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Abstract

Facebook as the biggest social network site has changed the way we see ourselves, friends and friends of friends. This bachelor thesis combines the theory of communities of practice with recent literature about social network sites (SNS) and online behavior, to explain how users of the SNS Facebook construe their online-identity. The characteristics of Facebook are juxtaposed with the definition of community of practice by Etienne Wenger and the associated approach to identity in practice. The findings of this comparison emphasize the importance of Facebook in the everyday life of its users and suggest that Facebook has become a part of their nexus of identities. A small pilot study based on data obtained from interviews with friends further explores users' attitude toward the service Facebook and supports the relevance of the platform in terms of identity.

1. Introduction

Motives and Aims

Online social communities are changing the world and the way we communicate with each other. During the last decade, a remarkable number of new social media platforms have gone online with an increasing number of users. Besides them, a large number of advisors and consulting companies for social media have arisen. Reto Stuber (2010) for instance, citing Brian Solis, suggests that “jede Organisation einen sogenannten Community Manager ernennt”¹ (43). In other words, companies not embarking on social media platforms and seriously organizing their profiles with a manager for this sector, will have little to no chance surviving in the future. Others, like Clippinger (2007), notice that “the Web is becoming more and more social” and that services become “people-centric” (193). Clearly, such a change involves online identity construction, which is social at its heart.

Regardless of its importance worldwide, only little research has been done so far on this phenomenon and the changes these sites bring to identity and identity construction (no matter whether private persons or companies). Linguistic research on computer-mediated communication is lagging behind the steady and fast-changing sphere of social media. No longer do people solely interact with others via mobile phone or email. People at the age of 16 to 30 get information about their Friends² primarily online. Those who have no Facebook profile report that they had missed important news regarding their friends (e.g. invitation for parties, holiday pictures shared on Facebook, etc.) in the past. Thus, the thesis at hand devotes itself to this important topic.

Formulation of Thesis & Methodology

The argument of the thesis at hand is that Facebook users construct their online identity similar to their offline identity, because Facebook is a community of practice in Wenger’s (1998) definition. In order to support this argument, the theory of *Communities of Practice* and its attention to identity is applied. The characteristics of a community of practice in Wenger’s terms are then compared to the features of the online community (of practice) Facebook. The aim is to find out to what degree Facebook really can be seen as a community of practice and if the behavior of users actually supports the argument. In order to

¹ My translation of the quote: “every organization should appoint a so-called community manager”.

² In order not to use inverted commas every time I mean “Facebook friend”, I am using capitalized “Friend” for the Social Network Site concept and lowercase “friend” for the offline concept.

do this, I set up a pilot study that can be found at the end of the thesis. I interviewed users who are my friends on Facebook and in real life. Its aim is to examine how Facebook users construct their identity online and how this differs from real-life identity construction, since the online platform makes it possible to alter the profile tending towards a planned and conceived identity. In my paper I do not address identity construction in real-life, the comparison of my friend's identity construction conforms to my view of them as individuals in real life and how they convey the bits and pieces online.

The chapters are structured as follows: The next chapter introduces Wenger's 1998 theory of *communities of practice*, paying special attention to *identity in practice*. What does it mean to belong to a community and how do people negotiate their identity within them? Identity, in this chapter, is introduced as a process and a result of interaction

The third chapter focuses on Social Network Sites (SNS)³ and Facebook in particular. The following questions shall be discussed: What is a SNS, how do they work and what is special about Facebook? How does a site that is part of the daily routine of most of its users, affect and stimulate their behavior and identity construction? After all, according to Kirkpatrick (2010), an "amazing 65 percent of [the users] were returning to the site daily, and 90 percent came back at least once a week" (111). How can the theory of *communities of practice* back the argument that Facebook is a community of practice itself? The concept behind SNSs may be new to some readers; this chapter explains what they are.

In chapters 4 and 5, finally, the findings are tested in a pilot study using data obtained in interviews with friends. The outcome of these interviews can only have limited significance due to the small age spectrum (27 to 31years) of the interview partners and can obviously not support the thesis in general. However, the pilot study sheds light on the behavior and self-conception of a group of Facebook users with regard to their profile.

Chapter 6 briefly summarizes the findings of this thesis. The theoretical background and the study findings are juxtaposed. In short, Facebook is identity-relevant and should be regarded as a community of practice. What the conclusion also reveals, however, is that identity construction is carried out in dissimilar manners in real life and online surroundings.

Omission of negative facets (moods, negative self-aspects) is much easier online than offline (a characteristic of CMC) and can be carried out more consciously, since for cautious users the profile is sort of a "business card". The thesis at hand also comes to the conclusion that

³ I will stick to the definition of Boyd & Ellison (2007) and not use the term *social network^{ing} sites*, for the reason that networking emphasizes relationship initiation, often between strangers. While networking is possible on these sites, it is not the primary practice on Facebook. For my thesis the term *network* more accurately emphasizes the fact that on Facebook, social networks can be explored and searched, while networking is only a secondary purpose of it.

the existence of Facebook has not made redundant other communication channels such as the telephone. My interview partners definitely use Facebook solely in suitable situations.

2. Communities of Practice

The originator of the most broadly accepted theory of communities of practice (CofP) is Etienne Wenger. In his 1998 book he combined learning and practice with the concept of community. In the introduction of the book he defines the term community of practice in the following words:

Being alive as human beings means that we are constantly engaged in the pursuit of enterprises of all kinds, from ensuring our physical survival to seeking the most lofty pleasures. As we define these enterprises and engage in their pursuit together, we interact with each other and with the world accordingly. In other words, we learn. Over time, this collective learning results in practices that reflect both the pursuit of our enterprises and the attendant social relations. These practices are thus the property of a kind of community created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise. It makes sense, therefore, to call these kinds of communities communities of practice. (45)

The engagement in the “pursuit of enterprises of all kinds” can also include a certain attitude on how to “interact with each other”. Practices may demand specific formalities of interaction and politeness standards. No two communities are alike. Every community consciously and subconsciously defines rules for inclusion and exclusion of members (and non-members). In the online world this is known as “netiquette”, a standard norm of etiquette valid for all the members of a community. With regard to SNS, jointly finding out together what the service is and should be, what behavior is right and what is out-of-favor, is a “pursuit of enterprise” accomplished by its members.

The pursuit of an enterprise within a community of practice relies heavily on interaction. Vrasidas & Veletsianos (2010) assert that interaction can be placed “at the center of human activity” and that “interaction as a process is constantly changing and adjusting to the needs of the community” (4). For every CofP it is the interaction in form of reification and negotiation of personal and group values, codes and principles.

CofP are formed around a profession, recurrent action or shared interests. For example, the Human Resources (HR) clerks of a company form a CofP. They all share the same job applying to the same company principles and sharing one corporate identity. They reify their position and negotiate the core values of being an HR clerk. However, these co-workers are not solely clerks in their lives. They may have different reasons for working for the company;

they all have different private lives and interests. It is only one of several CofP they all are part of.

Accepting the argument that we are all part of several CofP in our lives, it follows that these play a crucial role in our identity. Wenger (1998) claims that “there is a profound connection between identity and practice” (149). Hence, the second part of his book recasts the themes of the previous chapters in terms of identity. The next section will give a brief summary of those themes.

2.1. Communities of Practice and Identity

The parallels between practice and identity are summarized by Wenger (1998) with the following characterizations (149):

1. Identity as *negotiated experience*.
2. Identity as *community membership*
3. Identity as *learning trajectory*
4. Identity as *nexus of multi-membership*
5. Identity as *a relation between the local and the global*.

The above relations can be further described giving an example for each. 1) The hunters of a district negotiate their identity as hunters in a discussion about the experiences they have made hunting animals (with all the risks and joys associated with hunting). 2) The same hunters belong to the district’s hunter community. Non-hunters do not. 3) Hunters will mutually learn and discuss how to hunt various animals best, learn tricks and techniques. 4) Hunters are members of a number of other communities, e.g. wine tasting, drama group, sports clubs, etc. 5) Hunters from the said district are just one community of various hunter communities in the world. They may exchange news and negotiate the hunter identity locally and globally.

Etienne Wenger devotes a substantial part of his book *Communities of Practice. Learning, Meaning, and Identity* (1998) to several aspects of identity and its meaning. The focus in his approach to identity is that a person has a number of different part-identities depending on the communities he already is, or is trying to become, a member of. Thus, the collective identity becomes much more important, because part-identities are only activated in specific surroundings and situations. A private banker, for example, can be a football fan and father and have several other interests that make up his identity. Acting and behaving as a private banker, though, is restricted to his job duties and to situations when he spends time with his

colleagues. The individual identity, it follows, is the total of all the communities of practice that have an impact on the focus person's behavior and planning. Wenger (1998) claims that

focusing on identity within the context of communities of practice extends the framework in two directions: 1) it narrows the focus onto the person, but from a social perspective. 2) It expands the focus beyond communities of practice, calling attention to broader processes of identification and social structures. (145)

It is crucial to my thesis to consider this expansion of the theory of communities of practice and its effects on identity. Community membership is a substantial part of identity; Facebook is a worldwide online community. Hence, the next section treats Wenger's approach to community membership and tests if it can be applied to the online community Facebook .

2.2. Community Membership (e.g. "Facebook")

Wenger's (1998) view on identity is that "it is not an object, but rather constant becoming" (154). Thus, identity is never fully completed; it is an ongoing process with different **trajectories**. Using the concept of trajectories, Wenger argues that:

1. identity is fundamentally temporal
2. The work of identity is ongoing
3. Because it is constructed in social contexts, the temporality of identity is more complex than a linear notion of time.
4. Identities are defined with respect to the interaction of multiple convergent and divergent trajectories.

The concept of trajectories includes aspects of participation in a community and reification of its values and meanings. According to Wenger, there are five types of trajectories:

1. Peripheral trajectories
2. Inbound trajectories
3. Insider trajectories
4. Boundary trajectories and
5. Outbound trajectories

The first, **peripheral trajectories**, "never lead to full participation" (154). They generate access to a community, however, that "becomes significant enough to contribute to one's identity." An example of such a trajectory is that of a man who goes to a local volleyball team's game every now and then, but never becomes fully engaged in the club. The interest in volleyball contributes somehow to his identity.

A lot of Facebook users can be regarded as being on a peripheral trajectory with Facebook. This has to do with the regularity that users log on, chat, participate, create groups, etc. In other words, if someone is a “light user” (only sporadically using the service, only reading and not posting much) he/she can be said to be on a peripheral trajectory with Facebook. The fact that they do read on Facebook and that they have a profile makes Facebook significant enough to contribute to their identity. Furthermore, it is always possible to intensify usage of Facebook.

