

**The spread of memes and social media: Online persona construction and offline lives
in selected examples of film and television**

By

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SUMMARY

This research is based on the assumption that social media sites – such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube – have changed the way in which memes (culturally transmitted ideas) are transmitted or spread. Qualitative research is used in this study, particularly a literature study that applies and weighs the theories against a purposive sample of selected film examples between 2009 and 2010, to answer the question: what is the relationship between social media sites and the spread of memes? To answer this question, the way in which social media aids the spread of memes is analysed. It is argued that social media has provided the most fertile environment for the replication of memes to date. Also analysed is the way in which social media sites are represented in films, as well as the ways in which the offline lives of the characters are affected by their social media profiles, specifically as depicted in films *Julie & Julia* (Ephron 2009), *Trust* (Schwimmer 2010), and *Catfish* (Joost & Schulman 2010). Lastly, it is argued that one can construct an entirely new persona, or merely experiment with different aspects of who you are, on social media sites. This online persona can be influenced by the memes one chooses to spread online. Naturally, all memes carry connotations, values and judgements. These memes collaborate with one's profile and, thus, the connotations attached to the memes one shares are then associated with one's online persona (profile). This research is deemed relevant, also in a South African context, because the spread of memes does not respect national or international boundaries.

KEY TERMS: Memes, Facebook, Social networking, Chat rooms, Virtual communities, Blogging, Folksonomies, Identity, Semiotics, Social media

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Chapter One: Introduction

This research is based on the assumption that social media sites – such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube – have changed the way in which memes (culturally transmitted ideas) are transmitted or spread. In this regard, it is telling that the *Kony 2012* (Invisible Children 2012) YouTube video¹ starts with the words: “Nothing is more powerful than an idea whose time has come, whose time is now”; clearly illustrating how a powerful meme can spread through social media. The theory of memes was coined by Richard Dawkins, in his book *The Selfish Gene* (1976). While genes consist of DNA, Dawkins (1976:192) defines memes as:

tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate them in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation.

Dawkins, thus, suggests that memes spread through imitation. Memes, like genes, are replicators (Blackmore 1999:14), and therefore their main purpose is to replicate, but this is complicated by the fact that memes compete for limited space in the human mind (Dennett 1990:131). Although memes have become a contested subject and Dawkins, Daniel C. Dennett and Susan Blackmore’s theories have subsequently been challenged (cf. Jeffreys 2000; Lissack 2004; Edmonds 2005; Burman 2012), the concept is applied here as a “meaningful metaphor” (Jeffreys 2000:228) or “analytical tool” (Shifman 2011:188) to analyse the rapid spread of ideas in the digital domain, and specifically on social media sites. As Gary Marshall (1995:1) indicates, the Internet is “an ideal medium for the spread, replication and storage of memes”. This is then also referred to as an ‘Internet meme’ as it spreads via social networks, blogs, email, news sources, and other web-based services. In order to explain the new possibilities of the transmission of memes through social media, Tom Hayes (2007:1) coined the term

¹ To view the *Kony 2012* video visit <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y4MnpzG5Sqc>.

“beme”. Hayes (2007:1) explains the workings of the beme² (or super charged meme) as follows:

a turbo-charged meme made possible entirely by the existence of the network effect. A beme can be impactful because it is lurid – a photo of a panty-less Britney Spears, or humorous – a whimsical video of the band OKGO on treadmills, or gut-wrenching – the sad tirade by comedian Michael Richards. A beme can cement an idea with the public in a way that cannot be legislated or regulated.

For the purposes of this study, the term meme is utilised throughout, while acknowledging the developments and transitions in meanings of memes posted online. It is also argued that social media (e.g. blogs, wikis, social networking sites, micro blogs, and user-generated content sites), as well as social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter and MySpace assist in the transmission of memes. Accordingly, it may be argued that MySpace and iTunes assist in the transmission of tunes, while YouTube provides a video-sharing website. In this regard, Limor Shifman (2011:188) has recently “uncover[ed] the attributes common to ‘memetic videos’ – popular clips that generate extensive user engagement by way of creative derivatives” on YouTube. He comes to the conclusion that the “memetic videos” spreading on YouTube “becom[e] imbedded in peoples’ lives in numerous, often unexpected ways” (Shifman 2011:200). The example of Die Antwoord’s viral³ spread of their *Zef side*⁴ (NINJA & Metelerkamp 2009) and *Enter the ninja*⁵ (NINJA & Malpage 2009) videos on YouTube attest to the powerful possibilities of an Internet meme. In other words, memes are successfully transmitted online leading to participation, imitation and re-transmission of these memes. The same applies to the longer transmission of memes, such as fashion and food culture transmitted on blogs. This means that any story retold or any

² The term ‘beme’, in this context, refers specifically to those memes that are spread through blogs. However, these memes still possess the same qualities as the memes spread before the use of blogs. The term ‘meme’ is used throughout the research to maintain consistency, as well as highlight this similarity between the terms ‘meme’ and ‘beme’.

³ The Oxford English Dictionary (2014:1) defines viral as a video, image, meme, and so on, “circulated rapidly and widely from one Internet user to another”.

⁴ To view *the Zef side* video visit http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4_pS46YRMIQ.

⁵ To view *Enter the Ninja* visit http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wc3f4xU_FfQ.

craft that is learned becomes a form of meme replication. Arguably, social media sites provide memes with a completely new and advantageous form of spreading, as well as a greater chance of survival.

The spread of memes does not respect national or international boundaries, making the research relevant in a South African context. Not only is it a global phenomenon “naturally suitable to the age of the Internet and the World Wide web” (Jeffreys 2000:228), but according to Blackmore it forms part of human nature (2001:225). The theory of memes is currently applied in a broad field of subjects such as behavioural studies (Lane 1996), marketing (Williams 2002), branding (Marsden 2002), management studies (Pech 2003) and, significantly, aesthetics (Perricone 2004). Furthermore, the undeniable role played by online social media in the ‘Arab spring’ movement, for instance, places a definite currency on research analysing the spread of memes through social media (Bruns, Highfield & Burgess 2013).

In this research, it is argued that an online persona⁶ or virtual identity created on social media sites is influenced by the memes selected. Naturally all memes carry connotations, values and judgements. For instance, selecting the meme of ski-instructing on an online profile has the connotations of being adventurous, sporty, well-trained and out of the ordinary (at least in a South African context). Posting such a ski-instructing meme constructs one’s persona as including these qualities. This might be an aspect of one’s personality that people do not know about in one’s offline life and online persona, and therefore allows one to expose this aspect of oneself. Alternatively, one could merely post the ski-instructing meme because one enjoys the connotations attached to it and wishes to be viewed in such a light. By posing as a ski-instructor online one is then able to be perceived as someone who is sporty,

⁶ The terms ‘persona’ and ‘identity’ are used interchangeably throughout the research. A relationship exists between oneself and one’s environment, and an identity or persona results from this relationship (Jenkins 2004:4). In this way, one’s environment impacts one’s self perception, and vice versa.

adventurous and out of the ordinary without even being able to ski⁷. In this manner, one may construct an entirely new persona or merely experiment with different aspects of who one is on social media sites. The invention of the smartphone – the most recent invention in communication technologies – allows one to access social media at any time, as well as constantly receive updates on any social media one has signed up for. This means that one is potentially connected to thousands of people and constantly exposed to countless memes.

It is the intention of the study to carefully consider and interpret the impact of memes selected online on offline lives. To do this, it is important to examine the impact that online personae have on offline lives. This is explored through an analysis of television and film examples, specifically the films *Julie & Julia* (Ephron 2009), *Trust* (Schwimmer 2010), and *Catfish* (Joost & Schulman 2010). It is also important to note that the characters in the film and television examples spread memes online and there are connotations attached to the memes they choose to spread. For instance, in the film *Julie & Julia* (Ephron 2009), the main protagonist, Julie (Amy Adams), writes an online blog about cooking the 534 recipes in Julia Child's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, in 365 days. This process consumes her whole life. As already indicated, blogging allows for the transmission of lengthy ideas which may convey numerous memes simultaneously. In this film, perhaps the memes with connotations of passion, love of food and success may be isolated as the ingredients communicated through Julie's blog, which eventually changes her outlook on life and her future prospects. The film *Trust* (Schwimmer 2010) deals with a darker aspect of online activities when the fourteen-year-old Annie (Liana Liberato) meets her boyfriend online via online chat rooms and cell phone communication. It is argued that instant messaging and chat rooms provide a user with an opportunity to spread memes to the recipient who immediately views the message. This is similar to sms-ing on mobile phones, the difference being that other users may see that you one is 'online', making

⁷ Coincidentally, I am a ski-instructor and have instructed people in Lesotho.

communication even faster. The problem arises when Annie's boyfriend spreads false memes about himself, presenting himself as someone who he is not, not only in terms of age (he is actually thirty-five), but also his intentions. *Catfish* (Joost & Schulman 2010) illustrates the manner in which social networking may be used to perform identity and the manner in which social networking may be used to experiment with identity. In the documentary *Catfish* (Joost & Schulman 2010), Nev creates and performs an identity online (through the construction of a detailed profile including photographs of Nev and memes), which is similar to the identity he has offline as anonymous⁸ social networking sites, such as Facebook, make identity deception harder to achieve. Nev becomes Facebook friends with Abby (an eight year old who painted one of Nev's photographs), her mother, Angela, and her half-sister, Megan. Nev constructs Megan's identity through her Facebook profile and those memes she spreads online, and a romantic relationship develops between him and Megan. After several months of communication, Nev discovers that Megan has lied about certain things she has posted on her Facebook profile. Nev, accompanied by his brother, Ariel, and friend, Henry, travel to Michigan to confront Megan. Once there, they discover that Angela created 15 fake Facebook profiles, including Megan's profile, and Nev has actually been communicating with Angela this entire time (not Megan). The selected films provide representations of people's possible (but plausible) interactions with social media sites. They also provide an indication of how online social media sites might affect offline lives. The films selected are recent examples from 2009 to 2010 in order to provide a purposive sample of current interactions and trends on social media sites.

⁸ The Urban Dictionary (Nonymous 2014:1) defines nonymous as "Something that is publicly known. A proven accepted fact" as opposed to anonymous.

1.1. Research questions

The following research question captures what the research proposes to do, namely what is the relationship between social media sites and the spread of memes?

This research question can be divided into smaller ideas relating to the main research question. Research questions about the actual spread of memes on social media sites include:

- How do social media sites aid the spreading of memes?
- How do social media sites and the transmission of memes affect the construction of online personae? Do the online personae affect the transmission of memes through social media?

To understand the impact of the spread of memes through social media, it is important to examine the ways in which social media is used, as well as the way social media has become embedded into the everyday lives of its users. The following research questions aim to investigate the relationship that exists between social media and social media users:

- How are social media sites represented in selected films?
- How are the offline lives of characters portrayed in the selected films influenced by social media sites?

1.2. Theoretical approach and research methodology

Qualitative research is used in this study, particularly a literature study that applies and weighs the theories against a purposive sample of selected film examples from 2009 and 2010. The selected examples are considered to be the most productive sample to

answer the research question, namely what is the relationship between social media sites and the spread of memes. The study is, therefore, based on my own interpretation and guided by literature, particularly by the theories of memes/Internet memes and online identity. The crux of the study, therefore, lies in utilising meme theory as a meaningful metaphor and critical tool in analysing online and offline realities. The film examples are selected in order to explore and analyse the specific impact of meme transmissions on social media sites on the offline lives of the characters. As previously mentioned, the selected films include, but are not restricted to *Julie & Julia* (Ephron 2009), *Trust* (Schwimmer 2010), and *Catfish* (Joost & Schulman 2010).

This interpretive study bases some of its assumptions on hermeneutical principles such as pre-understanding. According to Arnold and Fischer (1994:56), “prior to any interpretation we and the object of our interpretation exist”. We exist in our own context of tradition. This refers to the different beliefs, ideologies, codes, myths, events and practices with which we have been raised – our pre-understanding. Hermeneutics uses this pre-understanding as a basis for comparison⁹. While other research approaches regard pre-understanding as an obstacle; hermeneutics considers it as enabling the interpreter to make meaning of the material. Similar pre-understandings may result in similar interpretations while non-similar pre-understandings may result in different understandings; but, all in all, pre-understanding provides a ‘horizon’ or place to start interpreting from. As the material is interpreted, pre-understanding changes, allowing one to better understand the material and the different perspectives concerning the material. The material (films and websites) is analysed according to its semiotic structure. It is also analysed in a specific-general-specific hermeneutic circle. The whole is understood individually and in accordance to the smaller elements, while the smaller elements are understood

⁹ I have been using social media sites for several years and also, as a Visual Culture student, I have background knowledge of visual analysis and film analysis. My own experience or pre-understanding becomes undeniable.

individually and according to the whole. After analysing the material, one is able to interpret the text, as well as weigh different interpretations and perspectives against the literature.

1.3. Literature review

The topic has been divided into two main focus areas that require research, namely the field of memes, and social media and online identity construction. The literature review provides an overview of both.

1.3.1. Memes and the Internet

Dawkins contends that the manner in which memes are transmitted is analogous to the manner in which genes are transmitted, in that both result in evolution (1976:189). Memes, therefore, result in cultural evolution, which moves at a faster rate than genetic evolution (Dawkins 1976:189). Dawkins states that any idea that is heard and passed on has been replicated or imitated, and is thus a meme (1976:192). Dawkins initially meant for the meme to be applied as a metaphor to shift focus to the gene's replicating property as the basis of evolution (Burman 2012:77). Alternately, Dennett (1995:344) defines memes as "complex ideas that form themselves into *distinct memorable units*". The examples he provides are things such as the wheel, wearing clothes, the alphabet, the calendar, the *Odyssey*, impressionism and deconstructionism (Holdcroft & Lewis 2000:163). Burman argues that, while Dawkins meant for the meme to be a metaphor, Dennett reinterpreted the meme as an active and predatory replicator (2012:93). Dennett structures his definition of the meme according to a meme's-eye point of view or the meme-gene analogy, whereby the meme, like the gene, replicates purely for its own advantages (sa:2). The continual replication and

imitation of a meme results in the meme's survival, as the meme is able to occupy the human mind. According to Blackmore, memes, in their effort to continually replicate through imitation, have assisted in the evolution of technology (1999: 204). Blackmore argues for the co-evolving of meme replication and technology by discussing the way in which writing has allowed humans to record memes, making the 'life cycle' of the meme longer (1999:205). Writing became faster and cheaper, allowing for a further spreading or replication of memes. Furthermore, Blackmore argues that the transport infrastructure also allows for the quicker spreading of memes, as humans in closer proximity to one another, in the cities, are able to communicate more than people living far away (1999:210). The transport infrastructure also allows for a quicker transmission of memes to those living far away. This further evolved into the use of telephones, then cellular phones and finally the Internet; each of these enabling the faster transmission and easier storing of information and memes.

The meme, particularly as described by Dennett and Blackmore, has been contested. In the late 1990s, the *Journal of Memetics*, a peer-reviewed journal, was established to encourage debate concerning the meaning of the term 'meme'. According to Edmonds, the *Journal of Memetics* failed due to the failure of participants to submit relevant and quality pieces on the study of memes (2005:1). Edmonds argues that it is essentially the narrow approach to memes, the meme-gene analogy, which caused this failure (2005). Holdcroft and Lewis systematically breakdown and criticise the meme-gene analogy, showing how the meme and gene are essentially different (2000). Similarly, Jeffreys (2000:230) argues that the meme and gene are different stating: "The meme-virus and meme-symbiont analogies need to be dropped altogether. It is impossible to theorize a distinct process of selection by making reference to parasitism". However, the meme as a virus argument is part of the meme-gene analogy established by Dennett (1995) and Blackmore (1999). The meme as a metaphor is re-established in this dissertation. This can be done by using the meme as an analytical tool. Lissack argues that the meme can be used as a tool to describe the

environment in which it is presented (2004:3). Lissack (2004:3) states that “memes ... succeed when they are accepted and used as tools for the accomplishment of a communicative purpose”. Memes can, therefore, be used as an analytic tool to analyse the communication on social media sites, which contributes to our understanding of the environment they are presented in or the online personae they help create.

1.3.2. Social media, meme dissemination and the construction of an online persona

According to Ana Alemàn and Katherine Wartman, it was only in the 1990s that people could start using the Internet on a day-to-day basis, as it was only during this time that users were able to open several windows, allowing for easier navigation (2009:14). It was also during the 1990s that Internet browsers were developed, which also made searching for content on the Internet much easier (Alemàn & Wartman 2009:14). As more and more people started using the Internet, communication-based sites were created. According to John Zuern (2003:vi),

In many ways ... the year 1995 marks the arrival of the Web as a fertile environment for the development of innovative forms of self-representation with potentially global audiences: personal home pages, online diaries and photo albums, Weblogs or “blogs”, Webrings of interconnected personal journals and home pages, and multi-media forms of self-exploration and exhibition using digital video cameras and other imaging and surveillance technologies.

This new form of self-representation on these communication-based sites led to the invention of social media sites. Social media sites provide one with the opportunity to have a personal profile (home page), photograph albums, video albums, and a section to blog about one’s ideas and feelings. Communicating with someone online or offline is becoming indistinguishable. As an example of this blurring of online and offline communication, David Porush (2007:163) discusses his daughter’s use of the social networking page, MySpace: “As she says, of her three hundred friends online, she has met over two hundred and fifty of them in the physical space and danced one way or

another, with them all". The transmission of memes online on social media sites is, therefore, becoming indistinguishable from the transmission of these memes offline. The lack of distinction between online and offline lives is illustrated in Howard Rheingold's (1993:4) use of the virtual community WELL:

People in virtual communities use words on screens to exchange pleasantries and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, conduct commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friends and lose them, play games, flirt, create a little high art and a lot of idle talk. People in virtual communities do just about everything people do in real life, but we leave our bodies behind.

Rheingold clearly links the similarity in the communication that occurs online and offline. The memes transmitted online will, therefore, be just as readily imitated, remembered and replicated as those that are transmitted offline – the only difference being that memes transmitted online will possibly be received by more people.

The theories surrounding online identity, specifically the theories of Sherry Turkle as put forward in sources such as *Life on the screen. Identity in the age of the Internet* (1995), shed light on online identity construction. According to Turkle, we are able to create avatars through our use of technology – cyberspace (2004). Turkle (1995:263) states:

Virtuality need not be a prison. It can be the raft, the ladder, the transitional space, the moratorium, that is discarded after reaching greater freedom. We don't have to reject life on screen, but we don't have to treat it as an alternate life either.

Turkle proposes that we can create avatars with a different name or personality – our second selves – but this identity is not separate from who one is in real life¹⁰; rather one's avatar is just another aspect of oneself (2004). Turkle argues that not all aspects of the self can be experienced through the bio-body (2004:2). For instance: a shy female can create a male persona online, which allows her to experience the assertive

¹⁰ The terms 'real life' and 'offline life' are used interchangeably throughout the research. Both are used to refer to a user's activities when not using a computer application or smartphone.

aspect of her identity, which she had been unable to experience in reality. While Turkle specifically refers to Multi-User Domains (MUDs), her theory of identity construction is applicable to most social media sites (1995). On most social media sites one is able to create an avatar with a different name and different personality to who one is in real life, if one chooses to do so. One's offline identity and online identity are merely "windows" in which one is simultaneously present (Turkle 2004:2). Even when one is not using the Internet, these numerous profiles may still be viewed. The smartphone allows one to immediately respond to messages or comments, as one is notified of these as they are published online, further integrating one's online and offline lives.

While Turkle discusses the experimentation with identity, Erving Goffman discusses the performance of identity in real life in his seminal book *The presentation of self in everyday life* (1969). Goffman argues that people tend to perform an idealised version of themselves to an audience (1969:30). This performance takes place in a certain environment or "setting", which comprises what Goffman (1969:19) refers to as the "front stage". Alternately, the "back stage" area is the area in which an actor has no need to perform and one can simply be oneself (Goffman 1969:97). Goffman argues that a performance is only believed by an audience if that performance is continuous and without error (1969:22). Misconceptions can, therefore, result in an audience's confusion over the performance they are viewing, which in turn could result in an audience's disbelief of a performance. According to Goffman, these misconceptions occur through the signs that are "given off" by a performer, as these signs are unintentionally portrayed (Goffman 1969:2, Sessions 2009:9). "Given" signs, on the other hand, are signs intentionally portrayed by the performer to support his/her performance (Goffman 1969:2, Sessions 2009:9). While Goffman's theory of identity performance is focused on the performance of offline identity, the theory may also be applied to the performance of identity online.

While Rheingold refers to online interaction (transmission of memes) as occurring in a “community” (1993:4), Linda Carroli (1997:359) disagrees, arguing that “collaboration displaces community”. Carroli (1997:360) argues that community “alludes to something that is whole and often geographically contingent, complying with ideas about metanarratives, rootedness, and permanence that deny and falsify difference”. The word ‘community’, in other words, is used to highlight a shared commonality between members. Marshall (1995:4) agrees that online communities are not restrained by this idea of a mutual commonality stating: “Virtual communities are not structured in the same way as real-world communities. Constraints of geography and status do not come into play”. Collaboration, according to Carroli (1997:360), is “an element not only of corporation but also ... permits the performance of more fluid and mutable identities”. These identities are those created both online and offline, as discussed by Turkle (2004). Katie Ellis (sa:39) also highlights this performing and collaborative aspect on Facebook (although it is applicable to all social media) stating:

Although I really enjoy my Facebook friends and feel a strong connection and sense of community with many of them, most of the time these people are little more than objects of entertainment to me. Many are involved in performance of gender and social identity, a performance I also participate in as I carve out an online identity based on how, and as whom, I want to be perceived in both the online and offline world.

Collaboration is also a useful term when describing the transmission of memes online. The connotations attached to memes collaborate with one another to contribute to the online persona. Memes also encourage further collaboration when they are re-edited and retransmitted. For example, according to Shifman, the memetic video encourages this collaborative receiver participation (2011:190). Collaboration can also be seen, for example, in the posting by others on one’s wall, adding to the online persona created. One, therefore, collaborates with other users to create one’s online persona or virtual identity.

1.4. Preliminary overview of chapters

In the introduction, the main aims of the dissertation are established and the chapters are outlined. The theoretical framework and methodology are established. Previous literature concerning memes and online personal identity is reviewed. Memes, specifically as outlined by Dawkins, Dennett and Blackmore is reviewed. The Internet and the effect of memes on an online persona, as well as the theories of identity construction as outlined by Turkle and Goffman are briefly discussed.

In chapter two, entitled 'Memetics and the Internet', the theory of memes as proposed by Dawkins, Dennett and Blackmore is discussed in detail. While these theorists have slightly different views of the meme, they all agree that the meme must have certain characteristics, namely longevity, fecundity, fidelity, variation, selection and heredity. Also, the three theorists agree that a meme can be transmitted through the act of imitation. The criticism that has been raised against the meme (as proposed by Dawkins, Dennett and Blackmore) is discussed. Also unpacked, is the manner in which memes could have influenced technology to evolve and provide better storage and spreading facilities for memes. With the invention of the Internet, it is argued that the meme (as proposed by Dawkins, Dennett and Blackmore) can now quickly spread as the Internet is particularly suited to assist memes in their longevity¹¹, fecundity¹², fidelity¹³, variation¹⁴, selection¹⁵ and heredity¹⁶. The meme is also a sign, and may

¹¹ Longevity refers to the lifespan of a meme. A meme must have a long lifespan for effective transmission to occur (Dawkins 1976:16-17).

¹² Fecundity refers to a meme's rate of transmission. A meme must be transmitted at a high rate for sufficient replication to occur (Dawkins 1976:16-17).

¹³ The copying-fidelity of memes must remain high for meme transmission to occur successfully. This means that a meme must resemble the meme it originated from after it has been copied several times (Dawkins 1999:xi).

¹⁴ Variation occurs through the breaking-down and rebuilding of certain memes (Blackmore 2000:26). As a result, memes can replicate with slight changes; however, these memes remain similar.

¹⁵ Only a limited amount of memes can be stored in a human brain at any point in time, thus some memes are discarded while others are selected (Blackmore 2000:26).

therefore be used symbolically to interpret the environment in which they appear. In this way, the meme may be used as an analytical tool to analyse someone's online identity on a social media site such as Facebook.

In the third chapter, entitled 'Social media and user participation', the relationship between specific social media and a user is discussed. Social media may be divided into wikis, mashups, virtual communities, folksonomies and social networking sites. As wikis and mashups do not involve the creation of an online persona or identity, only virtual communities, folksonomies and social networking sites are analysed. Chat rooms are discussed as an example of a virtual community, and the film *Trust* (Schwimmer 2010) is analysed to provide a visual example of the interaction between a user and a virtual community. The social networking site Facebook is briefly discussed as an example of a social networking sites. The relationship between a user and a social networking site as it is visually portrayed in the documentary *Catfish* (Joost & Schulman 2010) is investigated. Lastly, blogging is discussed as an example of a folksonomy. An analysis of the film *Julie & Julia* (Ephron 2009) provides a visual example of the relationship between a user and a folksonomy site (in this case a blog spot). The films also illustrate the ways in which the online and offline identities of the social media users differ.

In the fourth chapter, entitled 'The performance of identity and Facebook', the experimentation with identity, as proposed by Turkle, and the performance of identity, as proposed by Goffman, is discussed. This experimentation with identity is particularly possible on text-based social media sites such as virtual communities. Anonymous folksonomies also allow a fertile online environment for the experimentation with identity. The structure of social networking sites and nonymous folksonomies encourage users to provide a more detailed identity (profile) through the uploading of

¹⁶ Heredity refers to the spreading of memes from one person to the next (Blackmore 2000:26). In this way, memes are inherited from other people.

photographs, videos and so on. It is more difficult to experiment with identity on such social media sites, and, therefore, an idealised identity tends to be performed (as opposed to the complete deception sometimes used when experimenting with identity). The films are continuously referred to throughout the chapter to visually demonstrate the manner in which identity is experimented with and performed on social media sites. The social networking site Facebook is used as a visual example to explain the manner in which identity may be performed online. One of the ways in which performance occurs is through the posting and sharing of Internet memes. Several memes are discussed to illustrate the manner in which these memes contribute to a user's Facebook profile (or the environment in which the meme is presented).

Finally, in the conclusion, an overview is provided of what has been discussed in the previous chapters and the limitations of the research are mentioned. The film examples used are briefly summarised highlighting the manner in which a user interacts with social media sites, as well as the manner in which an online persona may be created on a social media site, particularly through the posting of Internet memes. It is argued that while an idealised identity is portrayed on social media using constructed signs, signs that are not constructed result in one's online and offline identity being very similar. Finally, the possible implications for further study are proposed.

Chapter Two: Memetics and the Internet

It can be argued that the most influential theorists in the field of memetics are Dawkins, Dennett and Blackmore. The meme, as defined by these theorists, is discussed in this chapter, as is some of the criticism that has been raised against memetics. While the meme as defined by Dawkins, Dennett and Blackmore remains highly contested; the Internet has provided the ideal environment for the variation, selection, heredity, longevity, fecundity and fidelity of memes. This 'Internet meme' spreads for numerous reasons, such as humorous or whimsical content, information value or an emotional response it triggers in the viewer. However, as the meme spreads it contributes to the online persona (or environment) of the social media profile page on which it is posted. This way in which the meme can be used as a semiotic analytic tool, when applied to the conveyance of a certain persona on a social media site, is also discussed.

