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Online Social Networking, Interactions, and Relations: Students at the University of the Free State, Bloemfontein

Abstract   Online social networking (OSN) is an activity performed through social network sites (SNS) such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram. OSN has become a dominant interaction mechanism within contemporary society. Online platforms are woven inextricably into the fabric of individuals' everyday lives, especially those of young adults. We present a mixed-methods study—conducted at the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein—that analyzes how students reflect on their everyday experiences of OSN. The key theoretical frameworks guiding this research are phenomenology, existentialism, and reflexive sociology. These theoretical lenses collectively assist in broadening our understanding of the students' experiences that reveal the complexities associated with their interactions and social relations via SNS. From their narratives we learn how the students make sense of their engagements on SNS, how these engagements have an impact on their social interactions, and how OSN affects their self-presentation.

Keywords   Online Social Networking (OSN); Social Network Sites (SNS); Social Interaction; Identity

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The end of the 20th century and the dawn of the 21st can be regarded as an important watershed in the history of the world. This period brought the heightened inventions of various technologies. Amongst the flood in contemporary technologies came an explosion of *social media*—a term used in this article to refer mainly to websites and Internet applications that allow users to create and share content through various online social networking (OSN) platforms. These online platforms enable people from all around the world to share their thoughts and ideas via the media of digital text, pictures, video recordings, and voice.

With the aid of modern small-scale, portable computers such as smartphones, tablets, and laptops, individuals have the ability to engage in online interactions through forms of social media known as *social network sites* (SNS). SNS refer to web-based "communities" that allow users to create profiles and virtually interact with other members (Henson, Reyns, and Fisher 2011:254). These online platforms have become the places and spaces where a large part of mundane socializing activities within present day society takes place. The absence of the time-space element of OSN makes it possible for high levels of interaction between individual users of SNS. OSN is used to refer to the processes of engaging with SNS such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp. The capacity of SNS to overcome the restrictions of time and space means that the interactions between individuals are no longer constrained within traditional geographic boundaries of neighborhoods, educational institutions, or recreational areas. OSN transpires beyond these physical parameters.

Tertiary education students have been identified by previous studies as a social group that is most particularly active in OSN. Previous studies (Thompson and Hickey 2005:126; McCuddy and Vogel 2015:169) found that students spend a large amount of time socializing with each other. This article aims to cast light on the impact of OSN on a group of tertiary education students' sense of self, their lifeworld experiences, and on social

reality as the emergent product of interacting with others.

Theoretical Points of Departure

This study is positioned in the theoretical frameworks of interpretivist thinking. According to this school of thought, reality is the world as we perceive it and we understand the fundamental nature of the social world at the level of subjective experience (Burrel and Morgan 1979:28). The key issue in an interpretivist approach is therefore to engage oneself in empathetic understanding to comprehend reality from the unique point of view of an individual. As such, a social scientist would strive for what Max Weber terms *Verstehen* (Babbie and Mouton 2001:31). To achieve *Verstehen*, we collect, analyze, and interpret narratives with the aim of discovering depth and meaning in as far as our research participants' experiences of social reality. The process of interpretation of the narratives to achieve empathetic understanding is related to *hermeneutics* (Babbie and Mouton 2001:30-31; Neuman 2006:87). Hermeneutics focus on the words, the intentions, and the actions of research participants to bring us to a better understanding.

The theoretical frameworks that provide context to this study consist mainly of ideas within phenomenology, existential sociology, and reflexive sociology. Phenomenology aims to understand the social world from the viewpoint of the actor and not of the social analyst (Overgaard 2007:21). Phenomenologically focused research is, therefore, oriented at the everyday lives of ordinary people who coexist within a given lifeworld—"the mundane, everyday

world in which people operate" (Inglis 2012:90). People share aspects of the same culture, language, and a set of meaning structures that allow them to negotiate their daily lives (Farganis 2014:245) and to construct reality within their lifeworlds. OSN represents the specific focus of people's lifeworld in this research and the aim is to determine how the research participants experience their everyday lives within the context of OSN.

In addition to these basic ideas of phenomenology, existential thinking explores the self, as well as the continuous conflict between the self and society. The self is regarded as a central point of all aspects of being, such as values, principles, and emotions (Kotarba 2009:149). An individual is an active social actor who endeavors to overcome and to conquer everyday dilemmas by seeking meanings and ways of action that help in dealing with the challenges that might be faced (Kotarba 2009:151). This theoretical perspective provides insight into how users of SNS assert their identities whilst operating within OSN.

As a third theoretical context, Pierre Bourdieu's reflexive sociology attempts to reconcile the seemingly contradictory dimensions of the objective and subjective aspects contained in social reality. Bourdieu argues for a bi-dimensional approach, combining *social physics*—a term used to refer to methods of observation used by structuralists to perform social inquiry—and *social phenomenology*—pointing to constructivists' inquiry based on meaning (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:7-9). In essence, reflexive sociology rejects any sociological paradigm that overemphasizes the importance of either the objective or

subjective dimension of phenomena while the other dimension is downplayed (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:10; Harrington 2005:221). Within the scope of this study, both the objective and subjective aspects of OSN were explored to broaden our understanding of the phenomenon under study. This was achieved by firstly analyzing available information found in literature on the usage of SNS globally and in South Africa. In addition to this aspect of the research, a survey consisting of closed-ended questionnaires was conducted amongst students of the University of the Free State (UFS) to generate statistical data. With regards to the social phenomenological and qualitative part of this study, in-depth interviews were conducted to establish a subjective dimension of the research participants' lifeworld experiences. A triangulation of these two different research approaches (qualitative and quantitative) positioned the study within the domain of mixed-methods research.