Inbound trajectories are those progressed in order to become a full member of a CofP. An example for this might be a man going to police officer school investing time to become a full member of the police.

Facebook represents an inbound trajectory for all the users who recently joined the community and who spend time to becoming full members and getting to know about everything on the platform. Their relation to Facebook at this time is peripheral.

Insider trajectories are the next step after an inbound trajectory has somehow been completed. In Wenger’s words, “the evolution of the practice continues – new events, new demands, new inventions, and new generations all create occasions for renegotiating one’s identity” (154).

Using the service Facebook, for example, means adjusting to new features implemented into the platform (Wall, Email address, News Feed) and learning how to use them best. Furthermore, users become experienced and get to know how to use the site’s various tools and applications.

Boundary trajectories are those which link CofP. Emergency services and the police have to work together to overcome complications of an accident, for example. Sustaining an identity both as a paramedic and as a policeman, when both have to cooperate and help each other, is a boundary trajectory.

Facebook can act as a boundary trajectory for people with various interests and goals. Because it connects numerous people on all continents, it can also be seen as a connector of communities of practice.

Outbound trajectories are those which “lead out of a community, as when children grow up. What matters then, is how a form of participation enables what comes next” (155).

I think it is not too far-fetched a statement to say that Facebook users too, might feel that they no longer belong to the community, or that they stop using the service altogether.

2.3. Summary of Identity in Practice

To complete this theoretical part of CofP, I would like to use Wenger's (1998, 155) summary of identity in practice. Identity, according to him, is:

- *Lived*. Identity is not merely a category, a personality trait, a role, or a label; it is more fundamentally an experience that involves both participation and reification. Hence, it is more diverse and more complex than categories, traits, roles, or labels would suggest.
- *Negotiated*. Identity is a becoming; the work of identity is ongoing and pervasive. It is not confined to specific periods of life, like adolescence, or to specific settings, like within the family.
- *Social*. Community membership gives the formation of identity a fundamentally social character. Our membership manifests itself in the familiarity we experience with certain social contexts.
- *A learning process*. An identity is a trajectory in time that incorporates both past and future into the meaning of the present.
- *A nexus*. An identity combines multiple forms of membership through a process of reconciliation across boundaries of practice.
- *A local-global interplay*. An identity is neither narrowly local to activities nor abstractly global. Like practice, it is an interplay of both of these.

Of this list, **Lived**, **Negotiated**, **Social**, and **Learning process** are the most important characteristics for my thesis, since they provide insight to how Facebook is also fundamentally formed as a CofP. Clearly, being a Facebook user is related to **learning** how the community works, reacts and **negotiates** the meaning of the platform, and its future direction/orientation. Furthermore, the conclusions of this have to be brought into alignment with all the other communities one is a part of. As such, this also includes **experiencing social** inter-action. Undoubtedly, Facebook is also a platform of **global and local interplay**. Most of the users have local friends and discuss local topics with them, but also Friends living in other countries around the world, who participate in their lives much more than ever before. In brief, SNS come in the form of CofP in many regards and bring together people of various backgrounds. The trajectories and identity processes are both global and local and have a strong social element.

A user's frequency of visits on Facebook emphasizes his commitment to the community and also the degree of integration in the "community of practice" of Facebook. As such I define the discourse about Facebook itself. Some feel the urge to discuss Facebook topics more often than others. What is the service about? What is the purpose of a recently implemented feature? Some discussions pop up in everyday situations, when people have seen something on Facebook and want to talk about it with friends, relatives and colleagues. All of a sudden, a discussion can shift to Facebook and/or a Facebook anecdote.

For a better understanding of the connection between communities of practice and the SNS Facebook, I will now turn to a description of the latter in its context.

3. Social Network Sites

In the late 1990s, some of the first of numerous SNS were launched, attracting millions of users with different practices and interests. Boyd & Ellison (2007) have indexed the most important and defined SNS in the following terms:

We define SNSs as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site.

This definition is, due to the large variety of SNS, rather general so that it covers only basic characteristics shared by all the SNS. *Last.fm*⁴, for example, focuses on people's music interests and favorite genres and artists so that people can connect to share information, chat, and send messages about music-related topics. *LinkedIn*⁵ and *Xing*⁶ are professional sites that connect users for business purposes, i.e. they are meant to keep track of business contacts and ties to former and possible future employers or employees. This already implies that a certain connection already exists offline before the connection online is established. Boyd & Ellison (2007) stress that, "what makes SNS unique is not that they allow individuals to meet strangers, but rather that they enable users to articulate and make visible their social networks." Meeting strangers is possible but not the main purpose of SNS. One of my interview partner's answer to a related question backs this argument:

But you would never use it (meaning Facebook) to socialize and make new friends?

No. I don't know how I could do it.

Most of the SNS consist of inter-connected and linked user profiles. This makes it possible for users to browse Friends lists and view mutual Friends (some sites allow users to opt out of displaying their network, or to restrict viewers). The content is generated by the users and then shared with a list of Friends visible on the profile. SNS provide the platform and the boundaries to connect with friends.

Profiles can be set to be public or semi-public, depending on how much the user wants to share. Some allow users to change the design of their site, others do not. What they all have in common, though, is that the user normally gives basic personal information about him- or herself in an "about me" section, and uploads a profile picture. SNS make it easy for everybody to get in touch with people, independent of purpose and interest. Figure 1 (see Appendix) shows the timeline for the launch of the most prominent SNS.

⁴ Last.fm is a music SNS. <http://www.last.fm>

⁵ <http://www.linkedin.com>

⁶ <http://www.xing.com>

3.1. Facebook

Facebook has seen an immense growth. According to Kirkpatrick (2010), “it occasionally hit 3 percent per *day*” (111) with thousands of new users signing up due to the “network effect” (each time a new user joins, his/her friends are mobilized to do so as well). Kirkpatrick emphasizes that “Facebook’s ultimate success owes a lot to the fact that it began at college where people’s social networks are densest and where they generally socialize more vigorously than at any other time in their lives” (39). Young people studying at a big institution have a strong bond and pursue the same goals. In fact, they are all members of a community of practice, namely, “students of [subject] at [university]”. Thus, it makes sense to share the real-life connection online in digitalized form, too. This is one of the basic differences to other SNS that were open to sign up to everybody right from the start. However, I would question whether the argument of socializing during college really holds true. A lot of businessmen, for example have to socialize and maintain a dense social network to make sure their business is running smoothly and to gain new customers. The existence of SNS such as Xing and LinkedIn confirm such a view.

Facebook’s importance is increasing in various business sectors, mainly because it is now the most often visited and biggest SNS with 500 million users visiting the site on an almost daily basis. Recently, CBC (2010) revealed that Facebook dethroned Google as the most popular website. Investors, users and researchers alike embrace the platform for its various possibilities. Why is it, for example, that people spend so much time on Facebook every day? How similar to the corresponding offline identities are identities on Facebook? Marketing and promotion departments have the unprecedented chance to target the audience they want and see as their customer base, using Facebook for target-group oriented advertisement and dialogue. Social media marketing is a fast-growing branch of marketing and there are people who predict that companies that miss jumping on the social media train will be left behind (see Stuber 2010). Will companies in the future have no other choice to get in touch with the right clientele than to use a Facebook profile? In order to answer such questions, one has to find out what the Facebook user benefits are. In the next few chapters, I shall present what a Facebook profile enables a user to do.

3.1.1. What is a Facebook Profile?

In short, a Facebook profile enables a user to keep in touch and communicate with all his friends and colleagues who also have a profile on Facebook and share a connection. This

already implies that profiles can be authenticated through the friends who vouch for someone by being Friends. Therefore, it makes little sense to sign up using pseudonyms, also because others will search for you on Facebook using your real name (See chapter 2.1.3. for “fake profiles” and “fakesters”). A new user has to register with his/her full name, email address, date of birth, and password. All the information and data on each profile is then uploaded by the user himself (profile picture, personal data, interests, etc.). The service provides several communication tools (such as “the Wall”, an on-site chat, status updates, and commenting on others’ uploads, status updates, etc). It follows that a profile enables the user to communicate actively (via chat and messages) and passively (via static information to be read by other users, e.g. comments and information slots). The latter, more persistent information on someone’s site is sometimes used to convey a desired identity or to come across as a certain personality (see chapter 2.1.3).

3.1.1.1 Adjusting the Service (Growth)

Initially, the creators of Facebook simply wanted to connect students on a campus via their campus email address, because before the site opened in 2004, students “only” had a printed yearbook enlisting all the other students of the same year with a picture. Facebook offered the advantage that students could stay in touch with classmates and other students on the campus, and upload their own photos and choose one that they thought represented them best. The slogan on the homepage of Facebook reads “Facebook helps you connect and share with the people in your life” (accessed November 5, 2010). With the rise of broadband mobile phones (smartphones) users today are able to connect with Friends everywhere. A new feature has recently been integrated that allows people to share their current location (using GPS data sent from the mobile device).

Figure 2 is an example of a Facebook profile. What is interesting in this profile is that “D” only shows birthday and not birthyear. People know when his birthday is, but not his age. We will see that status updates, link posts and info section details are identity-relevant. All the details in the picture are explained further down.

Facebook has recently introduced a new profile design. For the sake of completeness, Figure 3 gives a rough overview of how the profiles look in the new design.

3.1.2. Facebook and Identity

After the site’s launch in February 2004, it soon became clear that some people were using the service to “accumulate the largest possible number of friends” rather than “to communicate and gather useful information” (Kirkpatrick, 2010, 34). So in a way, the profile

is a means of expressing social status, for some more overtly than for others. Whenever people socialize or communicate they have a certain self-awareness, that is, they check their behavior against their own internal motives (private self-awareness) and broadly valid social standards (public self-awareness; see Joinson, 2003, for more information). We know that what we say, do and also what we do not say and do, can be judged, evaluated and form an outside image of ourselves that might someday be undesirable or regrettable. Kirkpatrick (2010) describes the scenario of such public self-awareness as it used to be back in 2004 in the United States:

Perfecting the details of your own profile in order to make yourself a more attractive potential friend occupied a considerable amount of time for many of the[se] newly networked Ivy Leaguers. [...] Many definitely selected classes based on who Facebook indicated would be joining them there. A subtle form of stalking became almost routine [...]. The more friends you already shared the easier that process would usually turn out to be. Your “Facebook” as profiles on the service began to be called, increasingly became your public face. It defined your identity.
(92)

The above quote describes the scenario with college and university students. “It defined your identity”, surely applies for this age group. Facebook is a unique service to get everyday information about Friends and their friends. In this sense it is a news channel about people with whom you maintain a certain relationship. For the same age group described in the quote above, making a good public impression among friends and potential mates is important. It is their identity card and profile for dating and flirting activities. For people between 27 and 31, however, Facebook is not the only place where they show their public face. Raphael (31), one of my interview partners, revealed to me his use of media next to Facebook:

When I am looking for interaction or information about a certain topic, I still prefer blogs and forums. Of course I also use phone calls and text messages to communicate. The exception being when I use Facebook for communication with people whose telephone number I do not have.

