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2011

Social networking texts among college students : identity and imagination online

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SOCIAL NETWORKING TEXTS AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS:
IDENTITY AND IMAGINATION ONLINE

A Dissertation Presented
to
The Faculty of the School of Education
Department of Leadership Studies
Organization and Leadership Program

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

By
Paul J. Raccanello
San Francisco
May 2011

THE UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

Dissertation Abstract

**Social Networking Texts among College Students:
Identity and Imagination Online**

This research studies the significance of online social networking in the lifeworld of the millennial student. The focus of this research is to come to a new understanding of how the created online profiles influence identity formation and understanding, as well as the capacity to imagine new relationships and different ways of being with others in the real world. Employing a framework of interpretive participatory inquiry (Herda 1999), this research analyzes data presented in research conversations using the critical hermeneutic concepts of text (Gadamer 1975), identity (Ricoeur 1992), and imagination (Kearney 1998).

The social networking paradigm suggests that the online profile is a representative text that is a cursory overview of the author. Though often superficial, these profiles do represent some parts of the identity of the author and also present the viewer with an opportunity to interpret and appropriate a different understanding of the author's identity. This research also explores the notion that social networking profiles, as embellished texts, allow the author to put forth online a manufactured identity different from their authentic self that can influence a different interpretation and understanding by the viewer who encounters this fabricated text. Furthermore, social networking profiles present opportunities for imagining different relationships in the real world. This research explores the relationship between the massive amounts of information and imagery available in the online text and the potential for this

technology to influence the collapse of imagination (Kearney 1988) among members of the millennial generation.

Findings from this research related to the three research categories of text, identity, and imagination, and they include the following: 1) online social networking texts are superficial and embellished but also representative of identity, and they influence prejudgments of others online; 2) students manufacture an online identity to connect with others; 3) social networking enhances envisioning real-world encounters but is also a significant and powerful influence on imagining new and different relationships. Suggested research as informed by this study include additional exploration of the manufactured online identity as well as further research on exploiting this technology to fulfill personal needs or to cause malice toward others.

This dissertation, written under the direction of the candidate's dissertation committee and approved by the members of the committee, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of the School of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

Paul J. Raccanello   March 7, 2011
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

"I would wager that no matter how cyber, digital or intergalactic our world becomes,

there will always be human selves to recite and receive stories.

And these narrative selves will always be capable of ethically responsible action."

Richard Kearney (2002:152).

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CHAPTER ONE: STATEMENT OF THE ISSUE

<u>Introduction</u>

In the past twenty years, the Internet has evolved from a repository of research

data and basic text-based communications to a virtual world teeming with information

and designed for entertainment presented through various multimedia platforms.

Beyond information and entertainment, the Internet provides unprecedented

opportunities for communication and interaction with others in virtual spaces. The

functionality and capabilities of online engagement that exist today will likely lead to

more significant developments in the future, which in turn will influence the everyday

lives of those who participate with this ubiquitous medium. The expansion, evolution,

and future potential of the Internet coincide with the maturation of a generation that has

grown and developed with this technology. Commonly referred to as the millennial

generation (Howe and Strauss 2000), these are the young people currently attending

colleges and universities "whose entire life experiences are being shaped by their

ubiquitous interactions with technology" (Speer 2007:50). These students are proficient

in online communication and comfortable using it in their daily lives (Jones 2002;

Buckingham and Willett 2006; Lenhart et al. 2007).

<u>Statement of the Issue</u>

The growing research investigating the relationship between online participation

and millennial students suggests that the Internet pervades their daily lives. In addition

to utilizing this technology as a tool and medium for academic and scholarly research,

millennials socially engage with others through various online technologies such as

instant messaging services, multiplayer gaming, and most especially through social

networking sites. In recent years, these social networking sites have become a notable form of communication for students; the multimedia capabilities allow individuals around the world with Internet access to be instantly part of these virtual interactive communities. Bargh and McKenna (2004:575) suggest that people, especially millennial students, "use the Internet is to communicate with other people … [and] to maintain interpersonal relationships." Colleges and university campuses, widely considered to be ideal venues for young adults to establish their identities as they engage academically and socially with others on campus, have become environments where communal gatherings and physically present discourse are eschewed in favor of socialization and communication through online interaction (Jones and Fox 2009, Porter 2006, Bargh 2002).

The influence of online engagement on millennial student identity development and peer relationship formation is a phenomenon that warrants additional exploration. Using critical hermeneutic participatory inquiry for this research (Herda 1999), I provide some understanding about, and a critical analysis of, the influence of online social networking on the student culture by means of students' relationship and identity formation. Current literature (Madge et al. 2009, Gleusing 2008, Buckingham and Willets 2006) suggests that online participation has the potential to influence peer relationships and identity formation for those millennial students engaged with this technology. Using the critical hermeneutic concepts of 1) text, 2) identity, and 3) imagination, this research explores how millennial students establish identity online and considers new ways of interpreting students' imagination for seeing themselves in relation to others – both in virtual networks and in the physically present campus community.

Background of the Issue

The college and university campus provides a physically present community whereby young adults learn and develop by socializing with peers and through involvement with events and happenings on campus. Institutions of higher education promote student engagement by developing their academic curricula, supporting co-curricular programming, and by encouraging participation in various student activities, clubs, and organizations. The notion of student engagement can imply various interpretations. In respect to this proposed study, I define student engagement as physically present interaction in student clubs, organizations, or peer-based social activities. This type of involvement is critical both to the success of the student and to the capacity of the institution to develop the learning environment (Tinto 2006; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005; Astin 1997). Pascarella and Terenzini (2005:602) suggest that "the impact of college is largely determined by individual effort and involvement in the academic, interpersonal, and extracurricular offerings" that are in place for students on a campus.

In my role as the Associate Dean of Students at Dominican University of California, I strive to help students become part of both the larger campus community and the myriad of smaller networks and peer groups that exist. The reason for promoting community and social engagement, in addition to being instrumental in the social and personal development of the student, pertains to the pragmatic necessity of retention. Retention is an issue of significant concern for many universities, most especially smaller institutions dependent on tuition as the main source of operating revenue. Experts in the field of student retention (Tinto 2006; Astin 1997, 1999) assert

that involvement and engagement are essential to student satisfaction and persistence. Students who are socially engaged and become a part of the campus community are more likely to stay at the university and persist to graduation.