Online Social Networking and Social Network Sites

All people form part of social networks. A *social network* can be described as "a configuration of people connected to one another through interpersonal means, such as friendship, common interests, or ideas" (Jin 2015:503). Because of our social networks, we get to fulfil many of our social roles as social beings. In contemporary society, social networks consist of the relationships that exist both in physical contexts and environments, as well as in online platforms via electronic and digital media. Any member of society can have relationships with his/her consociates (family, friends), contemporaries

(classmates, lecturers), and other people and groups with whom he/she chooses to have contact (Thompson and Hickey 2005:126; Jin 2015:502-503).

Those who are involved in OSN are part of an *online community*, which can be defined as "a group of people who may not meet one another face-to-face, and who exchange words and ideas through the mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks" (Rheingold 1994 as cited in Preece 2000:11). As members of online communities, individuals are capable of forming and maintaining their relations and interactions with their consociates, contemporaries, and other people via online platforms. For OSN activities to materialize, the individual has to join SNS—the "web-based 'communities' that allow users to create profiles and virtually interact with other members" (Henson et al. 2011:254). To gain access to SNS, the individual must create a public or semi-public profile within a particular online platform. Once an individual has created his/her profile, he/she becomes a member of the selected online community and can begin networking with other members or *friends*.[1]

A study (Statusbrew 2017:1) found that Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp are popular SNS for South African Students. *Facebook* is an OSN platform that focuses on keeping people connected. Statistics show that, as of 2018, Facebook consists of more than 2 billion users worldwide. This OSN site had approximately 16 million active users in South Africa in 2016 (Hunter 2017:1). Already in 2014 Munienge Mbodila and colleagues (2014:117) estimated

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[1] Friends: a list of one's contacts on a social networking website.

that between 85% and 99% of tertiary students use Facebook. This finding suggests that Facebook seems to be the most popular SNS for tertiary students by far.

Twitter is regarded to be more amenable to constant public dialogue than Facebook because it is mainly a micro blogging platform that enables users to share their ideas, thoughts, and information. Even as Twitter is positioned as an open online news portal—via interactive Tweets—it does allow the user to also communicate privately with others (Junco, Heiberger, and Loken 2010:3; Johnston, Chen, and Hauman 2013:202). It is estimated that in 2018, Twitter consists of 330 million monthly active users globally (Statusbrew 2017:1), with around 8 million users in South Africa (Hunter 2017:1). *Instagram* is predominantly used to capture and share digital photos and videos (Hu, Manikonda, and Kambhampati 2014:1). Users record videos and capture photos from their mobile devices to upload these materials onto their accounts. This SNS enables its users to connect and share their life moments with the broader online community (Herman 2014:1; Hu et al. 2014:1). By some accounts, Instagram has attracted already more than 800 million users globally—with an average of 95 million photos being uploaded daily (Statusbrew 2017:1). The number of Instagram users in South Africa purportedly amounts to 3.8 million users and, as is the case with other SNS, membership seems to continue to grow (Hunter 2017:1).

WhatsApp is a messaging application that can be downloaded onto any modern portable electronic mobile device such as a smartphone, iPad, or tablet to send instant messages to other users with compatible and Internet connected devices (Hedlund 2013:1). In contrast to traditional text messages sent using SMS or airtime, WhatsApp uses Internet connection to send text messages and media files. It is rated to be the most globally popular SNS application after Facebook with 1.3 billion active users in 2018 (Statusbrew 2017:1). According to Statista (2018:1), WhatsApp is the most popular application in the Android, Apple, and Windows applications stores and was used by 49% of South Africans in 2017.

Motives Behind Online Social Networking Activities

There are numerous reasons why people are involved in OSN. Previous studies show that individuals are driven by common social forces that motivate them to use SNS (Placencia and Lower 2013:617; Beneito-Montagut 2015:538). In physical contexts, individuals usually form and maintain social networks for functional reasons: among others, the advancement of their careers, social support, and the promotion of personal needs and interests (Thompson and Hickey 2005:126; McCuddy and Vogel 2015:169). In the same way as in offline contexts, OSN interactants build relationships by making friends, participating in social organizations, and engaging in some of the most trivial interactions and exchanges such as gossiping (Jin 2015:501; Tang et al. 2016:103).

Moreover, studies reveal that young adults often maintain interpersonal relationships with people that were already part of their social system prior to their online interactions (Sponcil and Gitimu 2013:4;

McCuddy and Vogel 2015:171). SNS have become the platforms that most young adults and students use to keep in touch with their consociates in a convenient manner (Placencia and Lower 2013:617-618; Sponcil and Gitimu 2013:4). Staying in touch with pre-existing social contacts in offline contexts is not the only use of SNS. *Open SNS*[2] such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram allow users to meet strangers online whilst maintaining contact with their already known acquaintances and followers. Online platforms such as WhatsApp are mainly used to maintain pre-existing social networks. This platform is, therefore, positioned as a *closed SNS*[3] in so far as allowing the user to participate in a direct one-on-one conversation with another active user.