2.1. Defining the meme

There are differing views concerning the definition of the meme. As technology has evolved so has the meaning of the term (Figure 1 depicts Dawkins' possible reaction to this evolution of the meaning of the word meme). While Dawkins, Dennett and Blackmore all argue that the meme is "an element of a culture or system of behaviour passed from one individual to another by imitation or other non-genetic means", the Internet has allowed for a slightly altered definition: "an image, video, piece of text, etc., typically humorous in nature, that is copied and spread rapidly by Internet users, often with slight variations" (Oxford English Dictionary 2012). The meme, as defined by Dawkins, Dennett and Blackmore, is analysed to determine the ways in which this offline meme and the Internet meme are similar. It is concluded that the Internet has provided the ideal medium to assist the replication of the meme (as outlined by

Dawkins, Dennett and Blackmore). After establishing the meaning of the term meme, the use of the Internet meme as a tool to analyse the online environment in which it is found, is discussed.



Figure 1: Slinky whippets land of lols, Unhappy Dawkins Lols, 2013.

2.1.1. *Origins of the meme*

Dawkins, Dennett and Blackmore are the foremost theorists in the origination of the term meme and its pre-Internet meaning. The term meme was first coined by Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene* (1976:192). Dawkins introduced the meme as a means to highlight the manner in which biology evolves, namely through the heredity, variation and selection of replicators. The meme was re-represented in 1981 as the “actual cultural counterpart of the gene” by Dennett and Douglas Hofstadter in their book: *The Mind’s I* (Burman 2012:81). Therefore, according to these theorists, the meme became a ‘selfish’ replicator and human minds became its prey. Dennett continued to develop his theory of the meme as a selfish replicator in his books: *Consciousness Explained* (1991) and *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea* (1995). Blackmore expanded on this argument of the ‘selfish’ meme and her book, *The Meme Machine* (1999), has become a departure point for all discussions related to memes (Burman 2012:97). These three theorists are the focus of this section.

According to Dawkins (1976:192), “memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation”. In other words, by imitating one another we are spreading units of cultural information or memes. Blackmore (2000:28) restricts the replication of memes to imitation¹⁷ stating: “I would argue that only imitation has the capacity to sustain an evolutionary process and this is a good reason for restricting the definition of memes to that which is imitated”. Blackmore is criticised for limiting meme transmission to imitation. Kate Distin (2005:101) states:

Many forms of learning or passing on information could facilitate evolution, *if* they involved replication – and Blackmore seems to be in danger of *defining* them out of the picture, with her statement that imitation is the only form that involves true replication.

Therefore, memes are stored in one’s brain through various forms of social learning, not just imitation (Boyd & Richerson 2000:144). Similarly, David Hull argues that limiting memes to only that which is passed on through imitation is too narrow a definition, especially because the field of memetics is still very young (2000:44). Mark Jeffreys, on the other hand, argues that language should be the focus when discussing the spreading of memes (rather than imitation) as without language all memes would go extinct (2000:233). Regardless of the manner in which memes replicate, when Dawkins coined the term meme he did not intend to name cultural replicators, but rather introduced the meme as a metaphor to “redirect the focus of biology away from genes and toward a more general engine for evolution” (Burman 2012:77). Dennett (1995:344), however, argues that Dawkins intended for the meme to be the cultural counterpart of the gene, defining the meme as “complex ideas that form themselves into *distinct memorable units*”¹⁸. Stephen Dougherty (2001:92) criticises the grouping of culture into distinguishable units:

¹⁷ Blackmore (1999:52) defines imitation as a process involving “(a) decisions about what to imitate, or what counts as ‘the same’ or ‘similar’, (b) complex transformations from one point of view to another, and (c) the production of matching bodily actions”.

¹⁸ A unit is the smallest element that can replicate itself, without error, at a high rate (Dennett 1990:128).

If culture is not reducible to bits of matter, then the problem for the computationalists and memeticists is that they cannot say anything about it. And therefore, if they wish to claim that culture and the workings of ideology are wholly understandable within the context of the terms that they provide, then they must perform this alchemy whereby belief becomes matter, meaning becomes data, culture becomes commodified information.

In other words, Dougherty argues that culture is not reducible to software, and memes cannot possibly exist if culture is not reduced to individual units.

These distinct memorable units of culture can be compared to the distinction of genes because Dennett adopts a meme-gene analogy when defining memes, whereby biological evolution can be used as an exact framework for cultural evolution (Holdcroft & Lewis 2000:162). This use of a meme-gene analogy is criticised by several theorists. Jeffreys suggests that this close link between the meme and gene should be dropped as one cannot hope to discuss something as intricate as cultural evolution if one uses words like 'host' and 'contagion' or any kind of a reference to parasitism (2000:228). Memes cannot parasitize the brain; rather, if cultural viruses exist, they are parasitizing other cultural entities (Jeffreys 2000:231). Another objection to the meme-gene analogy is that memes are transmitted too fast to be comparable to genes (Hull 2000:55). However, while memes transmit faster than genes in general, there are memes that take very long to transmit, such as Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*, and there are genes that transmit very quickly, such as viruses (Hull 2000:55). Also, while Dennett argues that meme vehicles (that enable the protection of the meme) are simply manifestations of the memes¹⁹, Richard Brodie has criticised the use of the term 'vehicle' as it is not as clearly defined in memetics as in biological evolution (1996:9). In other words, the line between the meme and the vehicle is not clearly drawn in memetics (Holdcroft & Lewis 2000:165). Similarly, Distin (2005:80) argues that there is a great confusion about the nature of Dennett's 'vehicle' as Dennett conflates the vehicle (the carrier of meme replicators) and the meme's effects (the results of

¹⁹ A wheel is, therefore, not just a wheel, but rather is a vehicle for the transmission of the wheel meme (Dennett 1995:348).

memes, such as a bridge) into one object. Hull has suggested using the term 'interactor' instead of 'vehicle' – as the term interactor refers to an object that assists in the replication of memes – thereby eliminating the association between a memetic vehicle and a genetic vehicle (Aunger 2000:9). The meme and gene are, therefore, essentially different as the meme creates a survival vehicle (such as books, songs or the Internet, amongst others) but also needs to inhabit a human mind to replicate (Holdcroft & Lewis 2000:166). The gene, on the other hand, has created the human body as a survival vehicle (used to protect genes) and as a source of replication. Alternately, Blackmore (1999:17) does not entirely reject the meme-gene analogy and states that, like genes that are stored in DNA, memes are stored in "human brains, or in artefacts such as books, pictures, bridges or steam trains".

While Dennett's meme-gene analogy is criticised, the meme and gene share certain properties, as both are defined as replicators by Dawkins, Dennett and Blackmore. A replicator must display the properties necessary for evolution to occur, namely variation, selection and heredity (Dawkins 1976:16-17, Dennett 1995:343). Variation occurs as memes mutate via degradation and recombination, selection occurs as only a set amount of memes may exist in a brain at a specific point in time, and heredity occurs because memes are transmitted from person to person and are, therefore, inherited (Blackmore 2000:26). Replicators must also possess a high longevity, fecundity and copying-fidelity in order to achieve natural selection (Dawkins 1976:35, Dennett 1995:343). In other words, for the meme to be a successful unit of natural selection (replicator) it must have a long lifespan, a high rate of transmission and it must be copied without too many errors. The replication of memes is criticised by theorists arguing that memes are not replicated; rather memes are inferred, decoded and combined with pre-existing knowledge (Sperber 2000:171, Boyd & Richerson 2000:155, Atran 2001:371 and Handwerker 1989:324). However, Distin (2005:103) argues that this recombination of new material and pre-existing knowledge also occurs in genetic evolution, as genes combine with one another when replicated. Also, pre-

existing knowledge is irrelevant when receiving new information or instruction, as the information has still been received from someone else – it was not invented by the recipient – and, therefore, replication has occurred regardless (Distin 2005:108). The copying-fidelity of memes have come into question as it is argued that meme fidelity is too low, and therefore, after a few generations of replication, the product no longer resembles the original meme (Atran 2001:359). Dawkins argues that it is the instructions that are copied, not the product, and, therefore, the fidelity remains high enough to guarantee a resemblance after several generations (1999:xi). Similarly, Blackmore distinguishes between two modes of transmission: ‘copy-the-product’ and ‘copy-the-instructions’ (1999:61). When copying-the-product, all mistakes will be copied, while copying-the-instructions ensures that mistakes are not copied – that the meme remains recognisable (Blackmore 1999:62). Distin argues that one must copy the instructions for replication to occur (2005:94). For example, when copying a wheel, one needs previous knowledge of carpentry and so on, and a blueprint of the wheel (the instructions), for replication to occur. While the replication of memes is questioned, so are the variation, selection and heredity properties of memes. Holdcroft and Lewis, argue that , firstly, memetic variation is not possible because it is still unclear exactly how a meme replicates and different memes are too closely linked to distinguish from one another (for example, French cuisine and cooking) while genes are not (2000:173). Secondly, memes are inherited from numerous sources in numerous ways, such as imitation, learning, teaching, and so on (Holdcroft & Lewis 2000:176). Genes, however, are only inherited from parents and only in one way, namely sexual reproduction. Lastly, the rapidity of meme replication eliminates selective pressures (Holdcroft & Lewis 2000:173). Also, selection does not exist between memes because people ultimately decide which ideas to adopt and which to abandon (Holdcroft & Lewis 2000:179).

However, according to Dawkins, Dennett and Blackmore, it is not so simple to choose which memes to adopt and which to reject. In *Viruses of the Mind*, Dawkins establishes

that ‘bad’ memes act like viruses (1991). The hosts of genetic, computer and memetic viruses all possess the following two qualities: “a readiness to replicate information accurately” and “a readiness to obey instructions encoded in the information so replicated” (Dawkins 1991:7). In other words, a memetic virus causes one to adopt a certain meme and pass this meme on to others. For example, religion is passed on from parents to their children at a young and influential stage in their development to ensure that the specific religion meme is replicated (Dawkins 1991:7). On the other hand, scientific theories, unlike religion, are not memetic viruses because different scientific theories are weighed against one another before this ‘good’ meme spreads (Dawkins 1991:14). Distin (2005:74) is critical of Dawkins classifying some memes as viruses and others as good memes, stating: “Dawkins comes dangerously close to labelling only things of which he approves as ‘great’ or nonviral”. Distin suggests that those memes which Dawkins should consider good are actually just the memes that are most compatible at a certain point in time and a certain period in culture (2005:74). In other words, a good replicator (meme) is dependent on its ability to replicate and not on whether its content is considered ‘good’ (Distin 2005:75). Dawkins (1976:201) remains optimistic about the viral nature of memes, arguing that memetic influence may be overcome by understanding the nature of memes: “We are built as gene machines and cultured as meme machines, but we have the power to turn against our creators. We, alone on earth, can rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicators”. Similarly, Dennett argues that viral memes compete for space in the human mind that they have helped create (1990:133). As a result, we cannot maintain a polarity between us and memes, as memes have already played a large role in shaping who we think we are (Dennett 1990:133). By adopting, what Dennett (1995:229) calls, an “intentional stance” we as humans are able to gain more control over the replication of memes. This control is achieved by asking what the intention of the human is who is conveying the meme, as well as what the meme is made of, or what type of meme it is (Burman 2012:95). Distin criticises Dennett, arguing that memes have not created the brain; rather memes are part of a larger environment that has created the brain (2005:83). Alternately, Blackmore argues that the human

mind is nothing more than a storage space and site of replication for memes, and, therefore, human consciousness is illusory (1999:233). The creation of an 'I' merely increases the ability of a meme to be spread or be retained, as it adds more to the power of the meme when it closely aligns with the idea of 'this is who I am' (Blackmore 1999:233). Blackmore (1999:231), thus completely abandons any sense of ever being able to control memes, rather an illusory self – the "selfplex" – is created through a combination of memes. Several theorists argue that human autonomy is maintained in various ways. Firstly, each of us have different past experiences and this makes us uniquely different from one another, which ultimately influences which memes we adopt (Miller 2000:99). Secondly, humans make decisions as to which transmitted ideas are accepted, according to their beliefs and goals (Conte 2000:91, Heylighen & Chielens sa:4). However, this autonomy is limited as there are external influences on a human's ability to filter ideas according to their beliefs and goals (Conte 2000:94). These include prejudices, superstitions, creeds, and so on.

While Blackmore argues that there is no human autonomy, I believe that humans choose which memes to replicate. This is particularly evident on the Internet, where memes are specifically selected by someone and spread through emails, websites and social media. Dawkins, Dennett and Blackmore all agree that memes replicate through variation, selection and heredity. Also; memes display the characteristics of longevity, fidelity and fecundity. Once again, this is particularly evident on the Internet, as the Internet assists the lifespan and rate of transmission of memes. As a result, Blackmore argues that memes have influenced the evolution of technology, as memes are primarily focused on their own survival and each new technology has assisted in the survival of memes (1999:204). In this way, technology evolved from simple recording devices, such as books, to more complex recording devices, such as the Internet and social media. This memetic evolution of technology and the phenomenon of the 'Internet meme' are discussed in the next section.

2.1.2. Internet memes

The Internet has changed the way in which memes are spread, but the Internet meme is still closely linked to the pre-Internet meme, as outlined by Dawkins, Dennett and Blackmore. Therefore, the Internet meme, like the pre-Internet meme (or offline meme) replicates through variation, selection and heredity. While all technology has assisted in the variation, selection and heredity of memes, it may be argued that the Internet has provided the most fertile environment for replication to date. Technology, especially the Internet, has also increased the lifespan, copying-fidelity and rate of transmission of memes. The memetic evolution of technology and the phenomenon of the Internet meme are discussed in this section.

The evolution of technology has assisted the spreading of memes. Books, the printing press, telephones, radios and television have all increased the replication of memes. The latest communication technologies, such as the Internet, have also allowed for a greater possibility of the variation, selection and heredity of memes. For this reason, Blackmore argues that memes, unlike genes, do not yet have copying machinery (such as DNA) and, therefore, technology is evolving toward memetic copying machinery (1999:204). Any technological progression may, therefore, be attributed to memes, as each new technology increases the replication of memes. Writing increased the longevity of the meme, as a meme could be recorded in a book and retrieved at a much later date (Blackmore 1999:205). The printing press increased both the fidelity and fecundity of memes, as memes could now be replicated accurately and exposed to numerous people (Blackmore 1999:209). Similarly, assembly lines may be said to increase the fecundity and fidelity of cars, clothing, and so on. Infrastructure and transportation also increased the spread of memes as, firstly, people in cities are able to communicate more and spread more memes (Blackmore 1999:211). Secondly, people living in rural areas are able to travel to the city and those living in the city are

able to travel to rural areas, allowing for an increase in communication and the spread of memes (Blackmore 1999:210). Similarly, Aaron Lynch (1996:25) states:

Population densities have soared, and transportation has improved immensely. Just as these factors favor the rampant, even worldwide spread of biological contagions, so too do they favor the spread of thought contagions. People have more communication partners from whom to catch communicable ideas, and more potential retransmitting contacts as well. Modern technology also fosters thought contagion, by putting those potential recipients only a phone call or a broadcast away.

In other words, just as infrastructure and transportation increased the spread of memes (or thought contagions), so have the telegraph, fax machine, telephone, radio, television and cellular phone; as each of these technologies increases the meme's ability to replicate and the area over which the meme can exert an influence (Blackmore 1999:212). This was followed by the invention of the Internet, which has also greatly increased the spread of memes.

The Internet is uniquely suited to the spreading of memes as the Internet supports communication, as well as ensures the longevity, transmission, replication and storage of memes (Marshall 1995:1). Similarly, Jean Burgess (2008:1) argues that the Internet meme replicates, mutates and spreads throughout the Internet:

...in contemporary popular usage an internet 'meme' is a faddish joke or practice (like a humorous way of captioning cat pictures) that becomes widely imitated. In this popular understanding, internet 'memes' do appear to spread and replicate 'virally' – that is, they appear to spread and mutate via distributed networks in ways that the original producers cannot determine or control.



Figure 2: Earlnbaker, Merry Christmas from LOLCats.com!, undated.

It may, therefore, be argued that these Internet memes, such as a cat meme (Figure 2), fulfil the replication requirements of the meme – as outlined by Dawkins, Dennett and Blackmore – as Internet memes undergo variation, selection and heredity. Any user may create a new meme on a meme generating site, such as www.memegenerator.net (Figure 3), www.knowyourmeme.com (Figure 4), www.quickmeme.com (Figure 5) and www.memecenter.com (Figure 6).

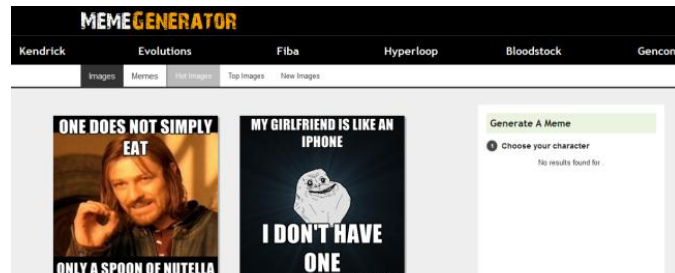


Figure 3: Unknown designer, Meme generator homepage, 2013. Screen shot by author.

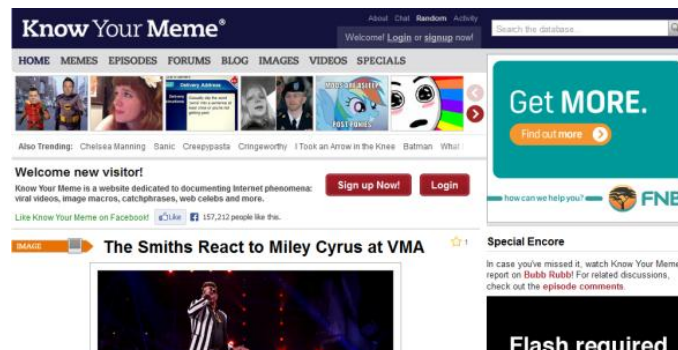


Figure 4: Unknown designer, Know your meme homepage, 2013. Screen shot by author.



Figure 5: Unknown designer, Quick meme homepage, 2013. Screen shot by author.

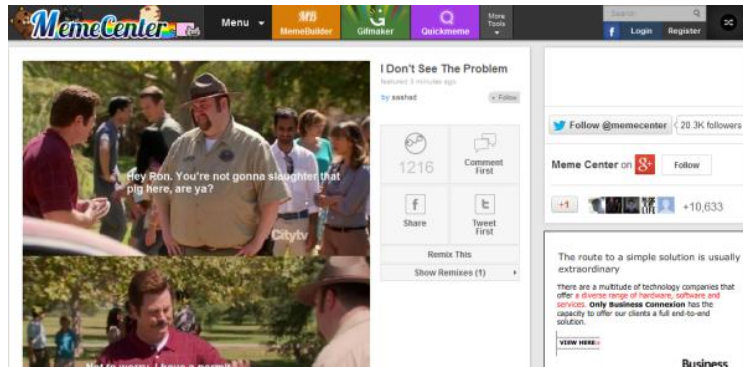


Figure 6: Unknown designer, Meme center homepage, 2013. Screen shot by author.

These sites contain the instructions or blueprints (templates) needed to create certain memes, therefore the transmission of memes is possible through the copying of instructions. The memes created on these meme generating sites are usually all slightly altered but still recognisably from the same meme family, allowing for the variation of memes. These same Internet memes are easily divided into distinguishable units, although some memes noticeably overlap. For example, the meme in Figure 7 contains the image used to create a “Brace yourself” meme, yet it contains the words of the “One does not simply” meme.



Figure 7: Unknown designer, One does not simply use the correct meme – Brace yourself, Meme generator, undated.

Digital technologies, such as “animation software, music, video editing applications, image manipulation”, also allow users to easily manipulate online content (Knobel & Lankshear 2005:2). Other memes, especially such memes as phrases, are easy to reproduce. For example, these simple phrases could spread from user to user on a social media site, such as Facebook, by asking other users to ‘like’ or ‘share’ the phrase

(Figure 8). When ‘liking’²⁰ or ‘sharing’ a status update²¹, this status update (or in the case of ‘liking’ a link) is posted on another user’s wall.



Figure 8: Unknown designer, Like and share status update, Facebook, 2012.

In this way, according to Shifman 2012:189, the Internet assists in both the spread of Internet memes and traditional memes (in an online environment):

...the internet has been described as facilitating the accelerated spread not only of texts that were previously identified with oral traditions, such as urban legends and jokes, but also as nesting the creation of spreadable new visual genres of expression.

Furthermore, the selection of Internet memes occurs as Internet users cannot possibly share every single online meme that is created, there are just too many, and, therefore, users must choose which memes they wish to share. Lastly, memes are hereditary as they are shared from another online source, and in this manner pass on from one Internet user to another. Users of the Internet see that someone else has shared a meme and then also choose to share that same meme. This imitation of or sharing of memes is particularly evident on social media sites, where users may share any content by simply clicking on a button. Imitation also occurs through the remixing of memes that one is exposed to. It may also be argued that the Internet increases the replication of Internet memes. Longevity is achieved on the Internet as all memes are stored online possibly indefinitely. Websites, such as www.9gag.com (Figure 9), store the latest and most popular memes.

²⁰ ‘Liking’ something on Facebook occurs when a user clicks on the ‘like’ button present below any status updates, photographs, profile pages dedicated to musicians, and so on. By clicking on the ‘like’ button, a user indicates their approval of a status update or photograph. By ‘liking’ a musician profile page, this musician is added to the ‘Likes’ section of this user’s profile. This section serves as an indicator of a user’s personality through their interests in music, films, books, and so on.

²¹ A status update is a message posted by a user. This message appears on this user’s profile page wall as well as other users’ news feeds. A profile page wall lists all of the current activities of a specific user, while a news feed lists all the current activities of a user’s online connections.

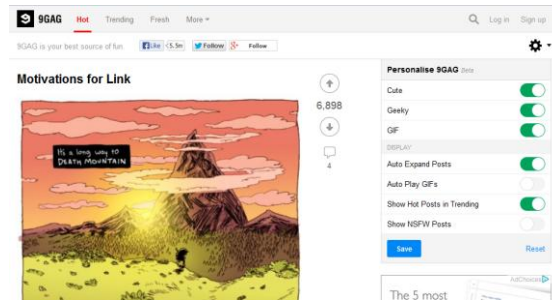


Figure 9: Unknown designer, 9 gag homepage, 2013. Screen shot by author.

The Internet, and Internet memes, may be accessed at any time of the day and may be stored in any country (Blackmore 1999:216). Fecundity is achieved as memes are shared online through emails or social media, and these memes may be shared with numerous people instantaneously. In other words, memes may appear anywhere regardless of geographical and cultural boundaries (Marshall 1995:3). Fidelity is achieved as online memes may be copied exactly, resulting in a 100% accuracy rate.

Although Internet memes may be replicated with 100% accuracy, not all memes are copied with such accuracy. Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear divide memes into those with high fidelity, copied with only slight variation, and those memes with a low fidelity, copied only after being remixed (2005:13). The high fidelity Internet memes consist of hoax memes (Figure 10), social commentary memes (Figure 11 is critical of the complaints of those in developed countries), memes celebrating the unusual [Figure 12 depicts the character Dwight Schrute (Rainn Wilson) from *The Office* (Daniels & Gervais 2005) who is considered odd by other characters of the show], and fan-based memes (Figure 13 was created by a fan of the novel *50 shades of grey* by E.L. James) (Knobel & Lankshear 2005:13).



Gray Kitten



Figure 10: Unknown designer, Bonsai kitten, Top 10 fake Internet memes, 2010.



Figure 11: Sanitaryum, My shampoo and conditioner, undated.



Figure 12: Nicole Jordan, Love is in the air. False, 2012.



Figure 13: Unknown designer, State of grey, 2013.

Figure 14: Unknown designer, One does not simply ask a girl out, Quick meme, undated.



Low fidelity Internet memes, on the other hand, consist of collaborative and humorous memes that have been remixed to a great extent (Knobel & Lankshear 2005:13). For example, Figure 14 depicts a combination of the “One does not simply” and the “Socially awkward penguin” memes. Not all Internet memes that are created are spread, as some memes are more likely to spread than others. The memes that spread online are often informational containing either positive or

negative information (Berger sa:5, Heath 2001:6). This is particularly evident on social media sites, such as Twitter, where users retweet news stories or events (Figure 15), or tweet a comment and link to news stories or events. These informational memes only spread if they are believed to be trustworthy, relevant and useful (Shifman 2012:199).



Figure 15: Winestyle Magazine, Retweet the wine school, 2013.

Internet memes often spread due to their positive or negative emotional content (Berger sa:5, Heath 2001:7). Once again, this is most evident on social media sites, such as Facebook, where a rhino poaching meme is specifically designed to create a strong emotional response in other users, thereby encouraging users to take action against rhino poaching (Figure 16).



Figure 16: Unknown designer, Rhino poaching meme, Facebook, 2013.

Internet memes are often humorous in nature (Knobel & Lankshear 2005:7). Other popular Internet memes contain numerous cross-references to popular culture or real life events (Knobel & Lankshear 2005:9-11). Shifman identifies Internet memes as containing one of the following: ordinary people, 'less-than-perfect' masculine protagonists, humour, simplicity, repetitiveness, or whimsical content (2012:192-197). An Internet meme regularly either relates to a real life event or story, or is a variation of a current popular meme, making timing an important factor in the spread of memes (Knobel & Lankshear 2005:14). For example, it is assumed that Oppikoppi memes circulate the Internet just before and after the festival. Figure 17 depicts a timely Oppikoppi meme that refers to popular culture, namely the character Boromir (Sean Bean) from the first two volumes of *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (Jackson 2001) and *The Twin Towers* (Jackson 2002). It also represents some of the characteristics of Internet memes listed by Shifman, namely humour, simplicity and whimsical content (2012:192-197).

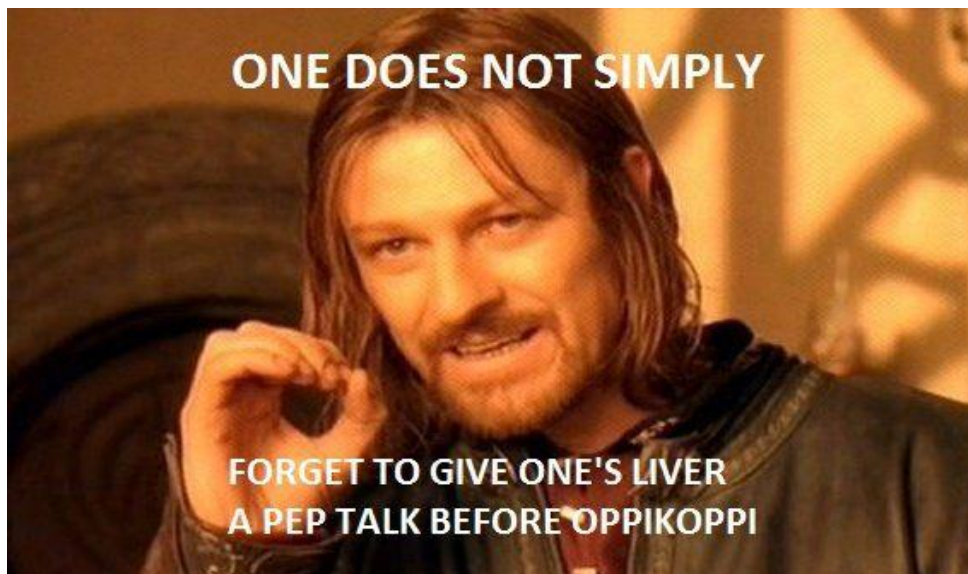


Figure 17: Unknown designer, One does not simply, Facebook, 2013.

In the *South Park*²² (Parker & Stone 2012) episode “Faith Hilling”, the spread of Internet memes is depicted as a result of the characters’ needs to be “with it” (current)

²² *South Park* (Parker & Stone 1997) is an “animated show that uses outlandish humor to make social commentary on a variety of cultural themes” (Faith hilling: Memes in action 2012:1)

or popular. The characters in the show are severely criticised for spreading out-dated memes. In this way, the mere act of imitation is directly tied to the online persona of a user, as those who spread (imitate) current Internet memes are considered more ‘cool’ than those who do not. These “meme fountains” (good imitators) gain power, status and become more desirable as more people imitate them and they have more useful (current) memes stored in their brains (Blackmore 2000:34).