Student peer engagement and involvement are critical components of a robust university experience. However, the arrival of the millennial generation students – those who have the access to, and affinity for, online interaction – presents a unique challenge for institutions because of the potential for social networking to influence student culture. In my experience at Dominican, I have seen students arrive focused on connecting their personal computers and gadgetry before trying to integrate with their peers and the campus community. The millennial generation students bring with them particular habits and traits toward technology that invite feelings of trepidation for faculty, staff, and administration (McGlynn 2008; Nworie and Haughton 2008; Speer 2007), who recognize that the students' interaction with online social networking is a phenomenon influencing the student culture; specifically, the development of peer relationships and identity formation. The students' familiarity and comfort with online engagement may be incongruent with the personal experiences and professional expectations of student development personnel who encourage more active participation with campus activities and organizations so as to promote peer relational development. Furthermore, participation in online social networking, though valuable in helping students to establish some social connections, is not considered by experts to be an adequate replacement to the physically present social interactions that are significant in students' personal development (Madge et al. 2009). The time spent with others in virtual communities may influence the quality of relationships formed with

others in the real world (Kraut et al. 2002). This disconnect from the campus-based peer network may be in direct contrast to the notion of the learning and development that occurs in social and academic communities, which are held in high esteem and promoted as core values at many institutions or higher education.

Online Social Networking

Developments in the speed and capabilities of the Internet have spurred online communications to progress beyond textual emails to advanced multimedia presentation systems that include pictures and music, instant messages, and live video connectivity. The social networking platforms popular with millennial generation students allow for users to capitalize on this new technology. Beyond the web-based profile pages that users create and share with others (Boyd and Ellison 2007), those who interact through social networking are able to virtually connect and communicate by means of online media. The people with whom students connect and communicate are labeled friends on many social networking sites; in actuality, these connections in the online world may be either actual peers of the students or individuals about whom the student knows little to nothing about outside of the user profile. Still, students share information with either category of online contact regardless (Acquisti and Gross 2006). Although there are numerous online social networking sites that exist for a variety of users, Facebook is the preferred site for university students and, as such, it is the primary site explored in this study. The statistical information illustrates the significant influence of this particular site; there are over 500 million Facebook users worldwide with 200 million having access through mobile devices, more than 30 billion pieces of information are posted on the network, people are connected on average to 130 other users online, half

of all users visit the site on a daily basis, and approximately 85% of all college and university students worldwide have accounts (http://www.facebook.com/press).

Significance of the Issue

I propose to explore the influence of online social networking on student identity formation and relationship development; more specifically, the pervasiveness of this technology and its role in transforming the student culture. Prensky (2001a:1) dubs millennial students "digital natives," and tells us that current university students "have spent their entire lives surrounded by and using computers … and all the other toys and tools of the digital age." As such, these students present differences in terms of how they learn and how they connect and engage with one another. Over the past decade, I have witnessed a trend of student disengagement from the peer community on my campus as an increasing number of students opt out of activities that require a physical presence in favor of active engagement with online social networking sites. In my role as mentor to various students on campus and as the primary individual who advises many student groups and organizations, I am compelled to understand better my students so that I can provide guidance in helping them to become engaged and contributing members of the campus community, in whatever ways the student culture is emerging.

Summary

Social networking sites have become increasingly popular and pervasive to the point that they "have a profound effect on the way people work, the opportunities they have, and the structure of their daily life" (Donath and Boyd 2004:71). Although engagement with others happens in the online world, the virtual relationships and user

identities formed by means of social networking profiles may not reflect students' authentic selves. Furthermore, these online relationships may detract from student activity on campus as time spent engaged with online social networking may diminish the quality of time spent involved in community with others on campus (Kraut et al. 2002). In turn, this may contribute to the development of habits, traits, and actions specific to the student culture.

In the following Chapters, I seek increased understanding about the influence of online social networking on student culture, student relationships, and student identity formation in order to consider new ways of appropriating students' ability to imagine themselves in relation to others in both virtual networks and in the physically present campus community. Chapter Two presents literature discussing millennial students' affinity for online interaction and the pervasiveness of this technology in their everyday lives. In Chapter Three, I provide detailed information about the research theory and protocol that guided this study, as well as an introduction to the critical hermeneutic categories of text, identity, and imagination. Chapters Four and Five present and analyze, respectively, the data that emerged during conversations with university students who are also members of the millennial generation. Lastly, in Chapter Six, following a Summary of this research, I provide Findings related to the data and the Implications and Actions based on the findings.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

<u>Introduction</u>

The pervasiveness of online interaction in the everyday lives of millennial students is a phenomenon with the potential to influence this generation's socialization and identity development. The literature (Madge et al. 2009; Buckingham and Willett 2006; Prensky 2001a) suggests that the development of norms peculiar to the culture of the modern university student are not unlike the culture and identity formation of indigenous people, tribal groups, and societies researched by early anthropologists. While there is compelling data and literature that discusses the significance of technology as a cultural phenomenon for the millennial generation, the research specific to the relationship between this technology, peer relationship formation, and identity development is only recently being explored. However, the literature addressing the influence of online engagement on millennial students comes from faculty and administrators immersed in the university culture and, as such, their insight and research is intriguing. The Parts of this Review of Literature explore early anthropological theory as related to a modern cultural group, data and research on millennial students' affinity for online engagement and interaction, and the influence of online engagement on relationship and identity development.

<u>Part One: Anthropological Theory</u>

Early anthropologists, specifically those referenced below, studied and documented the traits and behaviors of other cultures in an effort to understand these groups. Whereas in many instances the cultures were considered to be primitive by twentieth-century standards, the knowledge shared by these anthropologists −

specifically Franz Boas, Bronislaw Malinowski, and Ruth Benedict – influenced how researchers study behaviors and actions in an effort to understand better a particular culture or group. This study of the influence of technology in the lives of college students requires an investigation into the relationship between individual actions, cultural norms, and the behaviors of social groups.

