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‘Friending’: London-based undergraduates’ experience of Facebook

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Abstract
Facebook offers the possibility of increased social contact via a process known as ‘friending’, whereby users create personal profiles and accumulate ‘friends’ on a reciprocal basis. The making and maintaining of friendships has been shown to be particularly important to young adults, but there is a strong debate in the literature on computer-mediated communication about the value of the often weak ties that are created. Relatively little is known about the kind of contact that is made on Facebook in the UK context. This study interviewed 16 second- and third-year undergraduates who all joined Facebook soon after it was launched in UK universities in October 2005. This article explores the extent to which the nature of the Facebook site fosters particular kinds of social interaction, and how students seek to manage their Facebook ‘friendships’. It finds that Facebook promotes mainly weak, low-commitment ties.

Key words
computer-mediated communication • friendship • social interaction • transition to adulthood • university students

INTRODUCTION
The years spent at university are recognized as an important part of the transition to adulthood: a period of social as well as intellectual development,
offering a major opportunity for young adults to develop the interpersonal relationships that have long been recognized to be important (Erikson, 1963). As Pahl (2000) has observed, friendship is part of identity formation, and making and maintaining friendships has been shown to be particularly important to young single adults and undergraduates (e.g. Pulakos, 2001), who are involved in a transition that entails assuming more responsibility for self and often a move away from home and close kin. Social networking sites offer the possibility of increased social contact, but relatively little is known about the kind of contact that takes place, the extent to which it involves building relationships and friendships, and the extent to which users of these sites can be (or feel that they are) in control of what happens.

Facebook (www.facebook.com) was launched in February 2004 as a social networking site for Harvard students and expanded the following month to Stanford, Columbia and Yale, thus offering a wide reach within a defined geographical territory, unlike most internet sites. It entered British universities in October 2005 (Facebook, 2007a). In September 2006, it was opened up to anyone over the age of 13 with a valid email address and by December 2007, more than half of Facebook users were outside universities (Facebook, 2007b).

The site is free and offers the possibility of what has come to be known as ‘friending’ (boyd, 2006). Users create profiles which may contain photos and lists of personal interests, and accumulate friends on a reciprocal basis (a request to become a ‘friend’ must be accepted before the person is entered on their list of friends). In October 2006 Facebook had just 448,000 users in the UK (Kiss, 2007a) and by April 2009, 200 million active users (Facebook, 2009); the UK was the third largest country in terms of users after the USA and Canada (Burcher, 2009). The students interviewed for this study had joined in late 2005: four at the end of their first year and 12 at the end of their second year. Facebook originally offered affiliation to a student’s own university network, and most of our interviewees continued to operate within this geographical space, but some were also part of the London network, the largest network on Facebook (Kiss, 2007b).

Most research to date on social networking sites is North American and quantitative; the qualitative research of danah boyd (2006, 2007) and of Sonia Livingstone (2008), which has included Facebook, are exceptions. The context in which social networking sites are used matters, in terms of both the pre-existing ‘matrix of social contact’ (Licoppe, 2004; Zhao, 2006) and the ‘culture of friending’ (boyd, 2006), thus the experiences of UK student users may well differ from those in the USA. We have conducted exploratory, qualitative research to look at the nature of the ‘friending’ that takes place and the extent to which students are able to manage their interactions in the often public space of the social networking site.
'FRIENDS' AND COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

Facebook is a social networking site, and while it uses the term ‘friend’, this encompasses a wide variety of relationships. There are of course different sorts of friends in real life, most simply those who are close and those who are more like acquaintances (Allan, 1989), and the number of the latter usually far outstrip the former. Although it has been suggested by evolutionary psychologists that there is a limit on the number of social relationships that an individual can achieve, of about 150 with about five in the innermost ‘closest’ circle (Dunbar, 2007), empirical research by Spencer and Pahl (2006) found that the number of close friends reported by their qualitative sample of 60 people ranged from five to 41. However, one might expect the variety of relationships formed via a social networking site to be larger. Little research is available on the size of people’s networks, but of the few estimates of the exact number of people known, it has been suggested that approximately 290 people are known to a random individual (Killworth et al., 2006).

Certainly, the number of Facebook ‘friends’ a user has often runs into the hundreds, and prior to December 2007, the structure of Facebook was such that it reduced the options for the user’s friendship groups to be separated because it was not possible to differentiate between Facebook friends. As boyd (2006) has observed, there is no means of assessing the weight of these relationships or what metric is used in accepting or rejecting a request to ‘friend’. Thus, Facebook friends may run the gamut between close relationships and very distant and/or weak acquaintances. This ties in with research on the ways in which social and personal networks are clustered. For example, McCarty (2002) has found that individuals had an average (mean) of around six cluster types: such groups include family, neighbours, people from one’s current place of work, people from one’s previous place of work, schoolfriends and networks from another person. On Facebook, all these are ‘flattened’ into the single category of ‘friend’ (boyd, 2006).

