performance and sees an actor in trustable terms, requiring limited sharing of unnecessary information.

Goffman suggests “urban life would become unbearably sticky for some if every contact between two individuals entailed a sharing of personal trials, worries, and secrets” (p. 49). It is therefore in the interest of the audience to take at face value what is being presented, maintain a veneer of consensus and employ tact. When events occur which might seem to discredit the role played by the performer, the audience may often ignore such events, employ protective practices to ‘save’ the definition of the role and sustain the intended impression lest embarrassment and confusion arise.

### **3.2.5 – The Team**

A team is comprised of “any set of individuals who co-operate in staging a single routine” (Goffman, 1959, p. 79). A teammate is therefore any person whom one is dependent upon for creating and maintaining a particular impression. The team is the pluralisation of the actor and requires a level of trust and cooperation between actors to maintain the definition of the shared situation.

The team’s awareness of the fostered impression is referred to by Goffman as the “sweet guilt of conspirators” (ibid, p. 105). In a given interaction, it should be clear who is a teammate and who is an audience member as “no individual will be allowed to join both team and audience” (ibid, p. 93). The definitional conspiracy among the teammates and audience is identifiable by access or lack thereof to the stages upon which the performance is given (and retreated from).

### **3.2.6 – The Stage**

Finally the stage, also referred to as the region, is defined “as any place that is bounded to some degree by barriers to perception” (Goffman, 1959, p. 106).

There are two stage types which are most important to consider, the front stage and the back stage. The front stage refers to the “place where the performance is given” (ibid, p. 107). The back stage in contrast is a place relative to the front, where “the performer can relax; he can drop his [sic] front, forgo speaking his lines, and step out of character” (ibid, p. 112).

A stage is a socially constructed place and it is therefore reliant on the current audience, so while we often come to define one place as the back and one as the front, “there are many regions which function at one time and in one sense as a front region and at another time in another sense as a back region” (ibid, p. 128). So while one stage may be the front for one performance it may also be the back for another. Goffman also considers one last region, comprised of all areas not included in the front or the back, called “the outside” (ibid, p. 134-135).

The maintenance of this “two-face world” (ibid, p. 132) is reliant primarily upon a front. The front is a defining aspect of the front stage, it is the “expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance” (ibid, p. 22). Similar, yet distinct from the stage, the front is comprised of the setting, the personal front, appearance and manner. The front is therefore an important aspect of the front stage, and an actor’s performance, which helps to facilitate a given impression and form a connection.

### **3.2.7 – Conclusion**

Goffman believed that this dramaturgical framework could be applied to any social context and meant his work to “serve as a sort of handbook detailing one sociological perspective from which social life can be studied” (Preface). As already established here, we will be testing this claim in what follows.

## **3.3 – Goffman’s Later Works**

Goffman continued to produce ten publications subsequent to *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, all primarily concerning the structure and significance of social encounters. Four of these works concentrated on the micro-sociology of regular face-to-face interaction and therefore require further reference here, these being: *Interaction Ritual* (1967), *Strategic Interaction* (1969), *Relations in Public* (1971), and *Frame Analysis* (1974).

### **3.3.1 – Interaction Ritual**

*Interaction Ritual* is comprised of six of Goffman's shorter and earlier essays. It both encompasses and extends the work of *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. The dramaturgical framework remains a key component of this work however, the focus turning to the day to day interactional events which characterise daily life. Emphasis still remains on the individual. This individual, however, is more socialised, conditioned and "a product of joint ceremonial labor" (Goffman, 1967, p. 85).

This notion of joint ceremonial labour captures the sense, already alluded to, in which participants deliberately stabilise any role-threatening ambiguities that might arise, in order to sustain trustable interactions.

### **3.3.2 – Strategic Interaction**

*Strategic Interaction* continues to deal with the specific sub-area of Goffman's interest: face-to-face interaction. This book however, concentrates and expands upon *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*'s performance chapter, and more specifically the game-like aspects of interaction. An application of game theory allows Goffman (1969) to explain the actor's tactical impression management and the audience's strategic perception of this communication. The work presented in *Strategic Interaction* brings Goffman's thinking even further into the sociological field of symbolic interaction and habitually references a key architect of that theory, George Herbert Mead (1938).

The game theory references in *Strategic Interaction* concentrate primarily on the control moves of individuals attempting to define themselves and their situation, within the joint 'ceremony' of interaction. In their attempts to be believed, an

individual must use the expression games of “controlling, uncovering, and counter-uncovering” (Goffman, 1969, p. 64). The techniques employed are deemed effective or ineffective depending on the audience’s acceptance or counter moves. The actor’s task of *correctly* performing becomes a contest whereby “information becomes strategic and expression games occur” (ibid, p. 10). So the twinned notions of ceremony and game capture the sense in which interaction involves a to and fro of roles playing around which there are typically clear limits.

### 3.3.3 – Relations in Public

*Relations in Public* begins to project these ideas outwards into the public life generally. The important feature of *Relations in Public* however is the movement away from solely focusing on the actor and the audience and instead considering the cultural forces which impact on them. Systems, rules, rituals and their bearing on social relations are Goffman’s (1971) concern as he explains the “ground rules and the associated orderings of behavior that pertain to public life--to persons comingling and to places and social occasions” (p. xv).

*Relations in Public* builds upon Goffman’s work in *Interaction Ritual* around the social norms which guide individuals. In *Relations in Public* Goffman further concerns himself with the outcome of socialisation which informs the individual about what rules are ‘right’ and which are ‘wrong’ in the larger public game. Goffman further aligns himself with the social theory of symbolic interactionism when he states “the deepest nature of an individual is only skin deep, the deepness of his other’s skin” (Goffman, 1971, p. 363). We will come back in Chapter Four to the nature of this symbolic interactionist perspective.

### 3.3.4 – Frame Analysis

Finally *Frame Analysis*, while still concentrating on interaction, places a greater emphasis on the settings of these interactions, the frameworks which apply to social situations and mutual constructions. In *Frame Analysis* Goffman delves more into the ontological. The social frameworks within which we operate qualify actors as “self-determined agencies, legally competent to act and morally responsible for doing so properly” (Goffman, 1974, p. 188). It is only upon an

actor's non-conformance that the social frames within which we operate materialise. *Frame Analysis* sees a social assemblage at work. The individual is no longer the autonomous actor who creates the situation, instead "society often can be said to do so," (ibid, p. 2).

### **3.3.5 – Conclusion**

Goffman's later work expand upon and enhances *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, as Goffman moves to a more *networked* understanding of interaction. Although the concept of the network assemblage remains implied rather than explicit, it is clearly there as something to which we can connect our current interests.

### **3.4 – Chapter Summary**

To understand Goffman's applicability today "requires some settled judgement on the times in which he began to write and their relation to the times in which we now read" (Lemert & Branaman, 1997, p. xxi). The acquisition of such judgement is this project's primary concern. What this chapter suggests is a possible convergence of two perspectives: (1) Facebook's restabilisation of the virtual self (explained in Chapter 2), and (2) Goffman's depiction of a socially framed ceremony/game as the setting for the presentation of self. Through the ceremony/game of Facebook is the fluidity of virtual identity once hypothesised by Turkle now replaced by an enormously widespread 'framing' of virtual selves in self-presentational terms, that is neither radically unreliable (in the postmodern sense) nor radically authentic (as Rheingold might have hoped)? Instead of either of these 'radical' potentials having been realised, have we instead a suppression of extreme potentials in favour of something else that we still have to define more fully here?

## CHAPTER 4 - METHODOLOGY

*This chapter will discuss the procedures utilised for data collection and analysis. It will also outline the rationale behind the practical and theoretical methodological choices.*

### **4.1 – The Methodological Approach**

This project sought to better understand the relevance of Goffman's (1959) social-psychological, dramaturgical framework to online, mediated interaction. As already discussed, the applicability of Goffman's dramaturgical framework to online, mediated interaction has been largely unexplored. This lack of prior work left the field open for investigation; however, it also meant there was little basis upon which a hypothesis could be established.

When choosing a research method a scholar's epistemological, ontological, axiological and other ideological and philosophical beliefs tend to impact their choice (Creswell, 2009; Torraco, 2002; Gay & Weaver, 2011). When Dubin's positivist method of "theory-then research" (Torraco, 2002, p. 357) was unable to assist in the development of this project's research hypothesis, prior conceptions of what constitutes academic theory building had to be overcome. Months of literature review and research analysis did not yield a workable hypothesis and as a result, a hypothetico-inductive research model was adopted instead. In utilising an inductive methodology, this followed Mahootian and Eastman's (2009) statement that "successful science inquiry can proceed in the *absence of hypotheses*, and in the discovery and *selection of data* that are deemed worthy of hypothesizing about" (p. 65). So this shifted part of the literature review into Chapter Seven, about hypothesis building.

The lack of prior theory meant this project's research process was exploratory. Ruane (2005) explains "Exploratory research is typically conducted in the interest of "getting to know" or increasing our understanding of a new or little researched setting, group, or phenomenon; it is used to gain insight into a research topic" (p. 12). In the interest of better understanding mediated interaction this project, like

most exploratory studies, utilised a small sample of subjects which permitted the acquisition of “up-close first-hand information” (Ruane, 2005, p. 12).

#### **4.1.1 – Hypothetico-Inductive Research Model**

The hypothetico-inductive research model employed in this project is based on the grounded theory tradition (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) which operates in an almost reverse fashion from traditional positivist, deductive research models. Where deductive research requires that a hypothesis is based upon existing theories established within the field (e.g. via a literature review) before research commences (Mahootian & Eastman, 2009), inductive researchers collect all the relevant facts and then examine what emerges (Wengraf, 2006). Where “Deduction proves that something *must* be; Induction shows that something *actually is* operative” (Mahootian & Eastman, 2009, p. 66). In this project the relevant facts were collected, not for the purpose of drawing concrete conclusions, but rather, to provide exploratory research results upon which further deductive research could be based.

Grounded theory allows the research design to take shape after the research process has begun, permitting novel findings which “may not have been anticipated by the researcher” (Torraco, 2002, p. 373). The inductive, grounded theory research model utilised in this project, required the collection of relevant data to which evolving explanatory categories could be applied. Research results were subject to constant comparative analysis and the rigorous process of continually matching data and theory allowed for novel, if tentative hypothesis to evolve. The research process was conducted hypothesis free, the only assumption being that Goffman’s dramaturgical framework might assist in the understanding of online, mediated interaction of the sort now ‘framed’ by Facebook.

#### **4.1.2 – Social Constructionism**

Social constructionist theory building attempts to understand how people make sense of their everyday, social worlds through symbolic resources (Torraco, 2002). Like Goffman’s dramaturgical framework, the social constructionist perceives notions of interaction and identity to be parts of a constructed reality. This belief is shared by many social theorists (Cooley, 1902; Law & Hassard,

1999; Mead, 1938; Turkle, 1995) who, like Goffman, consider reality to be a socially constructed phenomenon, not independently knowable but fashioned through social narratives (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005, p. 34). This “impression of reality fostered by a performance” (Goffman, 1959, p. 56) is thereby subject to often contested interpretation.

Because this project sought to explore how interaction is experienced and given meaning in mediated environments, the social constructionist perspective best allowed for a model of this understanding to be developed as “constructionism emphasizes the role of humans in actively using symbolic resources to objectify, circulate and interpret the meaningfulness of their environments and existence” (Lindlof, 2011, p. 45). Communication is dependent upon the fashioning of symbols and social constructionism recognises the importance of this manipulation and interpretation in creating meaning. Facts are considered to be socially constructed and metaphorically based, as “one cannot escape perspective” (Gergen, 1991, p. 120). Social experience is also shaped by language. Constructionism recognises this importance of language and seeks to understand how social environments are experienced by analysing language use. Torraco (2002) explains that “social constructionist theory seeks to present authentic meaning through carefully crafted narratives of how people make sense of the social world in their everyday lives” (p. 362). The utilisation of the both the hypothetico-inductive model and social constructionist perspective also necessitated this project’s adoption of a qualitative methodology as “Interpretive methods, sometimes called naturalistic methods, are generally qualitative; the results are expressed in language rather than in numbers” (Priest, 2010, p. 4).

#### **4.1.3 – Qualitative Methodology**

Hypothetico-inductive research is typically qualitatively based (Gay & Weaver, 2011) and utilised in fields where controlled experiments are not feasible and the explored topics are difficult to quantify. The relevance of Goffman’s dramaturgical framework to online, mediated interaction could not be assessed through quantitative measures.

Previous interactionists have used quantitative methodologies sparingly, and primarily to complement more holistic qualitative methods (Davis, 2009; Smock, 2010; Tufekci, 2008b). The interpretative nature of this study and of many social-psychological interaction studies makes them difficult to quantify or measure. In-depth interviews, as Liamputtong & Ezzy (2005) explain, “aim to explore the complexity and in-process nature of meanings and interpretations that cannot be examined using positivist methodologies” (p. 56).

From a broadly post-modernist point of view, empirical, positivist methods are no less value free than their qualitative post-positivist counterparts (Whittle & Spicer, 2008, p. 617). More cynically Liamputtong & Ezzy (2005) claim “positivists are naïve realists” (p. 34) who believe they are external to the subject of study and are both uninfluenced and un-influencing in their observations (p. 34). Quantitative methods, according to this post-modernist critique, are no more scientific than qualitative methods and are subject to the same interpretative constraints. Influenced by Goffman and the theoretical frameworks upon which much of the interactionist literature is based, this project sought to use a post-positivist qualitative methodology.

#### **4.1.4 – In-Depth Interviews**

To find the relevant facts necessary for the development of a research hypothesis two rounds of five in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted. In-depth interviews allowed for the development of a research hypothesis which was then tested by completing two in-depth interviews and case studies. The first ten in-depth interviews permitted the exploration of complex theories and the semi-structured nature allowed for the probing of interviewees on important topics of relevance. The use of semi-structured interviewing allowed the project to explore the subjective world of the interviewees and how they conceptualised their online interactions.

In-depth interviews were chosen because they “explore the complexity and in-process nature of meanings and interpretations that cannot be examined using positivist methodologies” (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005 p. 56). This project’s hypothesis building (Chapter Five) would not have been feasible using solely

quantitative methods as “a quantitative approach limits investigation to factors that can be measured; this can mean ignoring important aspects of human social behavior, such as meaning itself, that may be difficult or impossible to quantify” (Priest, 2010, p. 4). Instead in-depth interviews aided this project’s exploration of the interpretative world of online social interaction as “in-depth interviews allow new understandings and theories to be developed *during* the research process” (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005, p. 71, emphasis added).

Participant observation was an alternative potential method utilised by Goffman (1959) and by many recent interactionists (Boyd & Heer, 2006; Boyd, 2008; Turkle, 1995). Due to the online nature of this project however, participant observation would have been subject to access, privacy and interpretative constraints. The content analysis method was a less common (Zhao, Gradmuck, & Martin, 2008) yet a potential method of choice. By focusing primarily on online content however, the motivations and understandings of research participants would have been left unexplored. In-depth semi-structured interviews allowed for contextually rich understandings and analyses while a complimentary content analysis of case study participant’s online interactions allowed for method triangulation.

#### **4.1.5 – Semi-Structured Interviews**

The exploratory nature of this project required a level of flexibility from its interviews. Semi-structured interviewing is best utilised for exploratory research where details, unique experiences, and perspectives are required. Semi-structured interviews were therefore the natural choice, allowing for greater depth, probing, and relevant directional questioning.

The initial attempt to begin with broad generalised questions was resisted by interviewees and short answers were provided. To ensure a greater collation of information a new format was employed which eased interviewees into the interview process with simpler questions, followed by broader questions, probes and enquiries. This is referred to as the inverted funnel approach (Wengraf, 2006, p. 109). This improvised, but relevant probing, allowed for greater insight into the subjective world of the participants. One-on-one interviews were chosen over

focus groups so as to allow for greater depth and exploration of individual participants' understandings and experiences.

#### **4.1.6 – Triangulation**

Methods triangulation, research triangulation, and theory triangulation can assist in adding validity to a researcher's results (Liamputton & Ezzy, 2005). Such triangulation is necessary because "research methods are not neutral tools that will produce the same results regardless of the method. Triangulation addresses this problem" (ibid, p. 41). Particularly important to this project, multi-method research is thought to help us "gain a better understanding of identity construction in different online environments" (Zhao, Gradmuch, & Martin, 2008, p. 1832)

This project achieved theory triangulation by utilising both the hypothetico-inductive research model and subsequently the deductive research model. Such utilisation was possible because the "frameworks are synergistic" (Mahootian & Eastman, 2009, p. 73) rather than exclusive. The combination of approaches allowed for method triangulation whereby both in-depth interviewing and content analyses were conducted. Finally a further level of research triangulation was achieved by testing and analysing interactionist theories against the collected research data (Chapter Five).