Digital Social Network Sites and the Sense of Reality

Small-scale mobile computers that are connected to the Internet have become increasingly ubiquitous, at least in settings such as the social environments of the students who were interviewed. In these lifeworlds, computer-mediated communication has not only come to shape social action and understandings profoundly, it has differentiated the actors' sense of "reality" in at least two interconnected ways: it has added another variation to what Schütz (1945:555) has called "worlds of phantasy" and it has changed the spatial organization of the everyday lifeworld (Schütz and Luckmann 1974:41).

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[2] *Open SNS* allow the interaction between multiple users to take place and access to the posted media files is public.

[3] *Closed SNS* allow communication to take place between two or more users. Access to the posted media files is private and generally controlled by the user.

Building on William James' analysis of how sub-universes are implicated in our sense of reality, Schütz distinguishes different types of reality: inter alia the reality of the everyday lifeworld, the worlds of phantasy, and the world of dreams. Each of these constitutes "finite provinces of meaning" (Schütz 1945:551), each characterized by a specific tension of consciousness, a specific époche (the suspension of doubt), and a specific form of experiencing the self (among other dimensions along which they differ). At any given moment, individuals perceive these dimensions as real "upon each of which we may bestow the accent of reality" (Schütz 1945:551). With reference to Kierkegaard, Schütz describes the switching between these realities not as a gradual process, but as a "leap." Of these manifold worlds, the everyday lifeworld is the paramount reality. As the reality that is socially shared and in which we interact and communicate with others, its reflection of reality is typically the strongest. Individuals return to this reality after "waking up" from the world of dreams or after putting aside a novel they were reading, having been immersed in the phantasy world of the narration.

Interconnected computers may simply add another world of phantasy. By accessing Internet services such as reading emails or websites, individuals leap into these realities as they would when reading a novel or watching TV. In contrast to conventional phantasy worlds, activities such as gaming, for example, immersing oneself in the "Fortnite" universe, or joining virtual worlds such as "Second Life," may generate an even stronger accent of reality, since they demand more active input from the user. To the extent, however, that these phantasy worlds are

shared with other (interacting) users—and Internet services such as SNS belong to this category—they constitute technologically mediated extensions of the *everyday* lifeworld.

SNS enable establishing contact and communication between individuals, as well as a range of methods for individuals to represent themselves, their understandings, and their activities on the corresponding platforms. By allowing actors to engage in technologically mediated exchanges (in principle similar to writing letters, making telephone calls, showing photographs to others, etc.), they change the way in which actors are co-present. It is not only through the physical presence in a shared zone of manipulation or world of actual reach (Schütz and Luckmann 1974:42) that co-presence is established but computer-mediated communication technologies allow for real-time face-to-face interaction that effectively constitutes co-presence as an "endogenous" variable (Campos-Castillo and Hitlin 2013:168), albeit in a reduced form as various senses are not registered technologically. Thus, while interacting in the everyday lifeworld in non-mediated ways, students increasingly have the ability to constitute co-presence through their computer devices. Technically, switching between mediated and non-mediated communication may be regarded as a "leap," but increasingly, students are simultaneously co-present in both ways, incorporating the mediated communication into their non-mediated communication. The students who were interviewed in this project do, however, still aim to make a distinction between their bodily and materially experienced everyday lifeworld and the technologically enabled representation of themselves and others, as many experien-

tial dimensions they consider "real" are not real or are inadequately "transposed" into the digital medium. When they speak of their "real self," they typically refer to the flow of experiences and processes of meaning constitution within their corporeal boundaries. Not only do they speak of difficulties to convey their subjectivity in adequate ways but they typically adhere to an empirical notion of "reality" that is in line with Schütz's analysis: they still regard the non-mediated experience of the everyday reality and who they are within that reality (i.e., who they are able to convey to be) as "more real" than what they can convey in and through computer-mediated digital spaces.

SNS do constitute, however, phantasy realities in the sense that they are *not only* used to engage in communication with other individuals but as opportunities for entertainment, education, and playful interaction and representation. By acquiring specific knowledge of how to display themselves on these platforms, actors may not only take the liberty to represent themselves in ways they would not in their embodied everyday lifeworld. They may also be uncertain of whether or not another "figure" engaged in these SNS represents a "real" person or is a "fictional" character and to what extent the online representation of this person corresponds to how they would perceive this individual—should this individual have been present in a non-mediated embodied form. This possibility does not take into account that some of these "figures" may in fact be "bots" (i.e., software agents) and thus may not relate to any specific human actor. Thus, while leaping into these technologically constituted realities by focusing their attention on the user interfaces of

the corresponding devices, the boundary between the everyday lifeworld on the one hand and the world of phantasy becomes blurred; the experience of a leap between realities becomes much less distinct compared to the more conventional media. In their narrations, the students convey different ways of how they deal with the increasing blurring of boundaries between these realities. Although many students perceive the non-mediated reality as having the strongest accent of reality, the blurring of boundaries increasingly fosters both a sense of reality and a sense of the self that are not decisively lodged in only one of the manifold realities of the actor's lifeworld.