Face-to-face contact and the use of other media are still regarded as important as the interaction on Facebook. Growing attention to Facebook as an online service might as well have contributed to the increasing use of it. The following section describes the use of Facebook of an adult.

3.1.2.1 Shana Swers, a Mother posting about Childbirth

Shana Swers, as reported by Saphira in the Washington Post online journal (2010), started to unfold her story of becoming and being a mother, over Facebook. It is a particularly good – although sad – example of how belonging to the community of practice “Mother-to-be” can become connected to online “blogging” and using SNS to spread news. Shana Swers

publicly announced that she and her husband were about to become parents. This big change in life also meant a turn in their identities in that they reached an *outbound trajectory* (see chapter 2.2). Identity formation took place in “terms of all the learning involved in entering a community of practice” (Wenger, 1998; 155). Clearly, this social part of sharing information is a way of negotiating identity in terms to Wenger’s assumptions.

For the thesis the story of Shana Swers is an accurate example to describe how people let other people know about their learning trajectories and identity development. After all, Wenger (1998) also emphasizes that “the temporal dimension of identity is critical” (155), meaning that identities are involved in a progress of constant renegotiation and reification (two important reoccurring terms in Wenger’s theory).

3.1.3. Virtual Identity Construction on Facebook

There are several aspects of virtual identity construction to be considered. The German social psychologist, Nicola Döring (2003) lists “5 dimensions of virtual identity construction” (346). These all have to do with the technology in use, whether it be chat, multi-user dungeon (MUD), own websites or SNS. He first differentiates between virtual self-portrayal and virtual identity. The difference is that in the first, the user creates only a transient image of himself (e.g. in a chat or in a single email message) which is of no subjective relevance. The virtual identity, as for example created on Facebook is much more stable and subjectively relevant. It also depends on the service and on logging in regularly. The personal data put online is linked to offline counterparts.

The five dimensions of virtual identity construction, according to Döring (2003, 346) include:

1. Degree of Integration or Fragmentation
(How much are the various online and offline identities linked or separated?)
2. Way of Handling positive or negative Aspects of Oneself
(How are negatively valued self-aspects treated and settled? How are positive self-aspects hidden or expressed and reinforced?)
3. Degree of Fictivity or Facticity
(How much are online identities fantasies or real world facts regarding the focus person’s life?)
4. Degree of Consciousness
(How much is the self-presentation of the focus-person consciously controlled or the embodiment of unconscious motives and needs?)

5. Choice of poor or rich Media

(How much do users choose internet services in terms of their media richness or modalities and codes so that they can optimally present their identities?)

Without going further into details, it can be seen that these five dimensions all stress the fact that every online identity is constructed by an individual. Given the fact that they all measure a “degree” to which they play a role, they can vary greatly and people’s online identity construction can show different degrees of these aspects.

Taking into consideration that dimension 5 is predetermined in the case of Facebook, dimension 1 can be examined. Choosing Facebook means choosing quite a rich media platform that makes other services dispensable. I have heard of a lot of Facebook users that have quit using other services because Facebook united most of those used on different sites into one. Thus, I would argue that the degree of integration on Facebook is high and that Facebook users also link their profiles to other services, like Twitter, and vice-versa.

It remains a question whether Facebook profiles represent fantasies or real world facts. It may be true that Facebook profiles do not show all the aspects of a person. However, I would argue that most of the profiles in use represent real world facts, and there is strong reason to believe that the conveyed information reflects offline interests and identities.

Referring to Walther, Joinson (2003) mentions the four main factors that create “hyperpersonal interaction” (129). Walther coined the term for his argument that “there are several instances in which CMC has surpassed the level of affection and emotion of parallel Face to Face interaction”. The first reason is that:

Many on-line (sic!) communicants share a social categorization, they will also tend to perceive greater similarity between themselves and their conversational partner. As we tend to like those whom we see as similar, people communicating on-line will be predisposed towards liking their communication partners. (129)

In this context, Facebook is the shared social categorization. The similarity aspect holds especially true for Facebook groups, although even people who do not like a group’s purpose at all or are completely against it can join the group in order to undermine a mannered discussion in it. The second reason why affection and emotion are even stronger than in face to face interaction is the following:

the sender of a message can optimize their self-presentation – that is, they can present themselves in a more positive light than they might be able to face to face because they do not have to worry about their non-verbal behavior. (129)

Again, this is a huge advantage of CMC: The messages are sent with a time lag and the interaction is asynchronous. In addition, the receiver(s) cannot see any facial expressions or gestures, body language, etc. This way, users are more focused on their inner self.

These factors should be considered for the construction of online identity, too. The optimization of self-presentation in a Facebook profile is in alignment with emotionality and affections in online interactions.

3.1.3.1 False Identity / Fakesters

People can, and actually do disguise their identities in order to mislead other users and play with certain persona and characters. Döring (2003) reports that “Männern gern unterstellt [wird], sie würden sich in Chats oder MUDs als Frauen ausgeben, um die Aufmerksamkeit ihrer heterosexuellen Geschlechtsgenossen auf sich zu ziehen, diese zu genießen und/oder sich dann über die Annäherungsversuche lustig zu machen.”⁷ (378). This behavior is known as *gender switching* or *gender swapping*. In most of the cases there is no bad intention behind the fakery. People just want to see how it feels and what happens if they pretend to be of the opposite sex.

Even though there is only little reason for serious users to fake a Facebook profile since most of the interaction value (i.e. creating social links) is lost this way, fake profiles exist on Facebook (e.g. pseudo profiles of celebrities, musicians, politicians, etc.). Many SNS have only poor means to prevent such profiles and users often cannot see whether a profile is owned by the “real” celebrity or maintained by a fan/fakester. For most of the users, false identity is therefore a rather negligible phenomenon (because it goes unnoticed). For the real celebrity, however, they can be a nuisance, because others may upload information which is not true, or offensive. In conclusion, fake profiles allow users to play with identity. In most cases they do no serious harm.

3.1.4. Identity Markers on Facebook

Each Facebook profile is a collection of various features marking someone’s identity. It enables the user to provide a lot of personal information and to communicate with hundreds of users synchronously and asynchronously. Not all of the slots to enter personal information

⁷ My translation of this quote: “men are imputed to pose as women in chats or MUDs in order to attract the attention of their heterosexual consensuals, that they enjoyed it or made fun of the advances”.

are always used and for some it is not the most interesting part of Facebook. Bernhard, one of my interview partners, told me the following about the info section:

I only share basic information. One can see my birthday, without the year but apart from this, I put very little information on Facebook. There are two sibling relationships mentioned in my info section which are actually a joke.

However, the mere fact that it is possible to provide detailed information about a person's background makes Facebook a real database of information on individuals.

There are other aspects of identity that have nothing to do with filled-out slots (stable and rarely changed over time). Users can regularly put recent, blog-like information onto their profiles which allows their behavior and preferences to be measured. This is why Döring (2003, 342), too, makes a distinction between *user-defined information* (e.g. information section of the profile) *system-generated information* (in this context conditioned by Facebook), and *co-user generated information* (e.g. Friends' comments on a post). The latter has, as should be clear, nothing to do with the focus person's identity, but more with his embedment in the community, i.e. his social network.

3.1.4.1 User- and Co-user defined Information of Identity

Some of the most important information a user can share is shown in Table 1 (Appendix). It is either part of every profile in the form of slots to fill in by the user, or additional applications and features next to one's profile page (e.g. groups or external applications). There are of course also features that have little or no relevance to the identity construction or performance, but rather help users to communicate or stay in touch with each other.

I will not further describe all of the features shown in the table for two reasons. First, for the sake of length of the thesis, some do not matter enough (compare pilot study), and second, they are self-explanatory with regard to their relevance to identity in general. In the following I will focus on some of the most important features.

I. The Groups

For the purpose of this thesis, Facebook groups constitute an important user-defined element. For at least two reasons they should be seen as small communities of practice within the Facebook community. First of all, groups represent an interest or topic, or are devoted to an organization or group in the real world. This is a characteristic that refers to shared and common practice in every one of the groups, no matter how important it is in reality. Secondly, political groups operating on a common basis can hugely affect

governments (as the examples below suggest). They share a reifying practice, negotiating meaning over and over again (e.g.: The FARC group “what do we do next?”). Thus, groups on Facebook are a central element of communities within the community.

Clearly, if the analogy of groups and communities of practice is made, it follows that groups are also significant in terms of someone’s identity. Wenger (1998) convincingly argues that “there is a profound connection between identity and practice” (149). This argument holds true for every Facebook user who joins groups with a serious intent. However, groups are not always to be taken seriously, because sometimes they deal with a humorous or trivial topic. In addition, groups can be joined easily (by one click of a button) and users may soon forget what groups they have joined (see interview with Raphael in section 4.2.1.1.). Thus, the importance of groups is ambiguous. On the one hand they embody political, social or general interests and maybe even serious real life engagement; on the other hand a lot of them are witty jokes or trivial phrases (e.g. “Every time I see someone with boots on I look (sic) to see if they are uggs”).

Users can create or join already existing groups without special permission to do so. The variety of groups is tremendous: politics, fun and nonsense, sports, food, places, companies and brands, persons (celebrities), and many more topics are the basis of countless groups. This bandwidth of groups demonstrates how accurately or even more detailed Facebook mirrors society and all its interests.

The following examples emphasize the importance of groups that were created on Facebook for serious reasons.

In order to illustrate “the Facebook effect”, Kirkpatrick (2010) starts his book with a short story of a man in Columbia creating a group against the guerrilla organization FARC (which by that time had been negotiating over a child hostage they didn’t have). In brief, the man created the group after he realized that no such group had already been created. After about six hours his group already had 1500 members and two days later 8000! These members discussed what action should be taken on the group-internal wall. The founder created an in-group demonstration event which was a huge success. Alvaro Uribe, the Colombian president, and Colombia’s political establishment

did everything they could to make it a success. After a week or two the local army commander began providing Morales [=the group creator] with three bodyguards and a car, [...]. Mayors and city governments throughout the country worked closely with demonstration volunteers to grant march permits. (5)

The term “Facebook effect” stands for the viral spread of news (in the example given “users’ joining of groups”). Instantaneously, a number of people can get involved in a topic and

engage. This shows that Facebook groups can empower citizens to take action against suppressors and terrorists.