To summarise, the spread of these memes on the Internet is effective as the Internet is an ideal medium for the replication of memes. The invention of the Internet was soon followed by the invention of social media sites, such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. These sites encourage users to create profiles, which further increases the transmission and importance of memes, as memes are now integrated into the online identity or persona (of a user) that is constructed on these social media sites. In this way, an Internet meme on a social media site can be used as a tool which symbolises or connotes the persona of a user. This is possible because all memes are signs and, therefore, have certain connotations, which are interpreted in conjunction with the online personae presented on social media sites.

2.2. The meme as an analytical tool

Mememes are ideally suited to the Internet as the Internet encourages the variation, selection and heredity of memes. Also, the Internet greatly increases the longevity, fidelity and fecundity of the meme. However, an Internet meme cannot be viewed in isolation as society effects the transmission of memes, as well as the development of the Internet. Information and communication technologies continuously affect how we relate to one another, ourselves, and the world, but also, as humans we continuously shape our being and thereby technology (Dougherty 2001:100, Alice Christie 2005:2). This is particularly relevant when discussing social media, as the architecture of a social

media site has an effect on the type of communication and persona construction that may occur on that site (Marwick 2005:9). In other words, the identity or persona that is constructed online is a combination of the architecture of a social media site (technology) and the social media users (society). Also, the online persona (or environment) on a social media site may influence the understanding of an Internet meme, while an Internet meme posted by a user may influence the interpretation of their online persona. As a result, the Internet meme can be used as a tool to analyse the online persona created on the social media site in which it is posted.

Internet memes contribute to the “environmental niche” of a webpage or social media site (Laland & Odling-Smee 2000:134). In other words, memes contribute to the environment in which they appear. Lissack (2004:3) argues that memes may be used as tools to enforce this environment:

Memes have longevity only if they both succeed and serve as a useful tool for a successful environmental niche. Memes can be short-lived due to the failure of their communicative efficiency or the failure of the niche they represent or both.

In this way, only those memes that are suited to their “socio-cultural environment” will spread (Shifman 2012:188). Memes are, therefore, *selected* by a user of a specific social media site or webpage to compliment the environment (online profile page or webpage) in which they are posted. Because of this, memes may find their usefulness in their semiotic contribution to the environment that they are interpreted in conjunction with. According to Terrence Deacon (sa:7):

A meme is a sign: some physical thing which, by virtue of some distinctive feature, can be recruited by an interpretive process within a larger system as re-presenting something else, conveying information into that system and reorganizing it with respect to that something else.

Therefore, a meme, similar to any other sign, has certain denotations²³, connotations²⁴, myths²⁵ and ideologies²⁶ attached to it, and these aspects of the meme are interpreted in relation to the environment in which it appears.

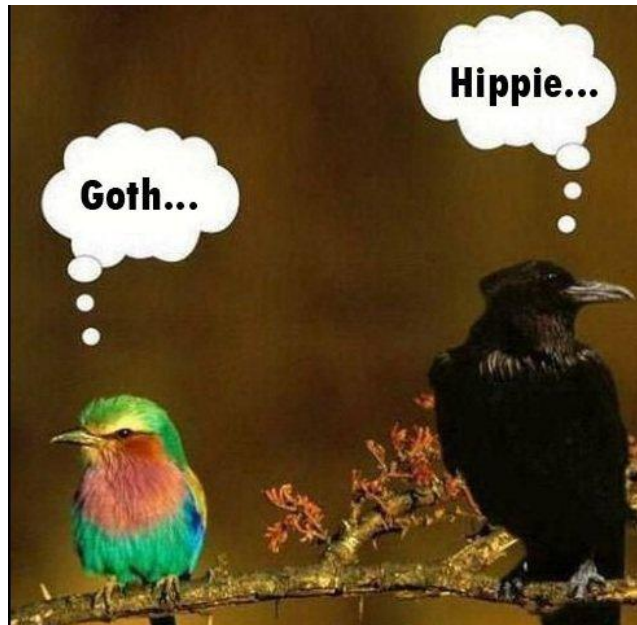


Figure 18: Unknown designer, Goth... Hippie..., Facebook, 2011.

As an example, on a denotative level the meme in Figure 18 shows a multi-coloured bird and a black bird sitting on a branch, looking away from one another. The word “Hippie...” appears in a speech bubble above the black bird and the word “Goth...” appears in a speech bubble above the multi-coloured bird. The connotations attached to this meme arise mainly from the words Hippie and Goth. A Hippie wears colourful clothing, is free-spirited, fun-loving, easy-going, and cares about nature – represented by the colourful bird. A Goth, on the other hand, wears black, is morbid and listens to heavy metal – represented by the black bird. The ‘Goth’ bird is clearly annoyed by the

²³ A denotation (signifier) is the literal meaning of an image or sign (Roland Barthes 1957:113).

²⁴ A connotation (signified) is the meanings or beliefs that are attached to a specific image or sign. These meanings or beliefs are highly subjective and culturally dependent (Barthes 1957:113).

²⁵ Myths are derived from connotations, for example a rose would signify the myth of romance. Myths are based on specific ideologies (Barthes 1957).

²⁶ Ideologies are learned from school, home, television, and so on. Ideologies are culturally specific. Myths are based on ideologies, for example the myth of romance is based on the ideology of patriarchy whereby the man is the protector and pursuer of the woman (Barthes 1957).

'Hippie' bird, and vice versa. Both the Hippie and the Goth fall into the myth of the anti-conformist. Depending on the environment in which it is posted, this meme may convey several different things, including a user's view on Hippies and Goths. As a result, the manner in which the meme is viewed on a social media site, such as Facebook, will be dependent on the meme's environment (the rest of the profile and posts) and, therefore, memes collaborate with one another and the environment they are presented in. In other words, part of an online persona may be created by the connotations that are attached to specific memes and these memes, in turn, add specific elements to one's online persona. In this way, new memes may reinforce any existing online persona that has been created by previous memes. If a meme contradicts the connotations attached to previous memes, one could simply assume that the person's online persona has gained a new complexity or that there is another aspect to someone's personality that one was not previously aware of. This highlights the fact that the one is autonomous as one decides which memes should be replicated on one's social media profile page after conscious and sub-conscious consideration of how one wants to appear to others. Therefore, a link to a YouTube music video on one's Facebook page (Figure 19) could indicate what music a user likes or what music a user thinks will make him/her appear 'cool'. Alternately, a meme stating: "Proud to be a lesbian" (Figure 20) may illustrate that a user is a homosexual and does not wish to hide their homosexuality. It is important to note that a meme can easily be misinterpreted on a social media site, such as Facebook, when a user has posted a meme on their profile page, but their Facebook friends only view this meme on their own news feed. In this case, the meme is not viewed within the environment of a social media profile page, and the meme may be interpreted differently to the intended interpretation hoped for by the user who posted the meme. Therefore, a user's online persona may be interpreted differently according to the manner in which their Facebook friends are exposed to their posted memes.

When I grow up
I want to live near the sea
Crab claws and bottles of rum
That's what I'll have
Staring at the seashell
Waiting for it to embrace me



Fever Ray 'When I Grow Up'
www.youtube.com

The official video for 'When I Grow Up', taken from Fever Ray's debut album 'Fever Ray' directed by Martin de Thurrah. For more info about Fever Ray go to: h...

Unlike · Comment · Promote · Share

Figure 19: Fever Ray, When I grow up Facebook link to YouTube music video, Facebook, 2013.

**PROUD TO BE A
LESBIAN**

Figure 20: Unknown designer, Proud to be a lesbian meme, Facebook, 2013.

To summarise, an Internet meme is a sign; and as such, every meme has connotations attached to it. Also, a meme is not interpreted in isolation; rather it is interpreted in conjunction with the environment in which it appears. Because of this, an Internet meme posted on a social media site, such as Facebook, has certain connotations, and these connotations are interpreted in conjunction with the rest of the profile page on which it appears. An online persona is created when this profile page and memes are interpreted together. In this way, memes either re-enforce previous interpretations of an online persona or cause confusion as new interpretations arise. It is also possible for memes to be misinterpreted when read out-of-context, and this could also lead to the misinterpretation of an online persona.

2.3. Conclusion

As this introductory discussion of memes has indicated, the meme remains a highly contested concept. There seems to be no clear definition for the term 'meme'. The replication of cultural ideas is criticised (Sperber 2000, Boyd & Richardson 2000,

Handwerker 1989) as is the division of culture into distinguishable units (Dougherty 2001, Adam Kuper 2000, Maurice Bloch 2000). Other theorists (Conte 2000, Dougherty 2001, Bloch 2000, Miller 2000) argue that one remains autonomous and in control of memes. However, the basic properties of the meme (variation, selection, heredity, longevity, fidelity and fecundity) as defined by Dawkins, Dennett and Blackmore, are particularly evident when examining the Internet meme. The Internet's environment allows for easier variation, selection and heredity of a meme. Also, the Internet greatly increases the longevity, fidelity and fecundity of a meme. This Internet meme makes a semiotic contribution to the environment in which it appears. In the case of social media, the Internet meme contributes to the online profile page that it is posted on. This is because each Internet meme has certain connotations, and these connotations are interpreted in conjunction with the rest of the social media profile page. The meme is employed as a semiotic tool, in chapter four, to analyse the potential online persona created when a meme is posted on Facebook. In the next chapter, the different types of social media, as well as the ways in which users interact with these types of social media are discussed.

Chapter Three: Social Media and user participation

In the previous chapter, it is argued that the Internet has assisted in establishing the variation, selection, heredity, longevity, fidelity and fecundity of memes. Variation occurs by creating slightly altered memes using templates on meme generating sites. An Internet user selects and passes on memes. In this way, Internet users spread and inherit memes. Also, Internet memes are potentially stored online indefinitely, resulting in an increased longevity. Finally, fecundity and fidelity are increased, as the Internet optimises the replication of memes amongst users and these memes can be replicated at a 100% accuracy rate. Similarly, it may be argued that social media has increased the variation, selection, heredity, longevity, fidelity and fecundity of memes.

In this chapter, the spread of memes through social media is discussed. Social media has become increasingly integrated into the lives of users, resulting in the growing importance of social media. Examples of the impact of social media and possible reasons for the current use of social media are provided. Thereafter, specific examples of social media are analysed, namely virtual communities, social networking sites and folksonomies. As an example of a virtual community, chat rooms are discussed. The film *Trust* (Schwimmer 2010) is analysed as an example of a real life interaction between a chat room user and a chat room. In the film, the main protagonist, Annie, is raped by a sexual predator she met on the chat room site Teen Chat. The film is inspired by actual events, therefore providing a very good example of the possible use of chat rooms. The documentary *Catfish* (Joost & Schulman 2010) is analysed as an example of the interaction between a user and a social networking site. In the documentary, the main protagonist, Nev, forms a relationship with a woman he met on Facebook (but has not met in real life). As the documentary progresses, Nev discovers that this woman is not who she said she is on Facebook. As it is a documentary, the film is an excellent portrayal of the possible interaction between a user and a social network site, like Facebook. Hereafter blogging is discussed as an

example of a folksonomy. In the film *Julie & Julia* (Ephron 2009), the main protagonist, Julie, creates a blog about her cooking. As the film is based on a true story, the film provides a suitable example of the possible interaction between a user and a blogging site. The films are also used as visual examples, of the deduction and formation of an identity on a social media site, in the next chapter.

3.1. What is Web 2.0?

Before discussing the spread of memes through social media sites, it is important to establish what social media is. The term 'Web 2.0' is often used to describe social media, as this new Internet communication is considered to be an upgraded, collaborative and participatory version of older Internet communications (Beer & Burrows 2007:2). Social media users create a collaboration of information, which may be highly useful, as seen in the use of the social media site Wikipedia, or simply entertaining, as seen in the popularity of song mashups²⁷. In this way, social media users are often confronted with recommendations, news about events or connections, and so on (Beer & Burrows 2007:4). The ways in which social media is changing the social landscape of the Internet is discussed in this section.

David Beer and Roger Burrows highlight three ways in which the Internet is changing, through the Internet user's adoption of social media (2007:8). Firstly, the relationship between the production and consumption of content is changing (Beer & Burrows 2007:8, Zajc 2013:3). Social media users generate and consume online content as they create tags, share content, blog and so on (Figure 21) (Beer & Burrows 2007:8). This content is automatically recorded and stored, easily duplicated, easily searched for, and potentially seen by many others (Boyd & Marwick 2011:9).

²⁷ Mashups are a combination of two pre-existing pieces of content, such as music, web sites or novels. These mashups are created and viewed by users.

Dimensions of Difference	Web 1.0 (1993-2003)	Web 2.0 (2004 - beyond)
Mode...	Read	Write and Contribute
Primary Unit of Content...	Page	Post/record
State...	Static	Dynamic
Viewed through...	Web Browser	Anything
Content created by...	Web Coder	Everyone
Domain of...	Web Designers and Geeks	A new culture of public research?

Figure 21: Dimensions of difference (Beer & Burrows 2007:5).

This production and consumption of Internet content results in “networked publics”

(Boyd & Marwick 2011:7). Boyd and Marwick (2011:7) define networked publics as

...simultaneously (1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined community that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice.

In this way, the production and consumption of content is a result of how the Internet is structured, Internet users and online user connections. However, Beer and Burrows argue that, while social media is free to use and the content is user generated, social media sites remain highly commercial (2007:9). Also, user profiles and connections have become the commodities of Web 2.0, as data-mining becomes increasingly prominent (Beer & Burrows 2007:9). Secondly, the Internet landscape is changing as private information is increasingly published in public domains (Beer & Burrows 2007:9). Social media users are documenting some of the most intimate details of their lives online, where it may be viewed by numerous others (Beer & Burrows 2007:9). Beer and Burrows argue that social media encourages users to reveal as much personal details as possible, that support the image that a user wishes to project (2007:10). Lastly, social media is changing the landscape of the Internet as everybody can be involved and potentially heard or seen (Beer and Burrows 2007:10).

This personal, user generated content on the Internet is rapidly increasing as the popularity of social media increases. The increase in the popularity of social media has resulted in a merging of online and offline life, where social media terms have entered everyday offline vocabulary (van Dijck 2013:202, Westlake 2008:30). Some of these terms include ‘friending’²⁸, ‘liking’, ‘following’²⁹, ‘Facebook official’³⁰, and so on. While the most popular social media site in the world is Facebook, a recent report indicates that Twitter is now the most popular social media site amongst American teenagers (Twitter overtakes Facebook among US teens 2013:1). Similarly, the social media site Mxit is more popular than Facebook amongst South African social media users (Duff 2013:1). As the popularity of social media increases, so does the spread of memes. The spread of memes through social media is discussed in the next section.

3.2. Social media memetics

The Internet provides an ideal medium for the replication of memes, namely through easier variation, selection and heredity. Similarly, the Internet increases the lifespan and rate of transmission of memes, as well as the accuracy with which memes are copied. These Internet memes spread rapidly through Internet communication channels, such as email. Just as the Internet enabled users to “do things with each other, and to do altogether new kinds of things”; so social media has enabled Internet users to do things with each other in new ways (Rheingold 1993:5). In other words, social media enables users to “hang out” in a new space or community (Marwick & Boyd 2011:11). Memes spread as a result of these online communities. The spread of memes through social media is discussed in this section.

²⁸ Friending occurs when online connections are formed. One user requests to be another user’s online friend (connection) and as soon as this user has accepted the request a new online connection is created.

²⁹ Following someone on Twitter allows one to view all the tweets (status updates) of the person one chooses to follow.

³⁰ Facebook official refers to the changing of one’s Facebook relationship status to ‘in a relationship’.



Figure 22: Justin Bieber Twitter statistics, Twitter, 2013.

network). For example, Justin Bieber has more than 44 million followers on the social media site Twitter (Figure 22), meaning over 44 million people are potentially exposed to each meme that he publishes. Similarly, Hayes (2007:1) argues that social media memes (“bemes”) spread rapidly amongst Internet users:

...a beme moves a billion times faster than a meme ever could. That’s the power of citizen-driven media networks. Do the math. There are nearly 60 million blogs...and many millions of social media citizens...a beme today can be created, promulgated and soldered into social consciousness in a fraction of the time it took memes to 30 years ago when Professor Dawkins first made the observation.

This mass exposure of memes on social media increases the fecundity of memes. There are several easy ways to share memes on social media (such as linking to a meme on Facebook, clicking on the ‘retweet’ button on Twitter, and so on). This “push-button” technology greatly increases the heredity of memes, as memes are easily passed on from one person to many other (Nardi, Schiano & Gumbrecht 2004:1). For example, user A could post a meme on their Facebook ‘wall’, which is then viewed

It can be argued that, just as the Internet assists the spread of memes, so social media assists the spread of memes. Any social media connects a network of Internet users, and the members of these networked publics can transmit memes to one another. While the Internet enables users to send memes to selected people (through emailing, and so on), social media enables a user to mass-publish a meme to numerous people (usually anyone in their

by their Facebook friends, including user B. User B can post this same meme on their own Facebook 'wall' by clicking on the 'share' button (Figure 23).



Figure 23: Share button, Facebook, 2013.

Similarly, social media technology ensures that Internet memes are passed on with a high degree of accuracy. By 'sharing' a meme on the social media site Facebook, a meme may be copied with 100% accuracy. Social media also enables the variation of memes. For example, when 'sharing' a meme on Facebook, a user is given the option to add a comment to the meme, thereby slightly altering that specific meme (Figure 24).

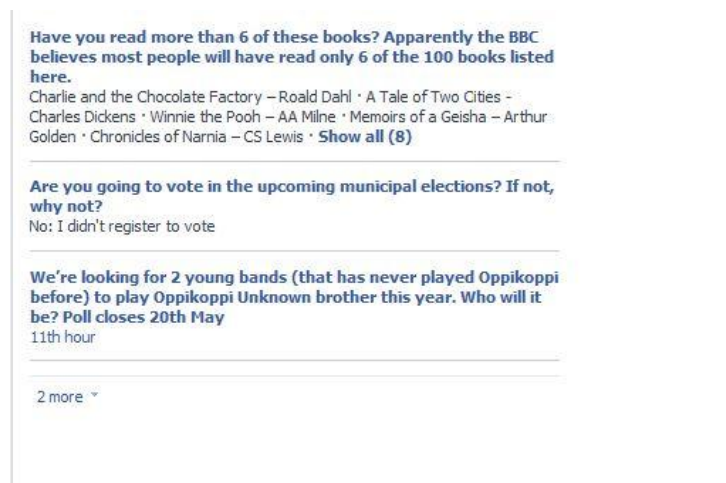


Figure 24: Unknown designer, Comment meme, Facebook, 2012.

As so many people are, potentially, exposed to the same memes, the variation of memes increases. The potential mass-exposure of users to Internet memes on social media sites, such as Facebook, and the resultant increase in the number of memes circulating the social media sphere due to easier replication, results in the increase in the selection of these memes. For example, a Facebook user is unlikely to 'share' every

meme that they come across on the Internet; therefore, a user selects which memes they will 'share' on their Facebook profile page. As discussed in the previous chapter, memes are selected for numerous reasons, such as humour, informational content or whimsical content. In this way, a meme may spread through social media because it is sensational, such as a photo of a panty-less Britney Spears (Figure 25), playful, such as a YouTube video of the song: *Here it goes again* (Figure 26), or agonising, such as the viral video of Michael Richards racist insults (Figure 27) (Hayes 2007:1). In the next chapter, the selection and spread of memes due to the impact of a meme on the rest of a social media user's profile page is discussed.



Figure 25: Unknown designer, Panty-less Britney Spears, undated.



Figure 26: OK GO, *Here it goes again*, 2006. Screen shot by author.



Figure 27: TMZ, Michael Richards spews racial hate – Kramer racist rant, Youtube, 2012. Screen shot by author.

Regardless of the reasons for the selection of certain memes, these Internet memes become part of a social media profile page history and remain there until specifically deleted by a user. For example, on the social media site Facebook, all memes 'shared' by a user become a part of that user's 'timeline'³¹, and these memes remain there unless deleted by a user. Social media memes, similar to Internet memes, are timely. As a result, a meme's chance of replication decreases as it moves further down on a Facebook user's 'timeline'; as other users must scroll further down the Facebook user's 'timeline' to be exposed to the meme, thus decreasing the likelihood of exposure.

Internet memes, therefore, replicate at a greater rate through social media, compared to the spread of Internet memes through email, and so on. This is mainly due to the increase of audiences on social media sites, as numerous Internet users are potentially exposed to the same meme. Similarly, the push-button technology of social media sites increases the spread of memes, as memes can be republished on another social media page instantaneously, thereby increasing the exposure of an Internet meme to numerous audiences. In the next section, the current integration of social media into everyday life and the use of social media are discussed.

3.3. Integration of social media into everyday life

The spread of Internet memes through social media is further enhanced by the increase in popularity of social media; as more people are using social media to communicate with friends and family, meet new people, stay up-to-date on current events, and so on. Furthermore, mobile social media has increased the availability and access to social media. The reasons for the use of a social media site vary from site to site depending on the type of social media, the site's architecture and the manner in which the audience chooses to use the site. Some possible reasons for the use of social

³¹ A 'timeline' is the name given to the chronological format of a Facebook profile page.

media, as well as the current prevalence of social media in everyday life are the focus of this section.

The reasons why people use specific social media sites largely depend on the type of social media. For example, social networking sites are more likely to support the formation and maintaining of visible connections. Furthermore, there are numerous social networking sites, each with its own specific function. For example, the social networking site Friendster is used to meet new friends and date, LinkedIn is used to find jobs and Tribe is used to provide recommendations (Gross & Acquisti 2005:1). Similarly, some sites could cater for a specific language or race, while other sites could incorporate newer communication tools, such as photo sharing (Boyd & Ellison 2007:1). Therefore, people can use social media sites for various reasons. Some people create online profiles because they feel peer-pressure to be part of an online world (Cohen & Shade 2008:1). For this reason, some participants on Facebook have noticed that there is a negative perception of not having a Facebook account (Imam 2012:3). The maintenance or creation of connections (whether visible or hidden) is a major aspect of most social media (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe 2006:27, Awan & Gauntlett 2013:118, Sheldon 2007:50). For example, Robert Wilson, Samuel Gosling and Lindsay Graham (2012:209) found that the most common reason for people to join a social networking site is to maintain pre-existing relationships. Similarly, Rheingold found that communities exist on virtual communities through the formation of new relationships (1993:4).



Figure 28: Unknown designer, Amazon Facebook page, 2013. Screen shot by author.



Figure 29: Barack Obama Twitter page, Twitter, 2013. Screen shot by author.

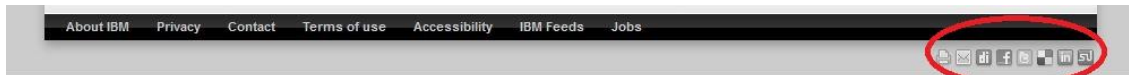


Figure 30: Unknown designer, IBM social media links, IBM homepage, 2013. Screen shot by author.

Social media sites may also be used to maintain self-branding (Hearn 2008:210, Van Dijck 2013:202). This can be seen in the adoption of social media by companies, such as Amazon (Figure 28) and IBM (Figure 30), or people, such as Barack Obama who has 31 403 209 followers on Twitter (Figure 29), to increase the value of a brand by directly communicating with consumers. An excellent example of the use of social media to communicate and build brands is a recent Porsche campaign, where a new Porsche was designed and released according to the specifications of Porsche’s 5 million Facebook fans (2013:1). Social media are also used as a means to gain information. For example, the Pew Research Centre found that up to 47% of adults get news from Facebook, although Facebook is not the main source of news for most of its users (2013:1). Social media may be used to ease and control communication (Awan & Gauntlett 2013:122). For example, the social networking site Facebook is often used to promote public performances and parties (Westlake 2008:31). Lastly, social media provides one with a means to experiment with and construct one’s identity. This experimentation and construction of identity is discussed in the next chapter.

Regardless of one’s reasons for using social media, the smartphone has increased the availability of social media and one’s access to social media. A user may now access social media via a cellular phone at any place or time (Weaver 2010:25, Beer & Burrows 2007:4). According to Lee Humphreys (2013:21), this mobile social media is used to communicate with people via the Internet and can be defined as:

...software, applications, or services accessed through mobile devices that allow users to connect with other people and to share information, news, and content.

Mary Madden, Amanda Lenhart, Sandra Cortesi, Urs Gasser, Maeve Duggan, Aaron Smith and Meredith Beaton found that 80% of online teenagers now use social media and 50% of smartphone-owning teenagers mostly access social media from their smartphones (2013:16). This is of particular importance in a South African context,

where there are more mobile Internet connections than traditional desktop connections (Donner & Gitau 2009:2). Jonathan Donner and Shikoh Gitau found that the mass-adoption of the use of smartphones to access social media by South Africans is due to several factors (2009). Firstly, users are shown how to access the social media sites using their cellular phones by those they trust (Donner & Gitau 2009:5). Secondly, social media is accessed through a smartphone to better maintain social networks (Donner & Gitau 2009:7). Thirdly, smartphones are used to access news and information, some of this being gained from social media sites (Donner & Gitau 2009:7). Lastly, the use of social media on a smartphone as a form of communication dramatically cuts the cost of communication as, for example, an instant message on the site Mxit is less expensive to send than a message sent via an SMS on a cell phone (Donner & Gitau 2009:9). The use of smartphones to access social media has also increased the rate at which images, texts and memes spread. For example, a photograph may be taken and directly uploaded onto a social media site using one's phone. Furthermore, social media applications may be downloaded and stored on a smartphone; resulting in immediate notifications of such things as tagged photographs or messages, as well as easier access to one's online profile and the profiles of other users.

As the use of social media increases, so does its effect on the social media user's life. People are examining one another's Facebook profiles before going on a date with them or before deciding whether to give that person a job (Bachrach, Kosinski, Graepel, Kohli & Stillwell 2012:1). In an attempt to make themselves seem more attractive to potential employers, social media users are untagging photographs, increasing their network sizes and hiding posts (Cohen & Shade 2008:211, Kelley 2007:23, Gershon 2011:876). There are concerns about the role of social media in the workplace (Purvis 2012:1, Greenhouse 2013:1, Taylor 2013:2, Gitlin 2013:1), social media addiction (Sparkes 2013:1, Potarazu 2013:1), the privacy of information on social media sites (Gatto 2013:1, Bosker 2013:1, Choney 2013: 1) and online sex offenders (Kravets 2013:1, FPB on Mixit's anti-porn stance 2010). Lastly, there are

concerns that social media is increasing the possibility of identity theft (Sweney 2013:1, Donath & Boyd 2004:76). This is particularly important in South Africa as numerous South African Facebook users suffered identity theft when their accounts were cloned in 2013 and used to solicit money from their online friends (Nair 2013:1). However, while there are many concerns about the use of social media, many users have benefitted from its use, by gaining money and popularity through their exposure on social media sites. In this way, social media has helped launch the careers of musicians and actors. For instance, Gus van Sant used MySpace to cast his film, *Paranoid Park* (Hart 2008:1). Similarly, MySpace helped the band Arctic Monkeys³² launch their music career (Dockrill 2006:1), while YouTube helped launch the careers of Justin Bieber³³ (Adib 2009:1) and PSY³⁴ (South Korean rapper PSY surpasses Bieber as video king 2012:1). PSY's *Gangnam Style* has spawned countless memes and is currently the most viewed video on YouTube with over 1.7 billion views (Figure 30). A recent YouTube phenomenon, Ylvis' *The Fox (What Does the Fox Say?)*, has surpassed 100 million views in little over a month (Figure 31).³⁵

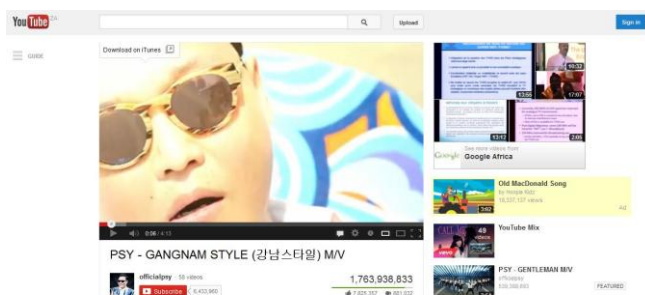


Figure 31: Psy, *Gangnam style*, 2012. Screen shot by author.