#### **4.2 – The Method**

A combination of in-depth interviews hypothesis building and conclusion drawing case studies comprised the project's methodology, the aim being to better understand the applicability, or inapplicability, of Goffman's dramaturgical framework and, through interviewing, "provide generalisations about social processes and typical patterns of meaning" (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005, p. 45) The step by step method of this project is outlined below.

##### **4.2.1 – Ethical Approval**

This project sought ethical approval from The University of Waikato Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee prior to the collection of primary research data. An ethical statement was developed and submitted and,

with a few minor adjustments, the application to conduct primary research via interviews was approved.

This project and its ethics application were guided by the ethical statement of the British Sociological Association (2002). As such, the physical, social and psychological well-being of participants during interviews was assured. Privacy and anonymity were given to all interviewees and their personal information was kept confidential. Furthermore, transparency was aimed for with all interview participants, particularly in regards to the use and purpose of this project and their data.

This project's use of human participants for in-depth interviewing meant informed consent was a high ethical priority. A responsibility to "explain as fully as possible, and in terms meaningful to participants, what the research is about, who is undertaking it and financing it, why it is being undertaken, and how it is to be disseminated" (British Sociological Association, 2002) was taken on board from the project's outset. Potential participants were given an information and consent form detailing the project and its requirements before any interviews were conducted (See Appendix A). Participants were made aware of their ability to refuse to participate or answer any question without penalty. Participants were also given a two week time frame after the interview, in which time they could choose to no longer have their information included in this project.

Ethical concern over participant's privacy was a matter which this project attempted to address. Participants were each given pseudonyms which were applied to their transcripts and all future references beyond the initial interviews. This protective measure preserved the confidentiality of participants. Concern over anonymity meant pseudonyms were also applied to all third party interview references and no specific information could be linked to the interview participants. Participants were made aware of their protection prior to the interviews and were therefore free to answer interview questions without concern over future implications. The protection of interview material was also a concern and as such was stored on a personal usb hard drive which was located in a locked

home office filing cabinet. The storage of interview material and transcripts were arranged to be stored on said device for a minimum of five years.

The use of online interviews raised specific ethical concerns which were readily addressed. Online, what is private and what is public is difficult to discern (British Sociological Association, 2002). Particular care was therefore taken to ensure security of the participant's interview material and a personal, password protected chat service was used. Ethical concern over access to participants online was also addressed by ensuring an information sheet and consent form was provided and returned by willing participants. Special care was taken to ensure all in-person interviews were conducted with the utmost concern for their privacy and therefore room bookings for interviews were never placed under interviewee names.

The sample of participants was selected from a pre-existing and known group of Facebook users. The relationship between participants and researcher was established prior to research being conducted and ethical consideration was given to this factor. Consideration of communicative goals, both of participants and researchers, is necessary for both qualitative and quantitative researchers. This project was therefore conducted under the awareness that "anything that is said, done, or apparently expressed in an interview is, as Maxwell points out, *fallible evidence of extra-interview realities*." (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005, p. 59). Conclusions drawn from interview communication were therefore cognisant of this factor.

The truthfulness of research participants is an ethical concern when conclusions must be drawn from their data. While outright lies may occur, it is often an issue of accurately encoding and decoding communication messages which researchers must be wary of (Wengraf, 2006, p. 49). Lindlof (2011) further explains how for a researcher of interaction the:

performance is not only the *object* of study for these scholars; it is also its *mode*. That is, they appropriate performance as an allegory in which corresponding elements of *the qualitative research process* are reframed as performer, audience, script, theatre, and so on. Viewed through this

lens, the researcher's presentation of self is central, fieldwork dialogue is both pre-scripted and improvised in the moment, and knowledge emerges from the contingencies of situated, collaborative interaction. (p. 26)

It was therefore important for this project to analyse the interview material carefully, pay attention to the words used and be conscious of their effects (Wengraf, 2006, p. 49). To put it simply “any analysis of interview material which assumes (rather than questions) a straight-forward automatic correspondence between the ‘presented world’ and the ‘actual world’ may be considered to be variably naïve and potentially worthless” (ibid, p. 27).

This project's use of qualitative, in-depth semi-structured interviews necessitated some specific ethical considerations. Qualitative research is often criticised by quantitative positivist researchers, who believe qualitative researchers can skew their research to achieve the desired results (Fine, 1993, p. 73). Positivists argue that the best way to understand reality is with a “strict reliance on an empirical (or data-based) research method” (Priest, 2010, p. 3) with the overall aim of developing a “science of society” (ibid). From the post-positivist perspective, which is employed in this study, both qualitative and quantitative researchers have developed a constructed reality and this formation is not method specific.

Finally the claimed application of this project's research results was an ethical matter. To apply the results produced from this project's research methods more broadly as a representation of all online interaction would be unethical. This project was not exhaustive and it aimed to be an introductory exploration. A wider scope would have allowed for more applicability but just as “no map can include everything about the territory of which it is a representation – a map that excluded nothing would be an identical full-size reduplication of the original” (Wengraf, 2006, p. 51). So the map offered here remains small in scale.

#### **4.2.2 – Participant Recruitment**

Hypothesis building interviews were conducted in two rounds of five where interview participants were recruited based on their fitting a purposive-typical requirement. A non-probability purposive-typical sample was chosen with the aim

to “select information-rich cases for studying in depth” (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005 p. 45). The non-probability sample technique allowed for the selection of interview participants who met the purposive-typical requirements.

Research participants were chosen based on their fitting a purposive-typical requirement as outlined below. Participants recruited needed to have a Facebook profile. Facebook was chosen as it is the most popular social networking website, with over 900 million active users as we have seen (Facebook, 2012). Participants were chosen based on whether they used Facebook on a daily basis, as more than 50% of its users log on to Facebook every day (Facebook, 2012). Participants chosen were to be aged between eighteen and twenty four, as this age group comprises Facebook’s largest user base (Facebook, 2012), however this was expanded to include willing participants slightly outside of this age range. Participants were also chosen based on their number of friends, with the average number for all Facebook users being 130 (Facebook, 2012).

The procedures for choosing the first ten, hypothetico-inductive, interview participants were used as approximate guidelines. The parameters were not stringent but were used to gather the most common sorts of Facebook user information and therefore develop a valid and reliable hypothesis. The purpose of such medians being chosen was to ensure that interview participants were not non-typical outliers, which could yield atypical research results.

The sample of interview participants was set at ten. This number allowed for a broad range of interview participants within the set parameters, while still working within the time constraints of this project. The interviews were conducted in two rounds of five, allowing for interview material to be examined in between for themes and commonalities. Upon completion of the first round of five interviews a tentative hypothesis was developed and focused upon in the subsequent round.

Hypothesis building research participants were selected from a pre-existing group of Facebook users. Potential interview participants were contacted via Facebook’s personal chat and message service where they received a copy of this project’s

information and consent form. After this initial invitation to participate, answers to all questions were given and extra information was provided where requested. Finally, when participants had agreed to be interviewed and returned the consent form, an interview time was arranged.

Upon completion of the first ten in-depth interviews an initial hypothesis for the project was developed. The hypothesis was based on the interview material's coding and analysis. Upon development of this hypothesis, two Facebook users were chosen as the project's primary in-depth case studies. The two case study participants, unlike prior interviewees, were unknown to the researcher and accessed via network recommendations. These case study participants were recommended based on their level of involvement with Facebook. The two case study participants were also chosen to be deliberately dissimilar. This allowed for some variation in the samples and maximised the chance of obtaining varying perspectives.

The two potential case study participants were given access to the information and consent form prior to the interviews being conducted. Both of the initially recommended case study participants agreed upon reading the information and consent form to participate and returned the signed consent form. Interviews and content analysis were then completed.

#### **4.2.3 – Interviews**

Data collection took place during a two month period between March and April of 2012. The first round of five, in-depth, semi-structured interviews was conducted in person. Upon return of the project's consent form in-person interviews were arranged to take place in The University of Waikato's library group rooms. This ensured minimal disturbance and recording accuracy. The first round of interview participants agreed to have the interview recorded, which was done using a cellular phone recording application. The recordings allowed for word-for-word transcription to occur after the interviews.

The second round of five, in-depth, semi-structured interviews was conducted online. Geographic dispersal of interview participants necessitated the use of these

remote interviews in the second round. Facebook's real-time chat service allowed for greater flexibility, it resolved time and access constraints and allowed geographically distant people to participate. It was already a prerequisite of this project that interviewees had access to and utilised the online communication tool Facebook. Facebook's real-time chat service was to be used as access was predetermined and its simultaneous nature allowed for a continuous two-way flow of communication.

Interviewees were all asked the same initial questions to get the interviewee comfortable and develop a flow of communication. As Ruane (2005) suggests after introducing respondents to the project it is best to open with "interesting or pleasant questions that are easy to answer" (p. 135). After this, broader questions were asked about their Facebook interactions. These questions were then followed up with flexible question posing and probes formulated in response to the interviewee's answers (See Appendix B). An interview schedule was used, though adapted to become more like a guide than a strict format because as understandings emerge "the phrasing of the questions and the order in which they are asked are altered to fit each individual. Open-ended interviewing assumes that meanings, understandings and interpretations cannot be standardized" (Liamputtong & Ezzy, D, 2005, p. 61).

#### **4.2.4 – Coding and Analysis**

In-person interviews were recorded using a digital recording application. Interviews were then transcribed, word-for-word, using computer software. Issues of inaccuracy were avoided by conducting the in-person interviews in a quiet space where recording was undisturbed and clear. The online interview transcripts were copied word-for-word from Facebook's real time chat service. Both in person and online interview transcripts were offered to participants for them to review, edit, or delete at they saw fit.

Upon completion of the first round of five in-person interviews and transcription, the process of axial coding was begun. Axial coding allowed for key themes to be identified amongst the interview material which specifically related to the project's research questions. The specialised analytical constant comparative

method was utilised to “extract recurring themes from a large body of verbal or textual material (such as a set of interview transcripts) in a systematic way” (Priest, 2010, p. 18). Dramaturgical framework relevant codes included: impression management, audience segregation, technological impact, scepticism, withdrawal, and sincerity versus cynicism. Constant comparative analysis allowed these codes to develop as the second round of in-depth interviews commenced.

From the second round of in-depth interviews the themes developed further until one key hypothesis emerged. The concept of sincerity versus cynicism was a prevalent factor in determining both the level of interaction and how one interacted on this mediated forum. The level of sincerity one holds for their own interactions was dealt with by Goffman (1959) and many key interaction theorists when determining the level of belief one puts into a performance. Through constant comparative analysis key themes extracted from the data were compared to interaction and identity theories, with the ‘sincerity’ theme already flagged. From this a hypothesis was developed which was then tested via two case studies.

#### **4.2.5 – Case Studies**

After the initial hypothetico-inductive in-depth interviews were completed, the two case studies were arranged. Setting the number of case studies at two allowed for some variation in participants while still keeping within the time constraints of this project. Case study participants were accessed via recommendations, based on their high usage and interaction with Facebook. Variation in case study participants was also a priority. By choosing dissimilar participants, it was thought potential result similarities could yield more interesting conclusions and discussions.

The case studies were comprised of both an in-depth interview, similar to, yet more comprehensive than prior participant interviewing, and a content analysis of the participant’s Facebook pages. Upon recommendation, a case study consent and information form was provided to two potential participants. Both potential case study participants, a female in her twenties, and a male in his sixties agreed to participate in an interview.

Both case study interviews took slightly over one hour to complete and concentrated on their use of, and interaction on, the social networking website Facebook. Particular focus was given to questions surrounding issues of identity and interaction online, the question of ‘sincerity’ having been flagged by the preceding work. Interviews took place at the case study participants’ chosen locations, one in a quiet café, and the other in a vacant university room. Interviews were once again recorded, and transcribed using a digital transcription program. The case study participants were then friended on Facebook and the interview transcripts were sent to them for review.

Further axial coding took place after the interviews’ completion and from this data the content analyses were begun. The content analysis of case study participants’ Facebook focused primarily on their profiles and homepages. Axial coding developed the emerging hypothesis into three key themes; romanticist ideals, impression management, and platform withdrawal. Each of these key themes included at least three sub-themes which embraced the research results as these emerged.

#### **4.2.6 – Reliability and Validity**

Reliability means “that repeating the same procedure would be highly likely to generate nearly the same result” (Priest, 2010, p. 67). Precise repeatability of this study would be difficult due to the qualitative, semi-structured methodology and interpretative nature, however, in theory, it could be conducted to yield similar results. Due to the exploratory and introductory nature of this project, a study using a larger field of analysis would be interesting, and would further the reliability and research results of this project.

Validity refers to “whether you are measuring the things you think you’re measuring--those that interest you on a theoretical level” (Priest, 2010, p. 67). Validity is a key issue for positivist, quantitative research where measurements are the basis of their evidence. But validity was achieved in this project by utilising non-probability recruitment techniques. Participants were chosen based on their use of Facebook to meet both purposive-typical requirements, and later, greater variation and depth.

The development of theory, based on the project's research results, has not been used in an attempt to achieve wider applicability. General applicability is not a fundamental goal, as "the results are still qualitative--there is no foundation for generalizing on statistical grounds to a larger population, which is not the goal of qualitative work in any event." (Priest, 2010, p. 165). Results and theory are exploratory in nature and create a basis upon which further interactionist study could take place.

#### **4.2.7 – The Sample**

The final hypothetico-inductive research sample was comprised of ten interview participants. All interview participants were active users of Facebook. All interview participants created their Facebook accounts between 2006 and 2009 with a majority leaning toward the former. Interview participants all logged into Facebook at least once a day, however most participants stated they were using Facebook more often than this, often logging in and checking their news feed multiple times a day. For more information and a list of interview participants please see Table 1.

***Table 1.***

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Years on Facebook</b>	<b>Friend Count</b>
Interview 1	24	6	124
Interview 2	27	3	213
Interview 3	30	5	126
Interview 4	23	6	156
Interview 5	24	3	194
Interview 6	27	5	47
Interview 7	28	5	239
Interview 8	23	5	254
Interview 9	22	3	220
Interview 10	25	5	401

Case study participants were also active users of the social networking website Facebook. Participants logged in at least once a day and both had been users of the website for several years, see Table 2.

**Table 2.**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Years on Facebook</b>	<b>Friend Count</b>
Case study 1	65	4	157
Case study 2	22	4	271

### **4.3 – Chapter Summary**

It is true that “today’s truth may be rejected tomorrow” (Priest, 2010, p. 5), and the interview process made this a constant reality. The constant comparing and contrasting of research material and theoretical perspectives allowed this project’s initial results to continually develop. The end result was a reflexive process of hypothesis building. So it is now necessary to present the ‘theory’ which was accessed during the described process in order to reflexively build a hypothesis.

## CHAPTER 5 – THEORETICAL RESOURCES FOR HYPOTHESIS BUILDING

*This chapter discusses the theoretical material that the project drew on for hypothesis building. Although presented sequentially, this material was explored in parallel with the methods described in the previous chapter. This allowed for an iterative process in formulating a hypothesis about the data being gathered, rather than putting ‘theory’ in place first.*

### **5.1 – Identity and Interaction Theories**

Prior sociological theories provide insight into the ways in which interaction and identity have been conceptualised in the past. In attempting to understand the relevance of Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical theory in online environments, it is important that this project also considers alternative theories. Previous online identity and interaction studies, informed by specific sociological theories, provide insight into how identity can be understood in mediated environments. Informed by these initial theories and the studies that have utilised them, this project will develop a hypothesis for interpreting its own empirical findings.

#### **5.1.1 – Symbolic Interactionism**

Symbolic interactionism’s origins lie in the work of two key theorists, George Herbert Mead and Charles Horton Cooley. Their work on symbolic interactionism which took place during the early twentieth century is, even today, highly influential in social psychology and sociology. From the work of Mead and Cooley, many interactionists, highly influenced by the forefathers’ theories, continued to develop this perspective.