Another very recent example of a group that is in vogue is Wikileaks. Wikileaks claims to be an independent organization that releases top secret US Government cables and documents. It is rather controversial but also has a lot of admirers and supporters (hackers and independent journalists alike) around the globe. The Facebook group has a relatively lively discussion section and a large number of people calling for action against those wanting to silence the organization. Blogs around the world use the “events”-section to refer to upcoming Wikileaks events (see figure 8).

Although Facebook groups represent an important tool and place where like-minded people can discuss any topic or express shared fandom, enthusiasm and interests, they cannot be singled out as the perfect example of an identity marker. The reason for this is that the degree of seriousness of and relatedness to groups varies greatly. Nevertheless, they constitute a powerful tool to express solidarity, displeasure and interests.

II. The Wall

The feature “Wall” contains *user-defined information* such as video uploads, status updates and links of every kind. On the other hand, it contains *system-defined information* such as tiny bits of tracking information which are created, for example, when accepting a new friend, or commenting on others’ shared links. With all this information, the Wall is sort of a hybrid of user-, co-user, and system-defined information. This chapter explains how the Wall works.

The Wall is the most prominent feature on a profile, because a) it is everybody’s personal Facebook feed⁸ and unites all the posts made by a user, b) it is displayed in the centre of every profile and claims one third of the profile page, and c) clicking someone’s name anywhere on Facebook directs you to the user’s Wall. It includes all the information – in the form of system-generated tracking information – about what a user has recently done on Facebook with all the comments of Friends attached to it (co-user defined information), unless the user disables an application to do so. If a user joins a new group, a short bit of information is added to the Wall.

The main purpose of the Wall, according to most of the users, is to post status updates. These can be short statements of mood, emotions, or feelings. Furthermore, they can be questions, quotes, or information about the person’s location. The list is endless and could form a research topic of its own (see end of the thesis). In summary, such status updates

⁸ For the explanation of feed, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_feed

express a variety of news: expressing a momentary mood, a funny expression or ideas in a nutshell.

Another Wall activity is uploading pictures. As soon as you upload pictures, the system publishes information onto the Wall, so that others can see the news and comment on the pictures. Apparently, pictures are a relevant identity feature, because they communicate various information about looks, style, body size, etc. Researching the use of profile pictures on Facebook could itself make up a thesis.

According to Kirkpatrick (2010), implementation of the Wall by Facebook in September 2004 “gave students even more reason to spend time there” (93). Before that, they were only able to see information, but “now not only could you surf around examining people, but you could react to what you learned.” Every other visitor of the profile could see such comments and comment to previous comments. Wall posts came in the form of “public email updates” (93). These include quotes recently seen somewhere, birthday wishes, open questions, etc.

In conclusion, the Wall is a crucial feature collecting information about everybody’s identity. This is why Facebook had to give users a privacy tool in order to have control over their wall entries. It is always possible to delete a wall entry and users can already prevent the system from generating unwanted wall posts as well. See figure 4 for an example of a Wall.

III. The News Feed

The News Feed summarizes all the posts made by Friends into one, frequently updating Feed extract in chronological order (see Figure 5). When logging in, a user sees this Feed first and can react to posts made by friends minutes or hours ago. The Feed is highly interactive and news can be spread quickly (*virally*) throughout it, because once news is seen by a Friend and “shared”, this Friend’s Friends will see the news, too, and distribute it. In a short period of time, news is spread all over Facebook.

Since the number of Friends with low relevance to one’s life is normally higher than the number of ‘best Friends’, posts and status updates by everyone can be hidden in the News Feed (Figure 6). People who post too frequently, and who do not share content with a minimum of relevance, risk being hidden by their “Friends”. Various bloggers explain why they would hide or even delete someone as a Friend (see, e.g. Gustafson , 2010).

The distribution of news in the Feed is based on an unknown algorithm. One can only guess as to what the factors are that generate one’s News Feed. I would argue that only news from Friends of relevance regarding the maintained interaction are put into someone’s Feed. For

example, if a user frequently “likes” A’s posts but never has “liked” B’s, it follows that A will appear in the user’s feed more often, whereas B’s posts possibly never do. Figure 7 is a good example of fan commitment that can arise, because of a post distributed by the News Feed.

The News Feed generates even more interaction among Facebook users, because users can react to users’ posts and comments immediately without having to visit their profile. The news Feed incorporates the “Home” function of a website. Logging in directs every user to his/her own News Feed.

3.1.4.2 Facebook use as Identity Information

There are other factors that point to a user’s identity on Facebook which are not user-generated but rather related to the behavior of the user or his exposure to Facebook. In Döring’s (2010) terms, the degree to which Facebook is part of one’s identity can be explained by the “objektive[m] Nutzungsverhalten der Fokusperson” (342)⁹. Not all profile holders use Facebook for similar reasons and not all of them with the same frequency. Although this information is not provided in the system or elsewhere (only the user himself knows when he last logged in, for example), it still makes a difference whether someone is a “light user” of Facebook, meaning that he/she visits the site rather infrequently and with little action performed on the site, or a “heavy user”, meaning that Facebook is an integral part of the everyday communication with friends, and thus the amount of time spent on the site and the action performed (e.g. commenting, updating, browsing) being significantly higher. Of course there are also people who have never heard of Facebook and do not want to use the service. There might even be people who do not want to use the internet at all. For my thesis – logically – these people are excluded.

Facebook as a platform offers a multitude of applications maintained by third parties. Everybody with programming knowledge can use Facebook for providing a game or application. Of course, such games, once they are part of a user’s Facebook practices, can play an identity role as well. However, games such as Farmville, although based on Facebook’s platform, are sites of their own. Every user has to allow such applications to connect with his/her profile (see Figure 10.). Farmville, for example, has grown enormously among Facebook users. It is a game where they can set up farms and interact as farmers with others. In a way, this game is a community of its own and to some people, it is even the main reason they log onto Facebook.

⁹ My translation of the quote: “*objective patterns of use of a person*”.

3.1.5. Facebook and Privacy

Opinions about Facebook differ greatly: Facebook is suspected of entering its user's privacy on more and more levels, as well as of massive data acquisition (photos, desires, places, social network of users, etc.) that might not sell too badly in the future. The opinion that it is dangerous to share too much information on the internet is prevalent, since nobody can be sure into whose hands the collected data falls (compare chapter 3.5.1 and the pilot study in chapter 4ff). In short, publishing too much information about one's identity can be harmful and have undesirable effects. There is, for example, the idea of thieves breaking into someone's house because they have seen that the person is not at home in a Facebook status message.

Facebook can mean a threat to security for those who use the service inappropriately or carelessly. According to Clippinger (2007) "security derives from the extent to which people, known and unknown to one another, are willing to trust and cooperate around common goals" (178). Since the level of trust can only be assumed but never generally taken for granted in online surroundings because of the above described identity issues, people have to be careful about what they do on Facebook. It is especially important to know, for example, who can read status updates. Stuber (2010) reports an incident seen on Facebook, where "an employee heavily complains about her boss – who promptly comments, that she should not 'bother coming in tomorrow'" (48). The employee was unaware of a Friend connection with her boss on Facebook.

It seems that a lot of users now care a lot about their privacy, or only use Facebook carefully, meaning that they use appropriate language, do not upload unflattering pictures, or they create "friend lists" in which they group their Friends according to the relevance of the connection. For example, a list called "intimate friends" can be created on which the user only puts the contacts he is good friends with offline as well, and excludes everyone else. For such a list privacy controls can be applied, giving every connection on the list (and only them) certain user-defined rights of viewing, commenting or tagging on the profile and photos. Figure 11 explains the system of "lists".

4. Pilot Study – Interview with Facebook Friends

In the following chapters I use interview data of 4 of my Friends with whom I maintain a good real-life friendship. The design of the interview aims at getting information about the profile

holder's intentions with his/her profile regarding the construction of a Facebook identity. How willing are my friends to publish personal data? To what degree does their Facebook account reflect their real-life identity?

In each of the interviews, my friend sat in front of his/her Facebook profile and explained to me why he/she posted a particular piece of information onto his profile or onto other users' profile (wall). Furthermore, questions about the general usage of Facebook were asked.

The friends in the interviews are all between 26 and 31 years old. Some are heavy users, which means that they log on daily and post heavily. Others are light users – they log on once a week or less, post only rarely but lurk¹⁰ all the more. Therefore, the data obtained cannot be seen as a broad overview of the usage. A fourteen year old teenage girl, who is still on her quest of identity, clearly behaves differently from a 30 year old woman who has more or less found her identity. That is to say, exposure and disclosure of teenagers oppose the behavior of adults. Photos and comments are posted with less wariness the younger a profile holder is.

The outcome of the interviews is the data for my pilot study and focuses on very simple and subjective user impressions.

4.1. Interview Partners

Manuel is one of the interview partners I have known for quite some time. He is an enthusiastic music-lover and musician himself, as DJ and MC of several band projects. His parents are teachers and last year he started his own career teaching. He is 27.

Cristina is Manuel's girlfriend. She works at a youth institute as a social worker and likes music and dancing. She is 27.

Bernhard is one of my closest friends. We completed our 3-year apprenticeships at the same company in 2001 (though in different occupations) and share a lot of common interests, especially music. He plays the guitar, is extremely athletic and open-minded. His job as a policeman renders a special view on how Facebook should and can be used.

Raphael has been a good friend of mine for years. He is 30 years old and works part-time for a big telecommunication company. He also works as a bartender in quite a well-known nightclub, goes to boxing practice every now and then and likes to go to football games of

¹⁰ The concept of lurking is well-known in chatrooms and multi-user dungeons. It means that a new user, instead of starting to post, first checks out what the rules and norms of the community are. Here it is used to refer to a similar behavior, namely that experienced users only "consume" the latest news updates by their Friends instead of updating their own status/profile.

the local team BSC Young Boys. He says that he is not a fan in the narrow sense but supports the team.

4.2. The Interviews

The interview part is split into four sections: In the first, *relatedness to groups*, my aim was to find out how closely related the interview partners feel to groups they have on their profile list. In the second section I wanted to talk about their *attitudes toward Facebook* and what they think the service is for. The next section treats the *perceived online Identity*. In other words, how they work on the profile, how they see themselves, and think others see them.

4.2.1. Relatedness to Groups

4.2.1.1 Raphael and Groups

Raphael is a supporter of the biggest Bernese football club, BSC Young Boys. Being asked about the group “Young Boys”, he was not too sure whether he was a real fan, although he possesses a season card and buys club merchandise.

