

# The Sadness of the Hand-held Self-portrait

The use of Photography in On-line Social Networks

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The use of Photography in On-line Social Networks

Dissertation of Michael Xuereb for Photography (Honours) Degree.

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## CHAPTER 1

### *An Introduction to the Cause*

We are living in a world where communication is instant, images are perfectly reproducible an infinite amount of times, and hooking up to the internet has become like hooking up to a life support mechanism. Not only has it become milliseconds long for us to find what we are looking for, but, nowadays, there's a constantly increasing probability that we *will* find what we're looking for. For most of us the internet has become a one stop shop for everything. It has revolutionized every entity that makes up a society. It has become a significant commodity for economic markets, mass-communication, event organizing, money transferring, educating people, gathering global statistics, electing presidents and everything in between. Throughout centuries the race has been to transport goods, services and ourselves in lesser time than the shortest time possible. With the introduction of telecommunication we had a taste of how we can virtually be somewhere else instantly. And when something reaches its destination immediately, distance becomes irrelevant, so the whole mentality of delivering a message changed. However it had to be the world wide web that truly made our presence virtual (Buffardi and Campbell, 2008), because now it's not only our voices we can instantly transfer and receive, but also anything that can be zipped up in any file format ever created.

This all sounds good, but is it really?

It's not just old media corporations that have been affected. This way of life has become a part of us so much, that it is altering our character development, our life values and our social ethics. Terms like 'online-presence' and 'online social gatherings' have been coined and entered the common-man's vocabulary. The internet has infiltrated our lives to the extent that we now constantly use it for everything and anything we do. People all around the world are looking for the shortest route to go to the closest key-maker and looking for the best way to remove red wine stains from nylon carpets. People are anonymously clicking through blogs and online social networks to *read* what is happening to their childhood friends and whether their last girlfriend found another guy, and if so click a bit more to see who the lucky bastard is. On such sites like Facebook and MySpace people are catching up on family life, new businesses are emerging, sub-cultures are being created, life-styles are being gauged and millions of human relationships are going through all the various cycles. All this change cannot be without flaws.

In 1970, while writing about the digital age ahead, Alvin Toffler mentioned how, before everyone is perfectly adaptable to the change, there will be “mass disorientation, future shock on a grand scale”. He wrote; “This is the prospect that man now faces. Change is avalanching upon our heads and most people are grotesquely unprepared to cope with it.” (Toffler, 1970, p.12) Now that this *change, (or start of a change)* has reached everyone in the developed countries, we are in a position to discuss how accurate our views into the future were. The generation we are a part of is the only generation that can discuss this change through experience.

Most people understand the capabilities of the digital technology, however in certain situations, they prefer having some things done with analogue methods. Such as asking around for advice instead of googling it. Not everyone’s opinion about this digital age is totally positive, but it’s very difficult to compete with the quick and easy methods provided online; all the time. General discourse hardly criticizes the recent technological influx that affected our developed communities . To be precise, most people aren’t the slightest preoccupied with having an opinion about how the change has affected them. They simply use what everyone else is using and complain when it stops working. In the case of the other small percentage of people who have their opinions heard, (mostly writers, journalists and people in the media) it is likely that many are simply bolstering this new communication and holding back from mentioning its weaknesses and limitations.

The main reason for this can be that old media companies and mainstream networks would not even dream of criticizing it, because if they did they would instantly be accused of being either out of touch or non-understanding. Younger media would fear being unpopular and would think that Facebook users will consider them unreliable if they had something bad to say about the new. And most probably they would, so they chose not to go against the grain.

I think we’ve heard enough of how great Facebook is, and even though its effects could be more positive than negative, there should be a wider explanation and understanding of the negative psychological and anthropological effects it may have. My intention is to take one step back from Facebook style networks, to observe and criticize what it did to us as a society. As a reference subject, I would like to focus on the images that members of such online networks choose to upload for their account photo albums.

Photography has been utilized in every way, and its recent purpose is the one it is now serving on online social networks. In a way this resembles the choice of photography for a family album, however these two are worlds apart. In Pierre Bourdieu’s view, social photography “is essentially

predisposed to serve the social functions which have been very generally conferred upon it, it remains the case that the social uses of photography, presented as a systematic (i.e. coherent and comprehensible) selection from objectively possible uses, define the social meaning of photography at the same time as they are defined by it.” (Bourdieu, 1990, p.77) Whichever role it has, the power of photography is never doubted.

What photography signifies to people is not always the same. Photography can mean documentation, souvenir, art, expression and so on. The meaning of photography varies both in time and with people, depending on the meaning of life for the people capturing the images. And the meaning of photography continued to drastically change with the increasing popularity of online social networks. Every image and snapshot has now a different significance since it serves a different purpose.