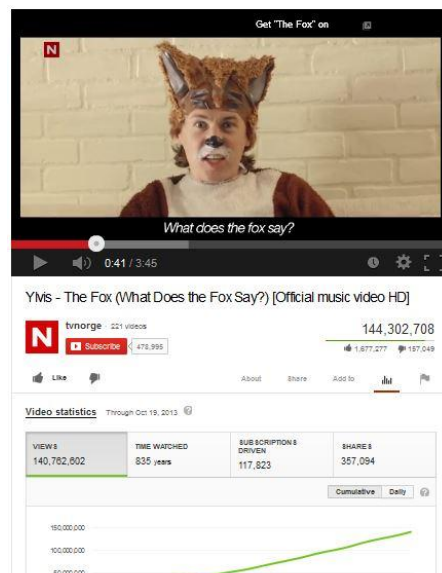


Figure 32: Ylvis, *The Fox (What Does the Fox Say?)*, 2013. Screen shot by author.

³² For more information on the band Arctic Monkeys visit their <https://myspace.com/arcticmonkeys>

³³ For more information Justin Bieber visit his YouTube page at <http://www.youtube.com/user/kidrauhl>

³⁴ To view the *Gangnam Style* video visit <http://www.youtube.com/user/officialpsy>

³⁵ To view the *The Fox (What does the fox say?)* video visit http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jofNR_WkoCE



Figure 33: Laurel Papworth, Facebook: Iceland constitution and Gov 2.0, undated.

Social media has also influenced government decisions and communication. For example, Iceland rewrote their constitution according to the comments made by Icelanders on Facebook (Figure 33) (Morris 2012:1). Another example is the recent assistance of social media in the capture of those responsible for the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings. As many people were filming or taking photographs of the Boston Marathon on their smartphones, the American police asked these people for any and all footage to help the police identify the bombers. One such mobile phone photograph helped the police identify the two bombers, as the photograph showed one of the suspects fleeing the scene moments before the first explosion (Jansen 2013:1). The police kept the citizens updated on the status of the proceeding manhunt, to capture the suspects, through Facebook and Twitter (Jansen 2013:2). Upon capturing the second suspect, the Boston police informed the public via their Twitter account (Figure 34):



Figure 34: Boston Police Department, Captured!!!, Twitter, 2013. Screen shot by author.

Furthermore, American citizens used social media to discuss their suspicions and theories surrounding the Boston Marathon bombing (Jansen 2013:2)³⁶.

The increase in popularity of social media, as well as the use of smartphones, has had a definite impact on the life of the social media user. While social media is mainly used to maintain and create friendships, build brands and gain information; social media has also helped launch careers, write constitutions, design cars and catch criminals. There are different types of social media, namely virtual communities, folksonomies, social networking sites, mashups and wikis. These different types of social media are discussed in detail in the next section.

3.4. Types of social media

In 1993, Rheingold wrote about his experience using the virtual community WELL in his book: *The virtual community. Homesteading on the electronic frontier*. WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link) involved the use of only written word. The introduction of virtual communities marked the dawn of the social media era, but since then social media has evolved to encompass many other types of applications, such as social networking sites and folksonomies. These social networking sites and folksonomies enable new forms of communication, such as the use of photographs, links, profiles, and videos. Social media sites have become increasingly popular over the past several years, with the social networking site Facebook currently boasting 750 million users (Top 15 most popular social networking sites 2013:1). The different types of social media sites (specifically virtual communities, social networking sites and folksonomies) are the focus of this section.

³⁶ A recent development in the Boston Marathon bombings situation is the arrest of 18 year old Cameron D'Ambrosio, who rapped about the bombing and his upcoming bombing of The White House on Facebook, and is facing 20 years in jail for acts of terrorism (Zetter 2013:1).

While the WELL (Rheingold 1993) and Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) (Turkle 1995) are examples of the earliest social media, social media quickly grew to encompass different types of applications. Social media can now be divided into different categories, namely virtual communities, wikis³⁷ (Figure 35), mashups (Figure 36), folksonomies and social networking (Beer 2008:519).



Figure 35: Unknown designer, Wikipedia home page, 2013. Screen shot by author.



Figure 36: Unknown designer, New Google Maps mashups, 2007.

While social networking, folksonomies and virtual communities involve the creation of a profile or the use of public user name; wikis and mashups do not. In other words, the user-generated content on wikis and mashups is posted anonymously, unlike the user-

³⁷ Wikis are web sites that are developed collaboratively by allowing users to add and edit any content.

generated content posted on virtual communities, social networking and folksonomies. As the focus of this dissertation is on the construction of identities in an online social media environment, only virtual communities, social networking and folksonomies will be discussed, as these entail the creation of an online persona or profile. On social networking sites and folksonomies an online persona is created through the publishing of a user's name (in some cases this is the same name the person has offline while in other cases this name is fabricated), details about this user, such as their location and likes, and a profile picture. On virtual communities, a similar online persona is established through the interaction a user has with others for a specific duration under the same online name (Rheingold 1993:135).

In the remainder of this section, virtual communities, social networking and folksonomies are discussed in greater detail. As an example of a virtual community, chat rooms are discussed. The film *Trust* (Schwimmer 2010) is analysed as an example of the interaction between a chat room user and a chat room. The film *Catfish* (Joost & Schulman 2010) is analysed as an example of the interaction between a social networking site user and a social networking site. Lastly, blogging is discussed as an example of a folksonomy. The film *Julie & Julia* (Ephron 2009) is analysed as an example of the interaction between a blogger and a blogging site. These film examples are also used as visual references in the next chapter.

3.4.1. Virtual communities

Virtual communities originate from a combination of inexpensive personal computers and communication technologies. According to Rheingold (1993:52), this combination was unavoidable:

When enough people brought sufficiently powerful computers into their homes, it was inevitable that somebody would figure out a way to plug PCs into telephones...With the powerful computers available today, you don't need an expensive, high-speed conduit like Internet uses. You just plug into your telephone line, perfectly legally – so far – and publish your manifestos or organize meetings.

These virtual communities can be divided into synchronous and asynchronous computer mediated communication (CMC) (Horton 2001:3). Synchronous CMCs happen in real time, while asynchronous CMCs occur “over broken periods of time” (Horton 2001:3). Synchronous CMCs encompass such activities as Internet Relay Chat (IRC), web-based chats and Instant Messaging (IM) (Horton 2001:3). Alternately, asynchronous CMCs encompass such activities as newsgroups and Bulletin Board Systems (BBSs) (Horton 2001:7). Virtual communities, particularly chat rooms, are the focus of this section.

Some of the very first virtual communities that were analysed were WELL (Rheingold 1993), MUDs (Turkle 1995) and Usenet (Rheingold 1993, Donath 1998 & Smith, McLaughlin & Osborne 1997). Rheingold (1993:5) defines virtual communities as:

...social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on...public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.

In other words, virtual communities are forums that allow online relationships to form between groups of people over an extended period of time. Unlike social networking sites, virtual communities are mostly text-based and usually do not contain any photographs of users. There are certain differences between IRC, IM and web-based chats; just as there are certain differences between newsgroups and BBSs. A BBS, such as WELL, is a single site that a user may access using a software program (Horton 2001:7). A user may navigate between boards using a menu that links all of the system’s content (Horton 2001:7). A newsgroup is a discussion group that may also be accessed using a software program (Horton 2001:7). Each of these newsgroups is devoted to a particular topic, making them very useful for hobbyists and specialists (Horton 2001:7). Usenet is a collection of different newsgroups. Because of this, Usenet is an information repository, while WELL is a community (Vitak 2008:42). Also, when using WELL, users may only post under their original user name, encouraging a closer sense of community (Vitak 2008:42). This sense of community on BBSs, such as WELL, allows users to form lasting relationships, often meeting in real life (Vitak

2008:42). Rheingold met numerous of his online WELL friends in real life, as well as attended real life marriages and funerals of those he met online (1993:3).

While BBSs and newsgroups represent CMCs that occur over extended periods of time; IRC, IM and web-based chat communications all take place in real time. These synchronous CMCs fall under the umbrella term: chats (Horton 2001:3). IRC or chat rooms are virtual rooms (Figure 37) where users talk to one another in groups or privately (Horton 2001:3).

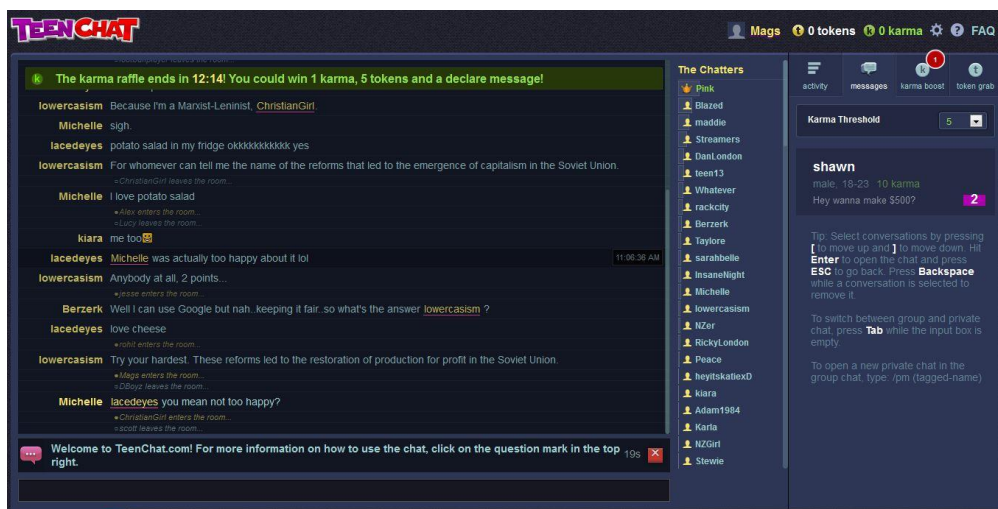


Figure 37: Designer unknown, Teen Chat virtual room, 2013. Screen shot by author.

According to Bays, these chats are different from emails or BBSs in two ways: Firstly, chat rooms do not keep a public record of previous exchanges (a chat log is only kept for a limited amount of time) and, secondly, chat rooms usually involve more than one conversation that one can participate in simultaneously, and these conversations usually involve more than two people (Bay sa:3). In the film *Trust* (Schwimmer 2010), the FBI is able to get a record of previous chats between Annie and Charlie from Teen Chat; however, these chats are no longer in the public domain. Also, in the opening sequence of the film, Annie is shown having multiple conversations simultaneously. These IRCs are usually text-based, such as MUDs (Figure 38); but there are IRCs that use virtual avatars, such as Second Life (Figure 39).



Figure 39: Designer unknown, Second Life homepage, 2013. Screen shot by author.



Figure 38: Designer unknown, Aardwolf MUD screen shot, undated.

The relationships formed on these chat rooms may be just as intimate, lasting and beneficial as those formed on BBSs. For example, on MUDs it is possible to date other users on the site, illustrating the intimacy of the relationships formed between users of chat rooms (Turkle 2004:3)³⁸. In the film *Trust* (Schwimmer 2010), Annie Cameron develops a relationship with another chat room user, Charlie. This relationship becomes so personal that Charlie and Annie engage in virtual sex, and Annie trusts Charlie enough to meet him in real life. Annie's trust of Charlie proves to be an error in judgement, and Annie is raped by Charlie in real life. The remainder of the film focuses on the police efforts to capture cyber-criminals, particularly Charlie, as well as Annie's and her family's struggle to come to terms with the incident.

³⁸ Alternately, virtual communities can have a negative impact on the offline life of a user, as seen in the occurrence of a virtual rape. Virtual rape occurs when one player is able to control the online actions of another user, and forces that user to have online sex (Turkle 1995:251).

Web-based chats are similar to IRC but, unlike IRC, are hosted by web sites and web browsers rather than IRC software (Horton 2001:4). IM applications, such as Whatsapp or Mxit, are also very similar to chat rooms, as it is also mostly text-based. However, according to Rich Ling and Naomi Baron, IM is essentially different to chat rooms as IM mainly takes place between two participants, although IM groups can be created where more than two people can have a conversation (2007:3). IM can also be differentiated from smsing as, firstly, smses are limited to 160 characters while IM has no upper limit, and, secondly, smses are usually sent in a single transmission while a single IM message could be sent in several separate transmissions (Figure 40 depicts a typical IM conversation on the IM site Whatsapp) (Ling & Baron 2007:3).

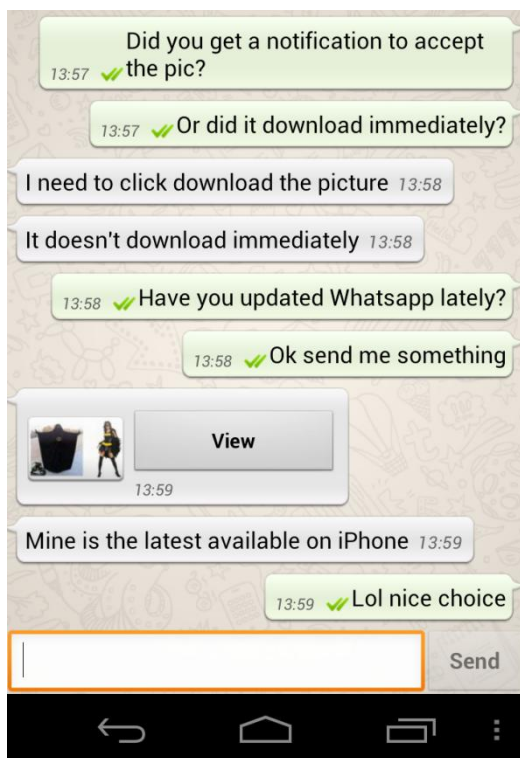


Figure 40: Designer unknown, Whatsapp conversation, undated.



Figure 41: Designer unknown, Mxit screen, undated.

While a sms is charged per unit, IM messages are not (Ling & Baron 2007:3). As a result, IM is an inexpensive form of communication. It could be argued that this inexpensive communication contributes to the IM site Mxit's status as the most

popular social media site in South Africa (Figure 41 depicts an example of a Mxit home page).

On a chat room site a user name is used to interact with the other members of the chat room. Similar to a user name on WELL, a chat room user name acts as one’s online identity in the sense that an online persona is established through the interaction a user has with others for a specific duration under the same online name (Rheingold 1993:135). In this way, other users learn what type of reaction or response they would receive from a certain person (user name). At the beginning of the film *Trust* (Schwimmer 2010), Annie’s Teen Chat user name is shown as “Volleygirl13” while Charlie’s user name is “chRLeeca”. Annie and Charlie’s relationship is able to develop as they both continuously use the same user name; therefore each knows that they are continuously communicating with the same person. During the title sequence of the film, Annie blocks the user “BigMike” for making inappropriate, sexual comments; illustrating the ease with which a user can control who they communicate with in a chat room. Similarly, age, sex and location are often used to divide chat rooms and chat room users (Del-Teso-Craviotto 2008:254). For example, when joining a chat room on the site Teen Chat, the age and gender of a user are required (Figure 42).

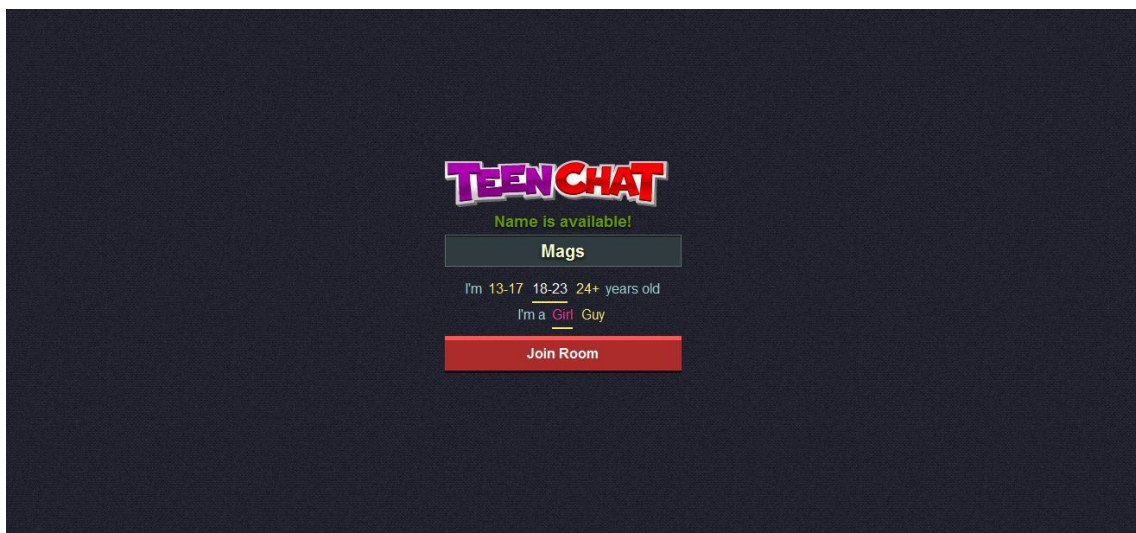


Figure 42: Designer unknown, Request for gender and age, Teen Chat homepage, 2013. Screen shot by author.

Chat rooms are text based interchanges, however, meaning that a user may be untruthful about anything they write on a chat room site. In this way, the Internet and virtual communities pose indirect and direct risks (Horton 2001:9). Indirect risks include the distribution of pornography and the formation of online groups of sexual predators (Horton 2001:9). Direct risks, on the other hand, include the release of private information which could lead to fraud and cyber-stalking; as well as the exposure of a child to a sexually and emotionally inappropriate situation (Horton 2001:10). This sexual and emotional abuse occurs through the exposure of children to pornography, the emotional manipulation of children into online friendships with sexual predators, and, in rare cases, the sexual predator meets the child offline to engage in inappropriate sexual activity (Horton 2001:10). This inappropriate sexual activity by online sexual predators is the focus of the film *Trust* (Schwimmer 2010). In the film, Charlie spends a few months manipulating Annie into caring for him, convincing her that they are in a relationship. Annie is aware that she should no longer be communicating with Charlie after discovering that he has lied about his age, as her parents would disapprove; but she continues as she has already developed feelings for him. Charlie also slowly introduces sexual elements into his relationship with Annie, first asking her about the bra she bought, and gradually progressing to having phone (virtual) sex with Annie. Charlie convinces Annie to meet him at a shopping mall when her parents are out of town. When they meet, Charlie (who is 35 years old) cleverly manipulates Annie (who is 14 years old), by discussing their love for each other and the fact that their age difference should not matter because they have a very special connection – he tells her that he believes that they are soul mates. After spending a few hours at the mall, Charlie gives Annie lingerie and takes her to a motel room where he rapes her. Charlie records the rape. This recording could be uploaded onto a chat room site, illustrating the ease with which sexual predators can use chat rooms to spread illegal content, such as child pornography. The FBI uses Teen Chat to try and trap Charlie, and to trace him; however, both methods are unsuccessful. Similarly, Annie's father, Will (Clive Owen), creates a fake profile on Teen Chat, pretending to be a 13 year old girl, to try and understand why someone would groom and assault

minors. Will also browses a website that lists local sexual perverts and visits the group that runs this website in New Jersey (Will lives in Chicago). David Schwimmer was inspired to write and direct the film after hearing a real life story from the father of a 14-year-old who was raped after meeting someone online (Murray 2011:1). This story was presented at the Rape Foundation where Schwimmer serves as a board member. Schwimmer developed the story with the help of other members of the Rape Foundation, councillors and a FBI agent who has worked on similar cases (Minow 2011:1).

After being raped, Annie initially protects Charlie because her relationship with Charlie has become extremely important to her. Annie's online relationship with Charlie is portrayed as equally (or perhaps more) important to her as her offline relationships with her family and friends. For this reason, Annie is upset when Charlie does not return her calls or communicate with her online, and on multiple occasions sends him messages and calls him asking why he is no longer communicating with her. It is only after the FBI shows Annie photographs of Charlie's previous victims (trying to establish a commonality between her and the other victims), that she realises that her relationship with Charlie was not unique or real, and finally admits that she was raped. As a result of being raped, Annie's online and offline lives begin to intersect. When Annie gets escorted to the police station for questioning about the rape, the other children in the school are all shown recording the event. Any of these videos may be uploaded onto a social media site, resulting in an overlap of online and offline life. Also, Annie's online and offline relationships intersect when she is cyber-bullied³⁹ at school (Figure 43). Marwick and Boyd argue that rumours, gossip and high school drama are not limited to one medium, and therefore bullying may transcend any one form of communication (2011:12). After being cyber-bullied, Annie tries to commit suicide, illustrating the impact of such online behaviour on offline life. For this reason, according to Zhao, Grasmuck and Martin (2008:1830), these online and offline environments must be managed:

³⁹ Cyber-bullying is "the use of electronic communication to bully a person, typically by sending messages of an intimidating or threatening nature" (Oxford English Dictionary 2013).

In the Internet era, the social world includes both the online and offline environments, and an important skill people need to learn is how to coordinate their behavior in these two realms.



Figure 43: Cyber-bullying, *Trust*. 2010. Screen shot by author.

There are several other instances in the film when Annie's online and offline lives intersect. Firstly, Annie is constantly using the chat room site at school, at home during dinner, and late into the night. Secondly, Annie tells her online friends about her offline life, and vice versa. Annie and Charlie discuss her day to day activities online, such as her volleyball and her interaction with the 'cool' girls at school. Similarly, the opening scene of the film shows Annie making a breakfast smoothie while a chat room discussion flashes across the screen, indicating that these chats and real life continue simultaneously. Also, there are numerous times in the film when someone offline interrupts Annie's online activities, such as when her brother, Peter (Spencer Curnutt), leaves for college and interrupts Annie's online conversation to say goodbye, and when her mother, Lynn (Catherine Keener), asks Annie to stop communicating online while they are eating dinner. This constant online connection is possible as Annie communicates with Charlie on her cellular phone and laptop, illustrating that chat rooms are one of many forms of virtual communication. Lastly, while attempting to commit suicide, Annie takes one final self-portrait photograph using her smartphone.

In this way, Annie tries to record all aspects of her life online, including her death offline.

The everyday interaction between members of a chat room eventually leads to an establishment of norms on the site (Bays sa:4). This establishment of norms may include new jargon or “netspeak”, such as “LOL” meaning “laughing out loud” (Huffaker & Calvert 2005:2). This jargon allows the members of chat rooms to communicate in a quick and efficient manner, as well as acts as a barrier to any parents trying to determine what their child is chatting about. For example, in the film *Trust* (Schwimmer 2010), Annie is chatting⁴⁰ to Charlie when her father walks into her room to tell her she needs to go to bed soon. Will asks Annie who she is talking⁴¹ to, she corrects him and tells him that she is ‘chatting’ (not talking) to someone named Charlie. Will’s mistaking ‘talking’ and ‘chatting’⁴² illustrates that parents do not understand the nature of chat rooms and, as a result, these chat rooms may be a place for teenage experimentation away from adult supervision. This misunderstanding of virtual chat rooms by parents is further highlighted by Will’s failure to understand the jargon on the chat site, which Annie decodes for him, for example ‘PWOMS’ meaning ‘parent watching over my shoulder’ (Figure 44).

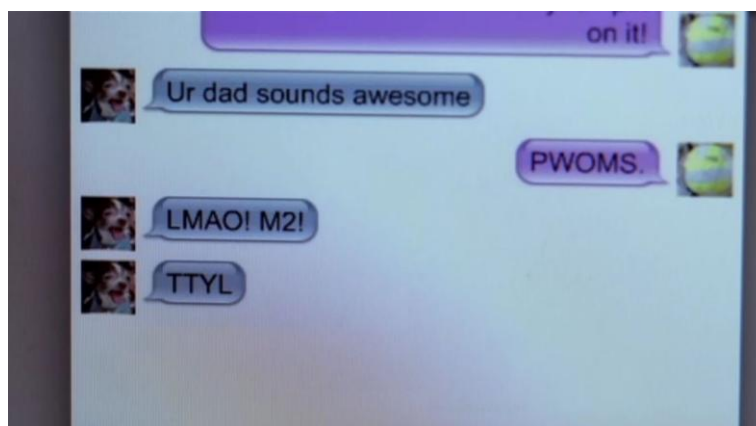


Figure 44: Chat room jargon, *Trust*. 2010. Screen shot by author.

⁴⁰ The Oxford Dictionary (2013) defines chatting as “the online exchange of messages in real time with one or more simultaneous users of a computer network”.

⁴¹ The Oxford Dictionary (2013) defines talking as “communication by spoken words; conversation or discussion”.

⁴² While chatting occurs over the Internet via text, talking occurs over the phone or face-to-face via speech.

The jargon present on chat rooms, therefore, assists in both quick communication, and the maintaining of this distance between what the meaning of a teenager's chat room post is and what a parent's understanding of this post is.

The chat room Teen Chat, therefore, provides Annie with a means to experiment with her own identity, her sexuality and her relationships in an environment free from adult supervision. This adult free environment may have negative consequences as seen in the film: Annie is raped by a sexual predator and she is cyber-bullied because of this event. Charlie is able to falsify his identity as virtual communities are mostly text-based, and there is no way to establish whether someone is being truthful online. The police fail to capture Charlie, illustrating the ease with which online sexual predators may sexually and emotionally abuse children, and avoid capture. Similarly, there have been growing concerns about the exposure of children to sexual predators on social networking sites such as MySpace. Susanna Schrobsdorff (2006:2) argues that social networking has increased the ability of sexual predators to gain access to children, as all the necessary information needed to groom the child is located in one central location. Social networking sites are discussed in the next section.

3.4.2. Social Networking Sites

Virtual communities can be distinguished from social networking, even though both involve the creation of an online persona. While a social networking site hosts a detailed user profile, including photographs of a user; a virtual community often includes only a user name. According to Ellison, Steinfeld and Lampe (2006:4), a further distinction is that virtual communities are focused on the creation of new relationships with people who are outside of pre-existing networks, while social networking sites are used to both create new relationships and maintain pre-existing relationships. Marwick further differentiates virtual communities and social networking sites, as the main element of a social networking site is the network itself (which could consist of several communities), while a virtual community is centred on

a specific commonality or shared interest. Social networking sites are the focus of this section (2005:6).

Boyd and Ellison (2007:2) define social networking sites as:

...web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and transverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.

A social network site therefore consists of an online profile which may be viewed by everyone or only by a selected few, as well as contains and displays a list of the online connections of all the users on the site. According to this definition of social networking, Boyd and Ellison argue that the first social network site was SixDegrees.com, which started up in 1997 but, due to its failure to establish a sustainable business, it closed in 2000 (2007:4). Other early social networking sites include Cyworld and Ryze (Boyd & Ellison 2007:6). A user profile on a social networking site (whether public or private) usually consists of similar features. After joining a social networking site, a user is required to fill in a questionnaire, and these answers are used to generate a profile (Boyd & Ellison 2007:3). These questionnaires usually include sections for an age, sex, location, interests, and an “about me” section (Boyd & Ellison 2007:3). Users also upload photographs of themselves onto the social networking site, including a profile picture (Figure 45).



Figure 45: Social networking basic information, *Catfish*. 2010. Screen shot by author.

Most social networking sites provide a means to communicate with one another, either by leaving messages on another user's profiles or by sending one another private messages.