The American literature has concentrated mainly on the kind of social ties that are created by the internet (Shklovski et al., 2006 provide a useful review of 16 major studies), and the extent to which they are weak or strong. Most commentators seem to agree that computer-mediated communication (CMC), Facebook included, results in more weak than strong ties (Donath and boyd, 2004; Leung and Lee, 2005). Some argue strongly that the internet enables weak ties with low levels of commitment. Thus Jones suggested that CMC results in ‘aimless connectedness’ (1997: 17), and Calhoun concluded that CMC consists mainly of ‘entertainment-expressive activity with low commitment levels’ (1998: 380).

However, Wellman et al. (2001) have been positive about the potential of CMC to build social ties and community on the basis of ‘networked individualism’, just as Granovetter (1973) insisted on the ‘strength of weak
ties’, and their capacity for building bridges between social networks. Baym and Lin (2004) concluded that the quality of student relationships online are of relatively high quality, while Ellison et al. (2007) concluded, on the basis of their 2006 survey of more than 200 Michigan first-year undergraduate student users of Facebook, that they have evidence of an increase in ‘bridging social capital’. Thus, it has been argued that even the weak ties that tend to characterize CMC can be positive.

Facebook is significantly different from much CMC and other social networking sites in that its users have been – and still are – territorially based to a large extent, and that they tend to know their Facebook friends. Thus for the most part, students have been able to conduct the face-to-face relationships with their Facebook friends that much of the literature on friendship insists is necessary for anything beyond shallow contact (e.g. Allan, 1989). In addition, the Michigan study has shown that contact with these friends consists largely of maintaining relationships rather than making new friends (Ellison et al., 2007).

Nevertheless, Facebook makes it possible to engage in a variety of ways: by supplementing other modes of communication with friends (per Wellman et al.’s (2001) conclusion that interaction online supplements offline communication, face-to-face and telephone); by keeping in touch with people who are not seen on a regular basis; and by keeping up with ‘what’s on’ and what others in the network are doing without necessarily making any contact with them.

Indeed, the use of Facebook raises difficult questions about the process and nature of ‘friending’ in relation to the nature of the social networking site. The early work of Innis (1951) and McLuhan (1964) provided deterministic accounts of the effects of media technologies, but later research has been more insistent on the possibilities for agency (e.g. Adams, 1998; Gershuny, 2003). Indeed, commenting on Facebook in the context of his acquisition of a share in another social networking site, MySpace (www.myspace.com), Rupert Murdoch was quoted as saying that Facebook was comparable to a utility and akin to a telephone book (Clark, 2007). This reduces it to a functional, information role, eminently controllable by the user. However, Facebook is interactive, and such sites are themselves social contexts that foster certain forms of interaction and social identities (boyd, 2007; Meyrowitz, 1997).

The architecture of the site is such that social interaction on Facebook is rarely private, although private messages, akin to email, can be sent to other users. Close friendships are held to require a degree of intimacy and privacy (Allan, 1989; Gerstein, 1984; Gross and Acquisti, 2005; Roseneil, 2000), and even if CMC merely supplements other forms of communication with this particular group of friends (Wellman and Gulia, 1999), it still may result in
changes in the nature, progress and balance of social relationships. Users may have several different groups of friends on Facebook – including since 2006 old schoolfriends, for example – all of whom often may have access to most parts of the user’s site.

Facebook requires users to construct profiles and ‘collect’ friends. At the extreme, this could have more to do with individual display and the presentation of self than with reciprocal friendship (boyd, 2007). After all, it has been shown that other forms of CMC allow users to ‘play’ with their identities (e.g. Smith and Kollock, 1999; Turkle, 1996). As Gross and Acquisti (2005) have argued, much depends on what people think they are doing and how similar their mental maps are to those of other users.

While Gershuny (2003) has argued that internet sites are best understood as just another way of achieving the goal of sociability, the nature of the site may foster, if not wholly determine, certain forms of interaction. For example, it may be easier to maintain shallow forms of contact than deeper ones; the course of social relationships may be changed, in particular the ‘natural decline’ that is experienced in many relationships may be postponed (Cummings et al., 2006); and problems may arise from the multiple audiences that exist on Facebook, particularly in respect of privacy and the disparity between perceived and actual audiences (Barnes, 2006). These issues will not necessarily be experienced as negative, but may reinforce the wider issue of the role that Facebook, rather than the user, plays in determining the nature of social contact.