Symbolic interaction’s primary premise is that the self, the way in which we understand who we are, is a social and ‘interactive’ construct. Symbolic interactionism was innovatory in that it stepped away from the romanticist sense of self that was prevalent in the nineteenth century (Gergen, 1991). Robinson (2007) explains:

Symbolic interactionist perspectives challenge the western conception of the person as bounded and unique (Andersen, 1997) by claiming that the

self is the product of interaction rather than an immutable entity. By asserting that the self is empirical rather than essential, symbolic interaction contests the popular idea of the bounded self that exists outside of social interaction. (p. 94)

Symbolic interactionists did not, unlike romanticists, believe in an organic self which is independent from society (Robinson, 2007). A person was not considered to be born with characteristics or traits, instead, these qualities could only be said to exist if they were recognised by others. Mead argued that the “self is something which has development; it is not initially there, at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity” (Mead, 1934, p. 135). The independently knowable and static self of the nineteenth century (Gergen, 1991) was no longer. In its place symbolic interactionists placed the realisation that one cannot have a self without others to help construct, and affirm it.

According to symbolic interactionists, the relational construction of self means that identity can be considered both dynamic and changeable (Varis, Wang, & Du, 2011), because as relations change, so to do our conceptions of self. Put simply, to understand oneself as a leader, others must follow, and to understand oneself as attractive, others must be attracted (Gergen, 1991). Mead and Cooley organise this theory’s premise in similar, yet subtly different ways. Mead organises the social theory into what he terms, the ‘I’ and the ‘me’ (Mead, 1934). For Mead this is a process of self-ing in which the “‘me’ referred to the social self while ‘I’ is the response to ‘me’” (Ellis, 2010, p. 39). In a similar way, yet perhaps more recognisably, Cooley explains interactionism through what he termed the looking glass self (Cooley, 1902). This is a three step process where, “First, the self imagines how it appears to others. Second, the self then imagines the other’s judgment. Finally, the self develops an emotional response to that judgement” (Robinson, 2007, p. 95). Already we can begin to see how something like Facebook may frame just such a process. Is ‘friending’ a stepped process of this sort?

Both approaches consider the self to be dynamic. To know one self through others, is to be, in a sense, as plural as the number of people you interact with.

This pluralism “undermines the concept of truth, creates a consciousness of self-construction, and kindles doubt in any form of “internal essences” or resources” (Gergen, 1991, p. 207) of the sort held dear by romanticists. Even Mead’s idea of the generalised other, which assembles individuals, and thereby provides a typical social role organisation for interaction and identity, cannot entirely avoid the multiplicity of identities produced through numerous communities. It is at this point that Goffman facilitates a greater understanding of symbolic interactionism. For if “each of us is a metaphor for those with whom we come in contact” (Gergen, 1991, p. 223) our conception of self, even if organised by social roles, needs to be understood as diverse and dynamic. Social roles, defined by Goffman (1959) as the “enactment of rights and duties attached to a given status” (p. 16) help to explain this perceived diversity of self, and further Park’s (1950) explanation of identity where he states:

It is probably no mere historical accident that the word person, in its first meaning, is a mask. It is rather a recognition of the fact that everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role... It is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves. (p. 249)

The *enactment* of identities therefore provides symbolic interactionism with a solution to the problem of multiple selves. For, as Varis, Wang, and Du (2011) state:

We cannot see identity as an essential feature of individuals, but as a bundle of processes and practices. We also need to pluralize ‘identity’, and start from the assumption that people do not ‘have’ *one* identity, but *perform a repertoire* of identities by means of resources they have acquired and have at their disposal for such purposes. (p. 267)

Rather than slipping into postmodernism’s tendency merely to celebrate the plurality, Goffman can aid the interactionist’s understanding of self-ing through the choosing of social roles, not the playful invention of the roles, as “he and his

body merely provide the peg on which something of collaborative manufacture will be hung for a time” (p. 253).

#### **5.1.1.1 – Symbolic Interactionism and Erving Goffman**

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman argues that impressions of self are constructed and construed via performance based interactions. While some theorists dispute Goffman’s labelling as a symbolic interactionist due to his unique approach (Burns, 1992), this study considers the commonalities of Goffman’s perspective in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* and the broader field of symbolic interactionism.

Goffman focuses primarily on day-to-day social interactions which help create and maintain a given impression of self. He reiterates Cooley’s (1902) three step process in which interaction occurs and self is created, when Goffman writes of the “person we can imagine that others might imagine us to be” (p. 236). He goes further to explain, in very interactional identity-based terms that:

the self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented.  
(p. 253)

Goffman (1959) does however, remain ambiguous as to whether he regards the back region self as one which is equated with a static, organic or born ‘self’. He states the “back region or backstage may be defined as a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course” (p. 112). Goffman does not directly attest to there being a true identity which is only revealed back stage, but rather contradicts this in saying, “in our society the character one performs and one’s self are somewhat equated” (p. 252). The concept of a fixed identity is further quelled in Goffman’s (1959) quoting of Park (1950) where he states:

It is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves. In a sense, and in so far as this mask represents the

conception we have formed of ourselves – the role we are striving to live up to – this mask is our truer self, the self we would like to be. In the end, our conception of our role becomes second nature and an integral part of our personality. We come into the world as individuals, achieve character, and become persons. (p. 249)

The idea of a static self however, is not entirely untranslatable to the symbolic interactionist theory. While Cooley (1902) contributed to the idea of interaction based identity, he also believed in a ‘true’, or ‘raw’ self which served as the base for the interactional self. This is contrasted by the likes of Mead (1934) who gives the self no distinctive attributes outside of those formed through interaction (Robinson, 2007). Goffman’s theories of impression management via interaction can therefore not be excluded from symbolic interactionism on this premise and in Robinson’s (2007) words, Goffman’s dramaturgical approach “of the self fits nicely with the symbolic interaction self in that the performer’s role is inseparable from the audience’s anticipated response” (p. 96). This is an idea that we can carry forward into our findings about Facebook users.

#### **5.1.1.2 – Symbolic Interactionism and Online Interaction**

Online interaction and identity studies utilising a symbolic interactionist framework are scarce. Symbolic interaction’s development in the early twentieth century, left the later fields of mediated interaction unimagined. Interactionists’ more current exploration of the micro social exchanges have often avoided discussing mediated interaction, from the early days of letter writing, to radio, to television, to today’s use of the internet. More recent studies, that examine interaction online, have evoked symbolic interactionism and Goffman’s dramaturgical framework uncritically in their attempts to analyse other aspects of mediated interaction (see below).

##### **5.1.1.2.1 – Aspling**

A master’s thesis titled, *The private and the public in online presentations of the self: A critical development of Goffman’s dramaturgical perspective* by Aspling (2011) from Stockholm University, is one of the most recent, and critical, explorations of Goffman’s applicability to mediated environments. Aspling

concentrates on what constitutes public and private spaces online, and draws parallels between this and Goffman's relevance. By interviewing ten participants, all of whom used both Facebook and personal blogs, Aspling hoped to draw conclusions regarding the types of mediated interaction which Goffman is and is not, applicable to.

From his ten interviews, Aspling suggests that Goffman's dramaturgical framework is more applicable to Facebook than to personal blogs. Aspling further suggests that Facebook is a type of front stage, whereas blogs allow people to re-stage the front stage as a back stage. The applicability of Goffman's dramaturgical framework to both mediums is, according to Aspling "not fully appropriate to use" (p. 42). The lack of co-presence, the re-staging of the front as the back, the diffused nature of the audience, and the lack of synchronicity are considered restraining features of Goffman's applicability. While Aspling believes performances still occur in these online environments, the perceived breakdown of back and front stages means "Goffman's dramaturgical perspective is not a theoretical framework that, in general, is suitable for a comprehensive understanding of social interaction in mediated forms" (Aspling, 2011, p. 43).

Aspling's explanation of Goffman's lack of applicability concentrated primarily on the perceived correspondence of public and private, and back and front stage. The backstage however, according to Goffman (1959), is a place relative to the front, where impression management takes place. Aspling concedes that presentations are taking place in both mediated environments, and as such, these spaces, according to Goffman, must be understood as a front. Aspling's convergence of private information sharing and the back stage perhaps hinders his ability to understand Goffman's interactionist perspective in these online environments. We will come back to these front/back distinctions in the later chapters.

The technological aspect of online mediated interaction is often considered a constraint to symbolic interactionism's applicability. Aspling (2011) reiterates this perceived constraint, declaring that the lack of synchronicity and the lack of co-presence, means Goffman's framework cannot be fully utilised. By considering

the lack of bodily co-presence as an inhibiting feature of Goffman's framework, rather than understanding co-presence as "being accessible, available and subject to one another" (Pinch, 2010, p. 413), one is never going to utilise Goffman's framework in any mediated environment or understand his potential for explaining online interaction. Finally, while Aspling offers insight into the potential of Goffman's ideas, he does not explore any related alternatives. Uninformed by other interaction theories, Aspling offers quite narrow insights into the limitations of one theory, and misses the possibility that related theories might allow us to modify our application of it.

#### **5.1.1.2.2 - Boyd**

Boyd is a current research assistant professor of the Media, Culture, and Communication department at New York University. Boyd's concentration has been on social media and she has written numerous papers on young people's use of social networking websites. While Boyd covers a wide variety of topics, most concentrate on social networking websites' dual private and public nature and how social interaction is conducted in these environments.

Boyd's conclusions on online interaction are often informed by the symbolic interactionist perspective. Boyd's work also often draws on Goffman's dramaturgical framework as a way of understanding social interaction and identity online. In *Why youth (heart) social network sites: The role of networked publics in teenage social life* Boyd (2008c) discusses the techniques teenagers employ to manage impressions and privacy concerns. Boyd argues that while the body usually serves as the critical site for identity performances, online the factors of persistence, search-ability, copy-ability, and invisible audiences strongly influence teenagers' ability to "define a situation" (p. 12). In *Facebook privacy settings: Who cares?* Boyd (2010) investigates the use, disuse and reasons behind privacy setting choices on social networking websites. Once again, Boyd draws on the work of Goffman and symbolic interactionism, stating "managing social situations and navigating impression management requires understanding one's audience (Goffman, 1959). In a mediated environment where one's audience is not easily understood, privacy settings can be used to control and manage one's audience" (p. 18).

Audience segregation, privacy, and technological impact are often considered to alter the symbolic interactionist perspective in online environments (Boyd, 2010). In *I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience*, Boyd (2010) investigates these matters. She discovers variables which differ from face-to-face interaction and identifies them as issues which complicate the interactionist theory. In saying “technology complicates our metaphors of space and place, including the belief that audiences are separate from each other” (Boyd, 2010, p. 115), she does not suggest that interactionism may not be a valid way of understanding online interaction, instead it is assumed that any outlying conditions are complications of the interactionism theory that have to be accommodated.

Boyd’s work is primarily based on symbolic interactionist theory and other sociological theories are not applied. While Boyd offers insight into the ways in which young people use social networking websites, her still fairly uncritical application of Goffman and symbolic interactionism is notable. Her somewhat intuitive application of an interactionist framework yields interesting results, but a project such as this one may help bring further validity to her arguments.

#### **5.1.1.2.3 - Hogan**

Hogan (2010) in *The presentation of self in the age of social media: Distinguishing performances and exhibitions online* applies Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical framework to an online environment, discusses the limitations of this application, and proposes alterations to the underpinning symbolic interactionist theory when applied in an online environment. Hogan like many academics utilising a symbolic interactionist perspective recognises the limitations of interactionism’s application to online communication. Constraining features, such as different usages of time, space, and audience segregation are again considered a hindrance to applying Goffman’s symbolic interactionist point of view without modification.

Hogan (2010) makes several suggestions as to how symbolic interactionism can be adjusted for application online. Hogan suggests that we “distinguish between

performance as ephemeral act and performance as recorded act” (p. 380). He differentiates traditional performances in synchronous spaces and coins a new term for asynchronous communication which he calls “exhibition spaces” (p. 377) where self-presentation takes place via “artifacts” (p. 377). This twist on Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical framework is taken a step further when Hogan says “the world is not only a stage but also a library and a gallery. We do not merely move through life’s stages... but leave a multitude of data traces as we go” (p. 377). Clearly this notion of traces left or not intersects with the question of privacy settings as factors in any staged online presence.

The issue of context collapse which occurs “when disparate social contexts are collapsed into one” (Boyd, 2008a, p. 18) and is caused by a lack of audience segregation is also discussed by Hogan (2010). He explains social network users’ capacity to communicate despite this context collapse as an ability to appeal to “the lowest common denominator of the people who view his content” (p. 383). Hogan suggests that online, we concern ourselves with only two audiences, those to whom we want to present an idealised self, and those who may find that problematic (p. 383). With these strategic considerations, Hogan believes a presentation of self can then take place online.

Hogan’s significant adaptations of the dramaturgical interactionist theory recognise its differences from face-to-face communication but still preserve some core interactionist principles.

#### **5.1.1.2.4 - Robinson**

Robinson (2007) in *The cyberself: The self-ing project goes online, symbolic interaction in the digital age* was one of the first theorists to explore the applicability of symbolic interaction to online environments. The article took a critical approach to postmodernist accounts, and discussed the inapplicability of postmodernism by exploring the ways in which symbolic interactionism could provide for less diffuse and unbounded understandings of self-presentation in interactive environments.

Robinson begins by discussing why postmodernism can no longer be understood as a valid way to conceptualise online identities. She states:

I find that in creating online selves, users do not seek to transcend the most fundamental aspects of their offline selves. Rather, users bring into being bodies, personas, and personalities framed according to the same categories that exist in the offline world. (p. 94)

Robinson, with this emphasis on framing, argues that postmodernism is no longer a useful perspective on new online environments. The generalisation of postmodernism's early MUD hypothesis to internet culture is generally criticised by Robinson (2007) as she states "postmodern accounts of cyberself-ing cannot credibly be regarded as generalizable to newer internet populations" (p. 101). To explore new online environments, Robinson applies symbolic interactionist theory in postmodernism's stead.

Symbolic interactionism is "crucial to understanding the cyberself-ing process because the cyberself is formed and negotiated in the same manner as the offline self" (Robinson, 2007, p. 94). Online identities are considered to be extensions of the offline masterself (p. 103) which was still 'itself' a product of interaction. Rather than understanding the self as fragmented and multiple and even invented as postmodernist accounts did. Robinson argues that "multiple self-ing online is in no way different from the chameleon-like behavior individuals may exhibit in the offline world" (p. 100).

Robinson's exploration of symbolic interactionism in online environments is highly informative for this study. The article, however, lacked empirical data or any form of concrete research data to support its conclusion. To defend, or dismiss the claims made by Robinson further investigation is required as "science is not willing to trust a mere assertion – it demands empirical documentation" (Ruane, 2005, p. 10). The dated nature of the discussion also means a more current analysis is required. As Robinson herself advocated, identity theorisation is prone to becoming dated, and just as postmodernism was no longer considered

explanatory, it is important to evaluate symbolic interactionism's own potential successor.

### **5.1.2 – Postmodernism, Multiplication, and Fragmentation**

Postmodernism is an ontology, claiming there is no absolute truth. Postmodernism of self holds itself in opposition to the positivist and modernist perspectives that dominated much of the twentieth century in many fields. This extreme social constructionist perspective on reality is far reaching, and has found footing in many interaction and identity studies.

As we noted in an earlier chapter, postmodernism has become an especially popular way of understanding self in online environments. Stepping away from the original symbolic interactionist perspective, and taking a step further than Goffman's dramaturgical approach, postmodernism sees the self as capable of multiplying and fragmenting through unbounded 'performances'. Rather than seeing life as a stage and ourselves as actors, postmodernism declares "we no longer exist as playwrights or actors, but as terminals of multiple networks" (Baudrillard, 1987, p. 16), and these networks *perform us*.

Coherency of self and the ability to know one self through the roles one plays is largely dismissed by postmodernist thought. The symbolic nature of identity from an interactionist perspective is broken down and in its place a radically fluid self is seemingly found. Even further disparity is found between postmodernism and the romanticist sense of self, as any absolutely fixed sense of real is largely considered illusory in postmodernist thought. The postmodernist sense of self has been greatly influenced by the increasingly mediated, networked, and socially saturated experiences of late twentieth century and early twenty-first lifestyles.

#### **5.1.2.1 - Postmodernism and Online Interaction**

The postmodernist identity perspective largely arose in reaction to the increasingly mediated environments of western society. As the environments which define us ever expand and the networks increase, so do our understandings of self. No longer limited by bounded relationships, the language of selfhood and therefore our ability to understand self in multiple ways became intensified. The

fixed nature of identity was challenged as the potential for seemingly unlimited experiences and relationships developed and with it the semantics of self as something fluid and changeable.

#### **5.1.2.1.1 – Turkle**

One of the first, and most famous postmodernist theory driven, pieces of online research was Turkle's (1995) *Life on the Screen: Identity in the age of the internet*. As noted earlier Turkle provided insights into how we may understand online interaction from a non-symbolic interactionist point of view. Turkle's work, conducted during the early 1990's primarily concentrated on the users of MUDs but the findings of this research were applied far beyond this realm.