For obvious reasons, the “point-and-shoot” method has been the selected capturing technique for photographers of the snapshot. In an essay, Craig Garrett coins snapshot photographers as “diarists”. He describes them as people who “engage the camera’s unique transparency to describe actual lived experience.” And he defines a snapshot image as grainy, off-kilter composed, with high contrast of an on-camera flash and murky from available light. “It has long been the equipment families rely on to capture the incidental moments in their lives, and its aesthetic has become the universal language of fleeting memories.” (Garrett 2003) With the popularity of photo-based online social networks, the snapshot’s functionality has changed; this is because it’s *audience* has changed. Snapshot photos have always been an expression of “this is MY life, MY observation, MY reality” (Garrett 2003), however they are no longer a matter of privacy and intimacy between the person who took the image and a few other people. Due to the popularity of sites like Facebook, the snapshot that we’re used to has become more accessible to a much wider (undefined) range of people.

Snapshot images are a personal narration of whatever the photographer thought would be worth to capture. They are generally taken to document casual occasions or as a memorabilia for the photographer and/or the people involved. The *author* of the snapshot image doesn’t necessarily have to be interested in photography; it’s usually a person who is keen on recording moments he or she thinks are meaningful and worth remembering. Due to the nature of snapshot images, it is the most popular style of photography found on online social networks and in this writing I will attempt to explore some consequences of when these snapshots become a *tool* of mass exposure. In the following chapters I will be discussing: What it means to live online; The

Narcissistic aspect of creating an online reference of yourself; Voyeuristic and Exhibitionistic traits that flourished out of this recent phenomenon and the concern one should have about all of this.

## CHAPTER 2

### *Online Living*

Less than a generation ago, the personal computer, and other interaction technologies started entering the average household (Negroponte, 1995). People started wondering where all this may lead to. They warned us about this new interaction with inanimate objects. They feared it would make us lose our human to human interaction. They warned us with insights to a future with artificial intelligence, destruction of civilization and human isolation. But now with online networks there should be a different kind of worry; a more complicated type of concern. It's no longer a fear of human to robot interaction, but rather the restrictions of human to human interaction brought about by our new chosen methods of interacting with each other.

“As human beings become increasingly intertwined with the technology and with each other via the technology, old distinctions between what is specifically human and specifically technological become more complex. Are we living life on the screen or life in the screen? Our new technologically enmeshed relationships oblige us to ask to what extent we ourselves have become cyborgs, transgressive mixture of biology, technology and code.” (Turkle 1995, p.21)

We have come to a point where we can do almost anything online, or so we think. In the real world, the differences between two activities are limitless, however all online activities are constrained to the limitations of being performed through a computer. In 1995 two authors wrote about what was there to come. Nicholas Negroponte predicted that internet facilities will make geographical location irrelevant. He argued that “digital living will include less and less dependence upon being in a specific place at a specific time..” He took it even further and continued; “..and the transmission of place itself will start to become possible.” (Negroponte, 1995 p.165) Sherry Turkle describes the same subject as a “culture of simulations.” I wouldn't say that these two authors' predictions were incorrect. It is true that we have come very far in technology and there will be much more development to come, (such as cooking shows you can smell and holographic assistants) however we are very far from comparing the possibilities of everyday physical life to life on the web. Perfect resemblance wouldn't be developed in our lifetime for sure. Both Negroponte and Turkle simply said what they thought would happen, and didn't really say if it would be a good thing or not. I think it's still early to comment on the “culture of simulations” because people are still spending their majority of time in the physical world, and the simulations technology available today is still not very close to the real thing.

Most networking sites have a page dedicated to the site's statistics - number of active users; number of photos uploaded every second; number of language translations, and so on. Their very own little mantelpiece of trophies. The most envious set of statistics has to be that of Facebook. It's enough to say that around 2000 new images were uploaded onto Facebook accounts while you were reading this sentence. (Facebook/comScore)