Franz Boas: The Culture of Social Groups

Franz Boas, a scholar of such varying disciplines as physical anthropology, biology, and archaeology, directed his studies and research toward understanding "what determines the behavior of human beings" (Boas and Stocking 1989:42). By uniting the aforementioned disciplines into a unified and holistic approach to investigating culture, Boas suggests that cultural practices are not solely "explicable only in reference to broad evolutionary stages," but that they are "understandable only in specific cultural contexts" (in Moore 2009:33-34). Specifically, he proposes that environmental factors influence the norms found in a specific culture. Boas (1955:4) writes, "each culture can be understood only as an historical growth determined by the social and geographical environment in which each people is placed and by the way in which it develops the cultural material that comes into its possession from the outside or through its own creativeness." The desire to understand what shapes human behavior influences Boas' studies of the relationship between the environment and a culture.

The relationship between people, environment, and materials is applicable to this particular study in that the university campus is an environment capable of influencing the traits and behaviors of students. Boas (1986:13) writes, "the individual develops and acts as a member of … a social group." The transition to university life

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can be a daunting experience for many young adults and, as it is the nature of students to want to be part of a peer social group, they may adopt the behaviors and practices that exist in that environment in an attempt to integrate better with the community. Effectively, students may adapt or modify their actions in order to fit in with their surrounding culture. For millennial generation students, the pervasiveness of the Internet in most aspects of their daily lives suggests that utilization of this particular technology is part of their everyday practices. Boas (1955) believes the things with which people regularly interact influence the behavior of individuals and larger groups. He writes, "the industrial and economic development of modern times has brought about a differentiation within our population" (Boas 2005:213). Use of the Internet by today's college students is analogous to Boas' contemporaries utilizing the industrial developments of their time; for both groups, the interactions with the available technologies influenced people's behaviors and practices.

Boas expresses astute awareness of the influence of industrial and technological developments on individuals and groups, as evidenced in his research of native peoples of the Pacific Northwest and his work as curator of the American Museum of Natural History. Challenging the evolutionary development theorists, Boas intentionally displayed the various artifacts collected during his research in such a way as to exemplify the function and the importance of the item to the environment and historical development of a particular culture (Moore 2009). His actions were informed by his research of certain developments in technology and industry not as unique to specific cultures, but as part of a much larger phenomenon. Boas (1955:5) suggests, "dynamic conditions exist, based on environment, physiological, psychological, and social

factors, that may bring forth similar cultural processes in different parts of the world, so that it is probable that some of the historical happenings may be viewed under more general dynamic viewpoints." Developments in online technologies, coupled with more access to mobile computing and wireless devices, are an example of such a phenomenon. As is discussed in Part Two of this Section, these conditions influence the culture of young adults to engage with technology as part of their daily practices and routines.

Lastly, Boas (1982:254) speaks of the "interdependence of cultural phenomena," exemplified in the dynamic between millennial students and online engagement. Students bring with them to campus their penchant for technology as well as a desire to adapt and to become part of the campus culture. As is explained in Part Two, once millennial students arrive on campus, they find that an existing practice of current students is the use of online social networking. Already comfortable with the technology and influenced by the existing culture of the campus, the new students assume the praxis of the established social group. Boas (1982:257) addresses the dynamic of this relationship, noting that "the causal conditions of cultural happenings lie always in the interaction between individual and society." This interaction can create somewhat of a vicious cycle; the environment influences the action, the action establishes a pattern, the pattern reinforces the culture within the environment, and the action repeats and continues.

Bronislaw Malinowski: Human Needs and Social Groups

The theory of functionalism, pioneered by anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, maintains that culture exists in order to support specific human needs.

Malinowski (1936:440) writes, "culture, in fact, is nothing but the organized behavior of man." The classification of actions and traits peculiar to a specific group of people allows those individuals foreign to the group to understand better the different and unfamiliar behaviors of others in relation to their own. Malinowski (1936:440) asserts that culture is a term ascribed to the actions and behaviors of others that serves as "a determinant of human behavior." As functionalist theory suggests, the purpose of culture is pragmatic; culture encompasses the actions and behaviors that serve to satisfy "the organic or basic needs of man" (Malinowski 2002:37). These behaviors and traits within a particular culture serve as systems and mechanisms to ensure human needs are met appropriately (Young 2004). However, Malinowski (2002:142) suggests certain behaviors, unless reinforced by habit, "become unlearned" and cease to be part of the person's activity. He writes, "no crucial system of activities can persist without being connected, directly or indirectly, with human needs and their satisfaction" (Malinowski 2002:142). Malinowski (2002) believes all behaviors have some sort of relationship, be it individual or cultural, with the need of the individual or group.

Functionalist theory, when applied to the present phenomenon of online interaction, suggests that students participating in online socialization do so to support a human need. Considering that the purpose of social networking is to establish a wide network of friends, students participate in the online world to reach out and connect with others. Social networking sites provide an accessible community; one that allows students to become part of already established groups, and to some extent, perpetuate existing cultural norms.

> Culture thus produces individuals whose behavior cannot be understood by the
> study of anatomy and physiology alone, but has to be studied through the

analysis of cultural determinism – that is, the process of conditioning and molding. At the same time we see that from the very outset and existence of groups – that is, of individuals organized for cooperation and cultural give and take – is made indispensable by culture (Malinowski 1939:947).

Groups represent community for individuals, and the collective membership of the group may exhibit the established traits and behaviors representative of their specific culture (Malinowski 1939).

Beyond the conformity that occurs as the group conditions individual actions, there exists within this collective a type of relationship that strengthens the connections of the group members. Malinowski (1939:953) writes, "people unite … because daily contact and cooperation develop the secondary bonds of acquaintance and affection." There becomes somewhat of a "mutual dependence" (Malinowski 1939:938) between the individual and the group. The individual is drawn in to satisfy a need for connection with others and is subsequently influenced by the established culture – the behaviors, traits, and norms – particular to the group. Malinowski (1939) observes that individuals interact within a particular setting and engage with one another to form a group that encompasses a variety of relationships and dynamics among the members. In turn, the bonds further adhere individuals to one another and attract others based on the need for companionship and recognition of particular cultural norms.