In your groups, I see a lot of football-fan sites related to the local football team. I'd say these groups suggest that you have a certain affinity to the club or that you are a fan, and that people browsing your profile might come to the same conclusion?

Yes, definitely. I never thought about this before. However, I would not call myself a hardcore-fan. But of course I have enthusiasm for the squad, at least more than for any other football club.

Browsing his other pages, we found a lot of similar groups. For example the “YB-Wurst” site, which is for all the people who like the special sausage during games. Other groups of his have little or nothing to do with his real life interests, for example the group “Mamis Kochkünste”, which is a homage to “Mum’s cooking skills”. Generally, Raphael believes that he has a rather weak connection to his groups.

How committed do you feel to the groups you have joined on Facebook? Do you use the group’s wall and contribute to group discussions?

Not at all. I hide groups I've joined in my News Feed in order not to get information from them. My groups are a mixture of random and useless groups and colleagues' groups such as the one of my boxing friend's. It's his company. Or the other which is another friend's art-group; he is a painter. I didn't actually know that he paints. One day I received a group invitation so I clicked on “join group” to show solidarity. But I do not feel committed to the groups. It seems to me, once I've joined a group I forget about it the next moment.

Are you a member of any political group on Facebook?

Yes. I recently joined a group about the controversial politician Erich Hess. It is not a serious discussion group, more intended to make fun of him. I joined because I thought it was fun.

The conclusion might be that such a clear-cut self-analysis diminishes the importance of groups, especially political ones. However, the group Raphael is speaking of is not political in terms of what is being discussed there. People just speak ill of a politician, which is in fact a reason to ban the group by the terms of use of Facebook. A political group is one that talks about political *issues* and not only denounces politicians. Moreover, there are many more serious political groups than he has joined that say a lot about user's political opinions. Some are meant to be opinion-forming groups, maintained by initiative committees and anti-movements.

The case is a bit less clear with Raphael regarding his relatedness to the BSC Young Boys group. There are probably other, perhaps younger, users who might contribute much more to topics and wall entries than he does, because he is not a "hardcore fan". Raphael's group behavior seems to be quite ambiguous but surely not following a serious intent.

4.2.1.2 Cristina and Groups

A recent example which runs counter argumentative to the weak group relationship of users is Cristina's commitment to the group "Vor die Tür? 2xNein".

I can see that you have joined a political group. How actively do you contribute to it and how committed do you feel to it?

The group "2xNein" is a very current and ongoing one¹¹. I think the discussion frame on Facebook and in real life differ a lot, though. In Facebook groups, people can more openly say what they think, even in an aggressive tone and without fear of consequences. I have a relation to these political groups and I think that people can and do act out their opinions.

The above statement highlights the importance of political opinion exchange on Facebook. Cristina argues, that "people can more openly say what they think" than they can in face-to-face discussions. Her argument has to do with "face" because people do not have to fear direct, ultimate consequences (see Lakoff, 1973, for a good basic overview). Speaking in identity terms, Facebook allows overcoming and hiding a shy or overly-polite behavior, only because of the conditions of CMC. However, I would argue that Cristina also contributes to political discussions at a table of friends rather amply. I remember a summer evening when some of our mutual friends were barbequing and discussing right-wing people's party propaganda. Although she had not started the new topic, she felt inclined to contribute to it.

With regard to other groups, Cristina often follows suggestions of the Facebook system.

Do you also actively search for musicians or other idols?

Not really. Most of the time I just follow links and suggestions.

¹¹ It is a group against the Swiss People's Party's referendum for a more strict deportation order policy for criminal foreigners.

But once you have joined a group or fan site, do you check it for news and contribute to discussions?

Yes and no. I check them for news but do not contribute unless I have been to a concert and would like to drop a comment.

4.2.1.3 Bernhard and Groups

Bernhard is fairly one-sided when it comes to groups and rarely joins new groups. This is to say that in real life he is much more willing to participate in new forms of group activity and frequently tries out new sports. He is a contributive speaker in discussions and his interests are diverse. I asked him about his group behavior, noticing that he had only joined music-related groups.

You only have a few groups, all of which have to do with music. How committed to the groups do you feel?

I have to say that since I've started using Facebook, I have never changed anything in this section. So, my relatedness is rather weak. I also believe that they are of little interest for others to check. It was just easy to add them at the beginning, but I couldn't say when I last added a new group, in fact.

One can conclude from Bernhard's answer that he does not use Facebook to demonstrate any political or other interests. Subconsciously, he probably does, because the groups he joined almost inevitably evoke an impression about who he is, held by the users who see them. He certainly speaks a lot about his interests and experience in various fields offline, but much more openly than on Facebook.

4.2.1.4 Manuel and Groups

Manuel is a rather cautious and selective user of groups. His list is quite small, but his relatedness to them actually quite strong.

You only have joined a few groups, I can see...

... yes, I am very selective about which groups I join. It has to mean something to me. Why should I join every silly group or page?

Why not?

Because I'm not on Facebook to join silly groups.

Manuel has not yet joined a political group or group created around another topic than music. It became clear while going through his list that he has a close relationship to them.

What is this group "Dooit" all about?

They are a band of which I know some members (=good friends). Generally, I do not join groups I have no connection to. All of my music groups are closely related to me and I

know the band members personally. I don't look for new groups to join but if I get an invitation, I accept it, as long as I know the members personally and think they're cool. I'm pretty focused and don't want to have my profile stuffed with groups that don't say anything about me, or rather only suggest what my music taste is. I prefer talking about my music taste offline.

Although he does not actively participate in most of the groups, he uses them to highlight a connection to other bands. His groups emphasize his social network offline. Therefore, his attitude toward groups differs a lot from Raphael's, who does not even know which group he has joined anymore.

4.2.1.5 Conclusions

As the different answers triggered by questions around group relatedness suggest, the joining of groups can either be seen as evidence for the relevance of a part of the identity of the focus person, or it is less relevant. The interview partners perceive their groups quite differently. The perceptions can be assorted according to degree of relevance:

1. No relevance: joining groups at every opportunity.
2. Little relevance: joining of groups rather often, but only if in balance with a certain view or interest.
3. High relevance: joining of groups infrequently; groups must cover a basic interest.

According to this list, Raphael belongs to the first, Cristina to the second, Bernhard and Manuel to the third category.

The findings therefore show that groups *can*, but do not necessarily *always* display a part of someone's identity to only one degree. In other words, not every group indicates a relevance to a profile holder's identity. In order to join a group, a user only has to click on a button. In real life, joining a group can be a process of signing forms and paying for membership. It goes without saying that joining a Facebook group can have absolutely no consequences whatsoever to someone's real life.

4.2.2. Attitudes toward Facebook and Privacy

For most of us, the need for security is an issue offline as well as online. We lock our front doors and our bicycles. We keep our money in a bank where it is thought to be safe and conclude insurance deals for our health and goods. We do online banking, but only with the appropriate safety measures. We chat with people we might barely know, but only under a pseudonym. Even though security issues are omnipresent, not everybody is similarly cautious about what information to give to whom, and what to say in which setting.

4.2.2.1 Bernhard and Cristina

Bernhard has joined SNS in the past and to him, learning how to use them has brought him to the current understanding:

At the beginning of all the SNSs, I used the services of MySpace and Hi5 heavily to make a mark as someone, partly also a bit anonymously. I had holiday photos in my photo galleries which have no business being there anymore.

This statement, in my opinion, is a strong argument for Facebook as a community of practice. It confirms Wenger's (1998) argument of the processes of **learning**. Bernhard and Cristina had to learn how the service works on a peripheral, inbound and insider trajectory. This learning included handling of the platform's dangers and misunderstandings and seeing behind the mechanisms of representation. Furthermore, eventually leaving the SNS became an issue on an outbound trajectory.

Do your posts reflect your identity? Do you ever upload things you don't actually like? Does your job as a policeman keep you from uploading more personal information?

I have an ambivalent relation to Facebook. I have a lot of colleagues (policemen) who have a an opinion on certain issues which is diametrically opposed to mine. And then there are other friends. [...] I don't care, however. This is my thing, what I post here is of interest to me and I can stand by it a 100 percent. Back to your question: I now think about posting something twice, whereas I didn't really care at the beginning, when I was not a policeman yet.

Issues of privacy became more important after having made positive or negative experiences and becoming a policeman. As a policeman, he has to be careful of what he says and who can view his posts. Removing pictures of holidays or parties is part of the maintenance of his identity ideal and skepticism.

Cristina has done things similar to Bernhard. She told me, for example, that this issue once became slightly complicated because she was not in possession of a picture of her and that the friend who had taken the photo did not want to remove it initially:

I have removed pictures I thought do not fit in the Facebook setting. I also removed tags of me on pictures I did not like and of which I was not the owner. I once had an argument with a friend who did not want to completely remove a picture I was tagged on... Overall, I have become more cautious.

Have you changed your behavior of accepting friends?

No question. I still have an open request from an intern of ours which I will probably ignore, because my Facebook is for private use and I often speak about my job. And I think it would be bad if my intern was able to read comments about my job. I used to accept much more willingly.

What about using friends lists instead of deleting?

I started creating lists. I categorized my Friends according to where I know them from. The lists are ready, but the problem is keeping them up to date. I really should start doing

it, since this is what we tell the girls in our youth institute. They have 600 Facebook friends and there is a competition going on about who has more friends!

Cristina's attitude toward Facebook indicates that a change of profession or becoming an employee with certain responsibilities can change user behavior as well. We have also seen this in Bernhard's statement. Cristina's last statement in the above quote, which is an observation of the behavior of her teenage girls at work, also confirms Kirkpatrick's assumption in the beginning, namely that focusing on a flawless profile picture and "accumulating the largest possible number of friends" is something quite important at that age. Cristina is a careful and cautious Facebook user. In fact, she is the only one who uses friends lists to restrict profile views. Similarly, Bernhard uses Facebook in alignment with his job duties. Thus, it seems that the community of practice "Facebook" is closely interwoven with other communities and their values. It is a learning process to harmonize the interests and trajectories of the various CofP's one is a part of. This proves the findings of Etienne Wenger's summary in chapter 1.1.2. to be correct.

4.2.2.2 Raphael

Raphael's attitude in this regard can be described as unconcerned. Whether his data can be accessed and used or not, does not unsettle him. After all, every time a user tags a picture of him, he gets a notification of this by email. He can always remove the tag later, which also makes it impossible to tag him again on the same picture.

Do you erase tags of you in photos uploaded by others, because you think they show you in an unfavorable way?