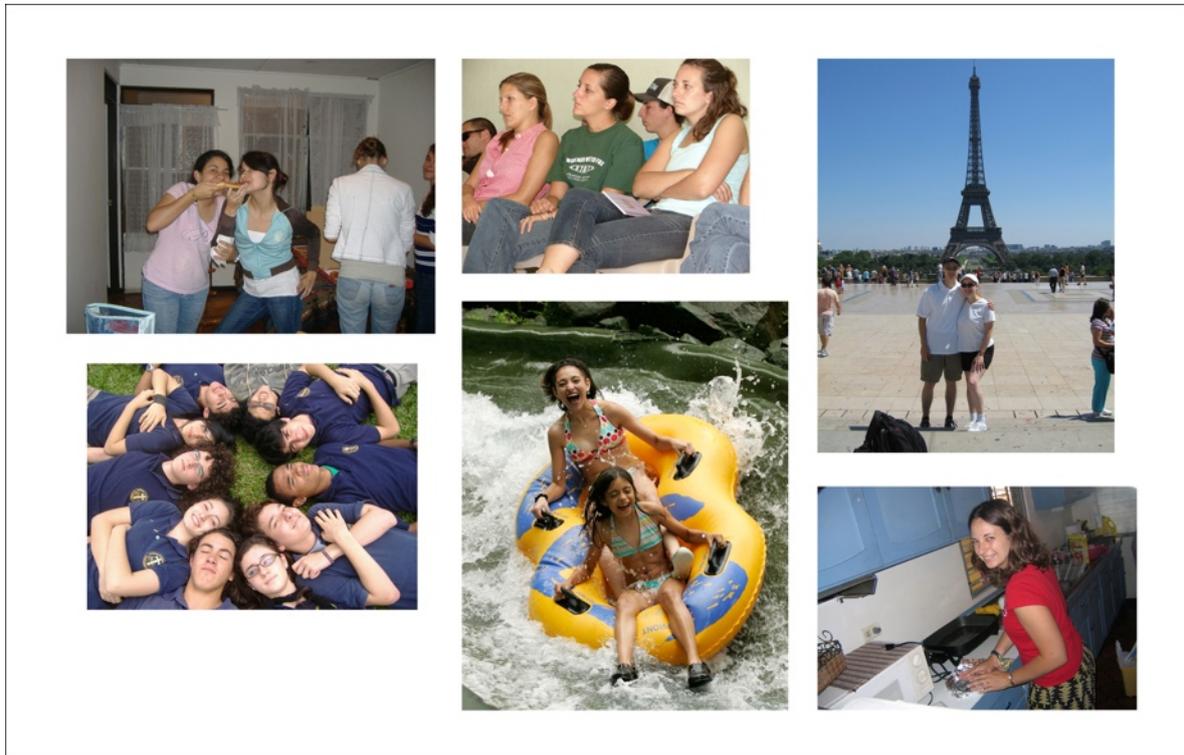
But Facebook wasn't always this popular, in fact in various interviews the creator of Facebook Mark Zuckerberg talks about how the initial intention was to make an online network between his peers while he was attending university. The success of online networks is based on the business model they use of user-generated content. (An even better example of this is YouTube.) Providing what the general public wants; then simply listening to the same people to see what else they want and providing it, is what made these Web 2.0 sites popular. Facebook, as we know it today, is the result of this *comprehending and providing* looping transformation. Facebook is nothing without its users. It is the user's desires that make up what Facebook is and these desires regenerate its characteristics over and over.

Facebook started as a reference space, a place to catch up on the people you know from the real world. Now it has become a hangout spot for many teenagers and college students. About half of its members are in college (Kirkpatrick, 2007). People are introducing their physical world friends and family to their new cyber-friends, through photos, invites and a number of applications swiftly provided on the site.

The role of casual snapshots is essential in understanding an individual on an intimate level, and similarly, our online-photographs are essential to fulfill the intention of online social networks. The decisions uploaders take while editing their choice of which images go online or not, are based on their personal judgement of a set of references. Charlotte Cotton calls these; "processes of signification and cultural coding" (Cotton, 2004). Later on in the same chapter she refers to the *fixed formula* of these elements in photos, and mentions two french philosophers (Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault) who describe this formula by explaining how "the meaning of any image was not of its author's making or necessarily under his or her control, but was determined only by reference of other images or signs." (Cotton, 2004). (Needless to say, online networks were not as popular when Charlotte Cotton wrote this. She was referring to photography in general.) The personal verdict of each image considered for uploading (such as those in Figure 1.) can be as various as one individual to another. For example a person can be perfectly comfortable to put unflattering images of his/her self, such as a photo of when a teenager's room-mates wrote

STUPID with mustard on his forehead while asleep. Other individuals have more rigorous selection standards, and make sure that only self-praising images make it online. For example only images with perfect hair and a calculated pose are considered.

Figure 1. A sample of typical images found on online social networks



Our choice of images is all about how we want to present ourselves with everyone and anyone. However social network users can forget who is (and who will be) able to view their photos. Users tend to designate their images to be viewed by their best mates, but can fail to evaluate the fact that their photo album can also one day be viewed by their employer and their mom!

## CHAPTER 3

### *Cultivating casual Narcissism*

This chapter addresses the probability or fact that people who are regular users of online social networks are more exposed to narcissistic attributes, due to the high level of narcissistic traits found online and in effect tend to become narcissistic themselves. (In this regard, narcissism is viewed as a community issue, rather than a personality disorder.)