The aim of this small exploratory study was to shed further light on key aspects of Facebook. The specific objectives were first, to examine the types of friends, the ways students used the site and the nature of the ties that were formed; and second, to see how students managed the tensions arising from the architecture of the site.

METHOD

Sample
We recruited 16 respondents using a purposive snowballing approach, with only undergraduate students who lived in London and who were known to be active Facebook users being approached by one of two students at different universities who were current users of Facebook. All but two of the respondents attended long-established ‘old’ universities in London. One attended a ‘new’ university in London (established in the 1990s) and one a provincial university, but was nevertheless a member of the London network on Facebook. All the respondents joined Facebook late in 2005, when the site was first made available to UK higher education students, and had experienced the opening up of the social networking site to non-university users in 2006. The study asked about a range of issues to do with the use of
Facebook, and the nature and management of ‘friending’. It did not ask about intimate relationships, although information about the effect of Facebook on these was revealed by some respondents.

The respondents consisted of seven men and nine women. They were aged between 21 and 26 (mean age = 22). In terms of ethnic background, 10 were classified as white, three as mixed, two as black and one as Asian. They were at the end of their second or third year of their undergraduate degree programmes in the humanities, social sciences and sciences (see Appendix).

**Data collection**

The semi-structured interviews, which lasted between 32 and 76 minutes (mean = 57 minutes), were carried out by a former undergraduate social sciences student between August and October 2007. The interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed.

All the respondents said that they were regular, everyday users of Facebook, although the number of hours they spent on the site showed considerable variation, from about 20 minutes to several hours. The interviews were carried out in the main during the summer vacation, when many had temporary jobs that they found boring. This often resulted in heavier than normal usage, just as the respondents admitted to heavier use during revision and examination periods, when using Facebook amounted to ‘displacement activity’. In the study, the vast majority of respondents used Facebook every day, with more use during weekdays.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Friends on Facebook**

All the respondents reported hearing about Facebook late in 2005 and responding to peer group pressure to join:

> My friend signed me up to it and … so that was when I first started using it and it was more, just by him pushing me because he was bored and wanted to add to his friend count, I guess. (William)

Two voiced explicit fears that their social life would suffer if they did not join and that they would be ‘left out’:

> I came back from the summer and everyone seemed to be using it in the common room, and you got, like, bullied into using it, mainly because people would just be: ‘Well, I will leave you a message when I am going out, then you will know where to meet.’ (Bryony)

Respondents reported having between 70 and 400 friends on Facebook, with most reporting 100 to 200. ‘Friend’ requests on Facebook are made by a wide variety of people, including:
• close friends;
• a range of acquaintances, who might have met only once or whose faces are familiar but little more is known about them;
• former schoolfriends; and
• family members and people met in the course of temporary jobs or travelling.

Many referred to the initial excitement of looking at profiles, and adding friends or being added as a friend, although none admitted to competing to ‘collect’ friends (also known as ‘social searching’, see Lampe et al., 2006). No respondent reported joining Facebook in order to make new friends; four added that they thought this would be an odd use of the site, more akin to internet dating. Only two said that they had friends (one or two) whom they had not met face-to-face.

The use of Facebook takes one of two main forms: direct engagement with one, some or all ‘friends’, which may involve a range of activities from messaging to joining interest groups and playing games (three respondents reported playing up to 15 games of Scrabulous at a time), or passively browsing the social networking site (Lampe et al., 2006). Once a user joins a network, they can see the profiles of other people in the network; similarly, theirs are available to all in the network, unless the user restricts access to their friends alone.

**Passive engagement**

Virtually all the respondents reported checking profiles, ‘Walls’ (where the user or friends can write comments or add photographs, music or video clips), and the ‘News Feed’ (introduced in September 2006; Facebook, 2007a), which provides an automatic update on the user’s activities, including – if the user chooses to fill it in on their profile – their relationship status. This was done for people they knew, but also for anyone on the network who permitted it, in order to know what people ‘were up to’ (most of the respondents referred to this as ‘stalking’ rather than browsing).