Malinowski's studies and research examine the influence of technology and machines – the forces of industrialization – on human needs and cultural behaviors. His writings suggest industrialization is a culture unto itself and those who interact with machinery become conditioned to rely on these technologies in their everyday actions (Malinowski 2002, 1939, 1936). The machines of man represent cultural influences in that together they work as "a large-scale molding matrix; a gigantic conditioning

apparatus" (Malinowski 1936:440). Additionally, Malinowski (1936) posits that interactions with machines become a hereditary behavior passed down and reinforced with each generation. There is a foreboding tone in his writings; a presentiment of technology being a significant and influential cultural force that must be regarded.

As explained in Section Two: Students and Technology, the pervasiveness of technology in the lives of students may be the actualized emergence of Malinowski's apprehensions. Malinowski (1936:449) cautions, "we have allowed the machine to overpower man. One of the reasons of this is that we have learned to understand, hence to respect and to handle the mechanism. But we have failed to develop the really scientific spirit in humanism." In his later writings, Malinowski (2002:116) states, "certain devices, forms of organization, customs or ideas enlarge the range of human potentialities on the one hand, and impose certain restrictions on human behavior on the other." Whereas students' use of social networking sites seems to fulfill the human need for a sense of belonging as members of a community, in actuality this community exists in a virtual space different from reality and absent of real human connection. To a certain extent, social networking may be a half-filled promise to establish connections with others. As such, online engagement is influencing, if not somewhat restricting, students' actions as they adjust to the social dynamic and environment of the actual university campus.

Ruth Benedict: Influences of Culture on Individuals

The research conducted by Ruth Benedict regarding the influence of societal norms on the development and actions of individuals is appropriate to this study. Whereas Boas suggests the environment influences cultural norms, Benedict extends

the research to investigate the influence of these cultural norms on individuals. Benedict maintains that the understanding of individual behavior is predicated on an analysis of the relationship between said behaviors and environmental influences, social norms, and personal experiences (Maslow and Honigman 1970). Moore (2009:81) points to Benedict's research as being focused on "the relationship not only between a set of things and behaviors, but between the underlying ideas, values and mores that characterize a particular society." Within a culture, there are norms and actions that serve to define a particular group; the pervasiveness of technology in the lives of millennial students exemplifies the research findings. Benedict (2005:254) asserts that in order to "understand the behavior of the individual … it is necessary to relate his congenial responses to the behavior that is singled out in the institutions of his culture." Consistent with her research, students may express the personality and norms representative of their culture through their individual actions.

Subscription to Benedict's research findings implies the recognition, understanding, and acceptance of the distinctions between cultures as identified by behaviors of the individuals within these groups. Benedict (1943:102) writes, "the crucial differences which distinguish human societies … are cultural." These differentiations between cultures are attributed to the concept of "cultural islanding" (Benedict 1932:4), which she equates to the deliberate action of one particular group to distinguish itself from another by resisting the inclusion of certain behaviors and practices specific to the other culture. Benedict (1932:5) writes, "the resistance … is a cultural resistance, not the result of isolation due to physical facts of the environment." The millennial generation's affinity for online engagement, a behavior peculiar to this

group, may be the result not of a willful refusal to accept the norms of others, but of a misinterpretation of these actions as being counter-cultural to the understood norm. The college campus, once considered to be grounds for social and individual development, has become an environment capable of influencing an entirely different type of cultural norm by means of the accessibility to online interaction.

Although the developing cultural groups Benedict researched may well be viewed as the antithesis to the present generation of college and university students, her studies of tribal cultures show an interesting parallel to the young adults in the university environment. Benedict (2005:55) notes that her studies of "simpler cultures" may help in understanding certain phenomena found in more modernized groups. In addition, she claims it is the "fundamental and distinctive cultural configurations that pattern existence and condition the thoughts and emotions of the individuals who participate in those cultures" (Benedict 2005:55). The patterns of action of cultural groups contribute greatly to individual learning and development within their respective social environments. Students notice the pervasiveness of online networking on campus and this recognition influences their acceptance of online social networking as an established and accepted cultural trait. Benedict (1932:25) writes, "it can always be unquestioningly assumed that by far the majority of any population will be thoroughly assimilated to the standards of their culture." In joining an online social network, students exemplify Benedict's concept of cultural norms influencing individual action.

Part Two: Students and Technology

The students presently enrolled at colleges nationwide are those in the millennial generation who interact regularly with online technologies (Jones and Fox

2009; Lenhart et al. 2007; McMillan and Morrison 2006). Bargh and McKenna (2004:574) suggest that "the Internet is fast becoming a natural, background part of everyday life." In many ways, this affinity for online interaction serves as a defining behavior and action peculiar to this cultural group. Online activity and engagement have been part of the millennial students' lives since they were children (Buckingham 2006b; Jones 2002; Livingstone 2002).

Millennial Students: The Online Generation

Millennials are considered part of the "digital generation – a generation defined in and through its experience of digital computer technology" (Buckingham 2006b:1). Whereas data illustrate the prevalence of the Internet in their lives, the millennial students are sometimes misrepresented based on "superficial aspects of Internet use" (Bargh 2002:7). There exists polarity in the understanding of this group; on the one hand, research suggests online activity may contribute to social isolation and lack of motivation (McGlynn 2008; Kraut et al. 2002; Nie and Erbring 2002), while on the other, online engagement may enhance peer relationship building and development (Pavicic et al. 2008; Boyd 2007; Quan-Haase et al. 2002).

The techno-referential epithet, coupled with an uncertainty of the influence of significant online interaction, influence the interpretation of the millennials as different kinds of students.

> Today's students have not just changed *incrementally* from those of the past …
> A really big *discontinuity* has taken place. One might even call it a 'singularity'
> – an event which changes things so fundamentally that there is absolutely no
> going back. This so-called 'singularity' is the arrival and rapid dissemination of
> digital technology in the last decades of the 20th century. Today's students …
> represent the first generations to grow up with this new technology (Prensky
> 2001a:1).