People all around (the majority being college and university students) are deciding if they want to keep their snapshots instead of deleting them, on the criteria of being good for Facebook or not. Now, more than ever, casual photography has become a tool for self-presentation and social interaction (Buffardi and Campbell 2008). As a person who most of the time has a camera at hand, I have been asked to e-mail photos of people a number of times. Since the Facebook boom, the main reason why people tell me they want a copy of their images has gradually changed from *I'd like to have it* to *I'd like to have it for my Facebook*. For their own particular reasons people choose to upload images that they think describe them best *or* images that portray the fictional or semi-fictional persona they are in the process of creating. In the domain of Facebook these photos take on a new role. They become interactive. They invite viewers not only to look at them but also to respond to them and to this life portrayed online. Such so-called 'role', forces Facebook users to constantly alter, update and retouch their photos so as to maintain and perfect their online status. (Rosen, 2007).

Many people's Facebook account is important to them and the reasons behind this can be different from one user to the other. According to Christine Rosen, the choice of images in these virtual galleries are simply an expression of the human desire for attention. (Rosen, 2007) On different levels, Facebook users can be self-indulgent and self-praising when it comes to building their online persona. I say *on different levels* because there are those who simply avoid images that do not compliment them, those who exaggerate pleasing images and text, and others who consciously lie for their own agenda.

A recent instant that comes to mind is when all of a sudden a childhood friend removed all photos of him at parties, drunk and the day he had a tattoo done, and replaced them with photos of him with his family and his graduation. This was not the person I knew. Later it all made sense when he

told me he was applying for a post of a history teacher. On Facebook, misrepresentation of your real self is a violation of the web-site's policy (Grossman, 2007), however I personally find no conviction against Facebook users who don't tell the exact truth, because I understand that only people who we choose should really get to know us. Nonetheless, this knocks down the ever-charmed argument that Facebook is a means of getting to know people.

The example of truth-twisting on Facebook mentioned above, had a conscious, defined cause. There is a more worrying type of photo sharing network users who are fabricating their persona on a much more psychologically critical manner. I am referring to the individuals who express their narcissistic tendencies through online social networks, resulting in an online social issue.

A narcissist is an individual with a personality trait reflecting grandiose and inflated self-concept, one who considers oneself as intelligent, powerful, physically attractive and unique. 'Narcissists do not focus on interpersonal intimacy, warmth or other positive long-term relational outcomes, but they are very skilled at both initiating relationships and using relationships to look popular, successful and high in status in the short term' (Buffardi and Campbell, 2008: 1304).

These individuals tend to be very cautious on choosing what to reveal about them and how to portray themselves. 'They may not feel the concern of others in putting so much of themselves and their lives onto the Internet, but feel greater concern in projecting a positive, attractive and even profitable vision of themselves – a face worthy of Facebook.' (Boon and Sinclair, 2007 p.17).

A bulletin brought out by the University of Georgia, discusses the concern we should have of online social networks, regarding this particular reason. "The concern is that these Web sites offer a gateway for self-promotion via self-descriptions, vanity via photos, and large numbers of shallow relationships (friends are counted—sometimes reaching the thousands—and in some cases ranked), each of which is potentially linked to trait narcissism" (Buffardi and Campbell, 2008). Mark McKinley, professor of psychology at Lorain Country College, compares this trend to a collector's quest, a pursuit of security, a way to fill an emotional void or even a way to achieve distinction and fame. (McKinley,2007)

Due to the nature of how people function online, the internet has always been something that complements narcissistic traits, and social websites are the perfect platform for people with narcissistic tendencies because one can, very conveniently and privately compare themselves with others. They can see how they compare with other people from the information in the About Me section, or from the images which show how they look, doing what, with whom, and where.

Narcissists are boastful and eager to talk about themselves (Buss and Chiodo, 1991), gain esteem from public glory (Wallace and Baumeister, 2002), and enjoy looking at themselves in the mirror, in photographs or videotapes (Robins and John, 1997). Virtual socializing provide adequately for self-promotion. As outlined in Christine Rosen's article "Virtual Friendship and the New Narcissism", the main point of concern is whether this technology, with its constant demands to collect friends and status, and market oneself, is in some way undermining one's ability to make more sense of who he or she is, or where he or she belongs (Rosen, 2007).