Stalking has little to do with building social relationships, but two respondents called it ‘addictive’. For example, three female respondents reported that either they or their friends followed what ex-boyfriends were doing by checking their profiles. For five respondents this appeared to account for a majority of the time spent on Facebook. However, several seemed uncomfortable admitting either to long hours of use or to stalking. For some, it was not ‘cool’ to admit to being a heavy user. Three expressed anxiety that they would be considered ‘geeks’ if they admitted to long hours of use. One male respondent (Matthew) said that he liked to think that he was ambivalent, but he was nevertheless a heavy user, signing on every hour.
or so while doing his vacation job. This respondent had removed the ‘Mini-Feed’ (which shows some of the user’s recent Facebook actions), so that no one would know how much time he spent, mainly stalking, on Facebook. Similarly, some respondents expressed disdain for a particular element of Facebook, such as the News Feed, but elsewhere in the interview revealed that they nevertheless made considerable use of it (e.g. Alice).

Two respondents admitted stalking rather guiltily, especially when it involved ‘random stalking’ (Charles). One respondent referred to this as ‘monitoring’ and said that everybody did it under the cover of their ‘electronic cloaks’ (Luke). A further three seemed to regard stalking as a normal part of their use of Facebook. One of these talked about: ‘mild … friendly … stalking … it is quite fun stalking people’ (Jessica). Another, who ‘stalked’ her friends, said that they all wanted to have ‘a bit of a sneak around’, and that she felt that it was a ‘common courtesy’ to put up something for people to look at, even though the thought of ex-boyfriends looking was ‘slightly painful’ (Lauren).

Passive engagement also involved using Facebook as an electronic message board to organize and find out about meetings and events. This was valued by all respondents because, as one put it: ‘London people just disperse’ (Hannah). Facebook, as the ‘student network of choice’ (Oliver), made it much easier to find out what was going on.

**Active engagement**

Most students’ close friends were on Facebook, but four reported having close friends who were not, because they were ‘technophobes’, were older or, in one case, thought Facebook was ‘cliquey’.

The respondents’ accounts indicated that Facebook had had little impact on this form of friendship. Telephone and text communication and face-to-face meetings were still very much a part of these relationships, with Facebook an additional form of communication, involving sending messages and ‘silly comments’ or banter posted on ‘Walls’ (Hannah). As one put it:

> I see the people that I am friends with much more than I spent time writing messages just on Facebook to them. (Bryony)

This is in line with other research, which has found additional interpersonal contact via the internet to be supplementary (Wellman et al., 2001).

Nevertheless, Facebook had the potential to change the course of some close friendships and certainly can be significant in the case of intimate relationships. A male respondent told the story of a female student he had been ‘fond of’, but had not seen for many months after she left the university, even though she continued to live in London and they continued to communicate via Facebook. When he bumped into her
one day on the street, he found that they had little to say – there was no
catching up to do. He also reflected that ‘I think Facebook made it easier
to not meet up’ (James). A female respondent reported that Facebook
complicated intimate relationships:

It’s also funny because it adds a whole other complication to the ‘Does he like
me/does he not?’ So now, not only do you have to interpret text messages,
phone calls, gestures in the street, you now have to interpret Facebook ‘Wall’
postings and inbox messages and, oh God, like, I’ve got quite a lot of paranoid
female friends. (Hannah)

There is the sense here that Facebook increases the amount of chatter
above all, even among close friends. While respondents dismissed any idea
that the basis for close friendships was affected by Facebook, it added a
layer of communication that ranged from the merely useful to the gossipy:
‘flim-flam chat’ (Lauren) or ‘silly’, short messages (Lorna, Hannah), usually
supplementing other forms of contact. Thus Hannah insisted that these
messages never substituted for seeing these friends or for telephone calls, ‘it’s
just an additional way to talk to them throughout the day’.

The vast majority of respondents’ friends on Facebook were acquaintances
of different kinds. First, there are the former schoolfriends. The respondents
agreed that Facebook provided an easy and cost-free way of ‘keeping in
touch’: ‘you can maintain these relationships’ (Sophie); ‘you just kind of want
to know [about what happened to them]’ (Lorna). For most this was just a
matter of touching base. One female respondent said that she had several
former schoolfriends whom she

would never phone … I’d probably send them a message saying ‘Hi, what are
you up to?’, but I’m not terribly interested in the response. (Kate)

By her own admission, this was more to show polite interest than a
commitment to maintaining a relationship. However, one male respondent
found even the minimal contact that he had with old school friends
reassuring. He described it as ‘satisfying’ to get back in touch:

When I see old friends have travelled the world … it makes me feel really proud
to say, good on that person, they’ve branched out, it’s really encouraging to see
that. (Joseph)