The millennials are those who "have always been surrounded by and are comfortable with technology" (Carey 2006:3). Furthermore, developments in mobile computing, most especially the introduction of web-enabled smart phones and ultra-portable notebook computers, have made it possible for students to be constantly connected online with one another.

The means of student communication and interaction is evolving, in large part because "the computer is taking on an increased social role for young adults" (McMillan and Morrison 2006:89). Prensky (2001b:1) notes that online activities extensively dominate students' time and attention to the point that there are "over 200,000 emails and instant messages sent and received; over 10,000 hours talking on digital cell phones; [and] over 20,000 hours watching TV … all before the kids leave college." The student culture is in transition; the use of instant messaging services and online social networking sites, coupled with the use of personal communication devices that have Internet access, is both portrayed by social media and accepted by the students as normal and appropriate as the primary form of communication (Hargittai and Hinnant 2008; Buckingham 2006a; McMillan and Morrison 2006). The ubiquitous nature of the Internet in society, most especially in the lives of young adults (Jones and Fox 2009; Nie and Erbring 2002; DiMaggio et al. 2001), has spurred developments in online technology and functionality that, in turn, are becoming part of the everyday habits of the generation of students now enrolled in college. The Internet is more than a tool for academic research and information gathering; McMillan and Morrison (2006:75) contend young adults "use the Internet to communicate socially, for

entertainment, [and] to easily and conveniently stay in touch with friends." For the

millennial generation, the Internet is part of their way of being in the world.

Millennial Students and Internet Use: The Pew Research Data

In recent years, there has been an increase in the literature investigating the

pervasiveness of the Internet in the lives of the millennial generation (Buckingham

2006a; McMillan and Morrison 2006; Leander and McKim 2003), as well as

information related to young adults' use of specific online technologies (Acharya 2007;

Acquisti and Gross 2006; Rice and Haythornthwaite 2006;). Much of the literature

addressing the millennial generation's affinity for the Internet stems from a

comprehensive study started in 2000 by the Pew Internet and American Life Project

(http://www.pewinternet.org). In 2002, Pew released the data on millennial students'

use of the Internet and the findings provide significant information on the relationship

between the technology and this specific demographic.

The research project sampled over 2000 students attending a variety of public

and private two and four-year institutions (Jones 2002:5) with the intent of learning

more of "the Internet's [effect] on college students … and to determine the [effect] of

that use on their academic and social routines" (Jones 2002:5). Jones (2002:2) notes,

"by the time they were 16 to 18 years old all of today's current college students had

begun using computers – and the Internet was a commonplace in the world in which

they lived." Ongoing research (Jones and Fox 2009) that is part of the Pew project

estimates that the significant majority of millennial students regularly use the Internet

as part of daily activities. Beyond the information gathered through the surveys,

ethnographic research and data collected from related studies that also focused on

Internet usage were compiled into the Pew report (Jones 2002). Findings from the

research reinforce that college students are "early adopters" (Jones 2002:2) and habitual

users of the Internet and they are "more likely than the general population to be online,

check email, use multiple email addresses, browse for fun, download music files, and

use instant messaging" (McMillan and Morrison 2006:75). Jones (2002:2) maintains

that "Internet use … has greatly changed the way [students] interact with others and

with information as they go about their studies." The data collected as part of the Pew

Project suggests that the Internet is part of the college students' everyday actions and

experiences (Jones 2002:2).

Online on Campus

The dominant presence of the Internet may influence the behaviors and actions

of millennial students' daily lives (Hargittai and Hinnant 2008; Bargh 2002;

Livingstone 2002). Students use the Internet to supplement academic research (Jones

2002), to establish social connections and communicate with peers (Madge et al. 2009),

and to engage in entertaining activities such as online gaming and web surfing (Jones

and Fox 2009). As Jones (2002:2) suggests, "college students are heavy users of the

Internet compared to the general population … the Internet is a part of college students'

daily routine." Residence halls, student unions, and cafeterias – once active and lively

social venues – have morphed into online access hubs where instant messaging, social

networking, and various other forms of mobile communications have become the new

systems of socialization, whereby peer relationships are built and communication skills

are honed. Jones' (2002:3) research suggests, "students use the Internet nearly as much

for social communication as they do for their education." Whereas faculty and staff,

especially those in the area of student development, seek to encourage students to be involved and engaged with the physically present campus community (McGlynn 2008; Porter 2006; Metz 2004), the students' affinity for technology presents continual challenges because of both their affinity for online engagement (Boyd and Ellison 2007; Fortson et al. 2007; Jones 2002) and because they are "undoubtedly one of the most significant target markets for new media" (Buckingham 2006a:77). As such, new developments and iterations in online technology will likely be designed and marketed with the intent of being incorporated into the everyday actions and behaviors of millennial students, furthering their virtual connectedness.

Social networking is popular with the majority of university students and has become the newest and preferred means of online communication and socialization for this population (Madge 2009; Lenhart et al. 2007; Anderson 2001). On these sites, users create profiles, volunteer personal information, and then virtually connect with one another based on self-identified commonalities such as schools attended, geographic proximity, and friends of others within the network. According to Bargh and McKenna (2004:586), "the Internet has unique, even transformational qualities as a communication channel, including … the ability to easily link with others who have similar interests, values, and beliefs." Social networking thus presents participants the opportunity to communicate with others and to establish relationships based on the information put forth online. Bargh (2002:7) maintains, "use of Internet communication modes for purposes of social interaction continues to grow worldwide at a rapid rate."   Online communication presents a phenomenon whereby individuals

are drawn together, socialize, and establish interpersonal connections in virtual communities (Norris 2004; Livingstone 2002; King 2001).

The Online Influence on Social Community

Though heralded by proponents as a means to promote and enhance connections between individuals, online interaction has been denigrated by others claiming that it "leads to an erosion of face-to-face community" (Koc and Ferneding 2007:88). The debate surrounding the significance of the Internet in influencing those who interact with it is rife with opponents who mockingly denounce it as "a powerful new tool for the devil … causing users to be addicted to hours each day of 'surfing' … [where] they are away from their family and friends, resulting in depression and loneliness for the individual user, and further weakening neighborhood and community ties" (Bargh and McKenna 2004:573-574). Though intended to elicit an emotive response, these statements are not completely unsubstantiated as the literature (McGlynn 2008; Kraut et al. 2002; Nie and Erbring 2002) suggests that online communication and engagement may well be deprived of the social interaction often found in physically present discourse.