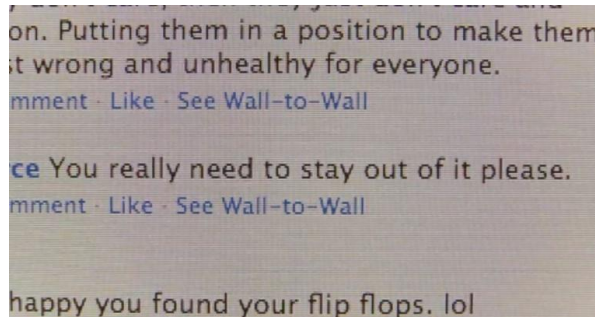


Figure 46: Social networking public message, *Catfish*. 2010. Screen shot by author.

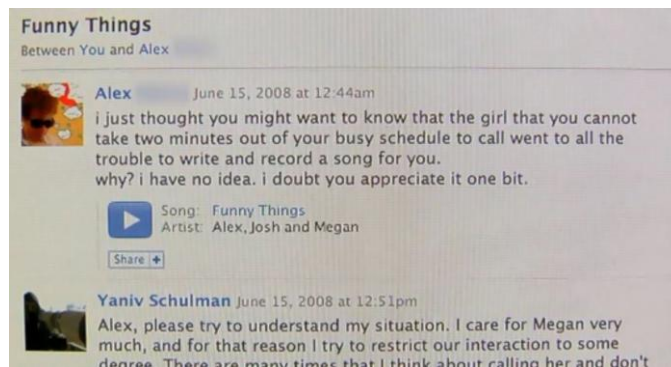


Figure 47: Social networking private message, *Catfish*. 2010. Screen shot by author.

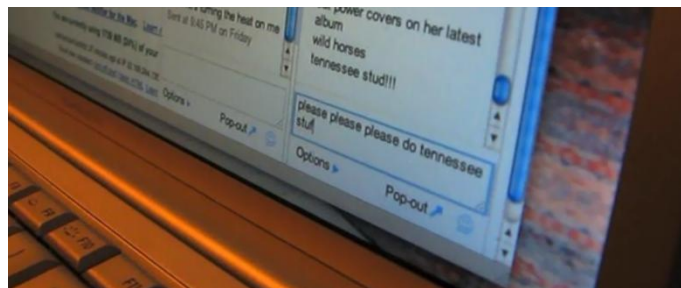


Figure 48: Facebook Chat, *Catfish*. 2010. Screen shot by author.

In the film *Catfish* (Joost & Schulman 2010), Nev meets a family on Facebook and forms online friendships with a few of them, particularly one of the daughters: Megan. Nev communicates with Megan and her family on numerous occasions using both

private Facebook messages (Figure 47) and Facebook wall posts (Figure 46). As Nev and Megan’s relationship becomes more intimate, he starts sending her more private messages. Lastly, some social networking sites also allow users to communicate using embedded chat facilities (Figure 48). In the film *Catfish* (Joost & Schulman 2010), Nev uses Facebook Chat to ask Megan to sing and record *Tennessee Stud*, and post it on Facebook. Megan immediately records and uploads the song onto Facebook. Therefore, similar to other chat facilities on the Internet, Facebook Chat is a synchronous form of CMC. After Megan uploads *Tennessee Stud* onto Facebook, Nev finds the exact same version of the song on YouTube (sung by someone else), and it is this discovery that leads Nev to question Megan’s Facebook identity. In the end, the Facebook Megan that Nev forms on a relationship with is a complete fabrication. Through private or public messages, social networking site users communicate “previously hard to access, private and mundane aspects of everyday life” (Beer 2008:525). For example, in the film *Catfish* (Joost & Schulman 2010) numerous verbal and visual examples are provided illustrating the mundane and sometimes highly personal aspects of their lives that social networking users share (Figure 49). Mundane conversations in the film include stories about Alex (Megan’s half-brother) driving into a pole while ploughing, Abby’s (Megan’s half-sister) snake dying, Megan’s new farm and animals, and so on. Through the mundane aspects posted on Megan’s Facebook profile, Nev establishes that he and Megan have certain similarities: Megan is a dancer and he takes photographs of dancers, she’s a veterinarian and he likes animals, and she is a musician and he likes music. However, Nev does admit that he does not know that much about Megan yet, even though he has learned all of these things from her Facebook profile.

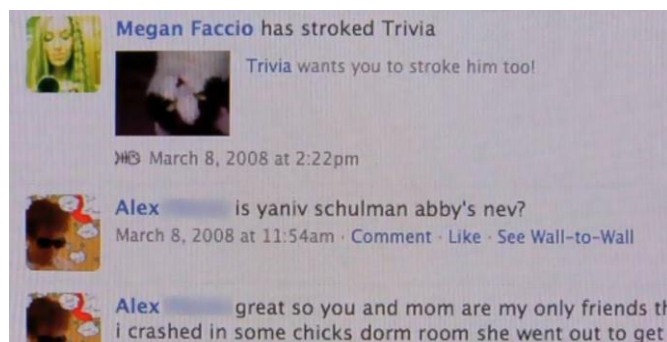


Figure 49: Mundane information, *Catfish*. 2010. Screen shot by author.

Users of social networking sites create visible connections with other users. These connections are mutual and public, no distinction is made between connections, and there is no way to display only some of one's connections (Donath & Boyd 2004:72). Social networking users make these connections for various reasons, such as connecting with offline friends, acquaintances, family and colleagues (Boyd 2006b:8). Other reasons for connections include wanting to appear popular (by having many online connections), wanting access to private profiles, and it being easier and less socially awkward to accept another user's request to be an online connection (Boyd 2006b:8). These online connections serve many important functions, such as emotional and financial support, information about people and the world, and so on (Donath & Boyd 2004:71). While some social networking sites, such as Facebook, encourage the creation of connections to maintain offline relationships; other social networking sites, such as MySpace, encourage the creation of connections that are unknown offline (Dwyer, Hiltz & Passerini 2007:7). In the film *Catfish* (Joost & Schulman 2010), Nev initially forms an online connection with Abby (who he has never met in real life). Nev is a dance photographer, and Abby paints and sends Nev one of Nev's photographs (which had appeared on the cover of the New York Sun in 2007). Nev continues to send Abby photographs, which she paints. Nev is then introduced to the rest of the family through his correspondence with Abby. He becomes Facebook friends with all of them: Angela Wesselman (Megan's mother), Vince (Megan's stepfather), Megan and Alex. As the months pass, Nev and Megan's relationship becomes more intimate, even though they have never met. Nev states that, while they are not currently dating, they would be in a relationship as soon as they met if their online attraction existed in real life as well. Similarly, Megan messages Nev stating: "I don't understand the hold you have on my heart. There isn't anything I wouldn't do for you babe". Nev and Megan also engage in phone (virtual) sex. Therefore, the relationship that is developing between Nev and Megan is very intimate and emotional, and their feelings are as real as any feelings that exist in an offline relationship. When Nev discovers that Megan and her family are being untruthful

about themselves on Facebook, he feels as though his trust has been betrayed, stating: “They’re complete psychopaths. I’ve probably been chatting to a guy this whole time”.

Nev drives to Michigan to meet Megan in real life and find out who she really is. The issue of privacy becomes relevant at this point in the film as so much has been posted on Facebook by Megan and her family, Nev is able to find both Megan’s and Angela’s homes. He discovers that Angela does not look the same as her photograph on Facebook. Neither does Vince. Vince has mentally handicapped twin sons, Ronald and Anthony, who live with Angela, Vince and Abby. Throughout the course of the day, Nev discovers that Abby does not paint; rather, Angela painted everything that was sent to him. Lastly, Abby does have a sister named Megan but she has not seen this sister is many years. Nev concludes that Angela has been phoning him pretending to be Megan:

So I’m 90% sure right now that Angela is the voice of Megan and that I’ve been texting and having this weird affair with, like, this strange 40 year old woman.

The following day, Nev confronts Angela about the situation. Angela admits that she pretended to be Megan on the phone. Angela seems proud when discussing her technological skill, as she was able to juggle multiple mobile telephones, as well as create 15 fake Facebook profiles. Angela copied numerous photographs of other Facebook users, and reused these photographs to create these fake profiles. This same method may be used to create fake profiles on any social networking sites. Angela was able to maintain this fabrication for a period of nine months, and a total of 1500 messages. At the beginning of the documentary, Nev suggests that the film makers’ print out all of his Facebook conversations with Angela’s family, indicating that a record of previous Facebook conversations are stored online unless deleted. A record of all exchanges and posts is kept on all social networking sites. These exchanges and posts are only removed if specifically deleted by a user. For this reason, Angela states that Facebook makes it easier to maintain her fabrication, as she is able to go back and look at things she has previously posted. Therefore, Angela did not delete any previous

posts on any one of her fake profiles; rather, fearing that she would be found out if Nev was able to view earlier posts, she hid numerous earlier posts (thus Angela was the only one who could see these posts). Angela maintains that her desire for connection was the main reason for her online deception: "...there were times when I felt like I was really overstepping and I try to pull it back by being like I don't wanna lose the friendship... [But] if I'm lying it's not really a friendship anyway". Similarly, Nev admits that he was looking for the type of connection Angela provided at that point in time. Because of this, Nev chooses to remain Facebook friends with Angela after returning to New York City.

It is through social networking connections that users consume content online (by browsing each other's profiles). Simultaneously, social media users are producing content by publishing content on their own profiles. The mundane information posted on these social networking sites is often highly personal in nature. It may be argued that the personal nature of this content is due to social networking's encouragement to maintain offline relationships online; therefore, users are sharing this personal information with real life friends or acquaintances. However, in the film *Catfish* (Joost & Schulman 2010), Nev connects with multiple people he has not met in real life. While the main focus of social networking sites is the network of connections that one creates; folksonomies also contain a network of connections, but the focus of the site is on other activities, such as blogging, sharing photographs or videos, and so on. Folksonomies are discussed in the next section.

3.4.3. Folksonomies

Folksonomies can be distinguished from social networking sites. While folksonomies and social networking services both involve the creation of profiles, the maintenance of old relationships and the creation of new relationships, networking is the sole intent of a social networking site and there are other activities that are predominant on folksonomies (Beer 2008:518). According to Beer, YouTube (a video-sharing site) is an

example of a folksonomy (2008:518) (Figure 50). Other examples of folksonomies would include Blogger (a blogging site) (Figure 51), Instagram (a photo-sharing site) (Figure 52), Foursquare (location-sharing site) (Figure 53), Pinterest (a bookmarking site 54) and last.fm (a music-sharing site) (Figure 55). Similar to social networking sites, folksonomies document the mundane and the everyday (Cohen 2005:887). As there are so many different types of folksonomies, only blogging is discussed as an example of a folksonomy.

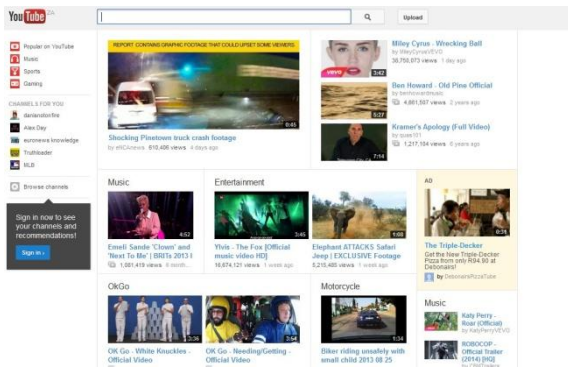


Figure 50: Unknown designer, YouTube homepage, 2013. Screen shot by author.

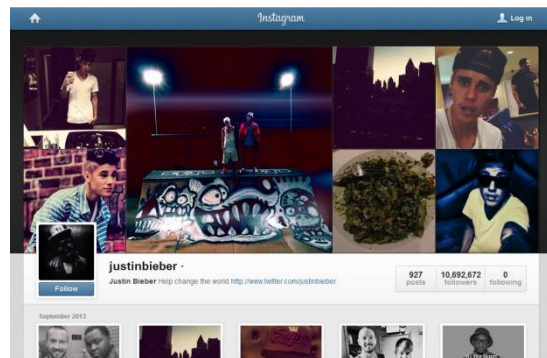


Figure 52: Justin Bieber's Instagram page, Instagram, 2013. Screen shot by author.



Figure 51: Unknown designer, Blogs of note, 2013. Screen shot by author.



Figure 54: Unknown designer, Pinterest home page, 2013. Screen shot by author.



Figure 55: Unknown designer, Last.fm home page, 2013. Screen shot by author.

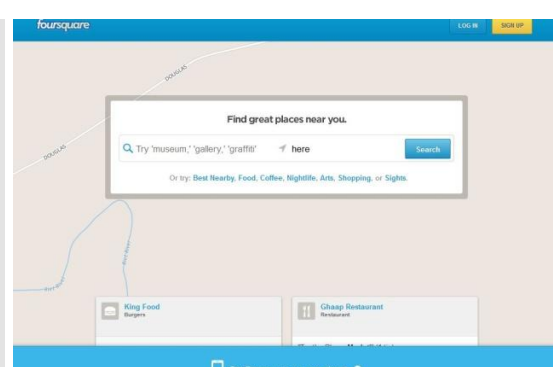


Figure 53: Unknown designer, Foursquare home page, 2013. Screen shot by author.

Folksonomies can be defined as any webpage that enables tagging – the marking or classifying of a webpage with a “metadata label” (figure 56) (Beer & Burrows 2007:6). Through tagging or bookmarking, web pages are organised into networks that may be navigated in a non-linear manner (Beer & Burrows 2007:6, Rheingold 2012:133). By clicking on a tag, a user is redirected to other posts with the same tag. Also, through the practice of tagging, communities and networks may form between people with similar interests who did not previously know one another (Rheingold 2012:133)



Figure 56: Unknown designer, Tags, Huffington post, 2012. Screen shot by author.

Blogging is an example of a folksonomy as user’s tag blog posts, which may be used to navigate between blog posts and blogs. The word ‘weblog’ was coined by John Barger in 1997, and Peter Merholz coined the term ‘blog’ in 1999 (Boyd 2006a:3). Blogs can be defined as “reverse-chronological, time-stamped, journal-type entries that are published either on Internet social networking sites or public hosting Web log sites” (Mazur and Kozarian 2009:125). In other words, a blog is a diary that is presented in reverse order and is available on specific sites on the Internet. There are many different blogs, such as written blogs, photo blogs or video blogs. According to Mazur & Kozarian, blogs are focused on daily activities, friendships, sexuality and sexual behaviour, personal future hopes, relationships with parents, and controversial topics (2009:130-134). Blogs are created for different reasons, including the desire to update others, express opinions, seek opinions and feedback, think, and release emotional tension (Nardi, Schiano & Gumbrecht 2004:225). Types of blogs include corporate blogs, individual blogs, collaborative blogs and traditional media blogs (Thvenot 2007:288). For this reason, there are many types of blogging applications: Blogging sites such as Wordpress and Movable Type are audience-driven, LiveJournal and Xanga are community-based, and Blogger supports newer bloggers (Boyd 2006:13). Many

blogs are based on a topic, such as problems at work, parties, heartbreak, music, and travelling (Cohen 2005:886).

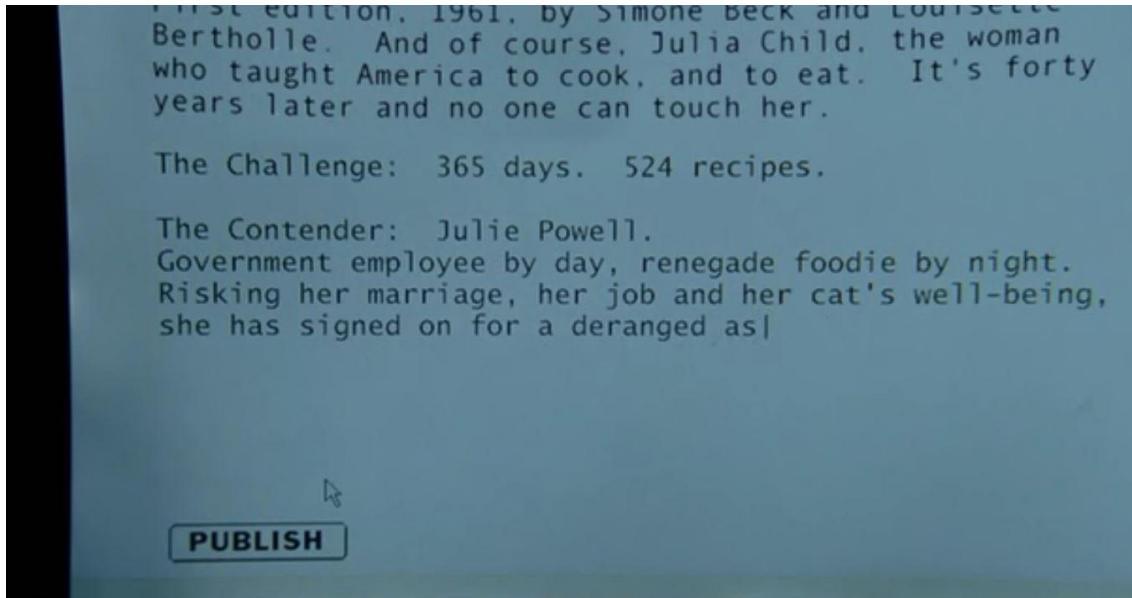


Figure 57: Julie's blog, *Julie & Julia*. 2009. Screen shot by author.

In the film *Julie & Julia* (Ephron 2009), Julie writes about cooking in her blog (Figure 57). The film follows the lives of two women: Julia Child (Meryl Streep), an American woman living in Paris who writes a French cooking book for Americans, and Julie, a woman writing a blog about her attempts to cook all of these same recipes. Each of Julie's blog posts adds to previous posts as the blog is centred on the completion of each of the recipes in the French cooking book. Throughout the film, Julie blogs about mundane aspects of her life, such as her love of butter, her horrible days at work and how cooking helps her to cope with life stresses, her family relationships, her shopping, her attempt to cook a lobster, and that she has never eaten an egg.

At the start of the film *Julie & Julia* (Ephron 2009), Julie and her husband, Eric (Chris Messina) move from Manhattan to Queens in New York City. Julie feels uprooted and unhappy because she will not know anyone in this new neighbourhood. Through her blog Julie manages to establish new connections. The establishment of such connections is important to the success of any blog, as the audience decides whether or not to follow the blog. If someone decides to follow a blog, this person is able to

stay up to date, as they get emails to tell them that a new blog entry has been created on the blog (Thevenot 2007:287). Also, a blogger’s audience becomes crucial, as the meaning and importance of what a blogger posts is partially determined by the audience. While some bloggers wish to hear from their audience, as they are motivated by comments and messages; other bloggers do not desire interaction from their audience (Nardi, Schiano & Gumbrecht 2004:227). However, all bloggers want a large readership (Nardi, Schiano & Gumbrecht 2004:228). In the film *Julie & Julia* (Ephron 2009), Julie directly addresses her audience and is constantly aware of this potential audience. At first, believing that she has no audience, she complains: “The truth is no one knows me. I feel like I’m sending things into this giant void”. She continues to seek recognition from readers and is disappointed when she discovers that her mother has been the only one to comment on her blog (Figure 58). By reading the blog, Julie’s mother is able to keep up to date with Julie’s day to day activities. Similarly, in the film *Trust* (Schwimmer 2010) Peter tells Annie that she can stay updated on his activities at college by reading his Twitter page (which is a micro-blogging social media site).

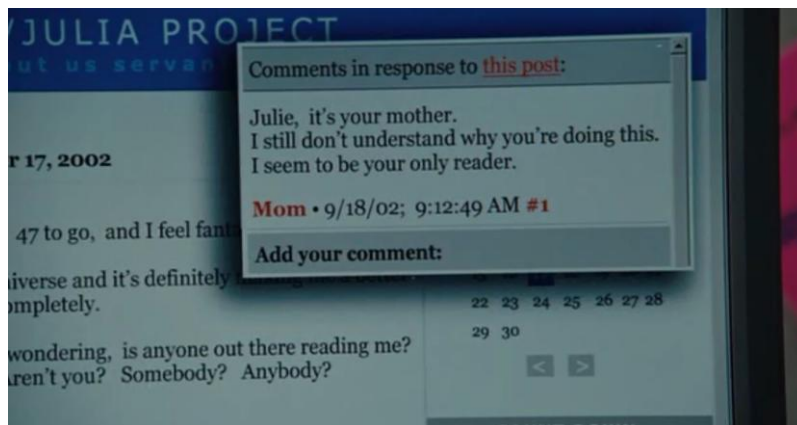


Figure 58: Blog comment, *Julie & Julia*. 2009. Screen shot by author.

As she continues her blog, Julie starts receiving more reader’s comments. Her readers also start giving Julie advice and sending her gifts. Once again, the privacy of the social media user is called into question, as Julie’s readers send these gifts to her home address, indicating that they are aware of where she lives. Julie’s blog eventually becomes the third most popular blog on salon.com, which causes her to feel obligated

to continue her blogging, as her readers would be upset were she to stop: “It’s like there’s this whole group of people who are sort of connected to me. They need me in some way. Like if I didn’t write they would really be upset”. In this way, Julie uses her blog to create and maintain relationships, similar to the maintenance of relationships on other social media (Nardi, Schiano & Gumbrecht 2004:226). The audience feedback (comments and messages) shapes the blog, as the blogger takes audience feedback into account and tries to write for the audience (Nardi, Schiano & Gumbrecht 2004:224, Rheingold 2012:121). For example, when Julie struggles with some of the recipes Eric tells her she can always lie in her blog and tell the readers that she has completed a recipe that she did not do, but she refuses as she does not want to break her readership’s trust.

According to Nardi, Schiano and Gumbrecht, blogs have become more widely used as they became more accessible and easier to use (2004:222). Similarly, Marydee Ojala (2005:270) argues that to blog “you do not need to be a programmer – the desire to express yourself, a computer, and an Internet connection will suffice”. In the film *Julie & Julia* (Ephron 2009), Eric helps Julie create a blog on the blog site salon.com (Figure 59). Eric states that it is very easy to publish any work on a blog site: “See that’s what’s so great about blogs. You don’t have to be published. You can just go online. Press enter and there it is, out there”.

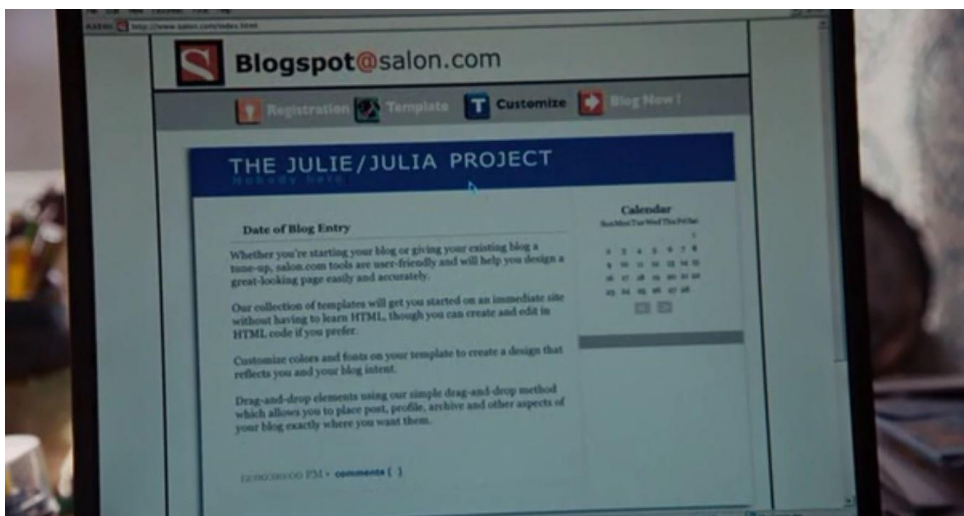


Figure 59: Creating a blog, *Julie & Julia*. 2009. Screen shot by author.

It takes very little time to create Julie's blog, illustrating how easy it is to create any blog. According to Mazur and Kozarian, bloggers are able to establish unique personae or identities online by changing the layout of the blog and by adding different videos, photographs, poems, web page links, and so on (2009:125). Blogs may be set according to different privacy settings, the most private being a password-protected blog that only those with the password may view, and the most public being a blog that may be found on search engines. While bloggers originally prided themselves on their "individuality, quirkiness, non-conformity and lack of respect for authority"; recent blogging has become more popular resulting in regular publishing, increased readership, and comments being published in other media (Ojala 2005:272). In the film *Julie & Julia* (Ephron 2009), Julie is published in print media: Amanda Hesser (who is played by herself), a reporter from *The New York Times*, writes an article about Julie and her blog. Julie's online and offline lives overlap as people start to recognise her in real life from the article about her blog. The original article, *A Race to Master the Art of French Cooking*, was published in *The New York Times* on August 13, 2003. After the article is published, Julie gets offered numerous book deals. Throughout the film, Julie continues to gain recognition for her blog, which causes more of an overlap of her real life and her online life. For instance: Julie stays at home to cook, but realising that her real life boss could read her blog, she posts that she is staying at home because she is sick.

To summarise, creating content on a blog or social media site does not guarantee success or readership (Rheingold 2012:114). However, it is possible to gain recognition or inspire social action through a social media endeavour (Rheingold 2012:112). In the film *Julie & Julia* (Ephron 2009), an article about Julie and her blog is published in *The New York Times*. Also, Julie's blog becomes one of the most read blogs on the blog-hosting site. This increased popularity causes a blur between Julie's online and offline lives, where her online activities increasingly affect her offline life. Julie is able to easily create a blog, as no technical skills are required. Similar to all other folksonomies, blogs are tagged or bookmarked. No technical skills are required to create a tag either. This

tagging allows for an alternative means to navigate through content. By clicking on a tag, a user is redirected to all other content with similar tags. These tags and the reader comments contribute to the online persona of the blogger. An online persona is also created on a blogging site (or other folksonomy) through the uploading of photos, links, posts, videos, and so on. The creation of an online persona on social media is discussed in the next chapter.

3.4. Conclusion

Social media is a new and collaborative function of the Internet. There are different types of social media, namely virtual communities, social networking, folksonomies, mashups, and wikis; however, only virtual communities, social networking and folksonomies allow for the creation of an online persona. On virtual communities, this online persona is created through the adoption of a user name; while on social networking and folksonomies, an online persona is created through a user name, photographs, videos, posts, and so on. The film *Trust* (Schwimmer 2010) provides an excellent visual example of the relationship between a user and a virtual community, namely the chat room Teen Chat. The film *Catfish* (Joost & Schulman 2010) is used as a visual example of the relationship that exists between a social networking user and a social networking site. Lastly, the film *Julie & Julia* (Ephron 2009) is used as a visual example of the relationship between a folksonomy user and a folksonomy site, namely a blogging site. The online personae created on virtual communities, social networking and folksonomies are both consumed and produced by users, as users are able to browse through the content produced by other users, as well as produce their own content. This content is usually mundane and of a highly personal nature. Lastly, anyone may sign up to, consume and participate in any social media, and as a result any one of these people may potentially be heard.

Social media also increases the spread of memes, just as the Internet increases the spread of memes. Memes are spread, with varying degrees of accuracy, through social media, through copy-and-paste methods or simply by clicking a button, such as 'share' or 'retweet'. In this way, memes are inherited. By, firstly, selecting, and, secondly, posting a meme on a social media site, this meme is instantly shared with all of one's online connections. As a result, numerous people are potentially simultaneously exposed to the same meme. Any of these users may then choose to share this meme, increasing the speed at which a meme spreads. Also, these memes are stored online until they are deleted, increasing the longevity of the meme. In the next chapter the creation of online personae on virtual communities, folksonomies and social networking is discussed. The films *Trust* (Schwimmer 2010), *Catfish* (Joost & Schulman 2010) and *Julie & Julia* (Ephron 2009) are again used as visual references. Thereafter, the creation of an online persona on the social networking site Facebook is discussed. Lastly, the ways in which Internet memes contribute to this persona that is created on Facebook is discussed.