Four had been contacted by a secondary school teacher, which they
welcomed. However, one male respondent noted the tendency for Facebook
to ‘meld all your social groups together’, with the result that a post on a
‘Wall’ from an old schoolfriend might ‘sort of clash with your social circle a
bit’ (William). In other words, the old schoolfriend might use language that
was not current among his university peer group.
This kind of ‘collision of contexts’ (see boyd, 2006) was much more of an issue in respect of family members who wanted to be ‘friends’. Many respondents had cousins of a roughly similar age on Facebook and a few siblings, but only two positively welcomed parents. While five said that it would be very difficult to reject a parent’s friending request (‘You can’t really reject your own mother, can you?’), all but three respondents felt that having their own or friends’ parents on Facebook was a step too far:

I see Facebook as being reserved for my social life with my own friends and it is sort of – although it is shown in a very public way, I still feel a bit private about the things that go on there. (William)

Another male participant did not want people in his network seeing pictures of his mother when she was younger, while several of the women did not want parents (or in one case, brothers) seeing pictures of them smoking or drinking.

Similarly, there were anxieties about the people that the respondents knew through their temporary jobs. In general, the respondents were less concerned about the idea of meeting their university teachers on Facebook, although one felt that it would be an ‘invasion’ if a lecturer looked at profiles (Lorna). Again, the issue was the need to try to keep a degree of separation between different worlds in face of the ‘flattening’ effect of friending on Facebook (boyd, 2006). The respondents distinguished between these mainly by group – family, work colleagues and peers – but also by age, although two expressed reservations about this last issue, reflecting that at 21 they were adults and not much younger than some of their university teachers.

Facebook enabled the respondents to keep in contact with people they had met once or twice in a bar or club, or people whom they knew vaguely from some part of life at their universities. Three female respondents reported that Facebook made it possible to ask about something read on the News Feed, or just provided a topic of conversation that is of almost universal interest to anyone ‘in the pub’. Most viewed Facebook as the most informal mode of communication that they used, and one said that while it might be a bit too formal to exchange telephone numbers in the pub, suggesting that they kept in touch via Facebook was perfectly acceptable (Bryony).

In line with the findings of Ellison et al. (2007), that Facebook was important for maintaining contact with old friends and acquaintances, it was generally agreed that Facebook was very useful for keeping in touch with this category of ‘friend’: ‘people you just don’t see socially that much, but it doesn’t necessarily mean you don’t want to hear from them ever again’ (Bryony), or:

Monitoring relationships that you don’t really want to be in … kind of holding together a social world, it’s just, it’s incredibly useful … a couple of them clicks,
y’know, and a nice little message and, and er things are kept alive, running along. (Luke)

Another used Facebook to keep this category of ‘friend’ informed about his active social relationships:

For me it’s just a good tool to talk about pictures or things that have happened with my good friends who I hang out with, and to touch base with people who I don’t keep in contact with that much, but it’s good to say ‘Hey, how’s life?’ (Charles)

For a few, this kind of contact provided reassurance: they could find out a bit more about people they had been scared to talk to properly, or they could reassure themselves that they were not missing exciting social events by looking to see what this group of ‘friends’ was doing. However, for most, it was a ‘way of continuing friendships without making that much effort’ (Matthew) and an easy way of just keeping in touch with a lot of people:

The fact that they have added you as a friend doesn’t really imply that that’s going to happen at all, I think it is a really loose contact, so it is quite easy and inoffensive to just accept them and then not do anything more … Facebook is a very broad and low commitment … it’s not the same as being committed as going for a coffee to catch up. (William)

A female respondent expressed similar sentiments when she said:

A lot of the people I have met once or I know vaguely, say ‘Hello!’ to. You say, ‘We should meet up for drinks’, but it’s kind of like you don’t really mean it … it’s just polite. (Jessica)

Another said:

You don’t always want to ring someone up and have a massive conversation, you can just say ‘Hi’ now and again … there’s no pressure into [sic] maintaining a relationship, it’s a really nice, easy thing to do, which isn’t putting yourself on the line. (Lauren)

Similarly, a male respondent reported that if he contacts someone he has not spoken to for a while, he will

just write on the Wall. It is easy for them to sort of ignore or just take their time, whereas a message in their inbox is more something that you have to deal with more immediately. (William)

The only respondent who admitted having had difficulty making friends at his university said that while he thought that Facebook would help in this regard, it had not done so at all. He too found that Facebook was a way of just keeping in touch with what he called his ‘hi and bye’ friends, ‘like if
you see them on the street you might say ‘Hey, OK, see ya’… (Charles). Ellison et al. (2007) suggested that the use of Facebook might lower barriers to communication; this may be the case, but it does not necessarily promote meaningful ties.