Social Interactions and Relations

SNS serve as the platforms through which a high level of *social interaction* and building of social relations take place. Social interaction, as defined by Panos Bardis (1979:148), refers to "the way in which personalities, groups or social systems act toward and mutually influence one another." SNS are channels in which online interactants realize their communication and interpersonal needs. Even traditional sociology—long before the advent of OSN and SNS—acknowledged five basic patterns of social interaction existing among groups, organizations, and societies, namely, exchange, cooperation, competition, conflict, and coercion (Gouldner 1960 as cited in Thompson and Hickey 2005:129).

Exchange is based on the norm of *reciprocity* in expectation of gifts, love, and other courtesies. These exchanges are generally taken for granted until people fail to meet others' expectations. Regarded as

basic to human survival, *cooperation* is said to maintain social order. Without cooperation, life would be next to impossible. Thus, in this type of social interaction, individuals, groups, and societies work collectively to achieve common goals. Another pattern of social interaction is *competition*. As in the case with cooperation, individuals and social groups strive to achieve common goals when involved in competition. In competition, individuals or groups contest to achieve valued goals, acknowledging that benefits or rewards that societies have to offer are limited. *Conflict* is characterized by disputes and disagreements among individuals or social groups. This pattern of interaction is common in open SNS such as Twitter and Facebook. These conflicts can be related to issues such as politics, religion, and racism. *Coercion* involves the realization of the threat or force that those with power usually use to achieve their ends. Although coercion is not usually present on SNS—since users are able to control who they want to interact with—instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp, where private chats between two users take place, can allow for coercion to occur.

From the brief introductions to these conventionally accepted patterns of real life social interactions it is clear that these interactions do contain similarities with the patterns of social interaction that take place in SNS. We refer to the conventionally accepted patterns of social interaction in real life, as well as in SNS, to emphasize that OSN displays resemblance with our mundane everyday social interactions and relations. Because of these similarities, OSN easily provides an alternative lifeworld and everyday reality.

Identification, Self-Understanding, and Online Social Networking

Identity is one of the central concepts in social sciences—including sociology. In this article, identity is thought of as "the traits and characteristics, social relations, roles, and social group memberships that define who one is" (Oyserman, Elmore, and Smith 2012:69).

SNS can be regarded as platforms where people—particularly young people—experiment with their identities. A study by Patti Valkenburg and colleagues (2008 as cited in Leung 2011:382) revealed that over half of adolescents and young adults pretend to be somebody else when interacting on instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp. Creating a false identity is not limited to instant messaging applications[4]; it can also be done on open SNS such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. This straightforward dichotomy in as far as the concept of identity is concerned—between "real" and "digital," or between "true" and "false"—cannot easily be upheld. For this reason we differentiate between "false identities" in those cases where online participants claim the authenticity of a non-existent person; "multiple identities" in those cases where an individual in a playful manner portrays different characters; and "concealed identities" in those cases where online participants use pseudonyms to protect themselves. In addition to the use of text and language, young people often spend considerable amounts of time posting photos, videos, and

personal information on SNS (Ahn 2011:1438; Leung 2011:382). The progress made in terms of Internet technology makes it possible for OSN to have evolved to a point where it gives people the opportunity and ability to present different aspects of their identities. This is due to an individual having ample time to figure out and to socially construct, via virtual reality, how he/she wants to present him-/herself online (Leung 2011:382; Sponcil and Gitimu 2013:5-6).

Moreover, one's online identity formation is also molded by self-presentation on SNS. Self-presentation is "the process through which individuals communicate an image of themselves to others and is a central element in the construction of one's self and efforts to establish a reputation within a social context" (Yang and Brown 2016:402). It can also be seen as "a specific and more strategic form of self-disclosure" (Yang and Brown 2016:402). Young adults often disclose personal information—thereby revealing their identities and preferences—on their SNS profiles (Ahn 2011:1438). Their profiles contain the summaries of how these individuals see themselves and how they intend to be seen by others. In addition to presenting themselves in a particular way, SNS enable users to actively accept or reject friends or other members. They, therefore, emphasize purpose, power, and autonomy over the people they would like to associate with and would like to disclose their identities to (Ahn 2011:1438).

Methodological Notes

OSN as a contemporary social phenomenon can be studied quantitatively or qualitatively depending on

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[4] Instant messaging applications refer to types of online chat that offer real-time text transmission over the SNS where messages are typically transmitted between two parties (or more).

the research questions and objectives of the researcher. It can also be studied utilizing both quantitative and qualitative approaches when the researcher's intention is to learn about more than one aspect of the phenomenon. This study adopts a mixed-methods approach—using quantitative data on students' OSN patterns to better understand their experiences of SNS. In the section *Theoretical Points of Departure*, we refer to Pierre Bourdieu's attempts to reconcile the seemingly contradictory dimensions of the subjective and objective aspects contained in social reality. Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant (1992:7) assert that the world in which we live exists in the forms of objective and subjective dimensions of the lifeworld—commonly referred to as the "double life." In an endeavor to come to a better understanding of the effects of OSN dynamics on the research participants, both quantitative (objective) and qualitative (subjective) approaches are used to collect data and to structure and guide the study. Mixed-methods approaches often serve to achieve the following outcomes—triangulation, complementarity, development, initiation, and expansion (Greene 2007:100; Combs and Onwuegbuzie 2010:2; 2011:4). For the purpose of this study—to understand how a group of university students reflect on their social interactions and relations—the principles of *complementarity* and *development* are foremost elements of our mixed-methods approach. In *complementarity*, we seek to elaborate, illustrate, enhance, deepen, and broaden the overall interpretations from one analytical strand (e.g., quantitative aspect) with the results from another analytical strand (e.g., qualitative aspect).