I think I never did. But let's have a look (opens his albums)... Aha.. There is one I could have deleted (it is a picture showing his friend standing next to a sign post on a hiking trail. He is tagged as the name of the place "Mösern" on the sign post). I mean, if someone who hates me uploaded a picture and tagged me as "shit", I would most certainly delete it.

So, you never feel bereft of your privacy and data?

No. Of course, if I saw myself figuring in a campaign of the Swiss People's Party I would think, "how come they are using my picture?" But it never happened to me, nor any other situation I felt uncomfortable with.

Raphael has a deep trust in Facebook, as it seems. He relies on the fact that nothing has ever happened that would have made him uneasy about his data. He does not even bother to use the privacy checks offered by the system. I do not know how problematic this could be, since nobody really knows what happens to all of the Facebook user data. Knowing Raphael, I would say that he is just as positive and trusting online as he is in real life.

4.2.2.3 Manuel

Manuel feels much more like Bernhard and Cristina when it comes to privacy. As a teacher, he has a job with a lot of responsibility and has to lead by example. He told me that Facebook was a topic in one of the subjects he teaches¹². It is clear that he had to instruct and inform his students about the possible dangers and shortcomings of the system, as soon as one discloses too much, publishes too problematic pictures, or comments over Facebook. He is a bit concerned to damage his reputation as a young teacher.

Do you sometimes feel like you lose control over your data?

(Thinks) I felt a certain fear initially that my data could be accessed. But I think I am well-protected as a teacher, in the sense that I only accept friends I deal with offline and put students of mine in a restricted group. I don't accept people with whom I have only exchanged a word or two. In addition, I trust Facebook and expect that they treat my data as they should.

Did you ever remove a tag of yourself on a photo uploaded by someone else?

Yes. There was once a photo online of a New Year's Eve party which I did not want to have on my wall and in "photos of me". But there has never been a photo online that I told the "owner" to remove completely. But again, I think it is due to my position as a teacher that I have to be careful about what to publish. All the more because I taught a class meant to sensitise them about the dangers of Facebook. As a teacher, I have to be a role model.

Manuel is certainly a bit more cautious than Raphael. He worries about photos of him others could publish and tag him in. He says "I think that I am well-protected as a teacher", which is a bit ambiguous: Does he mean Facebook treats teachers differently than nurses? In any case, he has lost his initial fears and now believes that he has control over the tools to protect his privacy.

4.2.3. Perceived Online Identity

In the following sections I have grouped questions around the self-perception of the interview partners' Facebook profile regarding several aspects of their user-generated information. Having been asked straightforwardly whether they believed their profile matched their offline identity, the answer was always "Yes, to a certain degree". In other words, all of the interview partners carefully selected which side of their personality they wanted to promote. This partly confirms Kirpatrick's (2010) argument that Facebook "is both in principle and in practice based on real identity" and that "if you invent a persona or too greatly enhance the way you present yourself, you will get little benefit from Facebook" (12). Some said that becoming more mature made them realize that it was of little use to disclose too much negative information, such as bad mood or sadness. The following piece of interview supports the view that disclosing negatively is viewed as inappropriate.

¹² Manuel teaches classes about how to use computers and the Internet.

Are you the same person on Facebook that you are privately?

Yes, but with the difference that Facebook only transmits my positive mood and feelings. I don't post negative things or moods (sadness, etc.). I think one shouldn't disclose negative mood.

A Facebook profile therefore matches the positive offline manifestations of the partners' identity. Nobody would even think of faking information only to play with identity on Facebook even though they all know that this would be no problem at all. Raphael, for example, uses various other CMC technologies to meet the different demands of communication. Chat rooms using pseudonyms are more suitable to play with identity than a Facebook profile. However, Döring, (2003) concludes that it is "auch im Netz nur in wenigen Situationen und Kontexten der Fall, dass die Beteiligten wirklich identitätslos auftreten können und wollen" (353).¹³

4.2.3.1 Use of Profile Picture

The use of the profile picture tells a lot about how the interview partners see themselves on Facebook and what message they want to convey. It would be interesting – but would go beyond the scope of the thesis – to find out more about the use of them. A study published online by Harvard professor Mikolaj Jan Piskorski (2011) reveals several interesting facts about photos, e.g. that "70% of all social network actions are related to viewing pictures or viewing other people's profiles" or that "women receive 2/3 of all picture pageviews". His study is of little relevance regarding identity construction, but confirms the importance of pictures on SNSs.

I. Cristina

Cristina uses her profile picture to show her interest in travelling:

Your profile picture is a holiday photo, showing you in front of a cliff and the ocean. Why this photo and not another one showing your face only, nothing of you, or perhaps an avatar or comic? What does it say about you?

Yes, it is a holiday picture and I share a lot of them. I used to have other profile pictures showing only my face. But because one can see my name, I think I don't need to show a detailed photo of my face. Holiday pictures say a lot about myself as a traveler and tourist. I like to travel around the world.

This clearly refers to her self-awareness. People can, but do not necessarily have to think that she likes to go on holidays. After all, everybody likes holidays. I think it is still interesting in that she does not show her face. Men and women alike both tend to put a picture online

¹³ My translation of the quote: "...rarely the case that people can appear in online contexts without any hints on their identity."

that shows their face in a positive way (in order to look nice or attract visitors of the opposite sex). I suggest that her approach to using the profile picture is simply not so self-centered as others', and knowing her, my real-life experience would certainly support this.

II. Bernhard

Bernhard's profile picture is quite similar to Cristina's in that he can hardly be recognized in it and that it is a holiday picture. The reason, however, why he chose it is different from Cristina's: he wants to remain a bit anonymous. Cristina wants to convey one of her interests in a way that can easily be comprehended.

Your profile picture is a photo of you doing a handstand in a beautiful Austrian mountain surrounding. You are very small in it, pretty hard to recognize...why this photo and not another one?

I tried to make my profile a bit more anonymous. There are only a few pictures of me I really want to share on Facebook. However, this handstand thing is something characteristic of me. I think people who know me can identify me by the picture because I often do handstands.

What Bernhard might not be aware of, is that the picture of him doing the handstand also conveys a message: He likes mountains. He is athletic. Only his Friends, however, know that he has this handstand quirk. What strikes me most, having been friends with Bernhard for a long time, is his wish to stay "a bit more anonymous". In real-life, Bernhard is exceedingly extrovert and loves to chat with everybody, whether they are strangers or not. I would go even as far as to claim that he loves to take center stage. This clearly does not match his personality. A possible reason for this discrepancy might be that the concerns about his privacy as a policeman dominate his actions on Facebook.

III. Manuel

Manuel, who, besides being a teacher, is also a hobby musician, uses his profile picture to convey a message, too. However, this can be quite tricky. As a teacher, he has a lot of responsibility and sometimes has to lead sternly, but on the other hand, as a musician he stands in the center of attention and has to be careful not to contribute to the idea that he is a *cool, easygoing* or *slack* teacher. In other words, his credibility as a serious teacher is at stake.

Your profile picture shows you with a microphone in your hand, on stage at the Gurtenfestival. I think it tells a lot about you being a musician. Why this picture and not some other?

I used to have a photo of me at 3years old. I needed a contrasting photo somehow, one that tells the others "I am a musician." It's a self-expression, pretty much. I also think that

people who are not my Friends could think “ah, he’s a musician, let’s write him a message and see what he does and when his next concerts are”. Kind of an advert, perhaps.

There are a lot of people who might want to know where Manuel is playing next and who might be potential promoters. He chose a picture related to music and believes that this can allure them. He told me that he was about to create a fan page of himself as a DJ in order to keep fans and friends apart. His intention is to completely move all the music-related information about him as an artist onto his fan page.

IV. Raphael

Raphael recently changed his profile picture. It is He-Man, the comic character. He-Man is a barbarian with superhuman strengths. It was an interesting trend of Facebook users at the moment of the completion of this thesis to use a comic character as a profile picture. Almost simultaneously, most of my Friends changed their profile picture using a comic figure of the past or which they liked as children. Why does Raphael use He-Man as a profile picture?

Why are you using He-Man as your profile picture?

It’s just a recent trend on Facebook. Everybody does it so I joined in. I like action comics and He-Man is just one of many I have read. It has no big relevance to me.

For Raphael, it seems, this use of a comic character as a profile picture means little less than participating in a trend. I disagree: He likes action comics and He-Man, so this is clearly identity-relevant.

4.2.4. Interview Conclusions

One of the conclusions that can be made from the juxtaposition of the above four friends’ answers to similar questions about their Facebook profile is that identity is as multifaceted as opinions on how a Facebook profile should be maintained or how the data should be protected. Even though my pilot study is rather small, it can be safely said that users in their late twenties no longer upload pictures, status updates or links without first thinking about the consequences this might have. It really depends on the attitude and occupation of the user. Is he/she playful and/or still a student? – Data protection issues might be less important. Is he/she rather self-aware and/or works in a job with high responsibility and the risk of losing credibility? – It is rather certain that data protection is of high relevance in this case.

How willingly somebody joins new groups depends on the user’s perception of how important groups in general are. The less important they are regarded, the more frequently a user joins

them and vice versa. Most of the groups are random and trivial, which means that they cannot be regarded as identity-relevant. I have shown, however, that there are political groups which are of big importance and that can change the way of thinking and agenda of whole governments.

The initial argument that online and offline identity are similarly constructed must be refuted. The features of the system on Facebook are only some of many more possible identity features in the real world. The data in my pilot study only suggests that the actions performed and the interaction of the interview partners correspond with their offline identity, i.e. their awareness that both should be consistent. Although the interview partners do not share everything on Facebook, all of them agree that their profile somehow represents their identity. Everything that is online has a certain connection to their real life interests. However, they all draw clear boundaries between real life and cyberspace. Nobody feels like online and offline worlds are merging. Facebook is, in their view, a CofP they belong to and therefore only one part of their *identity as a multi-membership* (see Wenger 1998, above).

5. Conclusions

The aim of this thesis was to emphasize the connection between communities of practice and social network sites. The link has been detected between Wenger's theory of CofP and the way social network sites like Facebook work. As community members, Facebook users constantly negotiate and reify their own identities and the meaning of the community. The findings in the pilot study support this argument. Most of the interview partners do care about the maintenance of their profile and use the service as a means of information, communication and interaction. Facebook is part of their daily routine and pops up in dialogues and discussions offline. For some (Bernhard, Manuel) Facebook is also part of their job duties and as Stuber (2010) suggests, a whole branch of marketing evolves around social networking sites. In other words, Facebook is relevant in jobs and business. Thus, Facebook can be seen as a community of practice and therefore also as being part of its users identity nexus.