Some of the respondents used the term ‘random friends’ to describe these contacts, because they fell outside the circle of people they met or saw on a regular basis:

A lot are acquaintances or random people I have bumped into and met, and like to keep in contact with and possibly see again in the future. (William)

There was a sense of security in this ‘safety net’ of friends, but these ties were acknowledged to be extremely weak indeed.

It is doubtful whether these kinds of relationship would have continued to exist without Facebook (per Cummings et al., 2006) and they constituted the majority of Facebook friends. It may be that such ‘friends’ constitute a reserve of social capital (Ellison et al., 2007), but this seems to be unlikely from the accounts in the present study. While seen as positive by the respondents – although one had ‘purged’ his friends list from 200 to 85 recently because he had not seen most of them ‘since Freshers’ week [the first week of the first academic year]’ (Matthew) – it seems that these ties are often a security blanket, that some leave these people on their list of friends ‘just in case’, while others cannot be bothered (or are not sure how) to remove them.

Indeed, the whole etiquette of ‘friending’ and the possibility of ‘de-friending’ or ‘un-friending’ on Facebook was an issue for most of the respondents. Those who expressed anxiety at the possibility of family members, particularly parents, making friend requests, said that they would let the request go unanswered rather than reject it. Respondents tended to express strong views on whether requests from others could be rejected:

You can’t refuse … it’s a complete ‘no-no’, a complete slap in the face to like deny anyone who wants to be your friend. (Oliver)

A further three were also of the view that people could not be rejected, but two more allowed requests to sit in their inbox, a form of passive rejection, and said that they would reject people whom they did not know or disliked, or they could not envision talking to in the future. The majority accepted friend requests. As one respondent put it, she had little problem in accepting requests from people she had only met once or twice, just because ‘you don’t necessarily talk to someone if you add them as a friend’ (Charlotte). Perhaps not surprisingly, there seemed to be more status involved in being added as a friend than in doing the adding. One said that he was ‘quite proud’ of being added as a friend more than adding, ‘I know I shouldn’t be’ (Matthew). There was no clarity at all about ‘de-friending’:
‘I mean, that’s such a bad thing to do … I don’t know what the etiquette and the protocol is’ (Alice). Only two respondents said that they had ‘deleted’ friends. Intimate relationships posed additional problems. One respondent had blocked her ex-boyfriend from seeing her profile, but as another female respondent commented, the information flows on Facebook make it difficult to close any relationship: ‘That gets a lot of people down, just because you can’t just blank someone out’ (Hannah).

Managing ‘friending’ on Facebook
While the respondents had met virtually all of the people on their list of friends on Facebook, the site required them to manage the blurred boundaries between different sorts of friends, and between themselves and the unknown, wider audience in their networks. The construction of profiles involves the presentation of self; as mentioned previously, Facebook is used for ‘stalking’ as well as interacting with ‘friends’. The respondents had to manage the fact that much of what they did on Facebook would be visible to all their different groups of friends and sometimes, depending on the privacy settings that they had adopted, to the whole network, whether university or London-wide. Many respondents reported adopting different strategies to deal with these issues: sometimes taking steps to limit access to their profiles, and sometimes to limit the kind of information that they chose to present. However, many were aware only partially of these issues or, even if they were aware, nevertheless tended to behave online as if they were addressing only their real-life friends. Indeed, the kind of difficulties reported by Livingstone (2008) in respect of the use of social networking sites by a younger group of UK teenagers were common also in the present sample.

While all the respondents understood that users of Facebook could ‘stalk’ as well as engage in social interaction, only a minority knew who exactly had access to which parts of their own site. Five respondents were convinced that ‘random’ people – meaning in this instance the people in their network whom they did not know personally – would just not be interested in their profiles. One of these respondents said that she had never thought about the issue of audience until her father had pointed out that other people on the London network might be looking at her photos. She had assumed that everyone used Facebook in the same way that she did, something that seemed to be common among this group of respondents, confirming Barnes’ (2006) and Stutzman’s (2006) concerns about the audience users think they have, and the audience they actually have for their interactions on Facebook, and hence about the extent to which users disclose personal information.