In the book, *The Culture of Narcissism*, which was written years before the creator of Facebook was even born, Christopher Lasch writes about how the narcissistic culture he was seeing in the American people of his generation, was the by-product of a nation wide attitude of self obsession. He discusses how he was seeing Americans isolating themselves and losing touch with reality, which lead to the feeling of emptiness in individuals. Lasch argues that every society reproduces its culture in its citizens, their way of life and their personality (Lasch 1979: 34). This argument can be linked to the findings of a study carried out by Dr. Will Reader, at Sheffield Hallam University. This study was based on a set of online questionnaires, the results of which showed that in the first few years of the twenty first century, all kinds of relationships amongst people were becoming ever more weak. Such trend was apparent in all societies across the globe. (Highfield and Fleming, 2008; Randerson, 2007) Nonetheless, the first few years of the 21st century were the period during which online social networks were becoming increasingly popular, especially with the mainstream population. What could such trends imply? Do they mean that whilst real-life friendships were going downhill, people started creating and resorting to the comfort of virtual relationships? Or was the popularity of online social networks such as Facebook, a result of a changing society, to one which finds superficial and virtual relationships more reliable than genuine and real intimacy? A society that trades actual human contact for virtual smiles on MySpace, winks on Match.com and pokes on Facebook, shows its desire to avoid the vulnerability and uncertainties that true and intimate friendships entail. (Rosen, 2007) Nonetheless, whether online social networks maybe regarded as the cause of this change in society or rather an effect of such change is very subjective.

The connection between narcissistic traits and online social networks is a contemporary subject that was the issue of several recent discussions (such as in Baldwin and Stroman, 2007; Orlet, 2007; Vaidhyanathan, 2006). Recent information shows that the total amount of MySpace.com users is 90 million per month, (Stone, 2007) and Facebook.com has 21 million members (Geist, 2007). Around the same time this data was collected, a study was conducted by Laura E. Buffardi and W. Keith Campbell, which analyzed how narcissism is manifested on virtual socialising.

Narcissistic personality self-reports were gathered from Facebook users, while another group of people, who did not know the candidates personally, were asked to view and rate their impression of the Facebook pages they were viewing. Most questions were answered by a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). Throughout the tests, there was a distinction between participants who were expressing self-promotion and those who were expressing self-importance. There were questions about every data entry section of a typical Facebook page, such as the *About Me* section; *Interests* section, member of groups, and most important for us; *images uploaded*; the way these are captioned; and about the main profile picture, which appears the most frequently from all the uploaded images. (Buffardi and Campbell, 2008) After the data was gathered, the researchers came up with a probability procedure to determine how narcissistic traits are expressed through writings and images, by asking the raters to compare the contents of the images uploaded on the owners' Facebook page, to the narcissistic perception they recorded from other sections of the owner's page.

The results were not at all surprising. The most 'physically attractive' main photos, belonged to the owners who were judged to be more narcissistic. Those Facebook identities which were thought to be less narcissistic were voted to have less 'seductive' and less 'self-promoting' main images. Similar results came up regarding images uploaded for online albums on Facebook. This means that posted photographs which were thought to be provocative and/or self-promoting, belonged to Facebook users who were thought to have higher narcissistic traits from their text input fields.

Boon and Sinclair state that the very structure and functioning of Facebook seems to encourage superficiality. Such online networks embrace the novel and the popular over the meaningful and the complex. (Boon and Sinclair, 2007 p.17) Narcissistic Facebook users invest so much energy into improving and grooming their online image that they might be missing the chance to genuinely improve themselves (Rosen, 2007). 'Indeed in some profile it is worryingly difficult to 'find' the person in among all the digital artifice.' (Boon and Sinclair, 2007 p.18).

Many argue that networking Web pages (such as that of Figure 2), are very controlled environments, (Vazire and Gosling, 2004) since each user decides what appears in his or her own time. However controlled this environment might be, according to Rosen, once you peruse a profile, you get to learn more about a potential acquaintance in few seconds than you might have learned about a flesh-and-blood friend in a month. (Rosen, 2007) Such virtual relationships are very different from traditional human interaction. Dr. Will Reader argues that face-to-face contact is a requirement for intimate friendships. (Highfield and Fleming, 2008; Randerson, 2007) In this respect, non-narcissistic Facebook users may be the first to realize that these online connections

and relationships have in fact a lot of flaws. On the contrary, the ways in which one can interact with others in the virtual environment, such as by provision of text, uploading of images, and online chatting, are more appealing to narcissistic individuals. This is because individuals with narcissistic tendencies tend to prefer superficial relationships. Relationships between individuals that are built and exist exclusively on social networking sites are rarely emotionally deep and committed relationships (Buffardi and Campbell, 2008). This explains why such relationships are the type that fulfill narcissistic individuals.



Figure 2. standard web-page setup of a Facebook user's profile

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Because of these reasons mentioned, narcissism in society is being generated through Facebook and other such online social networks. Facebook enables people to create idealistic representations of their real world, be selective on what to reveal or otherwise and engage themselves in virtual connections. Furthermore, since such websites are becoming increasingly popular, one can argue that these narcissistic traits are multiplying *more* narcissism, because other Facebook users tend to unconsciously copy the attitudes they are encountering on such online networks. Therefore, one could say that websites such as Facebook are becoming breeding

grounds for narcissism because individuals who are not necessarily narcissistic become so due to what they are being exposed to while online.