Turkle's interviews and direct observation of MUD users allowed her to apply a postmodernist understanding of identity online. Turkle identified an emergence of a fluid self, not only within the minds of participants, but located in western culture as a whole. Turkle states "in terms of our views of the self, new images of multiplicity, heterogeneity, flexibility, and fragmentation dominate current thinking about human identity" (p. 178). Turkle's widespread application of a somewhat controversial finding did however receive some criticism.

Turkle's work concentrated primarily on one medium, at a very specific time of online development, and was informed by a rather specific group of people: MUD users. Robinson (2007) states that the "fundamental flaw in postmodern interpretations of cyberself-ing lies in attempts to generalize from early studies of MUDs to cyberself-ing in general" (p. 101), Wakeford (1997) furthers this point arguing that "it is necessary to specify which aspects of new media are under examination in order to avoid the kind of 'conceptual leakage' that occurs when ideas about identity in one virtual context are applied to others" quoted in (Kennedy, 2006, p. 864). Turkle's (1995) research, while highly influential, has undoubtedly become dated and in need of re-examination in relation to more current online environments. Criticism of Turkle's broad conclusions may be justified; however outright dismissal of the postmodernist theory in online environments perhaps cannot be achieved without further consideration. It is important therefore for this project to understand postmodern thought as it may be

articulated by participants themselves. Conclusions drawn from this project however, will remain conscious of the environment upon which it is conducted, as even Turkle (1995) for all her tendency to generalise still states “the technologies of our everyday lives change the way we see the world” (p. 47). So the specificity of those technologies is inescapably important.

#### **5.1.2.1.2 - Gergen**

Gergen’s (1991) well known book, *The saturated self: Dilemmas of identity in contemporary life* explores the development of differing identity theories.

Following a similar train of thought as Turkle (1995), Gergen suggests that the technological, and the social saturation it achieves, is shifting our sense of self to a postmodernist perspective. Gergen begins by exploring the relationship between romanticism and the 1800’s village, goes on to review symbolic interactionism’s modernist and industrial context and ends by discussing the potentially unlimited relationships and therefore senses of selves facilitated by new technology, postmodernism, and post-industrial societies.

Gergen’s work is not based on primary research; his discussions on identity are mostly informed by theory and critical analysis. The social constructionist perspective of reality is applied in Gergen’s work. His belief that “words are not a mirror like reflections of reality, but expressions of group convention” (Gergen, 1991, p. 119) demonstrates why he believes identity theories have had to shift to more constructionist emphasises.

What Gergen offered was not only an understanding of how identity can be understood in technologically and socially saturated environments, but more importantly a theory about identity theory’s own development. Suggesting that technological mediation through industrialisation, science, the television, and now the computer, is shaping the way in which we understand ourselves and how identity theory is developed, Gergen’s work provides an interesting perspective for a project such as this to consider whilst collecting data. More recent analysis of identity construction and interaction online may prove to correspond to challenge Gergen’s understanding of self in these technological saturated environments. What is perhaps needed is a more recent approach to identity

construction theory, informed by Gergen but with consideration of more current technologically mediated environments. In short, what is needed is theory that understands *the network*.

### 5.1.3 – Actor Network Theory

Actor network theory originated from the work of John Law, Michel Callon, and Bruno Latour. Actor network theory is best understood as a “semiotics of materiality” (Law & Hassard, 1999, p. 4), of what non-human things mean. Actor network theory concentrates on what it terms networks. These networks are comprised of what it terms actants (Hanseth, Aanestad, & Berg, 2004). These can be human and non-human things interacting with each other. Relations and interactions are what form the network between two actants, and therefore define them.

ANT offers a modern and unique way of conceptualising networks and actors that has been strongly contested and hotly debated by social psychologists and interaction theorists. Lindlof and Taylor (2011) define it as a sociocultural theory which “has generated significant controversy--and growing interest--among researchers studying the often-related topics of science, technology, organization, and media” (p. 51). Controversy stems from ANT’s redefining of both the actant and the network. ANT argues that “researchers should impartially acknowledge the difference created by *all* types of entities involved in social interaction, regardless of their conformity to familiar categories” (Hanseth, Aanestad, & Berg, 2004, p. 51). ANT has, and confessedly, “opened the social sciences to non-humans” (Potts, 2009, p. 182) as a result of this impartiality. Dolwich (2009) explains:

the binary dualisms of social/natural, subject/object, individual/group, agency/structure, micro/macro, local/global, inside/outside, and particular/universal, are ‘bypassed’ (Latour 1999a) in favour of treating everything, humans and nonhumans alike, as relational effects. In such a way, ‘social’ is conceived of not as an essential property of humans, but as something that is actively assembled. (p. 36)

Actor network theory undeniably opens the social sciences to non-human in provocative ways. It collapses the prescribed differences between human and non-human, and gives equal respect to all, including technological artefacts (Whittle & Spicer, 2008). Distinguishing between actants, whether it is a human, an object, or a concept, is not of concern for those prescribing to the actor network theory. What is important is focusing “our theoretical lens on the nature of the network that ties together all actors in a web of discovery, action, scientific fact, and artifact” (Farai, Kwon, & Watts, 2004, p.187) .

ANT’s material-semiotic network recognises the power of non-human objects and technologies to help, hinder, shape, and influence our interactions and to give them meaning. ANT contrasts itself with previous action theories which conceptualised objects, including technologies, as mere tools to be used and defined by humans. ANT describes the ‘network’ as the symmetrical connectedness of the actants which influence and interact with one another, and goes on to suggest that “all networks are heterogeneous or socio-technical. There are no networks that consist of only humans or only of technological components. All networks contain elements of both” (Hanseth, Aanestad, & Berg, 2004, p. 117). In a sense, the network and the actant are one seamless structure, and certainly inseparable. This is highlighted by Latour, as cited by Saito, who says “when we speak of actor we should always add the large network of attachments making it act” (2005, p. 130). Furthering this point Dolwich claims that “generally speaking, both terms are interchangeable, an actor may be viewed as a network, and a network may be viewed as an actor” (2009, p. 39). This is to say, that everything is important and therefore everything is considered an actor (Dolwich, 2009, p. 39). Such vocabulary, though not referring specifically to something like Facebook, suddenly seems very apt.

In more explicit terms Dolwich (2009) defines the actor or actant, as “something that acts, or to which activity is granted by others. It may not necessarily be the source of an action, but something that modifies a state of affairs by making a perceptible difference.” (p. 39). Latour as cited by Satio, qualifies the definition of the ‘modifier’ further by stating that mediators “transform, translate, distort, and modify meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry” (2011, p. 138). It is

easy to hear this (wrongly) as a description of human action. Understanding Facebook as an actant or modifier, mediating our understanding of self, may be an important step towards to the understanding of symbolic interactionism and the looking glass self, in technologically saturated environments of the kind we are invested in here.

### **5.1.3.1 - Actor Network Theory and Online Interaction**

Actor network theory is a unique theory from a sociological point of view, as no other theory affords non-humans the same ability to shape definitions of self, let alone understand them as equals in this process. Actor network theory however, is one of the few identity-construction-via-interaction theories, which has surprisingly not seen widespread application in sociological studies of online life. While studies applying symbolic interactionist, postmodernist, or idealist theories of self online often discuss the impact technology is having on our understanding of self, none of them provide technology with agency beyond their simple affordances. So any hypothesis-building in this project may have to remain open to the agency of Facebook as itself a defining actant in the network being studied.

Actor network theory's lack of application to this kind of topic may be due to its fairly recent development as a theory, as it was first formed in the early 1980's. However, actor network theory has received greater application in fields such as science and technology, where industrialisers were quick to understand the importance of human-artifact interaction. What is further hindering the application of this theory in today's online environments is actor network theory's widespread attraction of criticism. Sociologists and social psychologists debating the relevance of actor network theory have some key criticisms which may be hindering its further application.

Actor network theory's key criticism is the lack of distinction it provides between humans and other actants. Whittle & Spicer (2008) state:

by collapsing human and non-human action, ANT also misses the *meaningful* character of human action (Munir and Jones, 2004: 570).

Collins and Yearly (1992) suggest that humans deserve an ontologically

distinct category for their ability to use language and other symbolic forms to generate and interpret meaning. (p. 621)

The key component to actor network theory's unique nature, the equality or flatness of the semiotic material network, is the very thing under question by social psychologists. The lack of wider acceptance at the theory's most fundamental level is probably the biggest contributor to the scarcity of online identity studies utilising actor network theory today. Of course, this does not mean that we cannot draw on ANT here if necessary to explain something.

#### **5.1.4 – Affordance Theory**

Affordance theory originated from the work of Gibson (1977) in *The Theory of Affordances*. This cognitive psychology theory explains affordances as an object's possibilities of action (Gibson, 1977). Possibilities of action are not considered to be simply physically enabled, but also affected by the perceptions of an actor. Affordance theory has been an important theory in the development of human computer interaction technologies (HCI) where the influence of technologies' affordances must self-evidently be considered. An understanding of technology affordances is important not simply from a business or technological point of view, but also a sociological point of view as these affordances shape or frame our interaction abilities.

Affordance theory is particularly important to this project as it offers insight into how “the psychological” is part of nature and can therefore be studied ecologically” (Reed, 1996, p. 8). It provides a way of understanding the interactions between objects and people, where the natural and the psychological are no longer separated and instead it allows a combining of the two, developing towards “psychology as a natural science” (p. 5). Affordance theory allows a middle ground to develop, where natural science and social norms combine. Unlike actor network theory, however, affordance theory still distinguishes humans, and focuses on them, rather than a flat understanding the human and artifacts as one and the same. Instead the ecological approach to psychology “offers us the prospect of a scientific approach to the study of human nature

without eliminating all that is human or meaningful from its subject matter”  
(Reed, 1996, p. 184).

Affordances, in a sense, are relations, which are comprised of both the capabilities of us as physical beings, and the features of the environment. Like symbolic interactionism it allows meaning and self to develop through interaction. Unlike symbolic interactionism however, this is not limited to human interaction and not dismissive of an ecological view of the technical, social, and psychological. So the *affordances* when understood in this way may be compatible with an ANT-based understanding of actants but without completely flattening the human into the network.

#### **5.1.4.1 - Affordance Theory and Online Interaction**

Affordance theory has received little application in media sociology, and studies utilising this theory for research into online interaction typically come from an HCI perspective. Cognitive system engineering has benefited greatly from affordance theory however identity and interaction studies in this field are scarce. Those utilising affordance theory, from a technological development perspective, such as Van House (2011) takes the view that “we need to describe some of the ways in which SNSs’ designs encourage or constrain certain forms of self-representation” (424). This project, with its inductive methodology seeks to better understand how participants articulate their sense of these *encouragements* and *constraints*.

## **5.2 - Chapter Summary**

The hypothesis-building achieved through the methods described in the previous chapter (that is, in relation to people’s actual sense of ‘encouragement’ and ‘constraints’ in, on, and through Facebook) will have to take on board the combined flattening of ANT (where everything can be a networked actant) *and* the (slightly less flat) emphasis in affordance theory on the whole ecology of a phenomenon such as Facebook.

## CHAPTER 6 – FINDINGS AND HYPOTHESIS

*This chapter will discuss the data analysis and coding techniques undertaken on the interview and case study material. It will also discuss the major themes acquired from this analysis and the hypothesis that was developed as a result.*

### **6.1 – Data Analysis**

This project sought to better understand the applicability of Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework to the mediated environment of Facebook. Other studies which had utilised Goffman's perspective in online environments were often thin on alternative or complementary theories. To recognise Goffman's adaptability, other interaction and identity theories were also considered. This project's exploratory nature meant that inductive reasoning allowed it to first gather data, and then attempt to understand where, or if, Goffman's framework was applicable in an emergent hypothesis.

Upon completion of the first ten in-depth interviews and the subsequent two case studies, transcription took place which allowed for data analysis to begin. A constant comparative method of analysing interview material then allowed for recurring themes to emerge. This systematic analysis of qualitative data produced three key identity and interaction themes and further sub-themes which are discussed below. These themes were the main threads for the fabric of the hypothesis.

In attempt into better understanding the way in which Facebook users conceptualised their own sense of identity online, interviewees were asked questions regarding how they interacted with Facebook on a day to day basis. Broad and comprehensive questions were followed with probes, attempting to understand how, or if, Goffman's dramaturgical framework was helpful. Key to this aspect of interviewing was allowing interviewees to describe their interactions in their own language and allowing themes to develop naturally.

#### **6.1.1 – Romantic Ideals**

What quickly became clear from the first ten interviews was that participants were not themselves describing their sense of self in inherently symbolic interactionist or postmodern terms. Identity on Facebook was not felt to be acted or constructed, or socially or technically variable. Instead, participants articulated a self that they felt was true, “I like to think that, I am who I am, and I’ve just got to be that” (Interviewee 1). Facebook was described as a place for truth and sincerity, as “the things I say in posts and the pages I ‘like’ are exactly the same as I do in ‘real life’” (Interviewee 9). It was considered a place for their real world networks to share and interact online.

Participants felt that on Facebook they were not acting, they were not attempting to shape people’s views of themselves, and instead, they felt they were being honest. This romanticist sense of self is explained by Goffman (1959) as typically being a sincere act. When one believes that the show they are putting on is true to one’s identity, this is considered sincerity as we find “an individual may be taken in by his own act” (Goffman, 1959, p. 19). So we don’t have to accept a ‘truth’ here so much as recognise a sincerity.

While participants primarily articulated a self that co-aligned with the romanticist theory of self, Goffman’s concept of the sincere self is more objective as a description. Participants often referred to acts outside of Facebook which fit within Goffman’s concept of the cynical and the sincere continuum. Interviewee 1 states:

In the real world it is inevitable that people are going to manage multiple facades. I just think it is inevitable. You are never going to act the same way around your parents as you do around your colleague, as you do around your girlfriend, as you do around your best mate.

But two participants did not align their sense of self online with the romanticist theory at all, “Facebook is definitely not the ‘true’ me, probably least of all the true me, as I’ll only ever put things on there that I want people to see” (Interviewee 7). The sincere or insincere *spectrum* of self-conceptualisation is therefore probably a more accurate way of describing identity online as

romanticism cannot account for the self-conscious deviation away from the one true self, online or off. Varis, Wang, and Du (2011) further argue for this performative perspective stating:

Although the performative, plural, dynamic and dialogical character of identity may be at odds with lay discourses and self-perceptions which stress singularity and stability (“I haven’t been *myself* lately”), we need to accept that all of this is *normal*, and indeed a core characteristic of the social processes we observe and examine. (p. 267)

Most participants’ portrayal of a sincere and honest self on Facebook can also be seen to be highly influenced by the technology facilitating this self. Being insincere on Facebook was often not considered an option by participants as Case Study 1 points out:

It would be foolish to misrepresent myself because you would be shot down by some humourist who would say ‘oh yes Case Study 1’, so. So I think the multi group audience on Facebook for any one person is that, and encourages them to be honest.

Participants felt unable to portray themselves in differing ways in the context of this collective framing. The mass audience and context collapse ensured participants’ surface sincerity. Kirkpatrick (2010) speaks of this dilemma, stating that Facebook’s attempt to reset the boundaries of personal intimacy is causing identity construction problems to occur where “you may attempt to project one identity for yourself on your Facebook profile, but your friends, through their comments and other actions may contradict you” (p. 200). Donath and Boyd (2004) further this point, arguing “that friends informally vet profile information, keeping the author honest” (p. 5). A stabilised identity is thereby all that is afforded to users, if they want to appear sincere. Case Study 2 spoke about this new affordance:

In this day and age everything is online, so why would you kind of hide? I remember back in the day, I used to go on the Hotmail chat-room, and

like, back then you knew hardly anyone online so it was easy to be this eighteen year old, even though you were only like seven, it was easy. But everyone is online these days, so it is kind of like, someone is going to catch you out along the way, and so you may as well just be yourself.

Facebook's attempt to allow users to segregate audiences, either through blocking, or through Facebook's groups was also not utilised by participants. The segregating features time consuming nature, and participants' wariness of potential social scandal by blocking audience members, meant participants were forced to communicate either en masse or individually through Facebook's chat service. Interviewee 5 did not block or use groups, stating "it sounds like a recipe for disaster. "Hey did you see that guys post on Facebook?" "No." Then you've opened a whole other can of worms. So no, I have not dabbled in any of that." Sincerity was therefore the only option afforded to Facebook users utilising Facebook's primary communication channel.