With *development*, the researcher's intention is to use the results or findings from one analytical strand to help inform another analytical strand. The rationale for adopting a mixed-methods approach is, therefore, to utilize quantitative data to contextualize the qualitative data. The collection of data was sequential—the first phase of data collection was quantitative, whereas the second phase was qualitative. The rationale for gathering quantitative data first (via the survey) was to identify suitable candidates for the one-on-one in-depth interviews (the qualitative data). Through an examination and scrutiny of the quantitative responses provided by the respondents, we were able to recruit the candidates with relevant exposure to and suitable experience of SNS. A mixed-methods approach in this study, therefore, means that the data were collected, analyzed, and interpreted employing both quantitative and qualitative dimensions via a survey and one-on-one interviews. These data collection methods lead to a better understanding of the studied phenomenon—by uncovering its different facets within their context and in terms of meaningfulness.

The study uses two main ways of analyzing the data. Firstly, a few socio-demographic variables, as well as frequencies related to OSN and SNS usage—obtained during the survey phase of this project—are presented in quantitative format. Secondly—and more importantly—students' perceptions, experiences, and feelings are expressed using their narratives. EvaSys (Education Survey Automation Suite)[5] was used to produce a few visual illustrations of the quantitative

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[5] EvaSys is used by universities, colleges, and training providers to carry out all necessary steps of a survey which include questionnaire construction and data evaluation. One can reach a target population in various ways including a paper-based, online, or hybrid survey (which is both online and paper-based).

data obtained during the survey. For the qualitative part of the research, the research participants gave us their consent to voice record each interview session. These digital recordings were then transcribed into written format, thematically coded, and analyzed. Thematic analysis involves the process of identifying themes in the data that carry meaning and that are relevant to the research question (Willig 2014:147). In this sense, thematic analysis assisted us to identify patterns in the data.

The target population of the study was identified as the undergraduate students between the ages of 18 and 30. The sample is inclusive of both the variables of gender and race. Non-probability *convenient sampling*[6] was used to recruit 100 students of which 97 questionnaires were captured. Three questionnaires were incomplete, therefore, not incorporated into the analysis. For the individual in-depth interviews, *quota sampling*[7] was used to select six participants from the 100 respondents who participated in the survey. We opted for this sampling to maintain a representation of variables such as sex and race. The six suitable candidates were systematically chosen to participate in the one-on-one interviews—a total of three males and three females.

The study was given ethical clearance by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of the Free State (UFS).[8] All research partic-

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[6] The primary criteria for "convenient sampling" are to select the cases that are conveniently and readily available (Neuman 2012:147).

[7] "Quota sampling" is used when the researcher wants to gather a pre-set number of cases in each of several predetermined categories that will reflect the diversity of the population (Neuman 2000:197).

[8] UFS ethical clearance number UFS-HSD2016/0324.

ipants signed a consent form explaining the aim of the study, the applicable ethical considerations, the data collection process, and the measures to guarantee participant anonymity. The participants were assured that all information obtained from them would be used without revealing their identities and would be kept in a secure location.

The Survey

SNS are forms of social structures that influence their users and mould their experiences. To embody this notion, the study describes a few objective facts concerning the participants and their online interactions.

Initially, a predetermined percentage (50%) for each gender category was set to ensure an equal number/ratio of respondents for both genders. Slightly more than half of 97 respondents who completed the questionnaires turned out to be males (50.5%). Almost two thirds (61.1%) of the questionnaire respondents are African, followed by White respondents consisting of 17.9%, and Colored respondents with 16.8% in total. A small percentage (4.5%) of the respondents are Indians. The proportions of respondents in terms of racial groups depict roughly the same demographic composition of the total student population at the UFS.
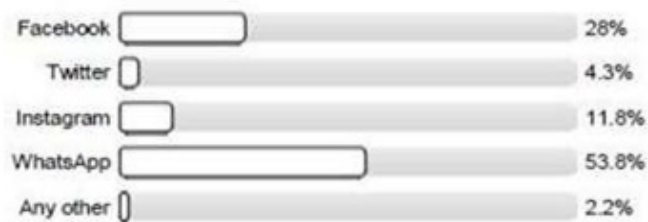
In addition to the demographic particulars mentioned above, the student profiles from the survey participants also indicate how much time the participants usually spend online and which SNS are perceived as more popular, accessible, and conducive to students' needs.

Figure 1. Social Network Sites which Provide Most Satisfaction.

Source: Self-elaboration.

Slightly more than half (53.8%) of the survey respondents obtain most satisfaction from WhatsApp. This figure is followed by their satisfaction with Facebook—where the level is 28%. Coming after Facebook is Instagram with 11.8% and Twitter with 4.3% as levels of satisfaction. Other SNS include Pinterest, Snapchat, Skype, Tumblr, Badoo, LinkedIn, BBM, and Mxit, but these sites appear to be providing low levels of satisfaction. Aspects of these results are affirmed by the *South African Social Media Landscape 2016: Executive Summary Report* (Fuseware 2016:2), which states that WhatsApp is regarded as the most used SNS in Android, Apple, and Windows online application stores with Facebook as the runner up.