> Computer-mediated communication is not conducted face-to-face but in the absence of non-verbal features of communication such as tone of voice, facial expressions, and potentially influential interpersonal features such as physical attractiveness, skin color, gender, and so on. Much of the extant computer science and communications research has explored how the absence of these features affects the process and outcome of social interactions (Bargh and McKenna 2004:577).

The concern with such an "impoverished and sterile form of social exchange" (Bargh and McKenna 2004:575) is the potentiality for online interaction to influence – possibly in ways not yet fully understood – our relationships with others in a social community

(Ellison et al. 2007; Livingstone 2002; King 2001;). Koc and Ferneding (2007:88) write, "the proliferation of information and communication technologies has influenced many aspects of the lives of young people through creating new social and cultural spaces that have challenged long-established ways of socialization." In addition to influencing relationships among those young adults who are part of the millennial generation, there remains the possibility that online interaction may have a significant influence on the ways members of a social community communicate with one another.

Though there have been significant advances in the capability of technology to virtually connect people, these connections ultimately happen in a virtual reality that is mediated by online technologies. Bargh and McKenna (2004:577-578) write that online communication "limits the 'bandwidth' of social communication, compared to traditional face-to-face communication settings." The authors suggest that "Internet communication assumes further that the reduction of social cues, compared to richer face-to-face situations, must necessarily have negative effects on social interaction" (Bargh and McKenna 2004:578). There exist differences in how people communicate online and in the real world; in essence, interactions that happen in virtual reality, and the relationships formed by way of these interactions, may be different from those that take place in actual reality. Part Three of this Review of Literature discusses the alternative option for online interaction as a means for promoting student engagement and fostering relationship developments.

Part Three: Relationship Building and Identity Formation

The computer, specifically online social networking, plays a critical role in helping individuals establish connections, communicate with others, and form groups

(Pavicic et al. 2008; Valentine and Holloway 2002; Turkle 1995). Speer (2007:52)

posits, "technology has greatly changed the context of one-to-one interaction." The

ways in which millennial generation students interact and communicate with one

another is in transition from in-person to online (Boyd 2007; Buckingham and Willett

2006; Anderson 2001), and the differences in which this particular generation relates to

others influences both the communication paradigm and the culture on many college

campuses.

> The rush to judgment about the social effects of the new communication media
> has branded them as positive and negative in equal measure. Alienation from
> "real world" relationships coupled with a lack of social regulation within the
> medium is balanced by liberation from the influences, inequalities, and
> identities to which people are subjected in face-to-face interaction (Spears et al.
> 2002:91).

Existing literature both supports and criticizes the influence of online communications,

most especially in relation to the millennial generation, which has grown up and is most

comfortable with this particular technology. Whereas online interaction does allow for

a certain degree of privacy that is sometimes misinterpreted as individuals being

isolated from others (Tufekci 2008; Spears et al. 2002; Anderson 2001), this virtual

anonymity may allow for individuals to better "express their 'true' selves (those self-

aspects they felt were important but which they were usually unable to present in

public) to their partner over the Internet than when face-to-face" (Bargh and McKenna

2004:581). Online engagement and interaction, contrary to other interpretations, may

therefore promote more interaction with others in both virtual and real spaces.

Self and Other in Online Relationships

McMillan and Morrison (2006:89), in discussing ways students interact and

engage with one another, note that "young adults build and form social relationships

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online." Millennial generation students communicate, establish connections, and develop community within these online networks (Lenhart et al. 2007; Livingstone 2002; King 2001). Furthermore, Beer and Burrows (2007:1.3) note that there have been "significant developments in Internet culture [that] have emerged in the last two years." Their research explores the capability of online technologies for "reworking hierarchies, changing social divisions, creating possibilities and opportunities, informing us, and reconfiguring our relations with objects, spaces and each other" (Beer and Burrows 2007:1.2). Students' persistent engagement with technology (Buckingham 2006b; Jones 2002; Prensky 2001a) suggests that it is becoming part of the "mundane realities of everyday life" (Beer and Burrows 2007:1.2). Online communication systems such as the social networking sites used by the millennial generation, allow for the sharing of everyday information, which influences learning about others (Madge et al. 2009; Lenhart et al. 2007; McKenna et al. 2002). McMillan and Morrison (2006:75) report that "young people's online social life mirrors offline relationships: computer activities provide support for offline friendships; are mainly devoted to ordinary yet intimate topics (e.g., friends, gossip); and are motivated by a desire for companionship." According to Anderson (2001:22), "the sense of security afforded by the anonymity of the Internet may provide some students with less risky opportunities for developing virtual relationships."

Whereas online interaction offers individuals a degree of privacy, it may also inhibit social development in the real world. Research indicates millennial students use the Internet to communicate with real-world friends, not necessarily to seek out new connections and establish new relationships (Jones and Fox 2009; Jones 2002; Kraut et

al. 2002). Use of the Internet is "an individual activity" (Nie and Erbring 2002:280);

online engagement may contribute to the interpretation of participants as being

reclusive or isolated (Fortson et al. 2007) and also reinforce existing similar behavioral

patterns (DiMaggio et al. 2001). In discussing issues of development specific to

college students, Anderson (2001:22) writes, "although some college students flourish

in an atmosphere that provides frequent opportunities for meeting new people and

developing new relationships, others who are less socially inclined may have difficulty

establishing real-life relationships." The security and anonymity (Anderson 2001)

offered online might not exist in real-world situations where individuals must encounter

one another and push themselves into new and different social situations in order to

establish a relationship.

The benefits and criticisms of online interaction and communication as a means

to establish relationships are secondary to the preferences of those individuals who

engage with this technology for the purpose of socializing with existing peers and

encountering new people in online spaces. Bargh (2002:3) writes, "because the quality

or nature of Internet interaction differs in important ways from face-to-face interaction,

some people feel more comfortable in one domain than the other." Individuals use

social networking as a means to reach out and establish new connections (Madge et al.