Development of the initial in-depth interviews and delving further into conversations involving self-conceptualisation on Facebook was an important next step for the two case study interviews. To understand this theme further, case study participants were asked to discuss how they navigated the context collapsed environment and presentation of self on Facebook. A modified, pragmatic romanticist sense of self was still evident. Case Study 1 said "I suppose it comes down to just being relatively honest, conveying an image of oneself that one believes in and that others will recognise." Further enquiry into online and offline presentations yielded responses such as "I don't think I act differently" (Case Study 2) and "I just want to be me" (Case Study 1).

#### **6.1.1.1 – Community**

Interviewees all expressed a requirement for real life interaction before allowing a person to become a friend on Facebook as "normally you are inviting someone on the basis that you know them quite well" (Case Study 1). Adding people from outside of the already acquainted was described as a strange thing to do, and most interviewees felt there was little purpose in doing this. Many interviewees mentioned they had only ever turned down friend requests if they were not people

they knew in real life. Several participants also mentioned ‘culling’ friends, by removing them from their list of friends. This was typically done because they did not want to read these people’s comments, or have them read theirs, and more importantly because “they weren’t really friends” (Interviewee 1).

A sense of community was articulated by these Facebook users, who all used the platform for real life, grounded relationships and interaction. Case Study 1 described their use of Facebook as being “for exchanges, for arranging meetings, for being in touch with someone who is going through a health crisis of some kind.” Case Study 1 went on to describe an example of Facebook’s utilisation as a community tool:

There was one charming case recently, well it was initially alarming, where a neighbour of mine back in Scotland had lost her dog and she got in touch with all her friends to look out for it. The dog was eventually found, not in very good condition, but it was fine, and it recovered, but I was amazed that Facebook was being used in that way.

The community like nature of Facebook was not always considered a positive feature, as the proliferation of material could potentially jeopardise their social roles offline. Interviewee 1 talked about their intention to be careful about their use of Facebook stating “you understand the pervasiveness of those social communities and the way that saying something could offend someone and it could get back to you through a connection you don’t know about.”

Communication was thus restricted, and impression management techniques corresponding with Goffman’s (1959) routinised act where an “individual may delude his audience for what he considers to be their own good, or for the good of the community” (p. 18) was evident in some participant’s interviews.

#### **6.1.1.2 – Juxtapositioning**

A common theme amongst interviewees was not only the articulation of a sincere, and true self, but their way of explaining it. Many interviewees attempted to convey their online self as their true self, by exploring ways in which other people were not sincere. Interviewees would often draw upon other insincere acts on

Facebook to legitimise their own sincerity in contrast. Case Study 2 describes a friend on Facebook:

She is so different on Facebook than in person, she just doesn't share that much, but on Facebook she will like post all these YouTube videos and things like that, that you would just never think that she is associated with and like makeup. I don't know if on Facebook she is trying to give herself this alter ego kind of thing, because she does add people that she doesn't know, like in bands and stuff. It's like she is trying to portray this other image, or she just feels like she can't portray it in real life... in the back of my mind I'm like, why are you even doing this?

Describing the way in which other Facebook users utilised the platform was the most common way interviewees expressed their understanding for how interaction should occur. Many interviewees felt others were wrong to add people that they didn't know, or to share personal information. Case Study 1 describes an incident on Facebook:

I had someone who started talking about their state of health and they were straying into far too personal territory about themselves, and her sister came on, because I was just witnessing this, I wasn't participating in this conversation, and her sister said "hey, what are you saying all this in a public domain for?" And the younger sister obviously didn't care. So that was some concern, but how one constrains a person who wishes to say these things I have no idea, because they were about themselves.

Such examples were quite common; not in number, "it is very rare that people surprise me with an indiscretion or inappropriate remark or too highly personalised of a remark" (Case Study 1) but in how they ingrained themselves in participants' memory for future recall. Interviewees' explanations of cases such as those above, provided insight into more than how Facebook shouldn't be used. Examples demonstrated the etiquette with which nonymous social media websites users are expected to be familiar.

### **6.1.1.3 – Special Cases**

Special cases relating to this requirement for sincerity and truthfulness were given by a number of interview participants. Interviewee 2 described a homosexual friend who had created a Facebook account for family and friends who were not aware of his sexual orientation and another account for friends within the gay community. The ability to sincerely portray oneself was also considered to be hindered for those with religious family pressures who did not subscribe to those beliefs. Empathy was shown towards these Facebook users as they were seen as having to “categorise what they say on Facebook... so it is hard to have that one identity” (Case Study 2).

Such acceptance seemed to be given for the breakdown between the real self and expected self, of which only special cases could be justified. The examples provided were generally of a person who had to hide from others, not the interview participant. Interview participants tended to show sympathy when they felt they were privy to the true identity, such as when they knew the friend was not actually religious. Goffman (1959) discusses this phenomenon, where an audience is privy to more than one social role, explaining that they will accept this discrepancy, if the individual fosters the impression that this routine is “their most essential one” (p. 48). This concept of the ‘most essential’ identity rather than the one, singular identity is very important in overcoming a simplistic essential/constructed binary distinction or polarity of cyber-selfing.

### **6.1.1.4 – Groups**

Facebook’s more recent group feature, which allows users to group friends and post to specific cohorts, rather than en masse, received a lot of media attention and user hype. The feature was introduced alongside its development at Google+ and was considered a useful way to specify a post’s audience. This feature was also important given prior studies’ call for “better authoring tools that support efficient content management” (DiMicco & Millen, 2007, p. 4) particularly in regards to work versus social contexts. As this feature shared strong links with Goffman’s (1959) concept of audience segregation, it was felt to be a particularly important area of questioning.

What was found from interviewing however was that not one interview participant or case study participant was utilising this feature. Most participants had heard of the feature, and of Google+, but no one was using it to segregate their audience. Many participants felt it could be a useful feature appropriate for special cases or those who had superiors as friends on their Facebook. However, nearly every interviewee articulated their reason for not using groups in a similar manner “I figure that if there are people on my friends list who I don’t want to see something, then I shouldn’t be posting it in the first place” (Interviewee 8). Furthermore, it was considered a hindrance to utilise the service as groups are time consuming to set up and employ. This is the same issue encountered by the prior DiMicco and Miller (2007) study, which found “managing multiple profiles is an added burden for users and sophisticated access control mechanisms are difficult to navigate and are often ignored by users” (p. 4). Interviewee 2 explains it “just never really took off you know, it is a good concept, but it’s not practical because it’s not efficient,” Interviewee 4 furthers this point stating “it’s too much work, if you think that investing a significant amount of time organising the infrastructure inside Facebook, you are too invested.” Instead, interviewees largely posted content that was available for everyone to see.

Beyond the lack of audience segregation, many other reasons for the attempted portrayal of a sincere self can be found. Prior interaction studies, investigating the early use of nonymous websites found that “when individuals have an expectation of future interaction--and especially when they want the future offline interaction to be ongoing--their self-presentation tends to be a more honest depiction of themselves” (McLaughlin, Vitak, & Crouse, 2011, p. 1). Furthermore “individuals acknowledge that too large of a mismatch between their online self-presentation and reality may lead to negative outcomes” (McLaughlin, Vitak, & Crouse, 2011, p. 2). Facebook’s intended and applied use as a social network for real life acquaintances has therefore limited its users’ performances to that of largely self-consciously sincere acts, at least in the eyes of the users studied here.

### **6.1.2 – Impression Management**

Despite interviewees’ perceived sincerity in their Facebook practices, further questioning revealed that distinct impression management techniques were being

employed. There was a disparity between the articulation of self and interviewees' romanticist ideals and their more symbolic interactionist actions. Questioning and probing regarding interviewees' actions revealed their greater concern for how others perceived their Facebook self than when they articulated this generically.

Impression management techniques and presentations were evident in the actions of participants. Facebook's profile creation and utilisation as a communication channel necessitates a level of presentation and impression management simply to interact on the website. Less basic and more detailed impression management techniques however, were very common. Interviewee 1 describes the impression management affordances of Facebook:

I think it is one of those things you are meant to do on Facebook, it is one of those things they encourage. They say on your Facebook, they give you a percentage, your profile is not complete until you 'like' all that stuff so it's kind of like it is tailoring to the gaming generation of getting one hundred per cent completion. But I think it's just like a social norm on that site. Maybe I am trying to have it so that someone can go to my page, look at me, and get what I am, who I am, what I like, but that's what Facebook is supposed to be right? It is supposed to be a thing where friends can come have a look and see what we are like... I just don't really have a choice if I want to behave correctly on Facebook.

While Facebook users do not have to upload a photo in order to utilise the communication channels, every participant was highly selective in not just their profile photos, but their album photos too. Many participants were selective of their likes, attempting to portray "the most important aspects of my persona" (Interviewee 4). Several participants mentioned they had untagged themselves from photos to avoid having that picture available for friends viewing. And nearly every participant admitted to writing a post, and editing, then either deleting it, or choosing not to post it in the first place, "maybe after five rewrites I'll come up with something that is acceptable for the public" (Interviewee 4).

The presentation techniques employed by participants were fitting within Goffman's (1959) understanding of the front stage. Several other interaction studies attempting to utilise Goffman's dramaturgical framework have suggested that Facebook is a form of backstage, but Goffman's own definition contradicts this as he defines the front as "the place where the performance is given" (p. 107). This is not to suggest that the person behind the screen is simply off-stage, instead Goffman suggests that one place can act as both a front and a back for separate performances.

#### **6.1.2.1 – Photos**

One of the clearest forms of impression management, which was easily articulated by interviewees, was their use of Facebook photos. Mendelson and Papacharissi's (2010) study of Facebook photo galleries clearly define photographs "as an instrument of self presentation" (p. 1). The photograph is a "highly selective version of themselves" (Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2010, p. 2) where strategic impression management can be easily identified.

Participants were all highly selective of their profile picture and album photos. Several interview participants admitted they had untagged themselves from photos on occasions. The photos' unflattering nature was generally given as the cause for concern. Other interviewees expressed concern over potential employers or their family's ability to see where they have been tagged. Specific reasons for un-tagging included "so parents wouldn't see drunk photos" (Interviewee 10) or "if I just don't like what that photo shows or represents" (Interviewee 6).

The decision to use a specific profile photo was also considered a very important impression management decision. The image decided upon was felt to have strong connotations as to how one was trying to represent self. Case Study 1 described the various stages of choosing a profile picture and developing an online identity:

We've got one image, one photographic image as our principle identifier, and I think most of us put a lot of care into what that one photograph is... I've kind of locked into grandpa and grandchild and I feel wonderfully

comfortable with that and I wouldn't want it to be complicated by any other image.

While a sense of sincerity was still often felt to be present in this profile picture decision, impression management was undeniable. Case Study 1 further says "I'm quite sure that a degree of self-deception goes on, the aversion to portray oneself in an unfavourable light is always there."

Once again interviewees seemed to express a distaste for others' lack of sincerity, even if, after some self-reflection, they realised they were employing the same impression management techniques. Recognising others' photos as strategic representations was common amongst interviewees. Case Study 2 gave an example of a young girl who "has this posey photo with her hair and her makeup all done and you can tell that her Facebook is what she wants to see her as, and what she would portray online." When interviewees recognised others' impression management a hint of unease about the perceived lack of sincerity infiltrated the conversations.

#### **6.1.2.2 – Privacy Settings**

Every interviewee utilised Facebook's privacy settings to at least some degree. While some remained slightly open, allowing their profile picture to be viewed by strangers, others restricted their profile entirely, allowing for nothing more than their name to be visible. When asked why their profiles were set to private some similarities became clear.

Many interviewees did not want businesses, or potentially dangerous strangers to access their information. Interviewee 8 expressed concern that:

Facebook profiles contain a lot of personal information and I don't really want that to be accessible on the open internet. Hackers, scammers, big businesses, small businesses, ex-girlfriends, prisoners, John Key, none of these people should be able to access that stuff.

Participants' widespread utilisation of privacy settings provided boundaries, separating the stage from the view of outsiders. Case Study 2 defends the utilisation of privacy settings, despite the articulation of being honest and singular in self by stating "you have that one identity but you still need those walls." This requirement of barriers is fitting within Goffman's conception of the region, or stage which "may be defined as any place that is bounded to some degree by barriers to perception" (p. 106). So the walled self seems to be an affordance here, despite the widespread feeling of public exposure that Facebook critics denigrate.

### 6.1.2.3 – "Superiors"

The primary privacy concern for interviewees was the ability for potential or current employers to access their information. Many interviewees utilised privacy settings solely to restrict superiors' access to their information. Even after utilising these settings, many interviewees expressed concern over their content's appropriateness for these audiences.

Interviewee 2 went so far as to unfriend their parents, declaring "I'm still going to be me, but it is probably better that some people just don't see it." Interviewee 1 removed friends from Facebook that could be linked with work because "if you say something on Facebook someone who you haven't seen in years is now a friend of your boss, and they make a connection and something stupid gets said, like, it's self-preservation more than anything." A study called *Identity management: Multiple presentations of self in Facebook* by DiMicco and Millen (2007) found similar results as their research observed that "there are difficulties in simultaneously using a single site for both professional and non-professional use" (p. 4). Furthermore, while multiple profiles and access controls were considered potentially helpful in the management of identities, they too found users were choosing not to add superiors due to a fear of "unintended leakage between corporate and social personas" (DiMicco & Millen, 2007, p. 4).

This disparity between friend self and employee self was clearly identified by interviewees, however most felt that they were forced to act in a certain way by employers, and this was not an active choice. Interviewee 2 discusses the standard way in which presentations may occur at work, giving the reason for not adding

employers as being that “you want to maintain a proper image with your peers and your co-workers.” Goffman (1959) explains the restriction of possible fronts available to an actor, stating that “the tendency for a large number of different acts to be presented from behind a small number of fronts is a natural development of social organization” (p. 26). Acts are therefore not considered to be created by the actor, they are socialised developments allowing fronts to be “selected, not created” (Goffman, 1959, p. 28). This very accurately describes our findings here.

The use of privacy settings was often considered necessary to keep superiors in what Goffman terms “the outside” (p. 135). Workmates, bosses, parents, and family were often considered outsiders from the stage of Facebook because “it’s only natural to adjust who we are based on the people around us. How I act around my grandparents or co-workers is vastly different to how I act around my friends” (Interviewee 9). Participants’ attempts to segregate superiors from their Facebook audience were done so as not to affect any future performance with them, which may conflict with the one presented on Facebook. Instead participants allowed only those who could be trusted to maintain their performance, co-operate, or at least not cause a scene. The dramaturgical language here seems entirely compatible with the findings. The Facebook audience can also, sometimes, be understood as a teammate and “someone whose dramaturgical co-operation one is dependent upon in fostering a given definition of the situation” (Goffman, 1959, p. 83).

A few prior interactionist studies have suggested that there is also an unknown audience, the curators and filterers of our Facebook information who must also be taken into account as unknown audience members. I suggest that we understand these people as being in what Goffman terms a non-person role, as “those who play this role are present during the interaction but in some respects do not take the role either of performer or of audience, nor do they (as do informers, skills, and spotters) pretend to be what they are not.” (p. 151). We will come back to this perception of dimly present curatorial ‘others’ in the network.

#### **6.1.2.4 – Acting Offline**

The sincerity expressed by interviewees' description of their Facebook selves was often juxtaposed by some lack of sincerity offline. Interviewees felt certain people, in other settings, required from them a self that was different to what they were portraying online. Superiors were the most common example of people "who I wouldn't add on Facebook, who wouldn't be exposed to that side of me" (Interviewee 2) because "I'm a lot different around my friends than I am around my boss at work and I imagine if I was friends with these people on Facebook, I would have to curtail some of the things I put on there" (Interviewee 3).

Many interviewees, however, further articulated the view that an *act* was required from them in offline environments. While their online selves were often described as the true selves, offline many thought there was a more cynical performance taking place where:

I act quite differently at work, not just for the patrons, but also for co-workers, as I am in a semi-managerial position, and again, I'm a different person while I'm playing cards with my friends and again at home when I'm with my daughter. (Interviewee 7)

Performances, in all situations, are socialised, and according to Goffman (1959) "molded, and modified to fit into the understanding and expectations of the society in which it is presented" (p. 35). Where on the scale of sincere to cynical one places oneself in any given social situation, recognition of an act, or the unthinking ease in which it is performed, "does not deny that a performance has occurred, merely that the participants have been aware of it" (Goffman, 1959, p. 75).