Chapter Four: The performance of identity and Facebook

In the previous chapters, the spread of memes through the Internet and through social media is discussed. It is argued that just as the Internet increases the spread of memes, so social media increases the spread of memes. As the popularity of social media increases, so does its impact on everyday lives and on the replication of memes, through the increase in exposure of social media users to memes. Social media users are able to post a meme, which is then shared with all of their connections simultaneously. Depending on a user's amount of connections, numerous people may potentially be exposed to the same meme. Memes are easily spread, with varying degrees of accuracy, by clicking on social media buttons, such as the 'share' button on Facebook posts. Therefore, these memes are inherited. Also, memes may be stored online indefinitely, increasing the longevity of these memes. As the amount of memes online increases, so does a user's need to select memes, as a user cannot share all the memes that they are exposed to. Social media, therefore, increases the replication, selection, heredity, longevity, fecundity and fidelity of memes. Virtual communities, folksonomies and social networking sites are examples of the types of social media discussed here that assists in the spread of memes. It may be argued that virtual communities assist in the spread of text-based memes; while social networking and folksonomies assist in the spread of text-based, image-based and video-based memes. As the social networking site Facebook is currently the most popular social media site, it forms the focus of this chapter.

The construction of an online identity is a result of a user's posts, biographical section, photographs, and so on, that are uploaded by a user onto their social media profile. The online environment (the architecture of the social media site) and the audience (online connections) also have an impact on the identity of a user, as the audience interprets this online identity. Social media, such as virtual communities and folksonomies provide a greater degree of anonymity, resulting in more identity play.

The ways in which identity can be falsified online is discussed with reference to Turkle's theories surrounding the experimentation with identity in an online environment. This experimentation is achieved by changing certain aspects of one's offline identity when creating an online identity, such as one's real name, age or gender. On the other hand, social networking sites (and some folksonomies) provide much less anonymity, resulting in less experimentation with identity, and rather a performance of identity. The performance of identity on social media sites is discussed with reference to Goffman's theories surrounding the performance of identity. The performance of identity is achieved through the portrayal of an idealised self on social media sites. This performance is achieved through the posting of constructed signs and signs that are not constructed. It is argued that, while constructed signs portray a user in an idealised manner, those signs not constructed portray a user's offline identity. The films *Trust* (Schwimmer 2010), *Catfish* (Joost & Schulman 2010) and *Julie & Julia* (Ephron 2009) are used as visual examples to illustrate the ways in which identity is experimented with and performed online. Thereafter, the performance of identity on Facebook is discussed. This performance involves the creation of a profile through the uploading of photographs, posts and so on. Similarly, the use of friending, status updates, and profile pictures allows a user to perform their identity online. Lastly, identity performance through the sharing of memes on Facebook is discussed.

4.1. Identity online

Identity is constructed through the interaction of a person and their environment. Jenkins (2004:4) argues that "identifying ourselves or others is a matter of meaning, and meaning always involves interaction". But identity is never fixed; rather one is constantly "being" (who one is now) and "becoming" (who one strives to be) (Jenkins 2004:5). According to Higgins (1987:320), there are three aspects of one's identity: the "actual self" is a representation of characteristics a person thinks they have, the "ideal self" is a representation of characteristics that a person thinks they should have, and the "ought self" is a representation of the characteristics that others think a person

should have. Identity is, therefore, a constant negotiation between one's self-perception and others' perception of one's identity (Jenkins 2004:18, Boyd 2001:21). Similarly, Hazel Markus and Paula Nurius (1986:954) argue that an identity consists of "possible selves", which are socially constrained. In this way, a person's possible selves could consist of an idealised self or a past self, amongst others (Markus & Nurius 1986:955). The idealised self or past self, and so on, are each portrayed in different social contexts, thus making identity "faceted" (Boyd 2001:11). In this way, people perform different identities to suit different environments or social contexts, to avoid socially awkward situations (Boyd 2001:28). As a result, while a user might try to portray their ideal self online, they are still dependent on the environment and the audience for the construction of their online identity. The impact of the environment and the audience on one's online identity is the focus of this section.

In most instances the audience does not view a performance as a conscious act, as at least part of the identity that one chooses to perform is decided subconsciously, based on the situation (environment and audience) (Kelley 2007:4). In other words, the performance of a specific identity is deliberate, yet not always entirely conscious (Kelley 2007:4). A social media identity is a collaboration of the online social media environment, a user and the audience. The environment of a social media site is the architecture of that specific site. The architecture of social media sites influences the performance of online identity in several ways (Marwick 2005:9). Firstly, the rigid profile structures of social media sites results in an online identity that is partly constructed by a user and partly structured by the site (Marwick 2005:9, Kelley 2007:12, Van Dijck 2013:147). For example, the introduction of the timeline layout on Facebook prompts users to upload milestone photographs of times before their Facebook profile was created (Van Dijck 2013:205). Users are thus more likely to upload such photographs when using the timeline profile format on Facebook, than before this new layout was introduced. Similarly, on the social networking site Friendster, a user may not upload nude photographs (Boyd sa:12). Furthermore, any such photographs are removed. However, users may choose to push against these

architectural boundaries (Marwick 2005:15). For example, on Facebook each user is only allowed one account, but a user can use two different email addresses to create two accounts. Secondly, the architecture forces users to portray themselves as consumers, rather than citizens, by focusing on their tastes in music, films, books, and so on (Marwick 2005:9). Lastly, social media inherently excludes parts of a population, as certain social media is more appealing to different segments of the population (Marwick 2005:10). For example, MySpace is more appealing to teenagers while LinkedIn would be more appealing to professionals. Similarly, Facebook is more appealing to white or affluent teenage Americans, while MySpace is more frequently used by other races of American teenagers (Boyd 2011b:3). The architecture of social media sites also encourages the spreading of memes. For example, the 'retweet' button on Twitter, as well as the ease with which one can create links to YouTube videos, encourages the spread of memes. However, external contexts also affect the type of communications that take place online, as well as the meanings of these conversations, as the audience is also essential to the meanings ascribed to online communications (Kelley 2007:13).

There are several ways in which the audience may assist in shaping one's online identity. Firstly, the audience may add content to a user's online profile or identity by adding posts, memes, images and videos to someone's profile (Van Doorn 2010:585). Secondly, users may censor online content. For example, on the social media site Facebook users may approve a post by clicking on the 'like' button, they may give their opinion by clicking on the 'comment' button, and they may disapprove by clicking on the 'report this' button (Enli & Thumin 2012:93). Similarly, by not liking a post or commenting on it, the audience is conveying their indifference towards that particular post. Lastly, a user imagines their audience and censors their content according to what facet of their identity they would like to expose to such an audience (both consciously and subconsciously), as well as what facet of their identity would be considered generally acceptable by society (Young 2013:125). For example, a recent video uploaded onto a Facebook account showing three men being beaten by another

man in a Fourways bar in Johannesburg has caused great outrage (Roane 2013:1). As a result, the video was deleted from the Facebook account. Similarly, in the film *Julie & Julia* (Ephron 2009), Julie believes her audience would only like to hear about certain aspects of her life, but not necessarily about other aspects, illustrating that she imagines her audience and tweaks her blog accordingly. A social media audience thus poses a potential problem when performing an identity online, as a user is simultaneously performing for everyone they are connected to, and, as a result, the performance must be believed by all of one's different audiences (Boyd 2006:3). Therefore, the same post or picture on Facebook could potentially be viewed by one's boss, father, lover and friend. For this reason, teenagers often represent themselves as how they want to be seen by friends, even though this upsets their parents (Boyd 2006:15). Facebook has attempted to solve this problem by providing a user with the option of limiting the exposure of certain posts to only certain groups of friends (which this user has divided his online friends into) (Enli & Thumin 2012:93). However, while a user may potentially gauge a current audience when performing online, the audience constantly changes (as more connections are made), making it impossible to gauge the future audience (Boyd and Heer 2006:4). The performance of identity remains online (unless a user deletes this information) and, therefore, this new audience is able to view a previous period in one's online identity years later. The problem of a conflated audience may be solved by using different social networking sites for different parts of one's identity, for example LinkedIn could be used to communicate with colleagues, while Facebook could be used to communicate with friends (Donath and Boyd 2004:78). The audience also impacts the ways in which memes spread through social media. For example, on the social media site Twitter memes are interpreted by an audience, thus the audience gives some meaning to the meme. Also, a user may censor what memes they post on their profile according to their desired identity representation and their imagined audience. The interpretation of memes is discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

Social media sites thus present themselves as both a community (of connections) and a stage (or setting) (Van Dijck 2012:144). In this way, YouTube is a platform for video sharing, and a space to demonstrate one's creative abilities (Van Dijck 2012:144). The identity that is created online, through the interaction of a user, the environment and the audience may be similar to one's offline identity or completely different to one's offline identity. The creation of a falsified online identity is much easier to achieve on a virtual community or folksonomy than on a social networking site, where identity is more likely performed. This experimentation with (or falsifying) identity is discussed in the next section.

4.1.1. *Turkle and identity play*

Due to the text-based nature of virtual communities, it is much easier to experiment with one's identity in a virtual community. Initially a one-to-one relationship existed between a user and the computer. However, when the Internet was invented, users started interacting with the computer and each other. Turkle's (1999:643) "second self" is no longer applicable, as the computer and a user no longer have a one-to-one relationship; rather, a computer facilitates the relationships formed between many users. Users are no longer alone in virtual worlds, and this increase in human interactivity leads to the creation of virtual communities, as well as the experimentation of identities. A user may be attractive, slim, another gender or another age online, even if they are someone completely different offline. This identity experimentation may have beneficial consequences; however, it may also have severely negative consequences, as seen in the film *Trust* (Schwimmer 2010), where Annie is raped by Charlie, who has deceived her online. The experimentation with identity is the focus of this section.

A cyber-identity is created when a user constructs a persona that is projected into an online environment (Turkle 1999:643). Identity play happens when some detail of an

identity is changed when presented online, such as a name⁴³, location or gender (Turkle 1999:643). However, the computer has not changed the identity of a user; rather, the computer allows a user to play with parts of their identity, as identity has always been fragmented and flexible (Turkle 1999:643). For example, one could be an offline lover, mother and lawyer in the same day (Turkle 1999:644). While one is being a lover, one remains a lawyer, but this fragmented part of one's identity becomes more suppressed. Virtual reality allows users to experiment with specific aspects of their fragmented identity individually through the numerous windows on the computer screen, as each window represents an aspect of identity, and a whole identity encompasses all these windows (Turkle 1999:644). When using social media, users achieve this fragmentation through the use of different social media sites. In this way; LinkedIn could deal with more professional aspects of one's identity, a blogging site could deal with one's love of cooking, as in the film *Julie & Julia* (Ephron 2009), while MySpace could allow a user to build a friendship network and experiment with popularity. According to Turkle, this offline fragmentation of identity often results in some aspects of identity not being explored as fully as others, and virtual realities allow users to experiment with these under-explored aspects of identity (1999:644). In this way, virtual reality could allow users to experiment with their sexuality without real life consequences (such as AIDS), as seen in the film *Trust* (Schwimmer 2010) where Annie uses a chat room to experiment with her sexuality. Annie only suffers real life consequences when she moves her online relationship offline. Similarly, virtual reality could allow a user to work through issues (such as being very shy in real life), as seen in the film *Julie & Julia* (Ephron 2009) where Julie struggles with feelings of loneliness (after moving to a different suburb of New York City) and helplessness (due to her failure to help all of the victims of the September 11th attack on the World Trade Centre). Lastly, virtual reality could allow users to act out unresolved conflicts and character difficulties (such as being unassertive in real life), as seen in the film *Catfish* (Joost & Schulman 2010) where Angela uses fake Facebook profiles to experiment with different fragments of her personality, such as her love for dance. The altering

⁴³ Ironically, Turkle came across a MUD character named "Dr. Sherry" – a cyber-psychotherapist based on herself, but created and controlled by someone else (1997:75).

between different fragments of online and offline identities has become more seamless through the use of the smartphone. The invention of the smartphone has, once again, changed the relationship between a user and the computer (Turkle 2012:161). A user is now, not only connected to an entire network of people; but rather, a user is always connected to an entire network of people. Turkle (2012:161) argues that users are no longer “cycling through” fragments of their identity through the use of windows; rather, they are ever-present in all fragments of their online and offline identities, and thus social identity has become a “mashup” of all these different identities. In the films *Trust* (Schwimmer 2010), *Julie & Julia* (Ephron 2009) and *Catfish* (Joost & Schulman 2010), the characters connect to each other using chat facilities, private smses, social networking sites, emails, and so on. These methods of communication are all directly accessed from their smartphones or desktop applications, thus these characters are always connected and available. Also, people may have multiple emails, phone numbers and online profiles (Boyd 2001:10). In this way, all fragmentations of one’s identity may now be experienced simultaneously and continuously. As a result, memes spread using social media can be sent and received constantly.

Because online and offline fragmentations of identity continuously intersect, virtual realities involve very real emotions and may, therefore, have an impact on one’s offline emotions, and identity as a whole. In his latest book, *Net smart. How to thrive online*, Rheingold (2012:163) argues that virtual communities allow users to create new relationships, share knowledge, establish ongoing collaborations and so on (2012:135). However, knowledge may be shared without establishing any personal connections; unlike social networking sites, where personal connections must be established (Rheingold 2012:13). When personal connections are established on virtual communities, these relationships can have a large impact on a user’s offline life, just as the relationships formed on social networking sites can impact a user’s offline life. For example, in the film *Catfish* (Joost & Schulman 2010), Nev develops a relationship with Megan on the social networking site Facebook. After Nev discovers that his

relationship with Megan was not real, as this Facebook Megan does not exist in real life, he mourns the loss of this relationship in real life. Similarly, on a set of virtual worlds, Mikael Jakobson wanted to ban a user but the user begged him not to, saying that he would rather be grounded in physical life than in cyberspace, as most of his friends were cyber and he spent most of his time in these virtual worlds (sa:3). As a further example, Rheingold attended the weddings and funerals of those he met on the virtual community WELL, illustrating the depth of the connections he formed with others online (1993:3, 2012:162). Rheingold was able to form these online relationships by continuously interacting with others using the same online (user) name. When joining a chat room, the first thing one creates is a user name. This user name acts as one's identifier on the chat room, thus enabling others to establish one's identity through one's participation in previous discussions (Bays sa:10, Bango 2013:11). In the film *Trust* (Schwimmer 2010), a relationship develops between Annie and Charlie through their use of the same chat room. This relationship is made possible due to Annie's and Charlie's continuous use of the same user names.



Figure 60: User names, *Trust*. 2010. Screen shot by author.

User names are often the result of careful consideration, as a user name becomes a representation of a user's identity (Del-Teso-Craviotto 2008:253). For example, in the film *Trust* (David Schwimmer 2010) Annie's and Charlie's user names immediately indicate something about them in real life: Annie's user name conveys that she loves

volleyball and also that she is 13 in real life, while Charlie's user name conveys his offline name and his location (CA for California) in real life (Figure 60). Charlie's inclusion of his location, and Annie's inclusion of her age, are common ways to structure online user names, as the age, sex and location of chat room users are very important identifiers (Del-Teso-Craviotto 2008:256).

While Annie's user name illustrates aspects of her real offline identity, Charlie's user name illustrates aspects of a fabricated offline identity. Charlie's online deception causes Annie great confusion when she meets him in real life, at first not believing that he is really the person she has been communicating with online. Initially, Charlie portrays himself as a 15 year old who is still in school (like Annie), thus he has the identity of another high school student. When Charlie admits that he is actually 20, his identity changes to that of a college student, with more life experience. Similarly, when Charlie admits that he is actually 25, his identity changes to that of a graduate student with much more life experience than Annie; prompting Annie to question whether he is still a virgin. However, while Charlie continually lies about his offline age online, he maintains that he plays volleyball in real life. Charlie also sends Annie photographs of himself playing volleyball, which adds to his online identity. However, Charlie fails to mention to Annie that he does not look the same in real life as in the photographs he has sent her, as these photographs are of someone else. Annie also sends Charlie a self-portrait, as there is a growing practice of social media users sending self-portraits as part of a flirting strategy (Lasén & Gómez-Cruz 2009:209). When Annie meets Charlie in real life she discovers that he is 35 years old. Annie is upset that Charlie has, once again, lied about his age. However, Charlie maintains the rest of his online identity when meeting Annie, including his name and the authenticity of their relationship. It is revealed that Charlie's name and the authenticity of his relationship with Annie are also false. After Charlie rapes Annie, the police discover that Charlie's name is false, and that he does not share a unique relationship with Annie as he has raped three other young girls in the past. At the end of the film, it is revealed that

Charlie's real life name is actually Graham Weston and he is a husband, father and high school teacher. Therefore, due to the text-based nature of chat rooms (and other virtual communities), Graham/Charlie is able to fabricate an entire identity online, including his name, age and interests.

It is only once Annie learns that Charlie has also groomed and raped three other teenagers that she accepts that Charlie's online identity is untrue (not the same as his offline identity). The real life distance between chat room participants, as well as the anonymity of the environment results in few real life consequences for online actions, such as lying about one's identity (Bowker 2006:64, Boyd 2001:9). As a result, sexual predators are attracted to chat rooms, as they may pretend to be younger than they really are to attract young victims (Huffaker & Calvert 2005:14). Also, numerous sexual perverts use chat rooms to spread child pornography with little real life consequences. For example, the Orchid Club,⁴⁴ Wonderland Club⁴⁵ and Netherlands Club⁴⁶ were groups that spread child pornographic images using chats. These child porn rings were uncovered and broken up through the international cooperation of law enforcement, as local law enforcement was unable to do this on their own (Hughes sa:5). Similarly, in the film *Trust* (Schwimmer), the FBI is immediately involved in Annie's rape case; however, they are unsuccessful in their attempt to capture Charlie. While Charlie uses the chat room maliciously, purposefully grooming young girls; Annie uses the chat site to explore aspects of her identity, particularly her sexuality. The use of virtual reality to explore sexual identity is of particular use to adolescents as the flexibility and anonymity of virtual reality creates a comfortable environment in which to express sexuality (Huffaker & Calvert 2005:4). In this way, while Annie is uncomfortable expressing certain aspects of her sexuality offline, she is more comfortable expressing this sexuality online. Will, on the other hand, uses the chat room to understand why

⁴⁴ The Orchid Club molested children between the ages of five and 10, and streamed each of these molestations onto the Internet for the other members to view the child pornography (Hughes sa:5).

⁴⁵ The Wonderland Club could be joined by invitation only. The criteria for joining was the possession of 10, 000 child pornographic images different to any already in possession by other members of the group (Hughes sa:6).

⁴⁶ The Netherlands Club spread child pornographic images, some videos including the sexual abuse of babies aged no more than 12 to 15 months (Hughes sa:6).

someone would lie about their age and identity to groom and rape minors. Therefore, Will uses the chat room to explore a new aspect of his identity as the father of a rape survivor. Lynn feels betrayed when she discovers that Will is searching for sexual predators online and pretending to be a teenager on a chat site, as this is an aspect of his identity that she has not been exposed to before. Similarly, in the film *Catfish* (Joost & Schulman 2010), Angela uses the social networking site Facebook to experiment with different fragments of her identity, as each of her numerous profiles explores one fragment of her identity.

The experimentation with identity is also possible through the use of folksonomy sites, such as blogging sites. In the film *Julie & Julia* (Ephron 2009), Julie uses her blog to experiment with her identity, as she constantly struggles with feelings of displacement. Julie has moved to a different borough in New York City, and no longer knows any of her neighbours or surroundings. She is questioning her identity, as she can no longer identify herself as a New Yorker living on Manhattan Island; rather, she is now a New Yorker living in Queens. Julie also struggles with her professional identity, as she pictured herself as successful (with an exciting and promising career); and instead is working at a government agency. This unwanted identity of professional failure is further enhanced when Julie's friend, Annabelle (Jullian Bach), writes a magazine article featuring Julie as someone who has failed to reach her professional potential. Online, Julie is provided with the opportunity to tell the world who she really is and what she really wants; rather than others judging her by where she lives and where she works. When Julie's online and offline identities start to intersect, she can no longer blog about anything that would cause problems for her at her job or in her relationships; and, therefore, is no longer able to experiment with her identity as fully as she could before. Julie eventually establishes herself as quite a good cook, a good writer, and someone who is happy with her current identity. While Julie remains nonymous on her blog, it is possible to create a blog and remain completely anonymous. According to Huffaker and Calvert, while a user must have a user name for MUDs, chat rooms and instant messaging, a blog does not require a user name and

one can, therefore, remain completely anonymous (2005:3). However, as a blog is created by one person (usually), a very strong identity can be established through the text, photographs and videos that are posted on the blog. Huffaker and Calvert also note that, while it is possible to remain completely anonymous in a blogging environment, most bloggers choose to use their real name in their blog (2005:4). Those using real names in their blogs also tend to reveal other correct personal information, such as age, as these items of personal information reveal what a person's true offline identity is (Huffaker & Calvert 2005:4). This revealing of personal information, such as age or gender, illustrates that, while cyberspace allows users to experiment with their identities, identities are still created according to offline identity boundaries. Laura Robinson (2007:99) agrees, arguing that "the cyberself seeks re-embodiment as a means of identity signalling and as a medium of interaction". Similarly, Bowker argues that, while it is possible to alter the self online, this online self is still influenced by the reproduction of offline social norms (2006:69). In this way, users may be untruthful about or exaggerate certain aspects of their identities, but these resulting online identities are still constructed according to identity boundaries that are present offline, such as age, gender and location. For example, in the film *Catfish* (Joost & Schulman 2010), Angela selects photographs of strangers to represent her family members as thin and attractive on Facebook (re-embodiment of offline standards). As a result, Nev believes that the family members are also thin and attractive offline, as he believes that these pictures are true representations of the family members in real life.

The fuller profile on social networking sites, such as Facebook, means that the experimentation with identity using online resources has become more complicated, as it is no longer merely a case of changing a user name and lying about one's age or gender. The use of photographs, videos, posts, comments, and so on, means that it has become far harder to be untruthful about one's offline identity, as many more elements of one's identity are portrayed online. As a result, users generally do not completely change their identity when using social networking sites; rather, they

highlight certain qualities or falsify certain qualities through their online performance. In this way, Robinson (2007:94) argues that the “cyberself is formed and negotiated in the same manner as the offline self”, namely through what one says, how one appears and what one likes. The performance of identity is discussed in the next section.

4.1.2. Goffman and performance

Just as users perform offline, so they perform online. The performance of identity is very important, as others viewing a performance must believe the performance; once again illustrating the role of the audience in the construction of an identity. According to Goffman (1969:19), the split between the performer’s view of his own identity and the audience’s interpretation of this identity is controlled by a split between a “front stage” area and a “back stage” area. The back stage is the area where the performer does not have to put on a show (as the performer is hidden from the audience), and where all performances are constructed (Goffman 1969:97). It is, therefore, an area free from the interpretation of the audience or the influence of the environment. While the actual self is visible back stage, the front stage is where the facet of one’s identity best suited to the audience and the environment is enacted. Therefore, the front stage is the area where the performance of identity occurs. The online performance of identity is the focus of this section.

According to Goffman (1969:19), the front stage encompasses the “setting”, or the environment (context), in which the performance takes place, as well the audience. In most circumstances this setting already exists and the performer must adapt to this environment (Goffman 1969:24). The setting may assist the performance of one’s online identity, by providing a user with tools. For example, on Facebook a user can use applications that assist with flirting or the comparing of tastes, as well as virtual gestures such as a ‘poke’, and so on. On the other hand, the setting may also restrict online performance. For example, on a social media site, such as Facebook, the site’s basic architecture restricts the ways in which identity can be performed, as a user must

obey certain guidelines. However, sometimes, as with the creation of Fakester⁴⁷ profiles on Friendster, a user can rebel against the architecture of the site by performing identity in ways not encouraged by the site (Boyd and Heer 2006:5). According to Robinson, the division of back stage and front stage is apparent on IM platforms as multiple conversations allow for the creation of multiple front and back stage areas, and it is possible to disappear from the front stage when online by choosing to appear offline (2007:107). This same feature is available on Facebook, as a user may choose to remain offline on Facebook Chat while browsing Facebook. Also, it may be argued that using multiple social media platforms creates multiple front stage areas. For example, in the film *Catfish* (Joost & Schulman 2010), Angela creates multiple front stages as each of her 15 Facebook profiles represents a different front stage, as well as a certain fragment of her identity. Each of the multiple front stages created can be used to perform a different facet of one's identity, to a different audience. Goffman argues that a performer segregates their audience in order to perform different aspects of their identity (1969:43), similar to the experimentation of different aspects of one's identity as proposed by Turkle.

However, in the film *Julie & Julia* (Ephron 2009), Julie performs for an integrated audience when blogging; and, as a result, Julie lies about being sick when staying at home to cook as her colleagues or boss could read the blog. Similarly, on Facebook users generally perform for an integrated audience, even though a user may choose to share posts with only a specific group of one's connections. These groups of connections create multiple front stages, as well as a segregated audience, as each of these groups of connections represents a different segment of one's audience, and thereby a different front stage. However, while it is possible to divide the list of connections on Facebook into groups, it is time consuming and most users opt to merely adapt their performance so that it is more suitable for their entire imagined

⁴⁷ Fakester profiles are fake profiles of people who do not exist in real life, or who did not create the profile. These fake profiles collapse the networks created on Friendster, as well as irritate the more serious users who want to use Friendster for dating purposes, and are thus removed (Boyd & Heer 2006:5).

audience (Enli & Thumin 2012:92). For this reason, users either share as little personal information as possible, share all information even intimate and private information or, lastly, share only information that shows a user in a good light (thereby performing only what they deem as their idealised self) (Enli and Thumin 2012:98). It is also possible to hide aspects of one's Facebook profile on a public profile page (their front stage area), while these posts remain visible, to only the performer, on their private profile page (their back stage area). For example, in the film *Catfish* (Joost & Schulman 2010), Angela admits that she is able to prevent Nev from reviewing certain Facebook posts, but still keep track of all of the things she had previously said on Facebook, by hiding some posts. In this way, Angela can still view any of the posts, but they were hidden from any of her Facebook friends. Therefore, it could be argued that the front stage performance of online identity takes place on online public profiles, while the backstage consists of private messages, emails, meetings, and any other information that is only visible to the performer (Marwick 2005:8).

The reasons someone would create fake public profiles (front stage areas), exaggerate certain aspects, or hide certain aspects of their identity online are because users tend to perform an idealised version of their identity, as opposed to their actual self (Goffman 1969:30). In the film *Catfish* (Joost & Schulman 2010), Angela exaggerates her own attractiveness by uploading another person's photographs and pretending they are of her. As a result, the Facebook Angela (Figure 61) can be considered more attractive than the offline Angela (Figure 62).



Figure 61: Angela's Facebook profile, *Catfish*. 2010. Screen shot by author.



Figure 62: Angela in real life, *Catfish*. 2010. Screen shot by author.

Similarly, Angela creates fake, exaggerated profiles by uploading photographs of attractive men and women, labelling these photographs as the members of her family. On the other hand, the concealment of certain aspects of identity can be achieved by purposefully concealing certain aspects of one's identity or by correcting errors in performance (Goffman 1969:37). In the film *Catfish* (Joost & Schulman 2010), Angela conceals parts of her identity in real life. As Angela cannot portray all of the aspects of her identity in real life, she performs each of these aspects of her identity on one of the numerous fake Facebook accounts. Angela states that she has missed out in her life and that she can no longer express all of her identity in her offline world. She has to take care of three children (two of the children require extreme attention), and this has resulted in her not regularly doing what she would like to be doing. For this reason, Angela becomes online friends with Nev, who reintroduces her to dance, which used to be an important part of Angela's offline life. Similarly, Megan's Facebook identity is that of a dancer and, therefore, Angela is able to experience this dancer aspect of her identity through the construction of Megan's online profile. In this way, Angela uses each of the fake Facebook profiles to explore aspects of her own identity. Therefore, Facebook allows Angela to express all of the facets of her identity that she struggles to express in real life.