## CHAPTER 4

### *Posers and Voyeurs*

Exhibitionists and Voyeurs are a common and integrated aspect of most societies. This chapter analyzes whether due to the essence of photo-based online networks, these two harmful characteristics are indeed being propagated more than ever before.

People enjoy knowing things about people. That's a known fact. And many people like to know that they are being seen by other people. Online social networks like Facebook are the ideal way of satisfying these guilty pleasures. Needless to say we didn't have to wait for such social sites to figure these things out.

Before social web sites were being used, people who were caught looking into other people's personal lives were regarded as nosey individuals and labeled as Peeping Toms. They were considered as disturbed individuals and socially harmful. But nowadays, funnily enough, spying on others has become the norm. Every day millions of people are logging into their online account to check out on people's profiles and photos, whether they know them or not. *Catching up on people* is just a mannerly way of saying *spying on whatever you can get your eyes on*. "For many Facebook users, this gossip is something they thrive on" (Kristy Ward, 2008). Some users enjoy flicking through pictures and profiles of others on Facebook simply for the fun of it and to kill some time. Others find pleasure and satisfaction in gathering information about people who are not aware that they are being spied on. This behavior can be regarded as an example of voyeurism, where the voyeurs (or spies) are perfectly concealed from the person they are spying on.

To be fair, 'Voyeuristic' would be a harsh word to describe these people, and the word also has sexual connotations. Many social network wonderers, simply look around to see what can be interesting. In a way, very similar to casual gossip. This curiosity on people we know is one of the biggest reasons why so many people are spending so many hours online.

So voyeurism nowadays, is also explained in terms of people's obsession with reality TV shows, such as Big Brother and America's Next Top Model. Viewers become addicted to contestants' lives, and crave for updates and news about their progress in the show. Similarly, through

Facebook, users are able to get a constant inside scoop of all the activity happening online. For example users are contacted when new photos of others are posted or when relationships fail. (Kristy Ward, 2008).

On Facebook people can go through whatever is available about somebody, without ever having to interact with him or her, or even be in the vicinity of the person. "To access someone's personal information without any effort to get to know him or her, desensitizes our awareness of and response to valuable details about people." (Grohol in Hirt, 2007). In fact, most users feel the need to 'catch up' on someone simply to please their curiosity and not to create a bond or relationship with him or her, especially if they do not know the person at all. On this basis, Facebook may be regarded as a *cyber-stalker's* paradise. (Sena-Becker, 2007).

Therefore being voyeuristic online is to a certain extent instinctive, since its very easy and tempting to dig into others' lives. The problem arises when people with voyeuristic tendencies, start taking it a bit too far. They start finding pleasure and satisfaction in someone else's misfortune portrayed through his pictures or profile. For example they are pleased to see that the most popular schoolmate turned out to have an ugly girlfriend, and ended up fat and bald. Learning that they are not the only ones who did not reach their life's ambitions is usually therapeutic. This type of behavior is termed as Schandenfreude, and Facebook is giving an easy leeway for such attitude, with a few mouse clicks away.

Despite all of this, one may argue that whatever one can view on such social sites is there by choice, since the individuals themselves decide what to upload and what they are willing to share with other online friends and possibly strangers. Therefore one can argue that Facebook does not give rise to real voyeurism since whatever a user is viewing on others' profiles is not truly private. However a counter-argument is that when people upload images and other information about themselves, they are uploading their material with the main intention to be viewed by a particular group of people that they have in mind, or sometimes even just one person. Therefore, when people prowl profile material that was not intended for them to view, it is reasonable to say, that they are engaging in real voyeuristic activity. And even though this type of twenty-first century voyeurism has less of a conviction than traditional voyeurism, the voyeur tends to feel the usual kind of excitement, because he knows that what he's watching wasn't intended to be viewed by him, and this makes it equally satisfying.

However, online social network users, (particularly youths) are not at all preoccupied by such

voyeuristic activities. They do not think twice to put up their regular photos. They are not worried of people intruding into their privacy. They find no significant threat that makes them reconsider uploading the majority of their photographs. This is not because they are naive of the various possible threats, but because they live online by the motto: 'security through obscurity' (Boyd, 2007). Subconsciously, they take it for granted that those who don't know them would not be interested in their photos or profile, and furthermore, having their profile and images viewed by a perfect stranger does not effect them. They prefer uploading freely what they want to upload, than being constrained to consider which photos to put on their profile, to avoid feeling threatened.