### **6.1.3 – Withdrawal**

While the interviewees were questioned specifically on their use of the social networking website Facebook, what became clear was that many participants were actually withdrawing to some degree from the platform. Many interviewees mentioned they were not engaging with Facebook to its full extent. Others felt it was a trivial place, becoming unworthy of their time. While all the interviewees admitted to logging into Facebook at least once a day, "Facebook is the first port

of call I have when the computer is turned on” (Case Study 1), many did not feel they were posting as much as others. Most participants felt they were not interacting with Facebook a great deal. They felt they kept their posts to a minimum, often applying caution before making a post or uploading content.

Interviewee 4 tried “to keep it to a minimum” when posting on Facebook. Like many interviewees, this circumspection was juxtaposed with others’ Facebook use, who:

Post stuff all the time and are annoying, you don’t need to know every little detail or every little facet of everyone’s lives... you know ten status updates within the space of an hour is far too much. So I try to limit mine to a few things, anything exciting or interesting that happens in my life in general. (Interviewee 4)

The reasons interviewees gave for this partial withdrawal from Facebook were quite similar. Some interviewees were attempting to avoid being boring or mundane, they felt Facebook posts should be made only rarely and only if they were interesting. These interviewees, like interviewee 4 above, mentioned those Facebook users who over-utilised the platform. Other interviewees expressed their concern over their audience, stating that rather than segregate their audience “you are able to limit your usage on Facebook instead” (Interviewee 10).

Interviews and theory both suggest this modified participation with the technological platform over time is due to the lack of audience segregation. Boyd and Marwick (2011) state, “The flattening of diverse social relationships into a monolithic group of “friends” makes it difficult for users to negotiate the normal variances of self-presentation that occur in day-to-day life. Social media participants regularly lament moments where worlds collide” (p. 10).

While participants were mostly aware of their ability to utilise groups for audience segregation, as we have noted they felt the time consuming nature of this facility made it worth their effort. Participants were also not blocking other audience members, either for similar reasons to why they did not create groups, or because

they felt there was potential anyway for the blocked person to become aware of their post.

Rather than segregate their audience, which averaged at 200 per person on Facebook, participants preferred to simply not engage with the medium as fully. Lack of engagement, caution, and uploading of only generic posts allowed participants to still utilise Facebook while not conflicting with presentations outside of this medium. Participants' reduced engagement and generic posting on Facebook meant they could avoid what Goffman termed a "scene" (1959, p. 208) as "context collisions that occur on the site are a constant source of tension" (Boyd & Marwick, 2011, p. 18). Maintaining the coherency of every other role which is played outside of Facebook, meant participants were forced to provide a surface level version of self, one that remained 'true' to every audience member. Zuckerberg's requirement of transparency, truth, and reflection of real-world conditions where the "vast majority of users identify themselves accurately" (Kirkpatrick, 2010, p. 213) was thereby achieved at the expense of any deeper level of engagement.

#### **6.1.3.1 – Cautiousness**

Interviewees commonly mentioned that they err on the side of caution when making a post. Participants often cited differing audiences for their carefulness or lack of posts. Personal information was commonly considered inappropriate to share, "I'm not putting stuff on there that I don't want certain people to see. I keep it very neutral" (Case Study 2). So too were any potentially inflammatory topics, "I avoid posts that could be offensive to certain groups, I try to avoid religious or political issues" (Interviewee 2). Interviewee 5 cites their restraint as being due to their parent's involvement with Facebook, "I think I would err on the side of caution if I did think this would cause more trouble than it is worth, it can't be that worth posting." The Facebook wall and all public posts were instead utilised for interesting, but generic information.

Despite the interviewees' advocacy of sincerity, every participant could recall a time where they had begun writing a post and then decided not to send it. An editing process was evident in all participants' posting decisions. Interviewee 4

justified the sincerity of such a decision stating “I imagine most people censor the things they say to most people, so it’s really just an online version of that.” This sense of combined caution, partial withdrawal, and generalness of posts which interviewees articulated dispels claims that social networking has created a more fully open generation that are “choosing social cohesion over privacy” (Westlake, 2008, p. 38). Claims that “Generation Y trust technology, believing they can direct their performances to their chosen audience” (Westlake, 2008, p. 37) and a perceived collapse of the private and the public (Aspling, 2011), conflict with the findings of this project where participants were in fact, reluctant to share some personal information, or make more revealing posts that were specific to one group of people.

### **6.1.3.2 – Generic**

Publicly available wall posts and comments were regarded by many interviewees as needing to be generic. Nonspecific content was regarded as more appropriate given the many audiences which could view a single post. Case Study 1 said they would not group their audience for specific posts as posts “would be specifically open ended enough not to go through that sorting process, and I would probably be reluctant to do it anyway, A. Because it would take quite a bit of time, and secondly, why would I want to?”

Interviewees once again cited the collapse of audience segregations as being their prime reason for their post’s generic nature. When asked how one would react to even more people being added to their Facebook friends list, Case Study 1 replied

It would push me in the direction of being very careful, editing like mad, and I hope not misrepresenting self but it would be a simpler version of self. I mean if everybody was there... sure I would be less inclined to share personal view or personal feelings.

Interviewee 1 shows their attempt at resisting the generic nature of Facebook posts. Initially feeling like they had to censor their posts, they removed around two hundred friends saying now “it feels like I am interacting with a more intimate cohort”. Furthering this point they say “I have noticed that people who

have higher amounts of friends post a lot less and when they do post it's just really bland" (Interviewee 1). Removing friends meant Facebook could be a place where they could pride themselves on being themselves "I like to think that, I am who I am, and I've just got to be that" (Interviewee 1). While others have claimed that Facebook is "causing a mass resetting of the boundaries of personal intimacy" (Kirkpatrick, 2010, p. 200) research participants here seemed resistant to this idea, and combated this boundary collapse with various practical usage strategies of their own as documented above.

### **6.1.3.3 – Fakes**

Those who did not hold back from Facebook in the same manner were often considered fake, or to be putting on an act. Participants who spotted a lack of coherency between a person's Facebook performances and real life performances, often considered the Facebook self to be the fake version. Case study 2's story of a friend, who used Facebook to present themselves differently from when they were together, is an example of context collapse being spotted. A sense of disillusionment was felt by Case Study 2, who didn't understand why their friend was acting differently online. In spotting the lack of coherency between the friend's selves, Case Study 2 suggested that this was a Facebook alter ego and went on to say:

I don't think that is how it should be used because it's kind of like you are giving yourself two different personalities, it is hard to accept someone when you don't really know what they, or what they believe in, but what they do in one sense, and then what they do online, it's completely different it's like, who are you?

In dealing with these situations, where the performances do not align with the self that others have been privy to offline, participants often chose not to engage with the content. While the relationship between Case Study 2 and their friend continues offline, online Case Study 2 says:

I don't comment on her photos [on Facebook] saying 'oh you look so pretty' because in the back of my mind, I'm like, why are you even doing

this? So it kind of lets me watch what she is doing but I don't really interact with it.

This voluntary withdrawal from interacting with performances that do not align with the expected act is what Goffman (1959) terms “defensive techniques” (p. 229). In order to avoid a scene, audience members privy to this interaction may apply tact by pretending not to see it. Protective practices allow the performer to continue the act without being called into question, because when segregation fails, outsiders should “tactfully act in an uninterested, uninvolved, unperceiving fashion, so that if physical isolation is not obtained by walls or distance, effective isolation can at least be obtained by convention” (Goffman, 1959, p. 230). Case Study 2 is therefore able to continue believing in the performance provided outside of Facebook, while providing tact to avoid a scene online. Goffman’s applicability here is quite striking.

## 6.2 – Chapter Summary

Interviewees articulated their Facebook selves as being sincere in a modified romanticist, rather than the symbolic interactionist sense. The modification is in the self-consciousness around self-presentational strategies (varying versions of self for different situations). However participants’ impression management actions and acknowledgment of offline ‘acting’ aligns with Goffman’s concept of sincerity. Facebook’s technology and its affordances, within which the self is being presented, inhibited users’ ability to present themselves in inconsistently multiple ways, or to segregate their audiences. Sincerity was rather, less a choice, than a requirement for interacting on the medium without causing embarrassment or a scene. The ‘scene’ here involves the collapse of self-presentational sincerity.

While users wanted to understand their online selves as being sincere, many symbolic interactionist impression management techniques were being undertaken. Uploading photos, editing one’s profile, choosing likes, and making posts were the actions afforded to users by Facebook. Impression management practices are *a requirement* of interacting with Facebook to any extent, however participants all utilised impression management techniques further than strictly necessary. Participants attempted to perform in ways that would correspond with

their audience's understanding of their role. In attempting to avoid conflict between the users' many roles, participants were required to keep these performative techniques generic and minimal in nature.

Finally interviewees all expressed a sense of circumspection, reserve, and inhibited use of Facebook. Minimal interaction and the generic nature of user's public posts were considered consequences of the conflicting requirements of sincerity and impression management. Because the audience that "one constructs for one's identity performance also has an effect on what is presented and what is not, for the kind of identity one wants to perform has to be authenticated and ratified by those observing the performance" (Varis, Want, & Du, 2011, p. 268), participants' online performances had to maintain integrity with their many typically offline audiences.

In summary, the hypothesis that has emerged is that these Facebook users were all in their various ways performing in a sincerity game, a staging of sincere performances that Goffman's work has helped us to describe in terms of their quite specific strategies. Play this game well involves not straying too far from what a user him or herself believes to be sincere, and Facebook affords various checks and balances to support this. But these users resisted the affordance opportunities to construct more 'walled' stages for themselves where deeper, more open self exposure might have been possible. All opted instead for a more superficial identity presentation, 'sincere' but limited. The flat world of ANT does not quite capture the ways in which these human actants sought minimally but significantly to transcend their technologized presences in the networked multitude in order to project or stage a small performance of personal sincerity. But the combination of ANT and affordance theory helps us to update Goffman's powerfully explanatory concepts in order to understand the nature of Facebook afforded cyber-selfing. It remains now to discuss this form of cyber-selfing in terms of what Giddens calls 'a reflexively organised endeavour' (1991, p. 5), and to explain the sense in which it might be considered a game where sincerity is the prize.

## CHAPTER 7 – MAINTAINING “CONSTANTS OF Demeanour”

*This chapter discovers a way of thinking about identity as a project that helps explain the reported findings. Limitations of the study, concluding notes, and suggestions for future research are identified.*

### **7.1 – The Trajectory of Self**

One of the key findings of this project was the interviewees' expressed requirement for a sincere portrayal of self on Facebook. While early identity studies on online interaction differed as to whether the online self was likely to be multiple and fluid (Turke, 1995) or stable and singular (Rheingold, 1995) this project found interviewees' expression of self to lie somewhere in-between. The dispute between conceptions of the plurality and singularity of identity found further reflection in this project's research results, where a sense of sincerity implied an intended truth and singularity of selfhood was articulated, yet participants acted differently offline and impression management was still actively taking place. Expressions of self on Facebook concentrated specifically on rendering an identity believable. While Facebook affords users the ability to segregate audiences and maintain multiple stage-like areas, interviewees maintained what they believed to be a single identity for all of their audiences and this was shaped by their choices of engagement with the platform. While these choices of engagement were seemingly unlimited, bar Facebook's own technological affordances, users chose only to project an identity which they hoped would be believed to be sincere.

What this project therefore hypothesises, is that a modified way of understanding identity construction on Facebook is required. Rather than understanding the self as either singular and static, or multiple and fluid, as the language of online identity theory thus far has required, this project's findings suggest another way of understanding self, more grounded in identity theory's application in offline environments. A projection of self, which is both singularly definable, yet able to grow, can be found on Facebook. Giddens' (1991) *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age* provides a theorisation for this understanding, in what he calls a trajectory of self. The middle ground

conceptualised by Giddens which subscribes to neither postmodern nor romantic theories' stark oppositions seems to best describe identity formation on Facebook as we have identified it here. Giddens' concept of a trajectory of self provides one resolution to these conflicting theories, which is particularly well suited to Facebook and mediated interaction. Informed by the past and their intentions for the future, Giddens believes people reflexively organise their identities by making choices. Giddens explains:

In the post-traditional order of modernity, and against the backdrop of new forms of mediated experience, self-identity becomes a reflexively organised endeavour. The reflexive project of the self, which consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised biographical narratives, takes place in the context of multiple choice as filtered through abstract systems. (1991, p. 5)

Giddens understands this middle ground, between romanticism and postmodernism, as a place where a singular, yet changeable self, is continuously in development. Romanticist understandings of self are thought by Giddens to have been afforded to people during the pre-industrial era, when choice of 'lifestyle' was unavailable. Postmodernism too, has been somewhat dismissed by Giddens as being a concept, not an era, which is equally contradicted by the "unifying features of modernity" (p. 27). Now, in what Giddens terms the "late modern age" (p. 4) a separation of time and space has occurred, disembedding mechanisms exist, and reflexivity is common. This affords a trajectory-based self a developing understanding of selfhood as a project.

Giddens' conceptualisation of a core singularly stable but revisable self, formed via choices, fits within the interviewees' articulation of self. Via choices such as uploading certain pictures, 'liking' particular businesses, and posting specific comments, Facebook users in effect created a self. But in attempting to appear sincere, projected consistency of self was also important for interviewees. Giddens' trajectory of self also works well here. Interviewees expressed the view that they generally kept their presentation of self on Facebook consistent with a

singular conception of identity that was expressed in earlier Facebook posts, pictures, and comments. Giddens explains this phenomenon stating:

the self forms a trajectory of development from the past to the anticipated future. The individual appropriates his past by sifting through it in the light of what is anticipated for an (organised) future. The trajectory of the self has a coherence that derives from a cognitive awareness of the various phases of the lifespan. (1991, p. 75)

Facebook's timeline for personal pages fits this description extremely well, as we will discuss in more detail below. The emphasis on sincerity has allowed for the creation of a new interactional metaphor. The performance has become the game. A game, rather than a performance, involves both rules and a prize. The rules afforded by Facebook and enforced by social requirements necessitates that users utilise the platform in a cohesive manner. The prize is perceived sincerity. While Facebook affords a framework for a singular definition of self to be portrayed, other platforms which do not, such as MUDs, are according to Giddens' framework not manifestations of postmodernism. Rather, Giddens suggests that the demands of the settings (or affordances) determine the way in which identity is portrayed. He states:

Naturally, individuals adjust both appearance and demeanour somewhat according to the perceived demands of the particular setting. That this is so has led some authors to suppose that the self essentially becomes broken up - that individuals tend to develop multiple selves in which there is no inner core of self-identity. Yet surely, as an abundance of studies of self-identity show, this is plainly not the case. The maintaining of constants of demeanour across varying settings of interaction is one of the prime means whereby coherence of self-identity is ordinarily preserved. The potential for the unravelling of self-identity is kept in check because demeanour sustains a link between 'feeling at home in one's body' and the personalised narrative. (1991, p. 100)

This aspect of the reflexive narrative is particularly well suited to explaining features of Facebook since the introduction of Facebook's timeline feature. Facebook profiles are now designed to provide their own trajectory of self, beginning from the day one is born. Interviewee 1 agrees, stating:

Facebook has specifically made it impossible to manage multiple identities and if you look at the progression of what he [Zuckerberg] wants Facebook to be in the next ten years, it is going to be about your timeline and your history, so it is going to be looking at your life right, which has started now.

Special events are selectively posted on Facebook, so while Facebook seemingly portrays a holistic and whole version of the self, in fact this is clearly subject to impression management techniques. Facebook users are able to delete past comments, as many interviewees had, they can also remove photos, and reorganise their 'likes'. These actions correspond with Giddens' concept that "the autobiography is a corrective intervention into the past, not merely a chronicle of elapsed events" (1991, p. 72) where the "reconstruction of the past goes along with anticipation of the likely life trajectory of the future" (ibid). A sincere sense of self is therefore able to be portrayed by selectively picking aspects of the self, though often just enough to maintain authenticity across all audiences. Giddens' theory relates well here as he states "Self-identity, in other words, is not something that is just given, as a result of the continuities of the individual's action-system, but something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual" (p. 52). Facebook users, while only able to present one identity, may edit this profile and timeline, at any point.

Reconceptualisation of self is permitted, posts are continuous, and pictures can be uploaded which correspond with the user's current understanding of self.

Giddens' (1991) furthers this point stating:

The existential question of self-identity is bound up with the fragile nature of the biography which the individual 'supplies' about herself. A person's identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor – important through this is – in

the reactions of others, but in the capacity *to keep a particular narrative going*. (p. 54)

Strate, Jacobson, and Gibson (2003) say that “the self in electronic writer space is no longer the relatively permanent and univocal figure of the printed page. The electronic self is instead unstable and polyvocal” (p. 13). Understanding Facebook in Giddens’ terms significantly modifies this view, finding instead an ongoing project of reflexive adjustment of self presentation in everyday online life. The echo of Goffman’s language here is of course deliberate, as Giddens allows us to update Goffman in a way that is fully compatible with this project’s findings from its interviewees. We need to note of course that Giddens was not writing about Facebook in the pre-internet era of the late 1980s when he was writing. So the fit with Facebook is evidence of his theory’s genuinely explanatory reach.