2009; Boyd 2007; Jones 2002) and they also utilize the technology to maintain existing

relationships (Boyd 2007; Buckingham 2006; Prensky 2001a). Both relationship

forming and friendship maintenance require participants to spend time actively engaged

online and not with others in physically present community. As noted in Section Two,

millennial students are pervasive users of the Internet. McMillan and Morrison

(2006:91) write, "many respondents reported that they feel in danger of losing themselves amidst the wealth of information available." This need to create distance from online engagement is critical in allowing participants to reflect on their relationships with others and their own identities.

Online Identity Formation and Interpretation

Current literature supports the notion of the millennial generation experimenting with identity play and formation in online networks (Valkenburg and Peter 2008; Buckingham and Willett 2006; Wilbur 2000). Bargh and McKenna (2004:583) write, "membership and participation in Internet groups can have powerful effects on … self and identity." Implicit in these discussions is the recognition that individuals possess multiple identities; those associated with the physically present body of people in the real world (Gleusing 2008; Donath 2005) and virtual personas developed online (Buckingham and Willett 2006; Livingstone 2002; Turkle 1995). Hodkinson (2007:628) writes, "online communications have proved to be a significant factor in the development of fragmented, fluid patterns of individual identity." Online participation frees the individual from the connection to a physically identifiable body, thereby allowing individuals to create multiple, and often different, identities online (Hodkinson 2007). Donath (2005:27) writes, "though the self may be complex and mutable over time and circumstance, the body provides a stabilizing anchor." Contrarily, within the virtual world, "information rather than matter" (Donath 2005:27) is the substantive form of identification.

The nature of social networking sites allows participants to share information by means of images, postings, and stories about themselves. Gleusing (2008:72) writes,

"personal narrative is a primary tool for sensemaking" and that the information shared online through these stories "can influence … a person's identity." The stories shared on social networks help individuals to make sense of others (Gleusing 2008). However, the voluntary actions of online participation suggest an individual can create multiple identities simply by choosing what information to share, and what to withhold. Gleusing (2008:72) further states, "people live according to stories … the stories we tell ourselves can heavily influence how we perceive the world around us, how we give it meaning, and how we behave in it, particularly in relationships with others." Implicit in social networking are questions regarding the validity, and appropriateness, of the information – the stories chosen to be shared – on participants' profiles.

Turkle (1995:178) writes, "when we step through the screen into virtual communities, we reconstruct our identities on the other side of the looking glass." There may be some disconcertion regarding the validity of the information shared to build online identities. On the one hand, the identity of the online person may be an anonymous or known representation of self (Lewis and West 2009; Tufekci 2008; Anderson 2001) where individual discloses information reflective of one's true character. On the other hand, the virtual identity might be a newly imagined persona or intentionally deceptive identity (Giglietto 2007; Donath 2005; Valentine and Holloway 2002). Donath (2005:28) asserts, "identity plays a key role in virtual communities … knowing the identity of those with whom you communicate is essential for understanding and evaluating an interaction." A challenge to the interpretation of identity online involves the textual nature of information shared. Online interaction "strips away the standard visual and aural cues of social identity … plausibly promoting

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heterogeneity" (Norris 2004:33). Valentine and Holloway (2002:304) write, "the material body is not simply rendered invisible online: it becomes completely irrelevant." In the online world, participants can be anyone they imagine themselves to be. Without the body to serve as reference to the identity, there exists a "possible discrepancy between 'cyberselves' and real selves'" (Hardey 2002:579). Understanding the other based on an interpretation of online identity requires recognition of the ambiguity of the online identity.

Online and Face-to-Face Relationships

Although the literature indicates that millennials use the Internet for communication with others (Madge et. al 2009; Golder et. al 2006; Jones 2002), Baym et al. (2004:306) note that among these students, "face-to-face communication clearly remained their dominant mode of interaction." Despite the prejudicial understanding that millennials constantly are connected to others via their online communication technology (McMillan and Morrison 2006; Jones 2002; Prensky 2001a), these young adults nonetheless remain open to the opportunity to converse with others through physically present dialogue and interaction. When compared to their use of online communication, millennials are "more likely to use face-to-face conversations … in more intimate relationships" (Baym et al. 2004:314). The prejudgments that online interaction is a detrimental influence on the millennial generation may thus be unfounded.

In addition to millennial students' affinity for physically present discourse (Madge et al. 2009; Baym et al. 2004; Bargh 2002), there is the potential for online interaction to enhance virtual connections in such a way that they transcend the

boundaries of cyberspace and possibly develop into actual real-world relationships (Madge et al. 2009; Ellison et al. 2007; Koc and Ferneding 2007). Bargh and McKenna (2004:582) note that online communication "not only helps to maintain close ties with one's family and friends, but also, if the individual is so inclined, facilitates the formation of close and meaningful new relationships." Furthermore, Koc and Ferneding (2007) discuss the notion of the Internet supplementing real-world social connections in that it offers a means for easy and convenient communication with others. These aforementioned studies indicate that contrary to the prejudicial notion that those who engage with the Internet may be reserved or anti-social (McGlynn 2008; Kraut et al. 2002; Nie and Erbring 2002), millennials enjoy socially interacting with others, both online and in the real world.

Although online social interaction suggests this technological medium promotes "online to offline connections [where] online connections resulted in face-to-face meetings … the assumed online to offline directionality may not apply to today's social networking sites that are structured both to articulate existing connections and enable the creation of new ones" (Ellison et al. 2007:1144). Bargh and McKenna (2004:586) further suggest that beyond promoting real-world interaction, social networking in itself may be a "fertile territory for the formation of new relationships." The paradigm that socialization happens in physically present community is shifting given the pervasiveness of the Internet in the lives of the millennials. Ellison et al. (2007:1146) write, "online interactions may supplement or replace in-person interactions, mitigating any loss from time spent online." For millennials, online engagement is more than a

medium for connecting with others; it is a place of being and a space where social interactions can occur.