Figure 2. Time Spent on Social Network Sites by Respondents on a Normal Day.

Source: Self-elaboration.

The figure above reveals that almost half (46.9%) of the survey respondents indicate that they spend more than 3 hours a day engaging in OSN activities. Those respondents who indicate to be spending 2 to 3 hours a day on SNS make up a proportion of 13.5% of the sample. This validates the findings of several studies which report that individuals who own modern Internet devices spend a large proportion of time on SNS (Tazghini and Siedlecki 2013:827; Tang et al. 2016:102).

Narrating OSN Activities: The Social Construction of Reality

The qualitative—and more important part of this study—entails the personal narratives of the research participants in relation to their experiences regarding online interactions. OSN has become part of the social reality in which members of the online community live. This is the social reality where these people live their daily lives and where they construe shared meanings created during the processes of relation formations and interactions. An important question is: "How do participants make sense of this constructed reality?" This question is partly answered by exploring the meanings participants attach to OSN:

Ehm, I would say it [OSN] means everything because lately, like now, that's where we get our information, you know. Not all of us read newspapers because we're lazy to read newspapers. So, online social networking is the closest [source of information]. And technology has improved, as you know. So, it's better 'cause you go online and see stuff. It's much easier than reading a newspaper! And every-

where you go, social networking on your phone... You know. It's everywhere—it's accessible; in simple terms. [Pretty]

What does it mean to me? It means, ehm...a chance to learn, a chance to engage with other people, a chance to ehm...to express what you feel. Like, you know, that sometimes it's sort of difficult to engage with people that you have in real life. That you're surrounded by and then, ehm...Yeah, for me, I've always took it as something...sort of ehm, a learning curve for me. [Lesego]

Online social networking is everything 'cause most of the things we…everything. Like when I'm bored, it's online social networks. When I'm having fun, I have to go on social network sites to update my friends so that they too can do what I'm doing or get hooked on what I'm doing. So, it's like…it's… everything that's "trending" [popular activities or topics on SNS]...Whatever you do, it's trending. So, [online] social networks, yeah! I can't live without them! [Millions]

What is salient in participants' narratives is the importance of SNS in facilitating communication between themselves and other people. OSN as a form of dominant technology in the current era is seen as a reliable and accessible source of information. Equally important is the role of SNS as tools of self-expression, thereby facilitating sociability.

The research participants in this study belong to Generation Z—the generation cohort which was born in the mid-1990s to early 2000s (Tulgan 2013:1).

They were born into the age of social media. The online environment as an intrinsic part of social reality is strongly integrated into their everyday lifeworld. Although they realize that the online world is not part of their natural world, they renegotiate it and often experience it as natural. To them SNS are a *paramount reality*—"the lifeworld seems like a completely unavoidable sphere in which one lives" (Inglis 2012:96). To emphasize this point, the research participants proclaim that, should they discontinue engaging with SNS, their lives would change dramatically:

Drastically, I think. Honestly, us as students or as sort of teenagers or young adults, you know social media...like, we grew up with social media, basically…From adolescence to early adulthood, we grew up with that. That is all we know, honestly. Life would change drastically, I think, yeah. It would almost be...I know it's weird to say this, but it would almost be impossible to live without social media. [Katlego]

How would my life change? I think I will be…There was a time a few years ago where my phone got broken and I couldn't use WhatsApp, I couldn't use Facebook, nothing. I was like in a…you know, that feeling when you get trapped!? That's a feeling I got when I think I can't use them anymore. That feeling of: "I want to communicate with these people, but I can't." And if online social networking can just stop for everybody, I think everybody will feel that something is missing. I can't explain it. It's just… you feel trapped. I feel trapped if I'm not using online social network sites and I feel like everybody is just "out there," but I can't get to them. [Wonder]

According to the participants, life without SNS is unimaginable. They view OSN as a phenomenon which is hard to escape. Some even make an analogy between stopping to engage on SNS and experiencing the withdrawal effects when an addict discontinues using a substance:

> It was, like ehm…You know that feeling when…the people that got addicted to drugs and stuff and then they need to get over it. That feeling of needing to attack the addiction, but at the same time you need to fulfil it. That's the feeling you get when you stop using social network sites. [Wonder]

Within phenomenological thinking, it happens that individuals "create large-scale social forces" that are products of their own interactions, but which in turn seem to be beyond their own control (Inglis 2012:94). In this sense, humans create social reality. Online social networks are products of human creation and humans use these sites to pursue their interactions. However, SNS are experienced by the users as real and objective.