Similarly, in the film *Julie & Julia* (Ephron 2009), Julie views her blog as a way for people to find out who she is offline, rather than her identity only being determined by her work and her home. Bloggers regularly identify with their blogs, seeing these blogs as an extension of themselves into a virtual space (Boyd 2006a:11). By changing

backgrounds, uploading different pictures and videos, blogging about specific interests, and writing a personal biography, a blogger is able to customise their blog with identity indicators (Bullingham and Vasconcelos 2013:102). Also, just as a social networking user may create multiple social networking accounts to perform different fragmentations of their identities, so a blogger may create different blogs for the same purpose (Bullingham and Vasconcelos 2013:103). Concealment of an offline identity also occurs through the correction of performance errors. Most errors or mistakes in performance are corrected before a performance occurs, and therefore an error-free end-product is performed to the audience (Goffman 1969:38). However, errors in performance may occur. In the film *Catfish* (Joost & Schulman 2010), Angela's performance of Megan becomes inconsistent, as Nev discovers that the songs that Megan has performed are actually performed by other musicians, causing him to question her performance.

For a performance to be believed by the audience, the performance must be coherent or continuous (Goffman 1969:22). The audience of a nonymous social media site, such as Facebook, may point out irregularities in a user's performance, as most online connections know this user offline as well (Stokes 2011:13, Donath & Boyd 2004:73). Therefore, a public list of connections should ensure an honest performance of the self. However, there are several reasons why an online audience might not point out irregularities between someone's online and offline performance (Donath and Boyd 2004:74). Firstly, some or all of the public connections could be fake (Donath and Boyd 2004:74). For example, in the film *Catfish* (Joost & Schulman 2010) Angela creates numerous profiles to interact with and, thereby, confirm her other profiles (Figure 63). None of Megan's friends, for example, will state that Megan's (Angela's) performance is false as these friends are also performances of Angela's. Nev's brother, Ariel, states that if Angela was performing Megan on Facebook, then she would have to be performing all of Megan's friends who have interacted with Nev, otherwise one of these friends would have pointed out irregularities in her performance.

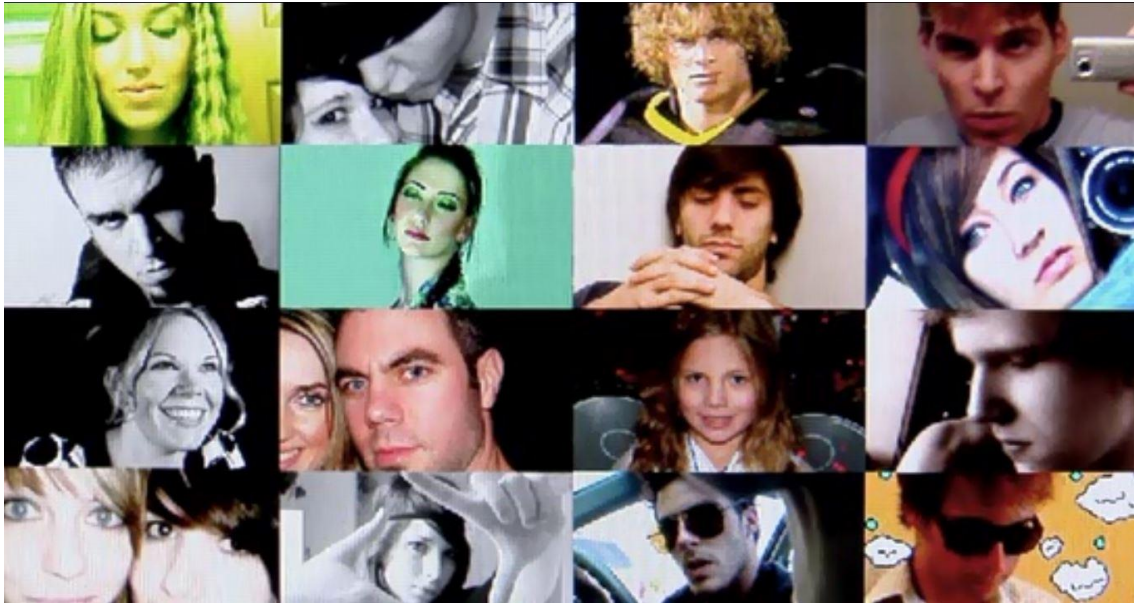


Figure 63: Angela's fake profile pictures and Nev's profile picture, *Catfish*. 2010. Screen shot by author.

Secondly, these online connections could be real; however, these connections may not know a user in real life and, therefore, cannot point out irregularities in the performance of this user's online and offline identities. For example, in the film *Catfish* (Joost & Schulman 2010), Nev is a real person who is friends with Megan and Angela; however, since he has not met either of them in real life, he fails for months to realise that their performances are fake. Lastly, these online connections could simply not care that someone's online and offline performance are inconsistent and, therefore, fail to mention it online (Donath and Boyd 2004:75). For example, Turkle interviews a Facebook user who states that it is uncommon for friends to say something or create an issue from something false that someone else publishes online (2012:195).

A user's online connections also contribute to this user's performance in other ways. Firstly, the number of online connections one has contributes to a user's performance. Facebook's architecture encourages users to continuously add more friends, as users are continuously reminded of their own friend count and their friends' friend count (Gershon 2011:876). Similarly, Facebook constantly suggests people that a user could possibly know to encourage the creation of connections (Gershon 2011:881). A user may be deemed unpopular because they have too few online connections; however, a

user may also be viewed as a “Facebook whore” (Westlake 2008:36) or “friends collector” (Gershon 2011:875) for having too many online connections. The type of connections that one has online also impacts one’s online performance. For example, Boyd’s online performance on the social networking site Friendster was affected by her online friends, who consisted of ‘burners’ (participants of the Burning Man Festival) and older men (sa:14). These friends, and Boyd’s profile picture (in which she is in a bikini top and skirt), caused other users to conclude that she is a Suicide Girl, as the real Suicide Girls’ Friendster profiles generally featured half-naked pictures and older men as friends (Boyd sa:14). Similarly, Boyd discusses the impact of online connections on the performance of a teacher: She joined Friendster and, while her profile was uncontroversial, she was friends with burners, which led her 16 year old students to question her about her addiction to drugs (Boyd sa:16). While the teacher did not take drugs, the students had reached this conclusion based on the teacher’s online friends (who had admitted to experimenting with drugs). It, therefore, becomes crucial to select one’s connections after careful consideration; yet this is problematic because “it is socially awkward to say no” to a friend request, thus users opt to include a person in their friends list, rather than to reject their friendship invitation (Boyd 2006b:9).

Goffman warns that the audience can sometimes misinterpret the signs of a performance, as seen in the misinterpretation of Boyd as a suicide girl on the social networking site Friendster (1969:45). These signs are performed in distinct ways, namely given (the expression that a user gives) and given off (the expression that a user gives off) (Goffman 1969:2). ‘Given’ signs are those signs performed deliberately, while those signs ‘given off’ are unintended signs that a performer conveys. While users perform their identity online through carefully constructed signs to portray themselves in an idealised fashion, the latest research suggests that users’ online and offline identities are very similar (Back *et al* 2010:374). In other words, online identity is not an ideal version of a user’s offline identity; rather, it is the same as this user’s offline identity. While ‘given’ signs are carefully constructed, it is important to

remember that signs ‘given off’ also contribute to the identity performed. As these signs ‘given off’ are not constructed, they are more likely to give a true impression of someone’s identity. A Facebook profile can, therefore, be an accurate representation of a user’s offline identity (which is also a performance), as the signs that are not constructed by a user give a true impression of their offline identity, regardless of the online, ‘given’ (constructed) identity. Identity signs are ‘given’ through status updates, likes, photographs, and so on. Identity signs are ‘given off’ (not constructed) through such things as memes. In the next section, Facebook identity performance, and the spread of memes are discussed.

4.2. Performance on Facebook

Facebook was created in 2004 as a Harvard-wide online version of a document containing information on all the students attending Harvard (Gershon 2011:871). Originally named thefacebook.com, Facebook grew to encompass more universities in America. In 2005, Facebook expanded to high school networks, and in 2006 Facebook was available to anyone with a valid email account (Gershon 2011:871). Facebook is currently the most popular social media tool, and has become incorporated into the everyday life of its users (Madden *et al* 2013:18). According to Madden *et al*, some teenage users now view Facebook as a utility, as well as a burden, that can be used to establish and maintain connections and popularity (2013:18). When logging into Facebook, a user is directed to their homepage, which features a news feed. From here, a user may visit their profile or the profile of any of their friends. They may also access friend requests, private messages, notifications, groups, and so on. A Facebook user is linked to others in numerous ways. Users are linked through groups and online connections (Westlake 2008:25).



Figure 64: Joelle, Why I left Facebook, 2013.

Also, by clicking on the name of a book, movie, or so on, a user is redirected to a list of Facebook users who have listed that specific book, movie, or so on as one of their likes (Westlake 2008:25). From the homepage (Figure 64), a user may access their private messages, Facebook Chat, as well as update their status. Once again, Facebook's architecture enables the spread of memes through Facebook communication channels. In this section, the performance of identity on Facebook is discussed, with reference to the layout and features of Facebook. Thereafter, the role of memes in the performance of an identity on Facebook is discussed.

The performance of identity on Facebook occurs in two distinct ways: Firstly, through those signs that are constructed and, secondly, through those signs that are not constructed. Through the signs that are constructed, users try to represent themselves in an idealised manner. For example, Turkle interviews a social media user who states that she performs her ideal self, since no person would advertise the negative aspects of their identity when given the choice and means to construct an identity that excludes these negative aspects (2012:191). This idealised self is performed on Facebook in several ways, namely through a user's likes, biography section, posts and photographs. Alternatively, signs that are not constructed could be conveyed through

posts and photographs uploaded by others, some of a user’s likes, or the memes a user shares. When a user signs up to Facebook to create a personal profile, the user is asked to fill in their name, surname, email, gender and age (Figure 65).

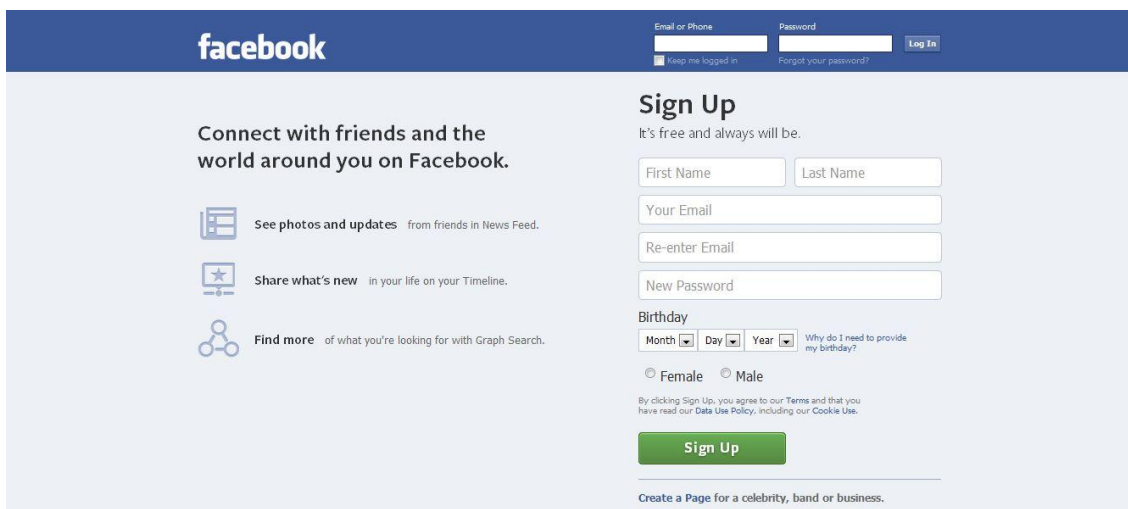


Figure 65: Unknown designer, Facebook sign up page, 2013. Screen shot by author.

In this way, as a nonymous user, one re-embodies oneself in the predetermined identity boundaries that exist in the offline world. A user has the option of reading the terms and conditions of the site, and the site’s privacy policy, before signing up. After signing up, a user is prompted to create their profile by filling in biographical information, such as one’s schools, universities, jobs, family members, relationships, favourite quotes, religious and political beliefs, amongst. Madden *et al* found that 92% of teenagers use their real name, 71% of teenagers reveal their school name and where they live, 82% reveal their birth date, and 62% reveal their relationship status (2013:3). While, Facebook users tend to use their real, offline names when creating a Facebook profile, there are numerous exceptions (Madden *et al* 2013:30). Similar to Fakester profiles, there are profile pages dedicated to bands, musicians and authors, as well as films and books (Westlake 2008:29). There are also Facebook profiles created by real people who do not use their offline names (Madden *et al* 2013:30). The general use of real names, results in one’s online Facebook identity potentially impacting real life and vice versa (Westlake 2008:25).

The name and biographical section of one's Facebook profile contribute to one's initial online identity. The biography section's fields are filled in with the intention of presenting oneself in a very specific manner. It is natural for someone to want to be liked, be popular and influential, and a user's profile on Facebook is constructed in order to achieve these results. Kelley's interview with a Facebook user illustrates the ways in which the biographical section of a Facebook page can portray identity: The Facebook user is a communist but "communism" is not an option under political views. He, therefore, selects the "other" option under political views; while referring to Carl Marx's ideas under the "Activities", "About Me" and "Favourite Quotes" sections, and listing the Marx book *Kapital* as one of his favourite books (2007:31). Lastly, he adds a photograph of Vladimir Lenin in front of the Soviet flag. This user has managed to overcome some of the identity restrictions created by the architecture of Facebook. Similarly, the architecture of Facebook prompts users to upload information about previous milestone moments in their lives, such as their wedding or their graduation from university. Therefore, the layout of Facebook impacts a user's initial identity. Also, in September 2006, Facebook introduced the news feed, which makes access to everyone else's information much easier (Gershon 2011:871, Boyd 2008:16, Westlake 2008:22) – users' are now able to read the latest updates of all their friends on their home page instead of only being able to see this information on friend's profile page. This creates a sense of inability to control one's online identity as other users can see when any changes to one's identity (profile) are made (Kelley 2001:21). As a result, users block changes from appearing on the news feed or opt to make no changes (Kelley 2007:22). While it is possible to change a profile any time after its creation, users rarely change more than adding a new book or movie, and so on, that they like (Kelley 2007:19, Papacharissi 2009:210).

A large part of the biography section of a Facebook profile consists of a user's tastes and likes. Users are able to select certain bands, books and films that they like, amongst other things (Figure 66).

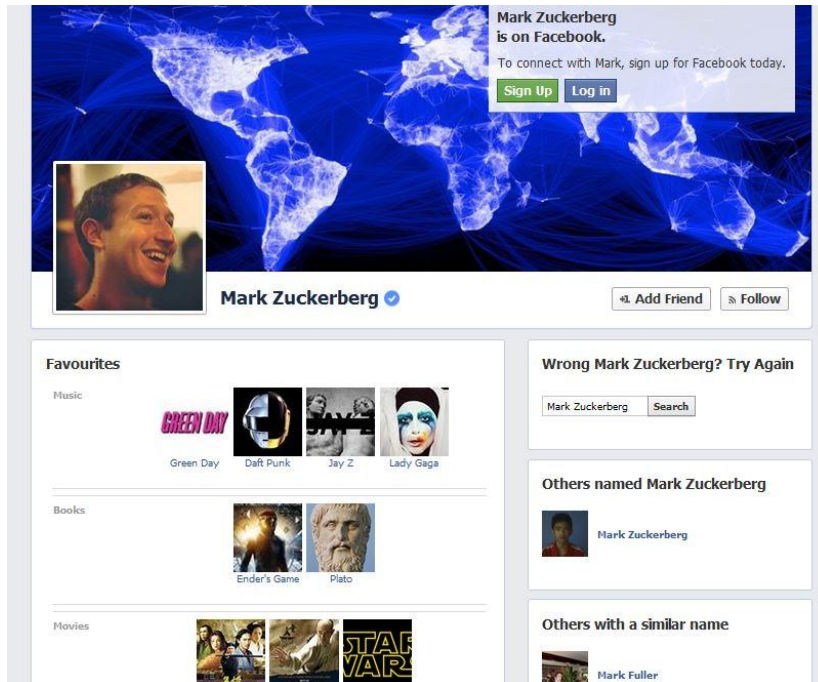


Figure 66: Mark Zuckerberg, Favourites, 2013. Screenshot by author.

Facebook is designed to encourage users to complete these sections and the biographical section, as failing to complete these sections results in an empty profile and an incomplete identity. Madden *et al* found that 84% of teenagers post their interests, such as movies, music, and books they like (2013:3). Another way that Facebook ensures the completion of the biography section is through the news feed. A user's friend will 'like' a certain band or movie, which is then added to that friend's profile, and this exposure to the band could prompt a user to also like the band or movie, adding it to their own profile. This biographical aspect of someone's profile may influence online interaction, as a similar favourite film could indicate that a user will understand references to the film, and so on (Lampe, Ellison & Steinfield 2006:3). An online identity is created through all of the information that is uploaded onto a user's Facebook profile under their likes and interests section. In the film *Catfish* (Joost & Schulman 2010), Nev is able to deduce numerous characteristics of Megan's identity from Facebook: He establishes her love of dancing, photography, music and animals through her photographs, uploaded songs and the biographical section of her Facebook. After completing this aspect of one's profile, one is prompted to upload a profile picture and then invite all of the people one knows to be an online connection.

After gaining connections, a user is prompted to add applications and groups to their profile. All of these factors are carefully considered; for example, Facebook users interviewed by Kelley realise that the groups they join on Facebook reflect their identity (2007:36). Similarly, Facebook check-ins are carefully considered and only performed if the check-in will contribute to a user's overall desired identity, as other user's will form opinions dependent on the places a user visits (Wang & Stefanone 2013:442).

A user's 'likes' does not only include their tastes and interests, but also the liking of other users' posts, comments and photographs. Facebook users may also click a like button on an external web page, and this activity is documented on their profile (Gerlitz & Helmond 2013:5). These 'likes' also contribute to a user's online identity. According to Rachel Kaufman (2013:1), Michal Kosinski, a psychometrician at the University of Cambridge, has developed an algorithm that accurately determines a user's personality through their Facebook likes. Users carefully evaluate what their 'likes' could contribute to their online identity and, therefore, only like something on Facebook if it can add to their idealised identity. For example, Turkle interviews a Facebook user who states that while he represents himself as cool and in the know on Facebook, he is hesitant to reveal other parts as himself, such as his like of Harry Potter (2012:185). However, Kosinski's algorithm can also link a user and his likes to personality traits that are not immediately obvious to humans, illustrating that a user's 'likes' also contribute to the signs that are not constructed by this user (Kaufman 2013:1). Posts and photographs are further ways in which identity can be constructed on Facebook. Facebook posts, comments, statuses and photographs are also managed by users to create specific impressions. The Facebook architecture prompts users to update their status as the previous status is automatically removed after a certain amount of time (Gershon 2011:877). Similarly, the Facebook architecture prompts users to upload photographs as users feel that they should upload more photographs than their friends. For example, Turkle interviews a Facebook user who boasts about having more Facebook albums (collections of photographs) than any of her friends

(2012:192). In an attempt to present themselves in an idealised manner, Madden *et al* found that 59% of teenage Facebook users have deleted or edited something they have posted, 53% deleted comments from others, 45% untagged themselves (removed their name) from photographs (2013:63). However, 19% have posted status updates, comments or videos they regretted sharing (Madden *et al* 2013:63). For this reason, Facebook users have developed methods to maintain some sort of privacy by limiting the amount that their Facebook friends can infer from their constructed signs through their status updates, comments and photographs. Boyd and Marwick interviewed numerous teenagers to discover the ways in which these Facebook users manage their identity (2011). One interviewee shares her photographs on Facebook, but none of her personal thoughts (Boyd & Marwick 2011:14). Another interviewee deactivates her account every time she logs off, as this way no one would be able to view her profile unless she is online (Boyd & Marwick 2011:20). Similarly, Madden *et al* found that 31% of teenage Facebook users have deleted or deactivated their Facebook accounts in the past (2013:63). According to Boyd and Marwick, another interviewee manages her Facebook profile by deleting all the comments from her own profile and deleting the comments she has made on her friends' profiles (after a day), as she states that they have already read the comments by then (2011:21). A Facebook user interviewed by Turkle warns that other Facebook users should be wary of what they post online, as a user does not need to make any immediate responses and, therefore, has time to think something over rather than saying something they will later regret (2012:258). He admits that he constructs Facebook posts for effect, and first considers how the post could be interpreted before publishing it on Facebook. While users may consider their posts before publishing them on Facebook, other users could post on a user's wall or tag this user in a post which further complicates impression management. Although a user is able to delete posts, tags and comments, others could see these published items before a user has deleted them. However, Facebook recently introduced a new feature, 'Timeline Review', which allows a user to first review any tagged posts, wall posts and comments before they are published on their Facebook profile (giving this user the option of deleting the content before it ever appears on

their Facebook profile). The same option is also available for the review of tagged photographs.

When trying to determine someone's identity from their Facebook profile, photographs are most often relied on as accurate portrayals of that person's identity (Gershon 2011:886). Photographs provide accidental glimpses into someone's life, making these photographs less likely to be staged to present a certain persona other than the offline performance of that user (Gershon 2011:886). For example, Turkle interviews a Facebook user who admits that he chooses a girl he is interested in and then follows a trail of photographs she was previously tagged in, learning whether she is popular, has a boyfriend and who she hangs out with (2012:252). He states that this behaviour can be considered stalking, as it can keep him preoccupied for hours, but also feels that others are also looking at his photographs so it has simply become a normal way to preoccupy oneself (Turkle 2012:252). Also, the Facebook accounts of all users are continuously updated with new photographs and status updates, therefore other users can repeatedly re-view someone's profile as it is always changing. While users may un-tag themselves in photographs or posts on Facebook, these photographs and posts are still viewable on the person's profile who originally published the item, as well as on the profiles of all the other people tagged in the published item. Un-tagging photographs also provides the other users with information about a person's identity, as other users know that this person has seen this photograph and is unhappy with the impression that this photograph creates in conjunction with the person's profile (Gershon 2011:789). Some photographs uploaded by users involve a specific generic pose, thus classifying as a meme. The role of memes in the performance of identity on Facebook is the discussed in the next section.

4.2.1. The role of memes

While the biography, likes and photographs one uploads are all constructed by a user; there are also a number of ways in which identity is conveyed through signs that are not constructed. These identifiers that are not constructed are often conveyed through the memes that users choose to share. These memes may be text-based, such as the sharing of chain letters via wall posts or private messages, or image-based or video-based, such as the uploading of specific photographic memes, links to video memes or other Internet memes. The performance of identity through the memes one shares is the focus of this section.

A new way to represent oneself photographically on Facebook is to take a self-portrait. The meme of the self-portrait or “selfie”⁴⁸ has resulted in numerous social media users posting self-portrait photographs. The self-portrait was originally known as “MySpace Angles”, as it originated on MySpace profiles (Sessions 2009:2). According to Williams, these different self-portraits allow the photographer to explore different aspects of their identity, similar to the ways in which earlier generations experimented with identity through different outfits and hairstyles (2006:2). Sessions (2009:3) lists three objections that other users have to the uploading of self-portraits onto social networking sites: Firstly, users argue that those using self-portraits are conforming, and thereby losing their individuality, secondly, the use of self-portraits is “narcissistic”, and, lastly, these self-portraits allow the photographer to appear more attractive and slimmer than in real life (as the self-portrait obscures the rest of the body or is taken from a high angle). According to Sessions (2009:4), there are a number of poses that are struck in these self-portraits, including “the kissy face” (pouting), “the Asian” (the forming of a peace sign gesture), and “the shocked pose” (appearing surprised).

⁴⁸ A close-up picture taken of oneself at arm’s length, specifically taken to be uploaded onto a social networking site.



Figure 67: Unknown photographer, Embarassing nightclub photos, Facebook, 2013.

Other users state that these self-portraits are an act of betrayal, as it portrays the person's identity falsely (Sessions 2009:8). The use of self-portraits is an example of memes. Similarly, photographic memes could also include the numerous poses, such as pouting, that are replicated, or of the embarrassing photographs taken of people when they are drinking (Figure 67).

The uses of text-based status updates that have been copied, but slightly altered, are examples of memes. These text-based memes constantly appear in sections of the biographical section of a Facebook profile, such as the "About Me" section or the "Favourite Quotes" section, as well as in status updates and comments. Private messages could also be used to transmit traditional chain letter memes, such as those previously transmitted via emails. Examples of memes as status updates would include such posts as: Status updates asking friends to like or share a status update (Figure 68) or the changing of a word or answering of a questions before reposting the status update (Figure 69), status updates asking users to comment if tagged on a status update (Figure 70), status updates asking to take action against something such as saving the rhinos or polar bears (Figure 71), and status update that asks a user to share if they know someone who has cancer or have a loving sister (Figure 72). Video memes are also created and posted on Facebook, such as users performing the 'Harlem Shake'⁴⁹ (Figure 73) or dancing 'Gangnam Style'⁵⁰ (Figure 74). A new meme is to link to

⁴⁹ This video features a masked individual, surrounded by a group of people, dancing to a heavy bass instrumental track produced by Baauer. The video then cuts to a scene where the entire group of people is dancing.

a song on a Facebook status and include some of the song’s lyrics in the post (Figure 75).

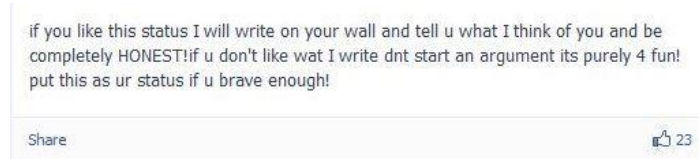


Figure 68: Unknown designer, ‘Like’ and ‘Share’ status update, Facebook, 2010.

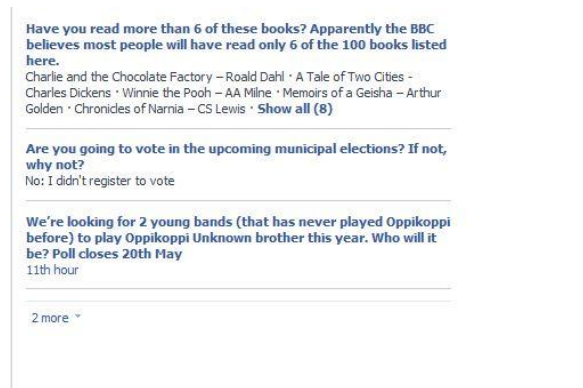


Figure 69: Unknown designer, ‘Answering a question’ status update, Facebook, 2011.

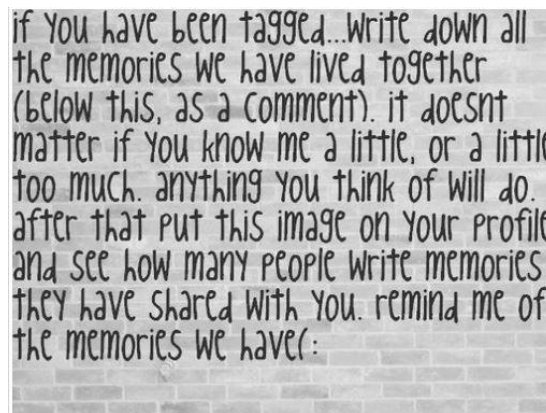


Figure 70: Unknown designer, ‘Tagging’ status update, Facebook, 2010.