The thesis also addressed the formation and creation of groups on Facebook. In conclusion, these can also be seen as communities of practice within the CofP "Facebook". The difference lies in the importance of groups with regard to identity, because the majority of the groups address rather trivial aspects of life – the liking of foods, clothes, companies, etc., or they are explicitly meant to be fun [e.g. "I Would Love to see the Look on peoples (sic!) Faces as they Walk Pass (sic!) This House" – notice: this group has 11'650 fans on

December 21, 2010 despite the spelling mistakes]. Clearly, such groups should not be seen as communities of practice in the narrow sense. Most of the users, once they join, forget about them. On the other hand, groups can be powerful and important, as the examples in the thesis suggest. Governments can be reached and people can get passionately involved in their interaction and discussion boards. This supports the argument that some groups are identity markers, at least for users who join groups selectively and in fine adjustment with their offline interests.

The argument that Facebook users are not who they appear to be can clearly be disproved. In most cases, the profile holders are the same person they are offline. Fakesters get no advantage of pretending and the Facebook mechanisms of “friends validating one’s identity” (Kirkpatrick 2010, 13) almost make it impossible to trick others. If at all, fake profiles attract incautious users who do not pay enough attention to the signs of a fake profile. As suggested by Döring (2010), people can always be identified by certain criteria.

The main argument of this thesis, namely that people similarly construct their online *and* offline identities, does not hold. The pilot study only indicates that Facebook is one of many different aspects of a person’s identity construction. As such, it is used as one among many tools to amend one’s identity through negotiation practices.

6. Further Research Topics

During the writing of this thesis, several research questions came to my mind which could be further analyzed:

- Do the conceptions and notions of Facebook differ among age groups? How?
- How important is the profile picture to users of all age groups and both sexes?
- Can Facebook lead to or abet a craving for admiration?
- How important is social media with regard to public opinion?
- Is communication without the existence of social network sites still conceivable?
- What is the difference between the relatedness to offline groups and online groups such as on Facebook?
- Which Facebook behavior (e.g. posting of status updates) is typical for teenagers or adults, men or women, people of high-status and low status, etc?
- Is the interaction on Facebook more cursory than face-to-face interaction?

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Declaration

I hereby state that I have read § 5 on **plagiarism** in *Help* and confirm that I have complied with the requirements.

Date: _____ Signature: _____

8. Further Reading

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9. Appendices

9.1. Figures

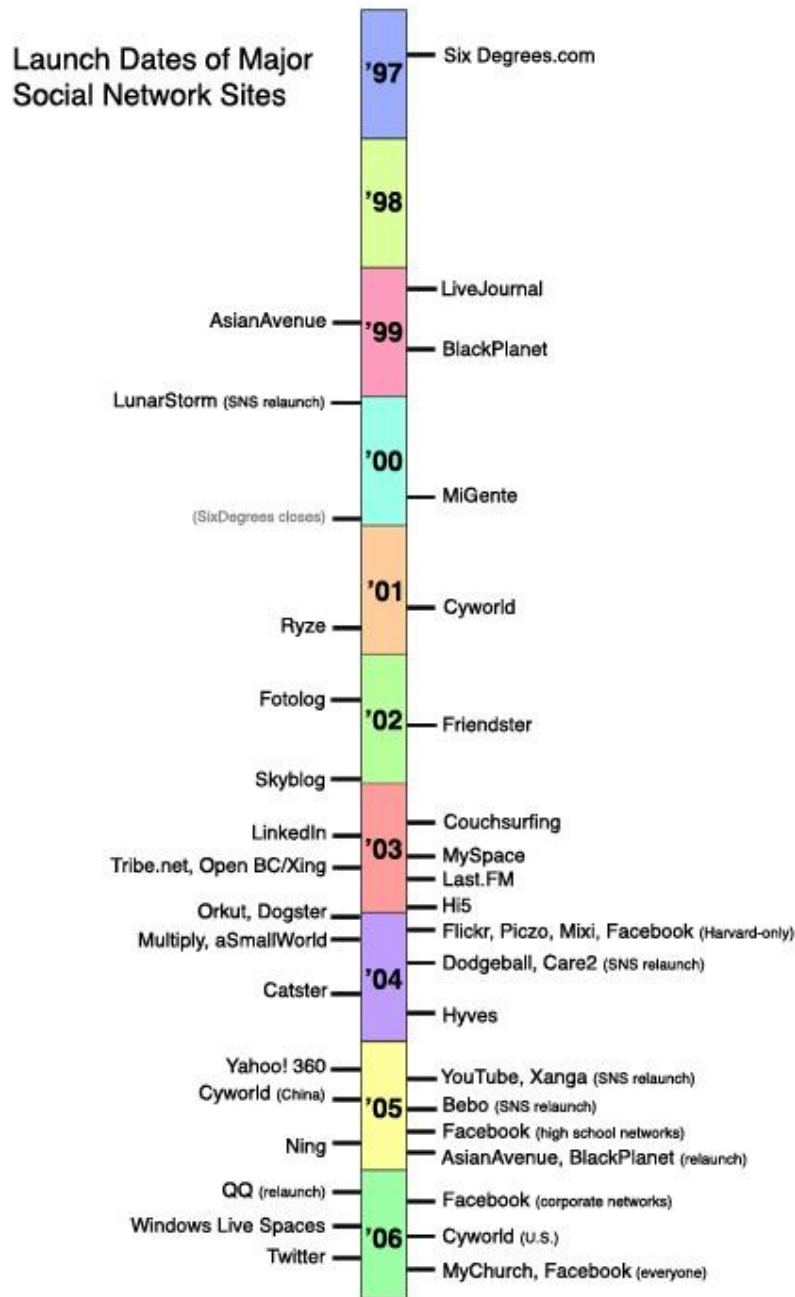


Figure 1: Launch Dates of Major SNSs (Boyd & Ellison, 2007)

The image shows a Facebook profile page for user 'D.' with several annotations:

- My Menu-Bar**: Points to the top navigation bar containing 'facebook', 'Search', and 'Home Profile Account'.
- D.'s profile picture**: Points to the profile picture area.
- Message button (private messaging)**: Points to the 'Message' button.
- "Poking" is an arbitrary feature used to say hi or catch someone's interest (introducing flirts)**: Points to the 'Poke' button.
- Information (here: only birthday, more under "Info")**: Points to the 'Info' tab.
- Friends of D. I also have as friends**: Points to the 'Mutual Friends' section.
- Total of friends of D.**: Points to the 'Friends' section.
- Username / profile holder**: Points to the top navigation bar.
- Boxes (more information about D.)**: Points to the 'Wall', 'Info', 'Photos', and 'Music' tabs.
- recently added friends**: Points to the 'recently added friends' section.
- Link Post**: Points to a post from 'www.wgzimmer.ch'.
- Adverts for me. Only I get this mix of adverts, because they are defined based on my profile information.**: Points to the 'Create an advert' section.
- status update**: Points to a status update from 'D.'.

Figure 2: A Facebook Profile

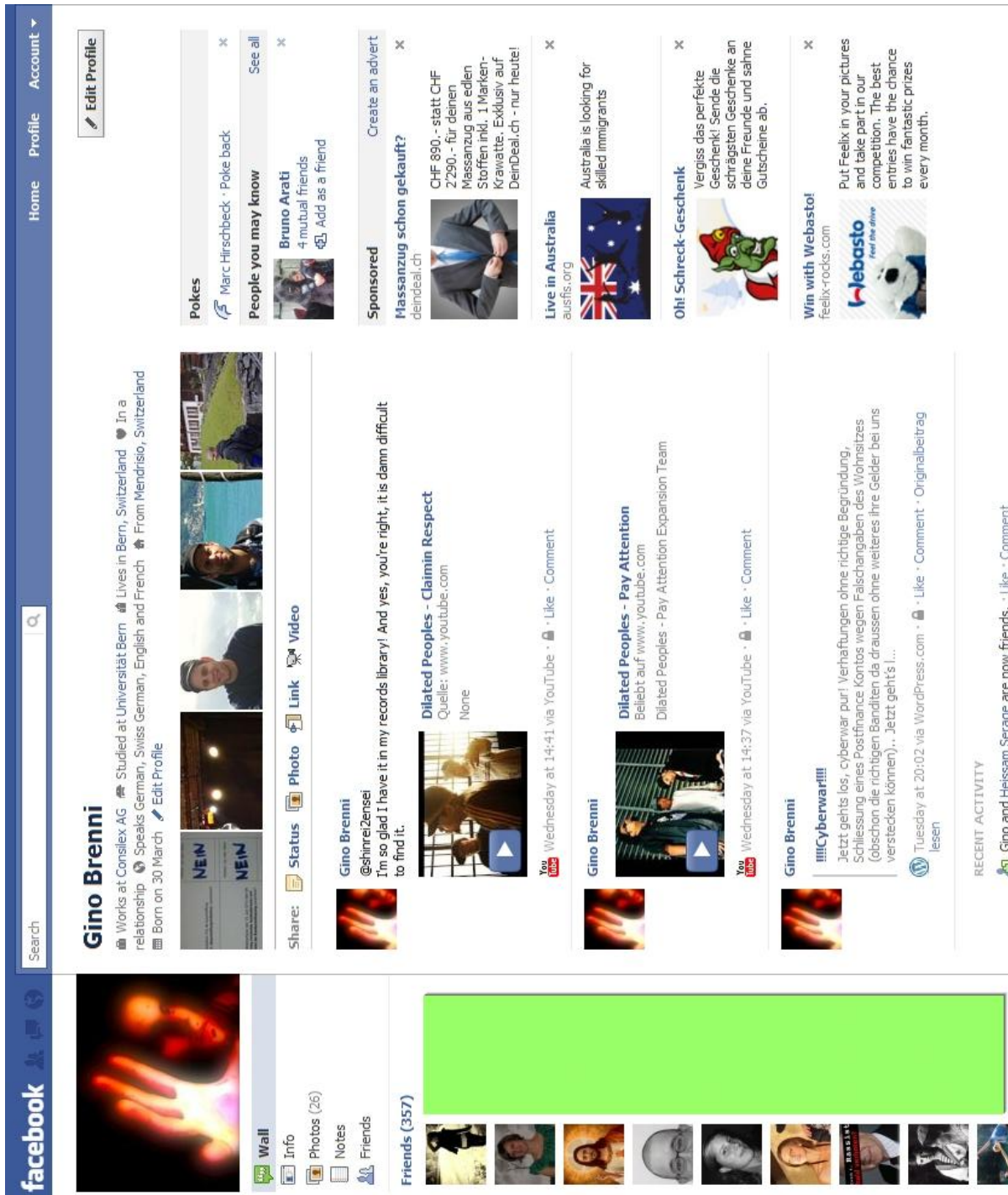


Figure 3: The new Facebook Profile

The image shows a Facebook profile page for Gino Brenni. At the top, there are navigation tabs: Wall, Info, Photos, Arsenal Fan, Boxes, Events, and a plus sign. Below the tabs is a text input field with the placeholder "What's on your mind?". To the right of the input field is a "Share" button and a lock icon. A callout box points to the "Share" button, stating "define who can see the post before sharing it".