Narratives on Social Interactions and Relations

SNS serve to facilitate the interpersonal relations amongst members of the online community. Through OSN individuals get to develop and maintain a form of *social capital*[9] that acts as an important resource that complements their social

relations (Lu 2011:52). Because of the ubiquitous nature of SNS, users often have more extended online relations and interactions—something that is rarely the case in the physical environment (Julien 2015:365). This theme explores the extent to which OSN interactions and relations feel real and intimate. The concept of *tie-strength*—the amount of connection a user has with his or her online friends—captures this process. To determine the tie-strength between the participants and their online friends, we focus on the description of the type of people participants interact with. We also look at the motives behind including those types of people into their social circles:

> I'd say I interact with everyone because, you know, nowadays even family members are on online social networks. On WhatsApp, for example, I have family...I have my parents on WhatsApp. I have my friends on WhatsApp. I have lovers, classmates, and even strangers on Facebook. Yeah, I'd say I interact with everybody on these social media. [Katlego]

Even though Katlego interacts with a broader online community, he is dedicated to interacting with his consociates—partners and friends. Rasala, too, interacts mostly with people who he regards as close to him, but he also spends time interacting with other individuals—acquaintances and common associates—who are part of online chat rooms. He realizes that these online interactions allow him to experience a sense of belonging through an ongoing interaction with these people:

> Okay, online I interact with mostly my friends. The ones I went to high school with, those from around

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[9] Lin (as cited in Jin 2015:503) defines social capital as "an investment in social relations on the part of individuals through which they gain access to embedded resources to enhance expected returns on instrumental or expressive actions."

varsity, and my girlfriend. And others are just group-chats where I'm involved in. Some stuff like church stuff and the choir. That's the people I communicate with, on my online platforms…I feel like they are closer to me and the breakdown in communication with them will just draw us apart if we don't keep communicating; we just gonna go apart. And then with them, I have a sense of belonging. We can relate when we communicate to each other. We can relate. We could have something to talk about. [Rasala]

While interactions with consociates are valued and prioritized by most of the participants, some of the female research participants disapprove of interactions and communications with online strangers. This disapproval is connected to previous experiences:

Everyone. But, on my side, I don't like talking to strangers. So, most of the time I talk to my friends and family…I'm avoiding trouble. Talking to a stranger, you don't know the risks. Okay, we can say it's 50/50 because you don't know if this person means good or this person means bad. But, I try to avoid that all the time because I'm a sweet person. I would think this person means good, *kanti* [whereas] this person means bad, you know. So, I just don't want to talk to strangers because I don't wanna find myself in trouble…Strangers, I just ignore. [Pretty]

I interact with family members, friends, lovers, and… besides them…okay, classmates, ex-classmates…that's it. I don't interact with strangers. You're a stranger, I don't know you. I just…I don't entertain strangers because you never know what the intentions of that

particular person are. So, if that person wants to talk to me, he/she would have [to] make some sort of efforts, sort of coming to me like face-to-face rather than on social media. So, strangers, I don't talk to them. [Lesego]

Ehm…my family, my friends and my fiancé—those are people I interact the most with. I don't trust strangers; I don't interact with them. Ehm…those are people who are closest to me. Like I said, I'm a social butterfly, at times. I want people who are closest to me to be in my life and online social networking provides that. [Wonder]

Even though Wonder does not reveal her experiences of interacting with online strangers, the following narrative reveals an experience that impacted her negatively. She indicates how some SNS such as WeChat and ToGo can create a platform for inappropriate and sometimes aggressive sexual advances:

In WeChat you can communicate with people around you, yeah! And that's crazy because WeChat you don't control it. ToGo too. ToGo is also a social network site; you can communicate with strangers around you. And if this stranger, let's say he's 50 years old and I'm 22…Let's say he's a psychopath and everything, that is scary [shivering voice]. And I don't say all guys are like that. But, most guys, in my experience. They only want one thing on WeChat, on ToGo and everything. They want this…"sexual vixen." I'm not interested, I have a fiancé. I don't want that! [Wonder]

The narratives reveal that the research participants maintain strong ties with their partners, family

members, and close friends. SNS are instrumental in fostering social cohesion and bonds with people who are already part of the research participants' lives, particularly in those cases where a connection/relationship was established outside the online spaces.

Narratives on Identity and Self-Presentation

OSN, according to Sponcil and Gitimu (2013:5-6), offers young people the opportunity to explore their identities in so far as how they want to express themselves. Thus, OSN provides them with ownership and agency over identity formation, contributing to how an individual wants to be perceived in the virtual spaces. In this sense, an individual's online interactants are similar to a mirror, reflecting back the created image. A sociological concept which captures this process of self-presentation is Charles Cooley's *looking-glass self*. According to this concept, people align their images with what they think other people see—they imagine how they must appear to others and resultantly act in terms of this assessment (Cooley 1902 as cited in OpenStax 2013:92). In this line of thought, self-presentation as performed by users of SNS can be seen as directly linked and influential to identity construction. The meaning of the concept "identity" as used by the participants can be classified into two distinct categories—identity as *self-understanding* and as a notion of *commonality*. Self-understanding refers to the way in which a person defines who he/she is (Fearon 1999:20), whereas commonality describes subjective, experienced, felt, and perceived sharing of (some)

characteristics amongst members of the group (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). Based on the complexities associated with the concept of identity, we probed how the research participants perceived and projected their online sense of self as opposed to their offline sense of self:

> When I'm not on social network sites, I think I'm more quiet...Yeah, I think I'm more quiet! I'm always alone. I don't talk that much [laughing] like when I'm on social network sites…Because offline, I'm more with myself. I talk to myself a lot. I feel like that's when I think a lot and that's when I get to go online and share all the stuff. But, when I'm offline, I don't really get to engage with people. I think I'm a bit emotional when I engage with people because people don't wanna accept your view and they want to force their viewpoint on you. That's why I just keep everything to myself [when engaging with people in real] and rather share it [online]. I won't be standing on the podium preaching or something. No! [Rasala]