Therefore youths from our generation don't mind being victims of voyeurism, but rather are glad to increase their online friend list without context of selection. Prof Robin Dunbar surveyed Facebook users to find out that each member has an average of 150 people listed as 'friends' in their social network. This number is referred to as *Dunbar Number*, which is the theoretical cognitive limit to the number of people with whom one can maintain stable social relationships. However from the total of 150 friends only around five friends make up their core of close friends (in Highfield & Fleming, 2008; Randerson, 2007). This is the same amount the average person has as friends in the real world (Reader, 2007). The reason why there are more than just these five friends is very subjective. It can be because accepting friends and making friends means more authorization to view more profiles. The reason can also be psychologically deeper, such as the inherent human need to be popular, to fulfill a sense of belongingness (Baumeister and Leary, 1995) or simply that friends' requests are difficult to 'ignore'. Another reason can be because it's easy to increase the friends' list, since it involves just one mouse click (Reader, 2007). The confirmation of someone as a friend, gives him or her the power to secretly view all the contents of one's profile, without one being aware of when or what they view. These reasons are the cause of why more profile viewing is happening, and it is also the indirect cause of why online privacy is diminishing. This might sound worrying, but in fact many younger users are not worried at all. For them, being extensively viewed is like being a Paris Hilton or a Lindsay Lohan, so they don't necessarily think about it as a negative, argues Sarah Kirk, director of KU Psychological Services (Megan, 2007).

For every online voyeur, there's an online exhibitionist. Social networks is the ideal location where the perfect storm of these two paraphilias can take place. We are part of a culture that likes to see itself and see others (Hirt, 2007).

For individuals who take pleasure in creating interest around their online persona, primarily need interesting material; which is not always available. In fact, only a few have something worthwhile to show, and it's rare to come across originality. Only a few people know how to write well, and at the

same time, people will do almost anything to be liked (Siegel, 2008; 161). People online also tend to imagine that since their profile is online, a high amount of people are going to see it and everyone would have the same amount of enthusiasm as their. Regarding self-centered individuals with exhibitionistic tendencies, Christopher Lasch writes; "People responded to others as if their actions were being recorded and simultaneously transmitted to an unseen audience or stored up for close scrutiny at some later time." (Lasch, 1979 p. 239)

A large percentage of the uploaded images are only interesting for the uploader. So the natural question is *why are they shared?* It's easy to point out that online network profiles have nothing to do with how we get to know people in real life friendships and relationships. Notice for example the 'Photos of..' section or the 'About Me' section; most of the time online people are presenting themselves without defined context, because they are sending out a message without having a specific recipient. And as recipients, we are viewing images, and reading things about people which they did not particularly intend for us to see. It's a very different experience from sending someone an e-mail with attached images or showing someone a real world photo album. In a way, it's like distributing your belongings, experiences and thoughts in a free-for-all, without any definite reward. Sending a message without a target audience is like mainstream journalism: participants in social network sites imagine their audience, and build their online image to what they think is normal and widespread acceptable. The difference is that journalists can talk about anything and anyone that's currently interesting, while teenagers have to constantly talk about themselves (Boyd, 2007). There's nothing more mundane and boring then someone showing 120 images of his student exchange trip to Athens, and talking about how he *loves loves loves U2*.

In an article for TIME Magazine, Lev Grossman had this to say about the argument:

"The Net has anarchy in its DNA; it's always been about anonymity, playing with your own identity and messing with other people's heads. The idea, such as it was, seems to have been that the Internet would free us of the burden of our public identities so we could be our true, authentic selves online. Except it turns out--who could've seen this coming?--that our true, authentic selves aren't that fantastic. The great experiment proved that some of us are wonderful and interesting but that a lot of us are hackers and pranksters and hucksters. Which is one way of explaining the extraordinary appeal of Facebook." (Grossman, 2007)

I find this *eagerness to be seen* sad. Why this frantic need for mass exhibition? Clearly not many are interested in our average lives. I remember seeing a photo on someone's Facebook album captioned "The best day of my life" and even though it only showed the user's face, none of his hundreds of 'friends' were interested in asking what was the occasion? Something else worth mentioning is the recurring occurrence of finding photos of people's faces or bust which were

clearly taken by the same person. Many use this image as their main account image. Hand-held self-portraits are easy to spot; the barrel effect due to the short distance; the extending hand on the bottom of the image holding the camera; the peculiar expression... Isn't it sad to think that these poor individuals didn't even have someone around to take their photo for them? The fact that most of these arm's length self-portrait are taken in the person's room, while on their new Facebook account shows a need of urgency to upload an image of themselves. An urgency that can't wait for another time to take a better representational image of themselves.