I want to conclude my project by discussing Giddens’ key formulation for our purpose here: “The maintaining of constants of demeanour across varying settings of interaction” (Giddens, 1991, p. 100).

## **7.2 – Goffman and Facebook**

Interview data revealed a co-alignment with Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical framework and interaction on Facebook. The five theoretical principles of Goffman’s dramaturgical framework, the actor, the audience, the performance, the stage, and the team were easily identifiable in participants’ use of Facebook. This project, like Robinson (2007) found “In Goffmanian terms, the ‘I’ constructs the homepage with expressions given by choosing text, photos, and digital formatting with the other’s reaction in mind” (p. 104). Or rather, people give performances online just as they do offline because “rather than freeing us from our offline social identities, cyberspace provides venues in which to codify them” (Robinson, 2007, p. 101). The point of difference online however, was that interviewees were not utilising Facebook’s affordance of multiple stages and thereby multiple performances, instead they were choosing a more Giddens like approach by choosing to portray just one identity to a collective audience.

The symbolic interactionist perspective also, did not account for the impact artifacts have in affording user's ability to interact in a specific dramaturgical manner. Facebook, Case Study 1 said, "specifically invites me to say something to all my friends, but not address one person." This affordance meant a singular and constant self as expressed by Giddens (1991), needed to be maintained across a wide range of potential audiences. Interviewee 1 discusses Facebook's affordances further, stating that the interactions made were necessary as "I just don't really have a choice if I want to behave correctly on Facebook." The results of this project advocate recognition of technical artifacts' affordances, a view which is not often taken on by interactionists as Lindlof (2011) states:

Communication is also a latecomer to the study of material culture. Part of this past neglect may be due to the tendency of communication researchers to regard objects and the built environments as a mere backdrop or "staging area" for speech acts. (p. 220)

To accept that material objects are influential, is to suggest then that "the design norms, and practices around SNSs do not simply shape how people present themselves, but that they discursively *produce* the subject by means of the identifications that are enabled versus those foreclosed" (Van House, 2011, p. 428). Therefore, to better understand how Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework is applicable to online interaction, this project suggests taking a more ecological approach as expressed by Giddens.

The lack of affordance recognition is not suffered by the work of Giddens. While Goffman does not clearly acknowledge mediating effects, resulting in theorists' confused attempts to apply his theory to online environments, Giddens (1991) bluntly addresses the issue stating "Mediated experience, since the first experience of writing, has long influenced both self-identity and the basic organisation of social relations" (p. 4). Giddens' recognition of mediating artifacts' affordances has made his work ideal for a development of Goffman's (1995) dramaturgical framework in technologically mediated contexts.

Van House (2011) explains these affording features online more specifically, stating that on social networking sites “the nature and content of member’s postings, and therefore of their presentation of self, are influenced by both the design and the norms of the site and the practices of one’s social group” (p. 426). These affordances shape how identity is articulated by influencing how interaction can take place. Van House (2011) expands on this point by stating that “the structure and policies of social networking sites, along with user practices and norms, support and even encourage certain kinds of self-representation, relationships, and even subjects of selves, while discouraging or making difficult others” (p. 426). As we have seen, this project’s data revealed evidence of all these factors. However, this project also suggests, as does Giddens, that offline interaction, where participants articulated an ability to act differently, is also materially mediated, and also requires artifact affordance analysis to better understand how dramaturgical performances and therefore identity construction can occur. This is once again reiterated by Giddens as he speaks of the everyday mediating effect of the written word (p. 4). Pinch agrees (2010) stating “Technology is so all-pervasive in our everyday world that we scarcely notice that the objects we interact with are technological at all” (p. 409) and this technology “plays a part in staging the role and is also crucial in terms of how the interaction is mediated” (p. 410). This recognition of the mediator’s effect has been lacking in most interactionist studies, which primarily coming from a social psychological perspective.

As has been noted, previous online identity studies have been contradictory in their attempts to determine how self is conceptualised online. Studies attempting to apply Goffman’s (1959) framework to online interaction have then been quick to dismiss the theory’s application not just to online, but to any mediated interaction. Technologically mediated interaction has commonly been considered to be special, or different from face-to-face interaction and social presence theory even declares there is an “inability of CMC systems to transmit much of the social information present in face-to-face interaction” (Strate, Jacobson, & Gibson, 2003, p. 333). What this project argues however is that all interaction is mediated, technologically or otherwise, and all “mediated experience has been incorporated reflexively into the project of the self” (Thompson, 1995, p. 230). Just as the

architecture of a physical environment affects the social behaviour of those present, online Boyd and Heer (2006) point out “holistically viewing conversation as the interplay of performance and interpretation within a mediating architecture can prove a valuable analytical lens for online space” (p. 10).

Many studies utilising symbolic interaction theory online have attempted to update, change, or simply dismiss the theory’s applicability to these environments. Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue that “no other form of social relating can reproduce the plenitude of symptoms of subjectivity present in the face-to-face situation” (p. 29) and Monist theories of self argue “that the physical body is an integral part of self-development. Touching, feeling, and having access to all five senses is essential to interacting with objects and people” (Strate, Jacobson, & Gibson, 2003, p. 240). What this project’s research findings suggest however, is that technologically mediated interaction can offer the same impression management techniques outlined in Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical framework. What is required though is recognition of artifacts affordances, not simply those presented in this project, but all materially mediated environments, including those found in Goffman’s (1959) own interaction examples.

What this project’s findings further suggest, is that symbolic interactionism, and Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical framework, correspond well with the studied interaction in online environments. Like Strate, Jacobson, and Gibson (2003) who compared the screen with the stage and identified “the power of the e-mail text to embody the writer while also creating a site for the writer’s performance” (p. 323), this project too, found Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical perspective offered similar metaphorical dramas in online environments. However, mediated interaction was found to impact the individual’s ability to act, and therefore recognition of mediating affordances, online and off, may assist in better understanding Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical framework in any such environment. Giddens does this by identifying the affording features of electronic media and interpreting how these affect the dramaturgical perspective. Rather than dismissing the dramatic theory, Giddens accepts the interactionist concepts while also considering the requirements of the medium, he states:

electronic media, alter the 'situational geography' of social life: 'More and more, media make us "direct" audiences to performances that happen in other places and give us access to audiences that are not "physically present" '. As a result, the traditional connection between 'physical setting' and 'social situation' has become undermined; mediated social situations construct new communalities - and differences - between pre constituted forms of social experience. (Giddens, 1991, p. 84)

Interview participants in this study generally believed they were sincere online, and still able to act differently offline. Giddens explains that offline, the self is able to be performed differently due to modern societies' division of labour, as now "the separate individual [has] become a focus of attention" (1991, p. 75). Online, however, the division is not as apparent and a reflexive and continuous self is expected to be all-pervasive (p. 76). Facebook largely necessitates this singular level of sincerity due to a lack of audience segregation. Its affordance of one stage and one audience means users are expected to choose one broad social role and perform accordingly without jeopardising the complementary performances put on offline.

This project, like Marwick and Boyd's (2010) found that "since authenticity is constituted by the audience, context collapse problematizes the individual's ability to shift between these selves and come off as authentic or fake" (p. 124). Giddens (1991) also addresses this issue. Through proper demeanour Giddens believes a person will typically "sustain 'normal appearances' and at the same time be convinced of personal continuity across time and space" (1991, p. 100). This constant and stable sense of self however, "may come under strain" (ibid), in situations such as presented by Facebook. Facebook's community necessitates the acting of a single role, as the community becomes, in Mead's (1962) terms "the *generalized other*" (Strate, Jacobson, & Gibson, 2003, p. 154). The generalised other being the "organized community or social group which gives to the individual his unity of self" (Strate, Jacobson, & Gibson, 2003, p. 154).

The requirement of sincerity however, meant interview participants did not want to perform too often, or provide too much information which could easily

“contradict, discredit, or otherwise throw doubt upon this projection” (Goffman, 1959, p. 12) given the wide audience. Offline, materially mediated environments afford participants the ability to act differently without causing embarrassment when “the self projected is somehow confronted with another self which, though valid in other contexts, cannot be sustained here in harmony with the first” (Goffman, 1959, p. 108). Interviewees online maintained this constant self in ways fitting within Giddens concept of the trajectory. A self-narrative allowed all Facebook friends access to a single-reflexive identity which could be expressed in minimal terms allowing them to avoid portraying contradictory definitions. Giddens clarifies again: “It is clear that self-identity, as a coherent phenomenon, presumes a narrative: the narrative of the self is made explicit” (1991, p. 76). It is the goal of this reflexive narrative to be perceived as sincere. That is what we are seeing on Facebook.

### **7.3 – Affording Dramaturgy**

Prior studies utilising non symbolic interaction theories have also been contradictory in their attempts to explain technologically mediated interaction and identity construction. Postmodernist theories believe the option saturated nature of western society is fragmenting and multiplying our sense of self. Other studies have found that online, our flexibility of self-construction is leading to idealised versions of online selves. Mark Zuckerberg offers yet another working theory, believing the proliferation of information means our online selves are becoming similar to the 1800’s romanticist concept of self as the global village emerges.

Zuckerberg’s belief in the movement toward electronic sharing of a singularly ‘true’ self, which has influenced Facebook’s design, is itself shaped by the technology of today. He believes the pervasiveness and accessibility of digital information means “the level of transparency the world has now won’t support having two identities for a person” (Kirkpatrick, 2010, p. 199). Facebook was designed with this transparency in mind, influenced by the affordances of the technology; Facebook is continuing this movement, shaping the way in which self is able to be portrayed online.

It is the work of Giddens (1991) that in the end best explains this project's actual research results. Giddens takes an approach to identity formation which aligns with neither postmodern or romanticist concepts of self. Instead, Giddens finds a middle ground which is quite explanatory for this project. Giddens also shows an appreciation for artifact affordances. Taking an extended view of the symbolic interactionist perspective, Giddens aligns his view with many of Goffman's concepts while also acknowledging that mediated interaction influences the formation of self. Rather than requiring either a romantic or postmodern perspective, which have both largely dominated online interaction studies, Giddens' more narrative-based approach better aligns with the interview material. Giddens explains "A person with a reasonably stable sense of self-identity has a feeling of biographical continuity which she is able to grasp reflexively and, to a greater or lesser degree, communicate to other people" (1991, p. 54). It is this reflexive narrative which interviewees suggested was most afforded to them on Facebook.

### **7.3.1 – Affordance and Identity Theory Development**

What had become clear from interview data, was that interviewees' articulation of self differed depending on the environment. A sincere sense of self could be felt online, and an 'acted' self described in offline environments. However to interact with Facebook at any level, requires users to utilise certain presentation techniques. Finally, while reflecting upon interaction theories and prior research, a relationship between these differing theories and the different technological affordances became clear. As Gardiner (2001) states and this project also found "we don't mutate into a new species when we connect to cyberspace, but the psychological factors that affect our behavior in real life play out differently online because the environments we enter are different" (p. 318). Below is a discussion of how these ideas can be seen to correlate with the technology's affordances.

#### **7.3.1.1 – Symbolic Interactionism**

Goffman (1959) developed his dramaturgical theory based on his observed interactions of people during the 1950's. Goffman believed people are similar to actors, performing and impressing others with stage and audience driven

interactions. This symbolic interactionist perspective was informed, like Mead's and Cooley's, by the technology of that time. Goffman was wholly concerned with the minute, social interactions of the individual. These interactions, according to Goffman, although not articulated in as many words, were afforded by artifacts. Goffman provides examples of artifacts influencing features by describing the setting as "involving furniture, décor, physical layout, and other background items which supply scenery and stage props for the spate of human action played out before, within, or upon it" (p. 22). A performance and thereby an identity was available to an actor only *if the stage was set*.

One of Goffman's primary interaction examples was that of the Shetland Island Hotel workers. The door of the hotel's kitchen afforded staff the ability to act differently in the kitchen than outside amongst customers. This project's findings suggest that further recognition of the affordances is necessary to understand how symbolic interaction is shaped. The impression management techniques, the social role, the audience, the team, and level of sincerity of Goffman's dramaturgical framework are dependent upon artifacts' affordances. The symbolic interactionist theory, whereby identity is acted out according to the current audience, is therefore only legitimised due to the technological boundaries which segregate audiences and provide a stage. Pinch (2010) further argues "we can see that a particular material technology, a door, is crucial in understanding the mediation between front stage and backstage" (p. 412). If stages were removed, audiences were meshed and interactions were expected to occur, the legitimisation of the dramaturgical theory could become jeopardised.

### **7.3.1.2 – Postmodernism**

Turkle's (1995) famous work on the users of MUDs aided her declaration that online environments are places for multiple identities to be developed; these identities were, she believed, both fluid and fragmented. Turkle's declaration of multiplicity and fragmentation was based on a technology which afforded users the ability to create themselves in multiple ways. Turkle acknowledges this affordance, stating:

The anonymity of MUDS--one is known on the MUD only by the name of one's character or characters--gives people the chance to express multiple and often unexplored aspects of the self, to play with their identity and to try out new ones. MUDs make possible the creation of an identity so fluid and multiple that it strains the limits of the notion. (p. 12)

Users could join many MUDs, create numerous accounts, generate a personality and an image, and the user's bodied social milieu was typically not brought with them into these anonymous sites to refute any inaccurate claims. This picture became hugely influential.

Turkle has been criticised for the widespread application of her identity theory (Kennedy, 2006; Robinson, 2007). Recognition of the mediating effect of technological artifacts is provided in her quoting of a young woman:

“It used to be that things weren't so artificial. We phoned each other every afternoon.” To this young woman, phone calls represented the natural, intimate, and immediate. We build our ideas about what is real and what is natural with the cultural materials available. (Turkle, 1995, p. 237)

If this insight about the affordances of the given cultural materials had further developed by proponents of MUD-style self proliferation and performance, they might well have concluded that different 'cultural materials', such as Facebook, will inevitably entail different understandings of the virtual self.

#### **7.4 - Conclusion**

An evolutionary period from the multi user domains popular in the early 90's, to the social media networks we use today, constituted a time of transition. Networks were not all entirelyonymous nor entirely anonymous, some were one, some were the other, and others were mixed. Chat rooms still allowed for something similar to the postmodern fluidity of self to arise, however the emergence of dating websites and other social networks meant users were increasingly required to identify with a more 'true' representation of self, one that included a social milieu and were often closer to a sincere self than an invented one. These online

selves, where in-person interaction could occur with someone outside of the current social network, were often considered to be idealised forms of identity (McLaughlin, Vitak, & Crouse, 2011, p. 3).

Websites during this time were designed to afford users flexibility of self, with no verification, however, the use of the website, typically for meeting someone in real life, or expanding their current social network, meant users needed to present a self which more closely resembled their offline identity. Myspace, Bebo and Friendster all became popular during this time. It was the expectation of these website developers that they would serve to increase and maintain social networks already in existence. The flexibility of these websites however, and the flexibility of online identities previously, allowed users to use pseudonyms, add people outside of their real life friends, and create an identity which resembled the self behind the computer screen, but in an idealised form.

Zuckerberg, creator of Facebook, believes the times and technologies are changing to a point that the expectation is we will present just one identity. He believes we have reached a time where the level of transparency will not allow for multiple identities or images. The perspective of an idealised self is no longer considered appropriate, as “reality can rarely compete with an idealized version of the self created online, and these exaggerated claims may damage the relationship as it moves off the computer screen to face-to-face” (McLaughlin, Vitak, & Crouse, 2011, p.3). This is also revealed in this project’s interviews, where a majority of people believe not in an ‘act’, but in a sincere, online self. Sanberg, the chief operating officer at Facebook is quoted saying “You can’t be on Facebook without being your authentic self” (Kirkpatrick, 2010, p. 210). The creator of Facebook is also quoted, declaring that “The days of you having a different image for your work friends or co-workers and for the other people you know are probably coming to an end pretty quickly” (Kirkpatrick, 2010, p. 199).

With the inventors of such technology declaring the way in which identity will be conceived, it is no surprise that users are articulating their sense of selves in similar ways. Facebook verifies identities, it allows one description of self, it permits just one profile picture, and it requires a level of transparency from its

users. Facebook users are expected to befriend people they know in real life, and they have just one profile for every user to see. With such technological affordances, Facebook users must articulate their sense of online identity by saying “I just want to be me” (Case Study 1).