Usually the personal information about respondents that existed on their profiles was tailored to their university peer group, but problems resulted from the fact that profiles (including comments on ‘Walls’) and lists of friends
were visible to all categories of friends, and, indeed, often to all of those on their network(s). The respondents were more alert to the implications of the former than the latter. However, only a minority of the respondents had changed their privacy settings in order to limit access to their profiles (a finding confirming that of Gross and Acquisti, 2005). As noted previously, one female respondent had ‘blocked’ an ex-boyfriend. In addition, a male respondent had

suddenly thought about all the time I spent looking at other people’s photos, bitching about them, like, ‘Oh, that guy at school looks like a right twat now’, and I thought: ‘Oh, people are probably doing this about me, I might change my settings.’ (Matthew)

Most of those who recognized the problem of multiple audiences sought to manage it by controlling the information on their profiles in some way: by limiting the information they put up (see also Acquisti and Gross, 2006), particularly in terms of personal details, such as mobile telephone numbers; actively editing the information displayed on their profiles; or by putting up false information. As one respondent observed, people’s ‘Walls’ are as revealing as their photos, but it is impossible to stop people with access to the profile posting comments. Sometimes respondents actively sought to manage the boundaries between different groups of friends and between friends and a wider public by minimizing the amount of information that they offered. The respondent who had commented on the way in which Facebook tended ‘to meld all your social groups together’ (William; see above) endeavoured to be a ‘little bit anonymous’ and to ‘control my identity’ by editing his profile. Two female respondents reported that initially they had tried to fill in all the personal information boxes on their profiles, but had decided to opt for a more minimalist approach because they disliked the impression that it conveyed: ‘I tried once, re-read it and thought, “Fuck no!”’ (Hannah); this respondent added that her aim was to contact friends rather than to publicize herself.

Seven respondents had decided to put up material on their profiles that was untrue in terms of personal details and/or their likes and dislikes. The presentation of self on a profile that includes false information may not be a deliberate attempt to deceive, but rather (albeit rarely) an attempt to protect privacy, or (more often) to be ‘cool’. Often such information was jokey and was sometimes an in-joke among the respondent’s normal social circle of university friends. This kind of information, like membership of some more obviously esoteric groups, was more about the presentation of self than anything else, even if the intended audience was the respondent’s university circle. Many of the respondents revealed directly or indirectly that they felt a degree of conflict between the perceived need and desire to combine...
the presentation of self ‘in a positive fashion’ (Bryony), which necessarily
involved the conscious construction of identity – ‘your own little PR
machine’ (Alice), with normal interaction between friends. Thus while some
were happy to present jokey or false profiles, four felt strongly that it was
wrong, and that it would be embarrassing to misrepresent themselves.

However, ideas about the relationship between self-presentation and
reciprocal exchange were complicated, for example in respect of the
treatment of photographs which, alongside postings on ‘Walls’, were
commonly acknowledged to be the most revealing parts of a user’s profile.
Irrespective of the extent to, or the way in which they sought to control the
information they presented, most of the female respondents said that they
‘detagged’ photos that they deemed to be unflattering. However, some male
respondents who sought in different ways to control their profiles, refused
to detag photos of themselves or others, either because they felt that such
behaviour signalled unwarranted vanity: ‘you can’t go around being offended
on Facebook’ (Luke), or, more unusually, because of a sense that photos were
an integral part of Facebook: ‘I personally see it as you lose face, it’s public
property, you just can’t’ (Charles; emphasis added).

CONCLUSION
For this sample of London-based students, Facebook was felt to be a socially
necessary tool and part of an increasingly wide range of communication
systems. It was valued particularly for the way it enabled broad, low pressure
and low commitment communication with acquaintances. Much time was
spent stalking: browsing the profiles of both Facebook friends and other
people in the network. For the most part, communicating on Facebook
was regarded as fun and not serious: it was seen as a supplement to other
forms of communication, especially between close friends, and a useful way
of touching base occasionally with others. It is not clear that it helped in
any substantial way in the process of transition to adulthood by sustaining
committed friendships. Indeed, there were some hints that Facebook could
introduce distortions into the normal pattern of both friendships and intimate
relationships in real life, although usually the impact of CMC on real-life,
close friendships was described as minimal.

Facebook was considered to offer a very informal means of communication
and, for this sample, maintained for the most part very weak and loose ties.
These seemed to act as a security blanket for some students: there was always
the possibility of checking to see that they were not missing something, or
to gain reassurance from the achievements of old schoolfriends. In addition,
while these weak ties spanned a number of different friendship groups, there
was no evidence of bridge-building between them (per Granovetter, 1973).
Rather, the respondents tended to perceive the management of the ‘flattened
friendship’ structure on Facebook as a challenge more akin to boyd’s (2006) idea of ‘colliding contexts’, and expressed some concern about the melding of their friendship groups.