## CHAPTER 5

### *Why Worry*

The popularity of online social networks has worried psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists alike. But it hasn't worried these as much as it has worried parents. There are a lot of things for parents to worry about when they see their child spending hours daily in online communities. Parents' worry multiplies because many of them cannot make sense of what's going on. Parents, and even educators, especially the conservative ones, think that social technology is corrupting and destroying today's youth. Other parents and educators, tend to address this confusion by simply hoping for it to disappear. Only a small percentage believe that it is essential to understand and embrace these phenomena (Boyd, 2007). The latter's approach is to provide precaution and protect the vulnerable from all possible harm. Photographs easily generate conversations. So obscure and uninterrupted correspondence between strangers of any age range are easily started. These are not only potentially dangerous because of, the usually mentioned, perverts and pedophiles, but it can also be harmful when older individuals communicate with younger people without any intention to harm. Clinical psychologist, James Houran, discusses this, and writes how it can mess the identity of the younger, because it tends to happen at a stage in life when they are starting to form an identity, such as during college years (Houran, 2007). And if the situation gets out of hands, there wouldn't be anyone from the real world that would be able to help the youth, because, as mentioned earlier, most parents and educators wouldn't understand what happened and how it happened.

The main advice misguided parents give is not to give true details such as name, address or school attending. The few youngsters who obey these instructions soon realize that there's no point in being on online networks if you can't say who you are in real life. Furthermore, encouragement to lie is definitely not the best method to solve social distress (Boyd, 2007).

There's a lot of deception going on on social sites. Is it possibly true that Paris Hilton has seven accounts on Facebook? (Figure 3) Or that Barak Obama really *wants to be my friend*? These are clearly fake, and fortunately almost everyone understands that. But this acceptance in itself can be worrying, because there has never been a society before where fakes, truth-twisters and hoaxes

were more accepted and expected. Some argue that this is anticipated from online communities (Geist, 2007).

For the past few years, there was a tendency coming from the online community, that embraced online-disguise altogether. A main reason why self-created online persona is so desired, is because it gives us the possibility to fulfill our fantasies of what we like to be. In online application based communities such as Second Life and World of Warcraft, avatars are created in the form of a digital persona. Similar to online social networks, these give their users the possibility to create an online interacting entity. However the similarities stop there. In Second Life, World of Warcraft and other similar online simulations, your appearance and name are the first things that are removed. While in social networks the appearance and name of the individual is what is used to link the digital self to the real person (Boon and Sinclair, 2008). We are living in an age where

the need to be someone different is the byproduct of our culture and instead of truly improving ourselves, many people are turning to the internet to fill this demand.



Figure 3. Multiple Paris Hilton Facebook accounts

## CONCLUSION

Online socializing sites are mostly utilized for their ability to exchange photography. Facebook, for example, suggests the conjugation with imagery in its name; face-book. Casual snapshots; the type everyone takes with their compact camera, are mostly taken during positive situations in people's life. People take photos to commemorate something they'd like to remember and to show others. When they select their choice of images to upload, there's none representing any of the other various times, and various moods in their lives. So the images that describe us end up being all smiles, all friends and all positive while looking good. You can't really get to know a person when you are only introduced to one side of him or her, through images. This concept should make the online community start realizing that there's need for more than just social sites filled with photos, to know the real someone.

In reality, cyber community facilities are just online applications, with their rules and norm formations. They may be regarded as simply tools used to serve the needs of the isolated, elevated, asocial individuals (Siegel 2008). Whilst using Facebook and other online social networks alike, 'no matter how radically divergent one is from the other, you are sitting in the same chair, in the same room, in the same house, using the same computer and the same screen. You are having the most various, and sometimes the most fundamental, experiences in an environment that never changes' (Siegel 2008).

The applications themselves have an endless amount of constraints and limitations. I'm guessing these will be highlighted and realized even more when the mainstream media tires talking about how great a phenomena they are. Just like any other vogue, at first we see its pros, then, slowly but surely, we start talking about its cons. (for example; the compact disk (CD): at first everyone was mentioning the great audio, then we were talk about its limited storage capabilities. Another example is eating at McDonalds: not too long ago, everyone found benefits in doing so, and nowadays everyone tries avoiding it.)

When communicating via wall-to-wall on Facebook or even chatting on Skype or expressing ourselves on Twitter, there is a lack of physical interaction. One gets to miss out on spontaneous

replies and messages that are usually only transmitted through instinct, body-language, sounds and touch. Communication on online social networks is dry and too structured, and lacks a sense of location. Reading a comment that someone posted on your image does not deliver the same experience as when showing it to a real life friend of yours and learning what he or she truly thinks about it. A good old face to face conversation is not just about the verbal context that is exchanged between the people talking. It's far more complex because of the non-verbal communication that comes with it. Traditional conversations contain gestures that are impossible to fake, such as smiling or laughing, whereas online, it's easy to say "You are wonderful" or "I love you", even if you don't mean them (Highfield and Fleming, 2008).

What worries me about Facebook, MySpace and similar sites, is not about the things they provide, but what we are substituting for the things they are providing. The things we are meant to exchange through online networks are the purest sentiments we have as human beings. All progress throughout mankind has taken place with the help of good uninterrupted conversation, and it's a shame if inferior modes of conversation and contact become the norm and replaces traditional social interaction.

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