With the affordances revealed, the relationship between technology and interaction theories becomes clearer. What this project’s findings suggest, is that the articulation of self is dependent upon technological affordances. However, rather than understanding technological development as entailing a fundamental shift in society’s conception of self, in need of new theorisation, we should recognise a degree of continuity. This is achieved by Giddens (1991) when he identifies the affording features of all mediation, from the written word, to electronic media, rather than insisting we view new technologies as uniquely impacting the formation of self and thereby requiring new theorisation. I suggest that this ecological/psychological perspective which appreciates artifact affordances, rather than the purely social psychological exploration of identity construction, may help to better understand identity creation via mediated interaction.

Recognition of affordance’s impact upon interaction may also assist our understanding the motivation behind the creation of prior identity theories. Postmodernism, as evoked by Turkle describes how the multiplication of selves can be acted out “as one can play as many roles as the number of windows that can fit on one’s computer screen” (1995, p. 83). Goffman’s (1959) own recognition of mediated interaction affordances, can help us to understand a door’s ability to segregate our roles in much the same manner. From door to window is not such a big leap after all.

Other social psychologists have not paid so much attention to the non-humans’ effect on interaction and identity. Actor network theory, being one of the exceptions, is quite unique in its acceptance of artifacts as equals in the network of identity creation. While this study found ANT’s rejection of the idea that “‘social relations’ are independent of the material and natural world (Latour, 2005)” (Whittle & Spicer, 2008, p. 611) helpful, the resulting object world does

seem to miss “the *meaningful* character of human action” (Whittle & Sicer, 2008, p. 621). This study, like Strate, Jacobson, and Gibson (2003), suggests an ecological perspective may better assist our understanding of self as “a cultural paradigm shift in thinking about human relationships to technology. This shift has profound implications for the natural ecology of self and the development of self in digital environments” (p. 230). Because, technological or not, mediating artifacts are influencing our interactions, and are therefore affecting our formation of self.

While technologies do impact upon actors’ ability to stage a role, perform in a specific dramaturgical manner, or access a specific audience, this is not special to interaction online. All “technological and material options are crucial to the sorts of social interactions they permit to be staged” (Pinch, 2010, p. 412). This project, in studying Facebook, found that users were afforded a Goffman-like and dramaturgical sense of self. The affordances of Facebook however, shaped the ways in which this impression management could be achieved. One of the key differences between Facebook’s technological affordances and other online mediated interaction is the ability for self to form a trajectory of development, from the past to the anticipated future, which is coherent and singular unlike the postmodernist, yet flexible and editable unlike concepts derived from romanticism. A “maintaining of constants of demeanor across varying settings of interaction” (Giddens, 1991, p. 100) was most important to interviewees in their bid to have their performances be perceived as sincere, which is the prize they were looking for in exchange for following the rules of the new dramaturgical game.

An investigation of Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical framework’s applicability to online interaction in Facebook found that participants primarily articulated and conducted themselves in ways fitting within the symbolic interactionist perspective. Performances online were subject to the same self-ing processes as those offline, whereby the reflexive process of the ‘I’ becoming the ‘me’ was dependent upon interaction. The five principles of Goffman’s dramaturgical framework were, however, influenced by the technological affordances as we have insisted.

The actor can be understood as the Facebook *user*, who is afforded one role which requires singularity and coherency. The Facebook *self* however can mature, through performances, editing of the trajectory of self, and adapting of the narrative to redefine and develop the sincere self. The self is “*reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography*” (Giddens, 1991, p. 53) and it is selectively presented via the timeline. The audience is comprised of the actor’s friends, typically not segregated to the extent they are offline, however, users are afforded the ability to choose the membership. This audience can also be understood as the Goffmanesque team as the “Facebook community works as a team in a performance to achieve “dramaturgical cooperation” in order to affirm each other’s performances and to define the local Facebook community” (Westlake, 2008, p. 27). The team is also visible when audience members show tact, using defensive techniques to reinforce the actor’s definition of self, or done through reply comments, ‘likes’ and even the accepting of the friend request. We saw examples in our interviewee accounts. Facebook can be understood as the front stage, while also allowing multiple back and front stages to be constructed through personal chat servicing. The outside is clearly understood by participants as comprised of those not friended, often including bosses, parents, and co-workers, as we saw.

What this project suggests is that the internet, and in turn Facebook, is not revolutionary, as Winston (1998) demonstrates. Rather, no new technology is ever completely new and, as Davis (2010) explains, technology “cannot be separated from the socially embedded human beings using it. Rather, technology and humans have a dialectic relationship, each acting upon, and shaping one another” (p. 1105).

So dismissal of Goffman’s framework is not, according to this project’s findings, justified. While mediated interaction was not a subject of reference for Goffman (1959) in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* as his later texts progressed, and mediating artifacts became more obvious, recognition of mediation was apparent. Goffman’s statement that “every person lives in a world of social encounters, involving him either in face-to-face or mediated contact with other

participants” (p. 5) shows the progress he began to make in regards to artifacts’ mediation. In his later text *Relations in Public* Goffman (1971) further demonstrated his movement toward a more networked way of understanding self, stating that ritual idiom is “a mixed bag of behavioural arrangements including acts seen as issuing from one person and ecological positionings involving two or more persons” (p. 225). Goffman’s late recognition of identity’s networked nature, and this project’s acknowledgement of cultural artifacts’ affordances, could be aligned with an actor network theory conceptualisation of self; however, this project’s research findings suggest (and Goffman (1971) argues) that interaction and therefore identity construction still requires two or more human beings in *meaningful* exchanges.

A development of Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical framework is not required specifically for Facebook, or for online interaction, rather, recognition of cultural artifacts’ ability to shape all of our interactions, and therefore our sense of self needs further theorisation and research. This recognition is pioneered by Giddens (1991) as he takes the interactionist perspective into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and provides a resolution to the competing nature of postmodern and romantic understandings of self. Turkle (1995) was correct in her claim that “the technologies of our everyday lives change the way we see the world” (p. 47). However this project suggests, that rather than being blinded by the new technologies of today, we understand the self-ing process as it is afforded not just by technologically mediated interaction, but all mediated interaction. As the internet, and new technologies evolve “identity signalling will undoubtedly mature” (Robinson, 2007, p. 107) re-theorisation of identity construction need not occur if an understanding of affordance and an ecological psychology are achieved.

### **7.5 – Limitations**

It is important when considering this project’s findings, to understand its necessarily limited scope. In-depth insight into participants’ Facebook use and the qualitative exploratory nature of this project limits the large scale applicability of this project’s findings. The time consuming nature of in-depth interviewing restricted the number of participants able to be interviewed. Participants accessed were primarily New Zealanders, and predominantly in their twenties. The

qualitative and inductive nature of this project means it was not designed to be applicable outside of its narrow scope, instead it provides a basis upon which further deductive research may be undertaken.

Technologically based studies are prone to becoming dated very quickly. This project provides insight into a very specific time in Facebook's development. Applicability outside of this project's time frame is also perhaps limited. Technological advancements are currently much faster than theory development. The lack of recent research in this field necessitated this project's use of an inductive methodology. What is required is a commitment by theorists to keep up to date with technological advancements.

As a first masters project, the methodological choices, interviewing, coding, and analysis techniques were both conducted and learnt by the researcher simultaneously. While research was completed prior to every methodological decision and action, this project is still limited by a lack of prior experience. Future studies attempting to expand upon or research this project's topic further, may choose to reduce this limitation by using trained interviewers and experienced coders.

## **7.6 – Future Studies**

It would be useful to investigate a collective of online communication technologies. Due to its resources, this project was limited to studying Facebook as the most popular social networking website. What this project has demonstrated however, is that communication technology is shaping our ways of understanding self. This project suggests that interaction and identity theories have been influenced by the technologies of their time. In a time when communication technologies are so diverse and abundant, an investigation into how conceptualisation of self is affected by these technologies is important.

This project provides a snap shot in time. While the wider conclusions of this study, about technologies' influence upon identity construction, may be applicable outside of this project's time frame, the way in which technology is influencing identity may not. What are required are further investigations providing a much

larger scale than this project could achieve. Investigations with a larger population and over a greater period of time may provide insight into how technological development and identity construction interrelate.

Future research could now be conducted using more deductive reasoning. This project was limited by a lack of prior research, and identity theories' conflicting nature. Identity theory's applications in online environments were scarce, and incohesive. Inductive reasoning allowed for exploratory insight to be gained which provided a novel hypothesis. Future research utilising deductive methodology may prove to be more useful in establishing this hypothesis' usefulness or otherwise.

### **7.7 – Summary of Key Findings**

This project found Goffman's framework applicable in a broad sense, but lacking regard for the specific *affordances* of the mediated environment. It is this absence of attention given to artifacts which has made Goffman's perspective difficult for theorists to apply online. The five components of the dramaturgical metaphor were identified in interviewees' articulation of self-formation on Facebook. However, the specific ways in which self-formation online differed from Goffman's perspective required that this project engage in some theory development.

The key finding, and main point of difference between Goffman's perspective and interviewees' understanding of self, concerned sincerity. Interviewees understood their online identity to be *sincere*. This singular and sincere sense of self was evident in spite of interviewees' lack of audience segregation, which Goffman believed is key to a performance's success. This disjunction was resolved by exploring the work of Giddens who further developed the dramaturgical perspective and presciently anticipated online developments without in fact knowing anything about what was coming.

Giddens understands, in terms equally articulated by this project's interviewees, that performances require a *consistence of demeanour* in order to be understood as authentic or sincere. By suggesting that identity is formed via a narrative, or

timeline, Giddens provides a resolution to the context collapse issues of Facebook that seems readily relatable both to the social network users of today and the platforms they utilise. Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework based on the face-to-face interactions of everyday life provided little recognition of artifacts' affordances. Applications of Goffman's framework to day-to-day interactions have rather ignored 'invisible' mediation. The conflict between the many stages expected by Goffman and the one stage afforded by Facebook made Goffman's application problematic. As a result, more recent recognition of the internet's and Facebook's unique technological mediation has led many re-theorisations to a complete dismissal of Goffman's original framework.

This project revealed that mediated interaction is not special to the internet or Facebook. Rather, applicability of Goffman's framework is equally as appropriate today as it was when first mediated by, for example, the door. What is required, to best understand how dramaturgy is played out, is an understanding of how artifacts' affordances impact the act. By utilising an ecological psychological approach, rather than focusing entirely on the social psychological, sociologists such as Giddens provide both a resolution to the oppositional conclusions of prior online interaction studies and a development of Goffman's framework that is well-suited to Facebook.

Where other interactionists have provided starkly oppositional theory about the online self, this project found Giddens' concepts complementary both to interview material and Goffman's framework. Giddens, I suggest, provides a development of Goffman's interactionist approach which could not have been achieved during Goffman's time. Understanding that performances require consistence of demeanour in order to be understood as authentic, Giddens provides a resolution to the context collapse issues of Facebook that seems readily relatable both to the social network users of today and the platforms they utilise.

## APPENDICIES

**Appendix A****Participant Information Sheet****Master's Thesis Title:**

Interaction and Identity Construction Online: An Exploratory Study of Erving Goffman's Dramaturgical Framework

**Master's Thesis Purpose:**

This project seeks to better understand, from a social-psychological perspective, how Facebook users interact on this social network on a day-to-day basis. This project will attempt to discover whether Erving Goffman's dramaturgical framework is applicable to the mediated environment of Facebook or whether this perspective requires a more modern or updated approach. This project will look specifically at whether Facebook users' interactions fit within this dramaturgical framework consisting of actors, performances, stages, audiences and teams. This project is exploratory and as such, seeks to offer an introductory examination of this theory's relevance to mediated interaction

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**What is required of participants:**

You are being asked to take part in an interview in which you will be asked questions regarding your interactions on the website Facebook. The interview can be conducted at your convenience. You may then be contacted regarding further questions or to verify information.

The research findings will be used in the production of a Master's Thesis with an online publication. Research findings may also be presented at conferences and published in journal articles.

You may choose to remain anonymous, in which case a pseudonym may be chosen and this will be assigned to your interview material along with any third party participants. The researcher, Amy Baker, and supervisor, Professor Dan Fleming will have access to this information and information will be stored digitally, on a usb drive, for a minimum of five years under password protection, after which time the raw research material will be deleted.

**Rights of participants:**

- You may choose to decline to participate.
- You may choose not to answer any questions.
- You and third party referents will be protected with pseudonyms.
- You may ask the researcher or supervisor any questions regarding the interview.
- You are welcome to contact the researcher or supervisor at any point.
- You will have access to their transcript.
- You may withdraw, review or amend the transcript up to two weeks after the interview.
- You may choose to withdraw at any point up to two weeks after the interview.

- You are welcome to access any published works.

**Research approval:**

This research project has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. Any questions about the ethical conduct of this research may be sent to the Secretary of the Committee, email [fass-ethics@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:fass-ethics@waikato.ac.nz), postal address, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Te Kura Kete Aronui, University of Waikato, Te Whare Wananga o Waikato, Private Bag 3105, Hamilton 3240.

Please copy and paste the consent information below into an email, and send it to me ([alb25@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:alb25@waikato.ac.nz)), OR print, sign and send this form to my physical address 641 Victoria Street, Apartment 7, Hamilton City, Hamilton.

## Appendix B

### In-depth Interview Questions

1. How long have you been a member of Facebook? (*Probe – why did you sign up to the website?*)
2. How often do you use Facebook? (*Clarify – everyday, a few times a week, once a week, or less, and for how long?*)
3. What are you using Facebook for? (*Expand – what sort of activities are you doing on Facebook?*) (*Probe – What sort of material are you posting on Facebook?*)
4. Do you utilise Facebook's privacy settings? (*Expand – why and how?*)
5. Who are your Facebook friends comprised of? (*Examples – friends, family, co-workers, parents, bosses, siblings*) (*Probe – who are these groups comprised of?*)
6. Are you concerned about who may be looking at your page? (*Examples – bosses, co-workers, family members*) (*Probe – why, or why not?*)
7. Do you ever block people from seeing your content on Facebook? (*Examples – through restricting who can see a post, by using Facebook's group setting, by utilising privacy settings for specific people*) (*Expand – if yes, how and why, if no, why not?*)
8. Do you ever censor your activity on Facebook? (*Examples – perhaps started writing a post and decided against posting it or felt as though you are holding back*)
9. Do you tailor your Facebook posts to a specific group? (*Probe – do you consider your posts appropriate and interesting for everyone, or only a select group?*)
10. Have you heard of Google+'s circles feature? (*Expand – if yes, what do you know about it?*) (*Probe – do you think this is a useful feature or not?*) (*Expand - why or why not?*)
11. Have you ever regretted making a public post on Facebook? (*Expand – if no, why?*) (*Expand – if yes, can you think of an example?*)
12. Have you ever been surprised at realising who was reading your Facebook posts? (*Clarify – perhaps when someone unexpected commented on a photo or comment*) (*Expand – if yes, what made you surprised*) (*Probe – are you generally aware of who can read your material?*)

13. Have you encountered, or know of someone who has encountered an awkward situation due to Facebook content? (*Expand – why was it awkward?*) (*Probe – how can people avoid awkward situations on Facebook?*)
14. Have you ever come across friend's content that did not seem appropriate for Facebook? (*Expand – if yes, why wasn't it appropriate?*) (*Probe – do Facebook friends post stuff they wouldn't normally talk to you about, or show you in a face-to-face situation?*) (*Expand – if yes, can you think of any examples?*)
15. Have you ever turned down a friend request? (*Expand – if yes, why?*)
16. Do you spend time managing your 'likes' on Facebook? (*Examples – films, groups, music, authors, sports, foods, business pages*) (*Expand – why, or why not?*)
17. Do you believe you are judged on what you post on Facebook? (*Expand – do you think your posts influence the way people think of you?*) (*Probe – does this affect what you post or how you post on Facebook?*)
18. Have you ever untagged yourself from a Facebook photo? (*Expand – if yes, why?*)
19. Do you think if you had a list of exactly who you are friends with, this would influence how you post? (*Expand – if yes, how so?*) (*Probe – why does this knowledge effect, or not effect what you post?*)
20. Mark Zuckerberg, creator of Facebook was quoted saying "the days of you having a different image for your work friends or co-workers and for the other people you know are probably coming to an end pretty quickly" he also says "you have one identity" and "having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity." What do you think about this? (*Probe – do you think he is correct?*) (*Expand – why or why not?*)
21. Is there anything else you would like to add?

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