Rasala describes himself as somewhat of an introvert when he is offline as opposed to resorting to projecting an extrovert self when online. Even though he seems to harbor two different identities, they complement each other—online platforms afford him an opportunity to externalize the thoughts and perceptions that he feels constrained to communicate in his offline environment. SNS afford the user time to figure out how they want to articulate their sentiments, views, thoughts, and perceptions (Leung 2011:382; Sponcil and Gitimu 2013:5-6). While Rasala feels that SNS grant him an opportunity to express himself, Wonder believes

that the disembodied nature of SNS makes it hard for her to express her true sense of self. The lack of face-to-face interactions and the inability to see and experience everyday micro-expressions are serious limitations of SNS:

On social network sites I think I'm really constricted. Because if I talk to a person face-to-face, they know exactly what I'm thinking, they know exactly what I'm feeling. Online platforms are really constricting me into being...I'm more proper on social network sites than I am in my real life [pause] more like a "proper lady," I can say. I'm more proper on social network sites than I am in my real life. [Wonder]

Oh, online? I'm all fake. Nah-nah, not all fake, a bit fake. Because some things, I fake them, you see. So, I lie a bit, twisting things around just to make myself look cool. Because I can't come second best all the time. It's just that sometimes you need to win, you know, stay winning. That's it. So, my personality is different from my actual self. I'm loud on Facebook, but all you see is typing. There's a line! Even if you can read it and you find it hilarious. But, if I say it to you in person, it's gonna be funnier. So, there's this thing that sets Facebook and my real personality apart. [Millions]

Millions re-negotiates his sense of self and portrays an alternative (fake) identity online. This *loud self* is driven by the need to be socially acceptable and a desire to be competitive on online platforms. In the process of interaction, people find themselves in situations where they have to compete with one another (Thompson and Hick-

ey 2005:129), and the presence of this competition is at the basis of the restrictive and determinist nature of OSN and SNS. However, this view is not accepted by all research participants—some feel that their offline identities are consistent with their online ones:

What they see on social media, what I post on social media represents me; whether I like it or not. So, hence I'm saying: I don't post naughty things 'cause I'm not naughty. So, what they see on social media is what they see when I'm not on social media. [Pretty]

Upon being asked to describe his identity, Katlego says:

[Laughs] Can I relate it to sort of my own online profile? For example, Facebook, they ask the same sort of question: Who are you? And based on who I am on Facebook and who I am in life in general...I actually wrote that I am the "African dream"...I shed light on a lot of problems that we have as Africans. I believe that we are still in a state of slavery; which is mental slavery, you know. So, I said to myself: that is the African dream. 'Cause I believe that our people can still be freed from these ideologies; from these thoughts that they have in their minds. [Katlego]

When talking about the question of: "Who I am?," Katlego describes himself as an "African dream" and it suggests a collective identity. Furthermore, he uses the "we" pronoun to polarize his identity or group membership from that of non-members. Katlego identifies himself with those who are

similar to him and who share a common social reality with him.

Conclusion

The narratives suggest that OSN has become part of the everyday mundane activities of most of the research participants. As such, they find it hard to imagine a life outside these online platforms. OSN is an important part of the social reality in which the online interactants experience their mundane everyday lives. In these online spaces, individuals get to negotiate their daily lives and construe shared meanings created during the processes of forming relations and interactions. OSN provides easy access to general information and is also seen as a symbol of effective and efficient communication and interaction.

SNS hold value to the participants' daily experiences and lifeworlds—they re-negotiate their *real* sense of self by projecting and engaging their online environment with an alternative, or even *alter ego*, identity. A recurring narrative that emerged is that online identities allow participants to exercise more autonomy and self-expression than real life settings. According to existential sociology, an individual constructs her/his *self* within the complexities of social and cultural contexts and is active in exercising her/his will and agency (Kotarba 2009:142-143). As such, online platforms are instrumental in assisting participants to exercise their agency. However, for some participants, OSN is restrictive in terms of expressing themselves. This is due to the disembodied nature of SNS: these participants are unable to externalize their real selves. SNS appear to mould the manner in which these users express, as well as present themselves online.

Given that SNS appear to be intriguing and inviting to student participants, questions arise: "With whom do students interact and form relations?" and "Who is most valued in these interactions?" The findings reveal that the participants maintain and develop social capital in two different ways— by interacting with people they meet online and those who are already part of their lives. For the majority of the participants, maintaining interpersonal relations with significant others such as families, relatives, and friends makes their online interactions worth their while. Although the participants prefer to interact with their consociates, they also interact with people that they come across online— these people are usually strangers. *Open* SNS such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram make it possible for users to interact with anyone, including strangers. Although the idea of meeting new people online seems to be exciting and thrilling, some of the participants show disapproval of developing interactions with online strangers. This attitude towards online strangers often relates to undesirable experiences. Online strangers are often linked to traits that include dishonesty, discourtesy, and opportunism. On the whole, OSN, taken granted as it is, can be seen as an everyday lived experience that is perpetuated through intersubjective interactions by members of the online community. As much as these online platforms are social spaces where participants continuously construct their reality, SNS influence and determine how the research participants experience this reality.

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