⁵⁰ Videos of users performing the “horse riding dance” featured in Psy’s music video: Gangnam Style.

Once more, Shell is threatening the home of polar bears with its greed for oil and its new dangerous partnership with Russian oil industry giant Gazprom.

Help stop Shell! Share and ask your friends to sign at <http://act.gp/1bbGMNo>

Many thanks to our supporter Irina Tikhomirova from Russia for this cool poster!



Figure 71: Unknown designer, 'Take action' status update, Facebook, 2013.

Your sister is your first female friend in life. No one will ever understand your craziness like your sister .. Even if you don't get together, or talk as much as you'd like, she always remains your friend...While people come and go in your life, your sisters will always be in your heart for a lifetime. It's "National sisters Week," so **SHARE** if you have a sister that you love with all your heart.

Figure 72: Unknown designer, "Share if you know someone who" status updates, Facebook, 2013.



Figure 75: Unknown designer, Song lyrics and hyperlink status update, Facebook, 2013.



Figure 73: Margot Peppers and Tamara Abraham, Underwater dance party, 2013.



Figure 74: A. D. Coleman, Barack-Obama-Gangnam-style-dansi, 2012.

Memes are spread most rapidly through the act of “Sharing”, which results in an image being re-posted on a user’s wall or their friend’s wall (if they chose to share it on the friend’s wall). The memes that are most commonly shared are online user-generated memes specifically created by users with the intention of having the meme go viral. As stated in chapter two, these memes convey certain signs. These signs are not constructed by a user, and while a user could merely spread the meme as they think that the meme is humorous, the meme has connotations, which are then associated with the rest of that user’s Facebook profile or online identity. As the meme is part of the performance of the Facebook user, it is reliant on the environment (the Facebook architecture and the rest of this user’s profile) and the audience’s interpretation of this meme in conjunction with the rest of the profile. The connotations attached to memes can change depending on the environment. This means that a meme may add to a person’s identity when interpreted in conjunction with the rest of the person’s Facebook profile; however, if the audience is only exposed to this meme through their news feed, the meme may be interpreted incorrectly. In this way, a user’s online identity may be misinterpreted. Figure 76 provides an example of the manner in which a meme can result in a misinterpretation of a user’s online identity. Figure 76 is a variation of the “Keep calm and carry on” meme (Figure 77). The yellow poster depicts a piece of butter with the words “Keep calm and add butter” below it. While figure 76 could represent someone’s love of butter, it could also illustrate someone’s love of the film *Julie & Julia* (Ephron 2009) in which Julie believes that butter is the greatest food. Also, the person could be a chef or simply be very passionate about cooking. The meme could also be posted on someone’s wall as an insult pointing to a weight problem. There are clearly numerous ways in which this meme can be interpreted. The meanings of memes are, therefore, dependent on the environment in which they appear, in this case the rest of the person’s Facebook profile or on another user’s news feed. For example, a user could post the meme in Figure 76 which would then appear on their friends’ news feed. One of their friends (who does not regularly view this user’s Facebook profile) could interpret it as a person indicating their love of butter, while another friend (who regularly views this user’s profile) could interpret it as this

user's love of the film *Julie & Julia* (Ephron 2009) as the rest of this user's profile contains likes of the film, book and the film's soundtrack, as well as quotations from the film.



Figure 76: Unknown designer, Keep calm and add butter, undated.



Figure 77: Unknown designer, Keep calm and carry on, undated.

To further illustrate the connotations, myths and ideologies that are possibly attached to memes, and the ways in which these connotations, myths and ideologies may add to one's online identity; three examples of the "What people think I do/What I really do" meme are analysed. The variations of this meme discussed are the "Working in Advertising" meme, the "Ski Instructor" meme and the "Stock Trader" meme.

The "What people think I do/What I really do" meme was first spotted on the 7th of February 2012 gaining the most popularity during February and March 2012. The original meme was that of the Science Student (What people think I do/What I really do 2013:1). All three variations of this meme illustrate a man as the ski instructor, stock trader and person working in advertising. The memes also depict men and women in relationships with each other, maintaining the belief that heterosexual relationships are preferable to homosexual relationships. The ideology of patriarchy is conveyed through both men working (while women are presumably at home taking

care of the household and children) and the preference of heterosexual relationships. The memes cleverly use the myths that are attached to each of the professions before revealing the reality of the profession thus creating humour, and this humour is a reason why the meme is more likely to spread.

Figure 78 depicts the “Working in Advertising” variation of the “What people think I do/What I really do” meme. The meme highlights the different perspectives of advertising and the humour of the meme is derived from these different misconceptions. Similarly, the “Ski Instructor” (Figure 79) and “Stock Trader” (Figure 80) versions of this meme are humorous as they play on the misconceptions concerning these professions. The memes all consist of different images depicting the views of different people concerning the profession involved. For example, in the first image of figure 79, the view of the parents of someone in advertising is depicted. This image illustrates that the parents of someone working in advertising think that their children make the advertisements seen on television.



Figure 78: Unknown designer, Working in advertising meme, Facebook, 2012.

Similarly, the second image is made of two print advertisements depicting slender and attractive models with the heading “What my friends think I do”. This image illustrates that the friends of someone working in advertising think that their friend is constantly

surrounded by attractive models when doing photo shoots. This friend (the person working in advertising) is therefore much more likely to ‘hook up’ with these attractive models. The models are depicted as heterosexual (especially in the second print advertisement where two men are seductively looking at a woman). This indicates that this meme supports a patriarchal society.



Figure 79: Unknown designer, Ski Instructor meme, Facebook, 2012.

In a similar manner, all images in the examples portray the view of people not in the profession, but who know someone in the profession. Also, all three examples depict heterosexual relationships, as well as men in positions of power; highlighting the memes’ support of the dominant ideology of patriarchy. The representations are very accurate representations of the myths of these professions: Advertising⁵¹, ski-instructing⁵², and stock trading. The humour is derived from the final image, which reveals what the person in the profession actually does. This image reveals that the misconceptions concerning the professions are much more glamorous than the actual work involved. For example, the last image of figure 78 depicts a man working at a

⁵¹ I completed a Copywriting course at AAA School of Advertising and was therefore exposed to all of these advertising myths during the duration of the course.

⁵² While working as a ski instructor at Afriski, I mainly taught children to ski. I was constantly faced with the misconceptions of what ski instructors do through the views of the guests at the resort.

desk at night under the heading “What I actually do”. This last image reveals what a person working in advertising really does: Sits at a desk working long hours (similar to many other jobs). These memes add certain qualities to a person’s online persona through those connotations attached to the memes. For example, figure 78 could appear on someone’s Facebook profile if they are interested in working in advertising or if they work in advertising. The advertising industry is portrayed in the television series *Mad Men* (Matthew Weiner 2007), and someone posting this meme on their Facebook profile could be a fan of the show. This show also portrays someone in advertising as powerful, influential and rich. The meme may also appear on someone’s profile if they wish to appear creative, and fashionable. This meme could, therefore, illustrate that someone has some degree of interest in advertising and is probably creative, and so on. The meme could also simply illustrate that a user has a sense of humour. The meme could be posted onto a friend’s wall by a user if this user thought that the friend possessed these qualities, or has an interest in or is currently pursuing a career in advertising. A last possibility is that someone does not like advertising at all and this meme is then posted by themselves or by a friend on their profile in an ironic manner. There are clearly many meanings that can be attached to this meme, and the meaning of the meme may change depending on whose profile it is posted, and who it is interpreted by.

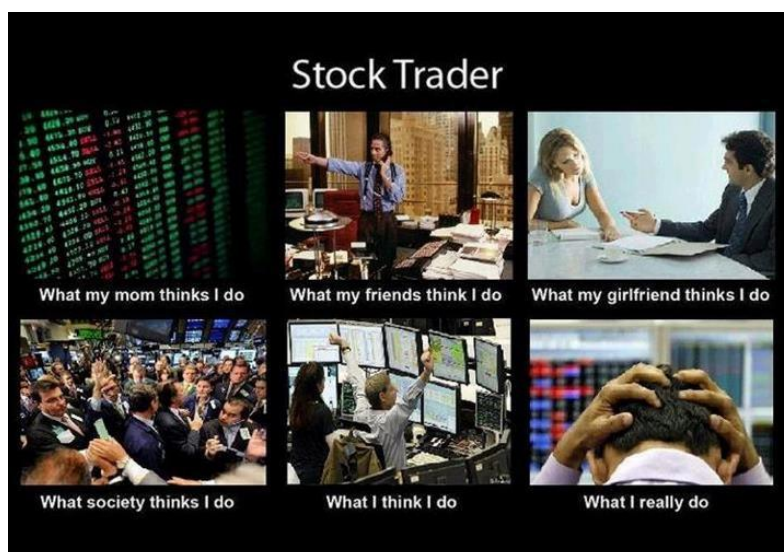


Figure 80: Unknown designer, Stock Trader meme, Facebook, 2012.

As seen in the “What people think I do/What I really do” examples, the connotations attached to the memes one chooses to share on Facebook add to one’s online identity, regardless of the reasons the meme was shared. It may be argued that while constructed signs are communicated to add to the idealised identity of a user, not all memes are (self-portrait photographs are the exception), as memes are not always directly linked to one’s offline appearance or interests. For this reason, a user is less likely to consider the ways in which a meme could affect their online identity before posting a meme. However, this meme will still reveal an aspect of a user’s online and offline identity, as a user still selects memes to share according to their sense of humour, likes, gender, race, and so on. In other words, a user could share a meme hoping to add to their idealised identity or simply because they think that the meme is humorous, but this user cannot control the ultimate interpretation of the meme, and this interpretation adds to their identity. Whether the meme is an Internet meme, a text-based meme or a photographic meme, these memes are interpreted by the audience, who deduce certain connotations from each meme. These memes are also interpreted in conjunction with the environment in which they are experienced by the audience, be this the rest of a user’s profile or someone else’s news feed. In this way, a meme shared on Facebook may, correctly or incorrectly, reveal a user’s likes, sexual orientation, race, and so on. It is, therefore, through signs that are not constructed that a user’s offline identity is revealed. As a result, many studies comparing online and offline identities have found that one’s online and offline identities are the same or very similar (Back *et al* 2009:2, Bachrach *et al* 2012:1).

4.3. Conclusion

This chapter dealt with identity experimentation and the performance of identity as it occurs on social media sites. Chat rooms are more suited to the experimentation with identity as chat rooms are text-based and, therefore, online deception is easier to achieve. The same applies to anonymous blog spots. While blog spots are not always

only text-based, it is still easier for someone to falsify aspects of their identity as there is no system of accountability in place (such as real life friends being able to point out the inaccuracies of an online identity). It is more difficult to experiment with identity on social networking sites and anonymous blog spots as real life friends may point out any inaccuracies between online and offline identities. Therefore, on social networking sites and anonymous blog spots aspects of one's identity are performed, as some aspects of one's identity are exaggerated, highlighted or suppressed.

In turn, identity is performed on the social networking site Facebook through signs that are constructed and signs that are not constructed. Signs that are constructed include those signs portrayed through status updates, likes and photographs. These signs are carefully considered to portray the idealised identity of a user. Those signs that are not constructed portray unintentional aspects of a user's identity, therefore providing an indication of that user's actual offline identity. This results in a more accurate portrayal of an offline identity on social networking sites such as Facebook. The signs that are not constructed are mainly portrayed through the sharing or posting of memes. These memes can be interpreted symbolically (according to the connotations, myths and ideologies attached to that specific meme), but misinterpretation of online identity may occur when the audience is exposed to the meme on their "news feed" rather than as part of someone's Facebook profile. The symbolic interpretation of memes is thus dependent on both the audience and the environment (whether the meme is viewed in someone's profile or their news feed). Therefore, it is through the constant negotiation of these constructed signs and those that are not, as well as a user, the audience and the environment, that online identity of a user takes shape on the social networking site Facebook.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

Recently South African resident Brent Lindeque decided to buy somebody lunch. He had been nominated on the new, viral, drinking game described as “the social drinking game for social media”: #NekNominate (South Africa turns #NekNominate on its head with one small change 2014:1). Believed to have originated in Perth, Australia, the game encourages participants to drink in outlandish ways before nominating two friends to do the same (South Africa turns #NekNominate on its head with one small change 2014:1). When Lindeque was nominated by one of his friends, he decided to change the rules of the game and buy someone lunch instead of drinking something (South Africa turns #NekNominate on its head with one small change 2014:1). He nominated two of his friends to do the same (South Africa turns #NekNominate on its head with one small change 2014:1). The new #NekNominate craze was almost immediately successful; spreading to England, Wales, Dubai, and so on (South Africa turns #NekNominate on its head with one small change 2014:1). When asked why he decided to buy someone food instead of participating in the drinking game, Lindeque stated: “When I first heard about the #NekNominate trend, I thought: ‘Why would anybody put something on Facebook that they wouldn’t be proud of?’ Facebook is 10 years old today and people actually see what you put out there. You should be proud of what you’re sharing” (South Africa turns #NekNominate on its head with one small change 2014:2). Lindeque is highlighting one of the main aspects of social media: The content published on social media, including memes in the form of text, images, and videos, contribute to the online persona of a user. As a result of this online persona, the audience interprets the offline persona of a specific user. This is the power of social media and memes.

5.1. Social media and memetics

The term meme was first coined by Dawkins in 1976 and it has since become defined as a cultural replicator (in that it entails the replication of cultural information). In chapter two it is argued that while the definition of the meme is still contested; Dawkins, Dennett and Blackmore all argue that the meme is a unit of imitation. Also, Dawkins, Dennett and Blackmore all argue that a meme must have the following characteristics: Longevity, fecundity, fidelity, variation, selection and heredity. In chapter two, I have argued that the Internet has now become the ideal medium needed for memes to fulfil these requirements. Longevity is achieved as Internet memes are stored online indefinitely. Fecundity is achieved as Internet memes are shared with numerous people simultaneously. Fidelity is achieved as Internet memes can be copied with 100 percent accuracy. There are numerous variations of any single Internet meme and, as a user can only share a set amount of memes in one day, selection occurs. Lastly, heredity is present as these Internet memes are passed on from one person to another when they are shared online. In chapter three, I argue that social media has further increased all of these characteristics respectively as a user is now able to simultaneously expose hundreds, thousands, or even millions of people to the same meme. As memes cannot be viewed in isolation, the environment in which they appear (such as a Facebook profile) is also important in the understanding of a meme. A meme can, therefore, be used as an analytical tool to interpret the environment in which the meme is found. Deacon (sa:7) argues that the meme is a sign. In chapter two, it is argued that a meme, therefore, possesses certain connotations, denotations, myths and ideologies; and by analysing these symbolic aspects of memes, one is able to interpret the environment in which it appears. In chapter four, the examples of the meme “What people think I do/What I really do” illustrate the possible connotations that could be attached to Internet memes. While people certainly do consider how an audience will react to the posting of a meme before posting it, I believe that a user is not always fully aware what all of the

connotations are that could be attached to a meme, and as a result the ways in which their profile could be interpreted. In this way, a user could be viewed in a different manner to how they view themselves or how they wish to be viewed. Also, the connotations (of memes) that are applicable to a person's profile, is dependent on the rest of the person's profile. However, it is concluded in chapter four that memes are usually viewed out of context on Facebook (on the news feed), which means that it is highly likely that the wrong connotations are often attached to a user's profile by the audience. So while Lindeque states that a user should be proud of what they are posting on their Facebook profile, what one posts could also be interpreted differently to how one intended.

As a result of the memes one wishes to share, as well as the rest of one's profile, an online identity is created. In chapter four it is argued that people are now continuously performing new, and existing, identities online in an attempt to stay ever connected to others. Turkle (2012) argues that this allows one to stay more connected online while creating a greater distance between oneself and those one is surrounded by offline: We are alone (offline), yet together (online). Facebook, a social networking site, has become the most popular social media site, but there are many different types of social media sites. The different categories of social media are discussed in chapter three. Social media can be divided into different categories, namely virtual communities, wikis, mashups, folksonomies and social networking sites. All social media involves the collaboration of users to create user-generated content. Wikis and mashups, however, only involve the anonymous generation of content; while virtual communities, folksonomies and social networking sites involve both the generation of collaborative content and the portrayal of an identity. Virtual communities include such things as chat rooms, instant messaging, public forums and virtual worlds. Social networking sites include such sites as Facebook, Twitter and MySpace. Folksonomies are such sites as Blogger (a blogging site), Instagram (a photo-sharing site), YouTube (a video-sharing site) and iTunes (a music-sharing site). The interaction between a user

and virtual communities, folksonomies and social networking sites are portrayed in the analysis of three films: *Trust* (Schwimmer 2010), *Julie & Julia* (Ephron 2009) and *Catfish* (Joost & Schulman 2010).

In chapter three, I have shown how the film *Trust* (Schwimmer 2010) provides a realistic example of the relationship between a user and a chat room, as it is based on a real life story about a girl who was raped by someone she met online. In the film, Annie interacts with those she has met online every day. Annie's online and offline friendships are equally important to her. Annie shares all of her day-to-day news with her online friends, especially Charlie. The chat room provides Annie with a way to experiment with her identity away from the control of her parents, which is further enabled by the use of chat room jargon (which Will fails to understand). Annie blocks other members from chatting to her, showing that she does understand some of the risks of using chat rooms (as sexual predators use chat rooms to groom teenagers), but she forgives Charlie every time he admits that he has lied about his age because she has already established a meaningful relationship with him. This relationship is very real and after Charlie rapes Annie, she struggles to accept that he is not in love with her and that they are not dating. Charlie uses the chat room for a very different reason: Purposefully luring numerous young girls into liking and meeting him before he rapes them. Will uses the chat room to try and understand why someone would use chat rooms in the manner that Charlie uses chat rooms.

Similarly, in chapter three I have shown the relationship that exists between a user and a folksonomy using the film *Julie & Julia* (Ephron 2009) as an example. In the film *Julie & Julia* (Ephron 2009), Julie uses her blog to explore and improve her cooking. Julie feels isolated from her friends and her neighbours. She spends all day talking to people who she will never meet or establish a long-standing relationship with, creating further isolation from those Julie is constantly surrounded by. Julie's blog allows her to feel connected to others. The relationship between Julie and her audience therefore

becomes very important to her as this interaction is a validation to her that she is creating real relationships with others. Julie also feels as though she has not reached her professional potential in her life and uses her blog to create a sense of achievement in her life. Julie's family also reads her blog and uses this blog to learn what is happening in her life. In this way, Julie's mother is able to phone her and ask her about things she has posted on her blog. The blog therefore allows Julie to communicate with those who only know her through her blog, but she is also able to communicate with those people who know her in real life through her blog. The blog adds to the other communication technology that the family is already using to stay in contact and updated on the day-to-day activities of Julie.

Lastly, in chapter three the relationship that exists between a social networking site user and a social networking site is discussed in reference to the film *Catfish* (Joost & Schulman 2010). Facebook allows users to stay updated on the day-to-day activities of their Facebook friends in the film *Catfish* (Joost & Schulman 2010). In this way, Nev knows what is happening in Megan's life even if he has not spoken to her for a few days as he stays updated through her status updates, comments and photographs that are continuously uploaded. Nev is also able to learn what is happening in Megan's life through the online interaction between Megan and her friends. Nev also uses Facebook to keep in contact with other friends and acquaintances. Nev is able to keep in contact with Abby, Angela and Megan through Facebook, even though they live hundreds of kilometres apart, as he lives in New York City and they all live in Michigan. The relationship that develops between Megan and Nev is a very real relationship involving real feelings. Nev is upset when he finds out that Megan has lied about herself online. Nev is further upset when he learns that the Megan he was talking to never existed and he mourns the end of this friendship when he returns to New York City. Nev considered Megan and himself to almost be in a relationship just from having communicated online. The only hindrance in a romantic relationship is that Nev and Megan have not met offline and therefore do not know if their attraction also exists in

real life, illustrating that there is still some distinction between online and offline communication. Angela also values the relationship she has built with Nev (through Megan's profile) and confesses that she was afraid to reveal the truth as this could result in her destroying the friendship between herself and Nev.

In all three films, users also experimented with and performed certain online identities. In chapter four, it is argued that any identity is an interaction between the environment (the architecture of the social media site), the audience and a user. According to Turkle, this online identity is experimented with when a certain aspect of one's identity is altered when presented online, such as a user's age, gender or name (1999:643). This experimentation with identity could allow a user to work through real life issues or work through unresolved conflicts without any real life consequences. Turkle also argues that the invention of the smartphone allows users to continuously connect with others online, which has resulted in a mashup of all one's online and offline identities (2012:161). In other words, we are no longer 'cycling through' the different parts of our fragmented identities, rather we are ever-present and equally present in all of them (Turkle 2012:161). This identity play is still restricted by the identity boundaries that exist offline as the age, gender, location and user name remain important to other users, even in a virtual world. Chat rooms and anonymous blogs are particularly suited to the type of identity play as proposed by Turkle, as both mediums are essentially text-based making identity easy to fabricate. Social networking sites and anonymous blogging sites, however, also involve the uploading of photographs and videos making identity deception harder. Whether on chat rooms or on social networking sites, a user performs a specific identity, just as this user performs an identity offline. Goffman's theory surrounding the performance of identity draws a distinction between the back stage area (where a performer is free to be themselves and plan performances) and the front stage (where performances are portrayed within a certain environment) (1969). The performance must be consistent for the audience to believe it, illustrating that the audience's approval of a

performance is crucial in the construction of identity. The films *Trust* (Schwimmer 2010), *Julie & Julia* (Ephron 2009) and *Catfish* (Joost & Schulman 2010) provide visual examples of realistic ways in which users experiment with and perform identity online.

In chapter four, it is shown that in the film *Trust* (Schwimmer 2010), Charlie uses a chat room site to purposefully misrepresent aspects of who he is in real life. At the beginning of the film, Charlie portrays himself as a 15 year old high school student. This online identity changes several times: Firstly, to that of a 20 year old college student, secondly to that of a 25 year old university student and lastly to that of a 35 year old man. Charlie's identity (which is partially constructed by Charlie and partially constructed by Annie) is so strong that Annie struggles to accept that this online identity was a fabrication. Annie continues to defend Charlie throughout the film until she discovers that Charlie has raped three other girls, and therefore he lied about being a virgin and about their relationship being unique. At the end of the film it is revealed that Charlie's offline identity is actually that of a high school physics teacher with the name Graham Weston. It may be argued that this offline identity of a teacher, father and husband is also merely a performance as his students, wife and son do not know that he has raped several girls in the past. Annie uses the chat room to experiment with her growing sexuality and her understanding of who she is sexually. The user names of Annie and Charlie provide further indicators of their offline identity (although Charlie's indicators prove to be fabricated). Annie's user name provides the cyberspace audience with an indication of her age and her love of volley ball. Charlie's user name provides the cyberspace audience with an indication of his name and his location. Will uses the chat room to create a fake profile of a young girl as he tries to understand his new identity of a father whose daughter has been raped. Lynn struggles to accept Will's new identity. Similarly, Annie struggles to accept her new identity as a rape survivor.

Furthermore, in chapter four the documentary *Catfish* (Joost & Schulman 2010) is discussed, in which Nev performs his identity on the social networking site Facebook. Through his Facebook friendship with Megan, and his Facebook friendships with Megan's friends and family, Nev is able to deduce Megan's identity. Nev believes that Megan enjoys dancing, photography and music, and that she loves animals. This identity is further affirmed by the Facebook interaction that Megan has with her friends. In a similar fashion, Nev is able to deduce Abby's identity as someone who loves painting, is a very talented painter and is always optimistic. Nev deduces that Alex loves music and is rebellious, and that Angela must be great as her children are great. Angela uses Facebook to experiment with aspects of her identity. She has always loved dancing and uses Megan's Facebook profile to perform this aspect of her identity. Similarly, Angela uses Abby's profile to experiment with the artist aspect of her identity. In this way, Angela uses each of her 15 Facebook profiles to explore another aspect of her identity, as she feels that these aspects of her identity must constantly be suppressed in real life. Nev is upset when he learns that Megan was being performed by Angela as his relationship with Megan had begun to form a significant part of his own identity.

Lastly, in chapter four the film *Julie & Julia* (Ephron 2009) is discussed, in which Julie struggles with the limitations of her new identity. Julie has moved to another borough of New York City and therefore her identity has changed. Julie also feels as though she has never reached her professional potential and struggles to accept this as part of her identity. In order to explore these new boundaries of her identity, and to form a connection with other people, Julie starts to blog. Her blog discusses her adaptation to her new environment as she adapts to living in Queens. The blog documents her cooking endeavours, as well as her love of butter and of Julia Childs. Julie uses Julia as a role model while she tries to redefine her own identity, constantly comparing her life to Julia's life. Julie also blogs about her real life relationships with her husband, mother and cat. Julie is forced to censor what she says on her blog because of her audience

(which includes her colleagues and boss), illustrating the effect that an audience may have on the construction of an online identity. Similarly, Julie censors what she posts according to what she believes her imagined audience would want to read. Eric struggles to accept Julie's new identity as she is constantly discussing herself and her audience, which he is not used to. By the end of the film, Julie has embraced the identity of a successful cook, a successful writer and a wife, living in the one of the outer boroughs of New York City.

Goffman argues that performers tend to portray an idealised version of themselves as opposed to the actual self (1969:30). In chapter four it is argued that on Facebook, this is achieved through the signs that are given through such things as personal information, likes and photographs. Personal information communicates a user's name, age, gender, location, school and so on. It is not mandatory to display any of one's personal information on Facebook, but according to Madden, et al most teenage Facebook users opt to display this personal information (2013:3). Facebook 'likes' are carefully considered as a user wishes to appear cool by 'liking' the film *Django Unchained* (Tarantino 2012), but would rather not publically 'like' the Harry Potter series as this could cause them to seem nerdy. Similarly, users are able to untag themselves from photographs uploaded by other users illustrating the desire of a user to control their own online identity portrayal. However, identity is also conveyed on Facebook through signs that are given off. Signs given off are those signs that a performer unintentionally communicates with the audience, which could lead to confusion (as this information is contradictory to the information given by the performer) or, as on Facebook, it could provide the audience with indicators of what the actual identity of a user is as opposed to their idealised identity. On Facebook, given off signs consist mainly of memes.

5.2. Suggestions for future research explorations

The study provides a good basis for the investigation of the meme's contribution to online identity on the social media site Facebook. It has been found that memes do contribute to the formation of an online identity. Social media has increased the spreading of memes as the Internet (and particularly social media as users spend many hours of the day on social media) has allowed for memes to spread more quickly, to more people and with a greater accuracy than ever before. It can also be argued that memes spread so effectively on social media precisely because these memes are attached to an online identity, giving these memes more power (similar to Blackmore's description of memes constructing offline identity to increase the power of certain memes). For example, if a user feels that Christianity is a very important aspect of 'who they are', they are much more likely to spread Internet memes about Christianity. Furthermore, memes are signs and as such have certain connotations, myths and ideologies. These connotations, myths and ideologies contribute to the online persona of a user on Facebook. In this way, a meme can be used as an analytical tool when establishing a user's Facebook identity. A meme may also negatively contribute to someone's Facebook identity as it may be viewed out of context (not on this user's Facebook page) and the wrong connotations may be attributed to a person's online identity. From the films discussed previously, it becomes apparent that social media has become very integrated into the lives of its users, and also that the offline lives of people can be impacted (negatively and positively) by the ways in which their identities are portrayed online. This is particularly the case when someone has been untruthful about an aspect of their offline identity when portraying themselves online. No ethnographic studies were done concerning users' interpretations of Internet memes. An ethnographic study of the connotations attached to memes and the way that the meme contributes to identity on Facebook could be a beneficial area of research.

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