The respondents expressed some anxieties about privacy, given that exchanges could be read by different groups of ‘friends’ and possibly broadcast to the whole network. Many had made communicating via Facebook part of their particular student culture, which often involved in-jokes and a refusal to take the social networking site too seriously. Nevertheless, the architecture of the site worked to encourage a particular form of communication between ‘friends’, based in the main on banter and gossip, often gleaned from social browsing. The site requires both the presentation of self and a process of ‘friending’, and there is a degree of incompatibility between these imperatives, which may increase with the growing commercialization and reach of Facebook. Indeed, a majority of respondents expressed regret that Facebook had been opened up to all those with an email account in 2006. These people disliked losing the idea of their university community, which was to them real rather than the usually imagined communities of internet users and for some provided a sense of safety.

Suggestions for further research

There were considerable differences between the respondents as to how they managed interactions on Facebook. What determines these requires more research, but it is suggested that the following are likely to be important: the ways in which Facebook is used, for example, for ‘stalking’, social interaction, and/or organizing social activities; what the audience is understood to be; and what the user’s ideas of public and private and the boundaries between Facebook friends are. However, agency is limited by the Facebook architecture, which allows profiles to be visible to anyone on a particular network. This makes it likely that part of the user’s social life and personal details is likely to be broadcast to a wider audience (unless the user restricts access). Communication on Facebook appears to be rarely a matter of a private exchange between two or even a group of like-minded friends, even though a significant minority behave for the most part as if it is. Most of the respondents accepted the architecture of the site, regarding it as the individual’s choice (and responsibility) about what to post, there being no established norms about what is public and private on social networking sites. However, for others this was a source of some unease and possibly ambivalent feelings about Facebook: one female respondent felt that in the end, sending little messages was rather ‘superficial’ (Charlotte), even though the majority welcomed the ease of contact that Facebook offered.

It is suggested that this article has highlighted the following areas in particular for further research: the impact of ‘friending’ on Facebook (and
other social networking sites) on intimate relationships, as opposed to the impact on close friendships or weak ties; the issue of how to treat Facebook friends, particularly in regard to the etiquette of adding and deleting friends and the passive rejection of friendship requests; how people write for multiple audiences; and how the way in which Facebook is used relates to the way in which information is managed. More broadly, the large number of ‘friends’ that are accumulated on Facebook require the kind of quantitative cluster analysis carried out by social network analysts (e.g. McCarty, 2002), particularly in relation to an exploration of the specific issue of strength of ties (e.g. McCarty, 1996). In addition, given that our findings have confirmed Cumming’s et al.’s (2006) conclusions that CMC may change the natural pattern of decline in relationships, we might speculate that it is difficult to predict how social networking sites will be used over time, which calls for more longitudinal research. Lampe et al. (2006) have suggested (on the basis of the 2005 surveys of Michigan first-year students) that the way in which students use Facebook may change over time.

In conclusion, for this sample of undergraduates, Facebook did not necessarily contribute significantly to the maintenance of close friendships. It might be argued that it comes close to Calhoun’s description of CMC as ‘entertainment-expressive activity with low commitment’ (1998: 380), albeit without damaging strong ties. However, given that there is evidence that breadth of interaction between friends is positively correlated with ratings of the intensity of friendship (Hays, 1984), it may be that there are gains from the additional means of communication offered by Facebook. What is clear is that the possibility of just being able to keep in touch with short messages and to know what was going on in their social networks was regarded positively by the respondents. However, for this group of students, perhaps Facebook is best understood as a form of entertainment first, and as a means to a larger group of weak social contacts second.

Appendix: Characteristics of respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Undergraduate degree course</th>
<th>Year of degree completed</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>White</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Social sciences</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

(Continued)
Acknowledgements
We would like to thank Peter Currie for carrying out the interviews, advising on Facebook and commenting on an earlier draft. We would also like to thank Jamie West for advice on Facebook.

Notes
1 ‘New’ universities were created following legislation passed in 1992 and are in the main former polytechnics offering more vocational programmes than ‘old’ universities.
2 The respondents were asked what they considered their ethnic background to be, but in order to preserve their anonymity, these were replaced with the broader categories used in the British census.
3 There was some support in this small sample for Golder et al.’s (2007) finding in the USA, on the basis of an analysis of 362 million Facebook message headings, that student use was heaviest at the beginning of the week, which they attributed to the wish to organize social lives over the weekend.
4 This term was used a lot by respondents, with different shades of meaning. A ‘random’ person might be someone unknown to the respondent who gets in touch, or someone who is outside the respondent’s normal social circle.
5 Baym et al. (2007) have stressed the importance of distinguishing between relationship quality and intimacy.

References


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