Below the input field is a section titled "RECENT ACTIVITY". It lists several actions: "Gino commented on Urs Geissbühler's status.", "Gino likes Vor die Tür? 2xNein (Non-profit).", and "Gino commented on Phil Suter's photo.". A callout box points to this section, stating "Recent Activity: shows recent comments & Likes".

Below the activity is a post by Gino Brenni. It features three photos: a Mercedes car, a road, and a close-up of a green object. A callout box points to these photos, stating "These photos were uploaded via iPhone.". Below the photos, it says "4 new photos" and "Thursday at 19:54 via Facebook for Phone and Facebook for Android".

Below the post is another "RECENT ACTIVITY" section. It lists: "Gino is now friends with Rikke [redacted] and 2 other people.", "Gino commented on Geoffrey [redacted]'s photo.", and "Gino commented on Moon [redacted]'s link.". Below this is a post where Gino Brenni is tagged in Anja [redacted]'s album. The album is titled "Carpe diem..." and "2ForSoul". It shows a photo of a group of people at a party. Below the photo, it says "27 October at 15:49".

Below the album is another "RECENT ACTIVITY" section. It lists: "Gino commented on Anja [redacted]'s photo.", "Gino commented on Lea [redacted]'s status.", "Gino likes DJ [redacted] (Musican).", "Gino commented on Anja [redacted]'s status.", "Gino commented on Simon [redacted]'s status.", and "Gino commented on Urs [redacted]'s photo.". Below this is a post by Gino Brenni titled "Boahsel". It says "19 October at 21:37" and "Comment · Like". Below the post, it says "Olivia [redacted] likes this." and "Write a comment...". A callout box points to the "Boahsel" post, stating "Boahsel is a wordplay on the performance of the football club Basel, which the evening before was winning against AS Roma. 'Boah!' is exclamation ('wow'). Olivia, who commented on this status update is an FC Basel fan."

Below the "Boahsel" post is a post by Gino Brenni titled "Gino Brenni saw 'the social network' last night... Facebook invented by a sociopath, isn't it ironic?". It says "19 October at 11:49" and "Comment · Like". Below the post, there are three comments: "Daniel [redacted] fame attracts envy. don't believe the hype and don't believe holly-fucking-wood. 19 October at 12:13 · Like", "Gino Brenni yeah right, question fucking everything, hu? I did. two references of books with interviews and comments of MZ prove his social incapacities... 19 October at 15:03 · Like", and "Daniel [redacted] :o) 19 October at 15:10 · Like". Below the comments, it says "Write a comment...". A callout box points to the comments, stating "comments on the post".

Below the "social network" post is a post by Gino Brenni titled "Gino Brenni Cool, ey! Gar nid gmerkt!!". It says "17 October at 15:39" and "Comment · Like · Mein Glück ansehen". Below the post, there is a "Glücksnuß" button and a photo of a cookie. Below the photo, it says "Gino hat die Glücksnuß aufgemacht und ihr/sein Glück ist: 1: Du hast das Talent die Gedanken der anderen zu lesen." A callout box points to the "Glücksnuß" button, stating "'Glücksnuß' is a Facebook application it is a daily updated 'Fortune Cookie'".

Figure 4: The Wall



Figure 5: The News Feed



Figure 6: Hiding Feed News of a Friend

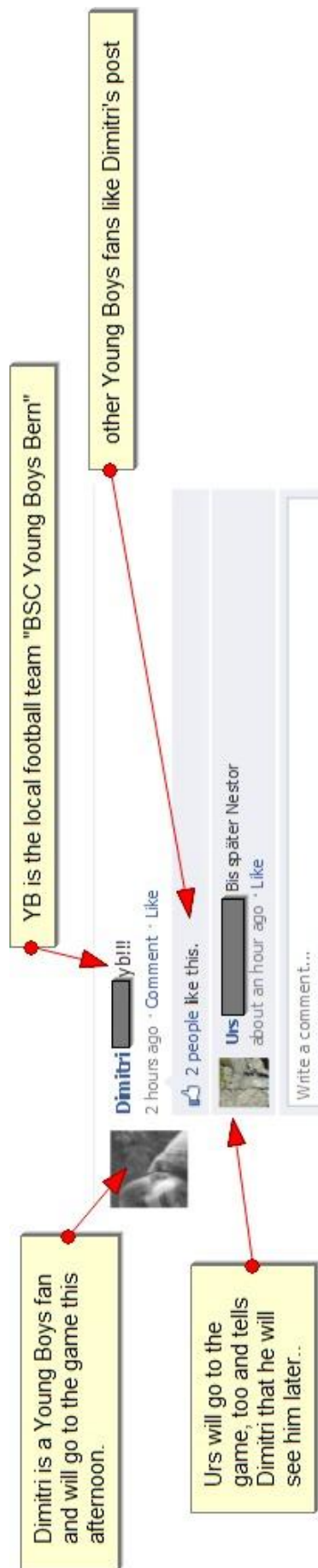


Figure 7: Fan Commitment

The website "support-julian-assange.com" refers to upcoming worldwide events.

Wikileaks Upcoming Events Worldwide

December 9, 2010 | Author [ThaBoas](#)

AUSTRALIA

Melbourne: A meeting to discuss Wikileaks' Julian Assange's legal and political position
 Speakers: Julian Burnside AO QC, Peter Gordon, John Faine and Professor Spencer Zifcak
 Date: Thursday 9 December 2010
 Time: 5:30pm
 Venue: the Law Institute of Victoria, 470 Bourke St, Melbourne
 Details: <http://www.law.monash.edu.au/castancentre/events/index.html>

Brisbane: Rally in support of Julian Assange and WikiLeaks
 Date and time: Thursday, December 9, 5.30pm
 Location: Brisbane Square CBD
 Event page: <http://www.facebook.com/event.php?eid=153885131325141>

UNITED STATES

New York, NY: Thursday, December 9, 6:30pm – 0:30am
 Location: New York Times Bldg, New York, NY 10018
 Event page: <http://www.facebook.com/event.php?eid=155203287858724>

New York, NY: Thursday, December 9, 5:00pm
 Location: Federal Building, Broadway between Worth and Duane St, NY, NY (A, C, E, R, 4, 5, 6 Trains to Chamber and/or Brooklyn Bridge stops)
 Event page: http://www.iacenter.org/nyc_actions/
 Facebook page: <http://www.facebook.com/event.php?eid=182681678414096>
 Organized by: International Action Center, 212-633-6646 [Read the rest of this entry »](#)

Spread the Word!

Posted in [News](#) | [No Comments »](#)

The events are organized in a Facebook group event

people can share the above information over their social media platforms

Figure 8: referring to Facebook group events

Request for permission

FarmVille is requesting permission to do the following:

Send me email

FarmVille may email me directly at
 [Change](#)

→

FarmVille
★★★★☆

By proceeding, you agree to the [FarmVille Terms of Service](#) and [Privacy policy](#) · [Report application](#)

Logged in as (Not you?)

Allow

Don't allow

Figure 9: request for permission of 3rd party website

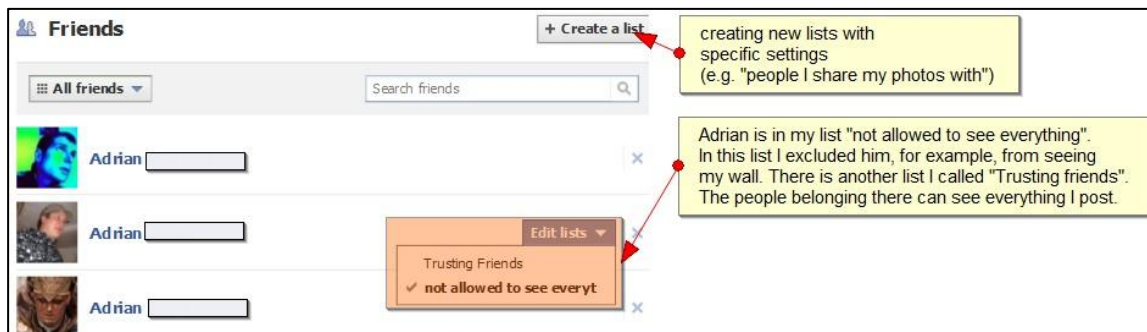


Figure 10: Creating "Friends lists"

9.2. Tables

Feature	Meaning	Identity relevance
(Number of) Friends	the people who are Facebook friends	indicates network of friends, number can indicate popularity and social status.
Activities	Hobbies	e.g. reading, writing, sports, etc.
Wall	poster site of all status updates and wall-posts by others	the wall is sort of a smorgasbord of all “blogging” action going on. It is the central interaction feature on Facebook (see chapter “The Wall”)
Email address		domain name, indicating network relations (@harvard.edu?, or @gmx.net/ch/de?) and first part (e.g. cinderella368@, taffguy@) allows expression of attributes (real or intended).
Events	shows the events that someone will attend in the future	Shows the music taste, preferences how to spend the free time and where so. socializes.
Fan Pages / “Likes”	closely related to “groups”	Show so.’s interests, which are central identity markers. Can mirror real life communities of practice
Groups	Groups formed around a topic	Indicate interests, hobbies, communities of practice and are more meant to be discussion groups in the form of bulletin boards integrated in Facebook.
Interested in	sexual orientation	sexual orientation
Nationality	Hometown, Country	Citizen identity; what possible cultural background does so. have (to be questioned in a globalized world)
Profession & Company	employer and occupation	Community of practice, possible hint about income, status, influence.
Profile name	name of the profile holder	Civil name? Fantasy name?
profile picture	photo, avatar, or something random	Uncountable interpretations possible (funny, moody, emo, rocker, nerd, geek?)
Quote	“say something about yourself”	Used for all sorts of quotes, phrases, idioms, locutions, etc. mostly short and on point. A sentence that is liked by the user.
Relationship status	Shows if so. is “single”; “in a relationship”; “married”, “widowed” or “engaged”.	Affects the online behavior: contacting people for dating reasons or not, flirting. Being contacted by others for different reasons.
Religious Beliefs	-	indicating moral values and perhaps religious community of practice (churchgoer)
Siblings / Family members	-	citizen identity

Table 1: Overview of the most important system-generated identity features on Facebook