The millennials comfort with technology, coupled with their affinity for online engagement, suggests that these individuals interact with others in a way that may be significantly different from the existing paradigm of a physically present social community. The literature suggests that beyond online social networking or physically present face-to-face discourse, millennials also form relationships because of the capabilities of online interaction to influence real-world engagement. Baym et al. (2004:303) write, "the stronger … local ties were, the more likely one was to meet new people online." The notion that online interaction has the potential "to maintain or intensify relationships characterized by some form of offline connection" (Ellison et al. 2007:1162) may challenge existing prejudgments that millennials have a revulsion to face-to-face interaction with others (Koc and Ferneding 2007; Nie and Erbring 2002; Prensky 2001a).

<div align="center">

<u>Summary</u>

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Reviewing the literature on anthropologists' research of cultural influences on groups and individuals, online technology use by millennial students, and these students' preference for reaching out to others by means of computer-mediated communication demonstrates the ubiquitous nature and pervasive influence of technology in the lives of students. Specifically, socialization with others and formation of their own identities is exposed as a phenomenon worthy of further exploration. The college experience, for many students, marks a time of personal growth and social development. Given their comfort and familiarity with technology,

students choose to utilize online communication systems, such as social networking sites, to adapt to their new environment, or they may be influenced by established cultural norms to participate in these online interactions. In addition, some may choose to engage with others offline by means of dialogue and physically present interactions with others. The following Chapters offer further exploration of this phenomenon of online social networking through a framework of critical hermeneutic theory in the context of text, identity, and imagination. In the next Chapter, I provide information on the Research Theory and Protocol, as well as specific information about the research site and the research conversation participants for this study.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH THEORY AND PROTOCOL

<u>Introduction</u>

I carried out this research through an interpretive inquiry using critical hermeneutic theory as a framework. Critical hermeneutic theory provides the foundation for the interpretation of the actions of others in an attempt to come to a new understanding of both individuals and communities. Herda (1999:82) writes that "the purpose of participatory research is to create conditions whereby people can engage in discourse so that truth can be recognized and new realities can be brought into being." As an engaged and active participant who works closely with the student community, I followed this research framework so that the participants and I could come to understand online social networking as it has influenced individual students, their community, and the larger student culture.

Ricoeur (1974:266) writes that before there is change, "first there is being-in-the-world, then understanding, then interpreting." Participatory research creates a space for the researcher and participants to encounter the issue, and through conversation, to recognize a new paradigm that may lead to new understanding. Herda (1999:80) supports this idea, noting that "we need to examine these actions for the additional possibilities they suggest to us that may be different from the actions in which we are now engaged." In the following section, I detail the theoretical concepts of text, identity, and imagination chosen for this study to provide a foundation for the research I carried out that explored the relationship between online social networking and student identity formation within the student culture.

Conceptual Background and Protocol

For this research project, I followed participatory research protocol, as guided by critical hermeneutic inquiry. Through a collaborative effort where the researcher and participants came together in conversation, this research protocol allowed for data to emerge through dialogue and understanding. Herda (1999:93) suggests that the "hermeneutic researcher understands that we live in a world already familiar to us and the participants." Participatory inquiry invites the researcher and the participants to challenge prejudgments during conversation and in the reflection that follows. I used the research categories of text, identity, and imagination to guide the research conversations in an attempt to understand the influence of online social networking on the lives of college students and the student culture.

Research Categories

The categories developed for this research were determined by a combination of critical hermeneutic literature, my personal interests, and life experience (Herda 1999:96). These categories helped guide the overall inquiry and the collection and analysis of data.

Text is a creation of the author and a representation of his world that is open for interpretation by the viewer. Presented in various forms, a text remains open to interpretation with each viewing and may be understood differently with each interpretation. Prior to the research conversations, I was particularly interested in exploring the representative quality of text. A social networking site, when considered as a text reflective of the author's identity, may influence the viewer's understanding of the other's identity based on the interpretation of the online text.

Identity establishment is pivotal to the development of college students. The search for self-identity coincides with the formation and development of relationships with others; specifically, the understanding of self as influenced by the interpretation of the other. I chose to explore the relationship between authentic and virtual identities and the influence of online texts in the interpretation of others in virtual worlds.

Imagination is influential in the creation of text and the formation of identity because it allows for new possibilities and new ways of being. The refigured world with new ways of being and acting (Herda 1999:78) exists because of imagination. Similarly, imagination gives individuals the possibility to see themselves differently, and as a result, to have different relationships with others in the world.

Research Category One: Text

The reader who encounters a text should "expose oneself to it" (Ricoeur 1981:94) rather than to try to discern how their life or their world might be viewed in relation to the text. That is to say that remaining open to the text is to remain open to new understanding and new possibilities. Ricoeur (1981:94) writes, "the primary concern of hermeneutics is not to discover an intention hidden behind the text but to unfold a world in front of it." Text presents to the viewer a world where understanding and interpretation are possible. This world of the text (Ricoeur 1988) creates a space for the recognition and interpretation of the identity of the author who puts forth the text into the world by the viewer who encounters it. In the encounter that occurs, the reader is presented with the matter of the text (Gadamer 2004), whereby through understanding and the act of interpretation, the reader is able to imagine the possibility of a new and refigured world (Herda 1999).

Text: Offered and Interpreted Meanings

Text is presented to a reader in many forms. Whereas text is often associated with being literary, it also includes visual representations such as photographs, film, or works of art. In addition, a conversation or the act of speaking, what Ricoeur (1992) refers to as an utterance, is considered a text. Herda (1999:73), in discussing conversation and the act of speaking, notes, "what [individuals] say, after it is said, no longer belongs to either the speaker or the hearer. It has, in a sense, a life of its own." The various forms of text – literal, visual, and oral – all share a distinct commonality: each text is presented to a reader for interpretation and the possibility for understanding. This phenomenon occurs in the encounter between the text put forth and the viewer's interpretation of meaning based on prior experience and understanding.

> The possibility of multiple interpretations is opened up by a text which is thus free from its Sitz-im-Leben [site-in-life]. Beyond the polysemy of words in a conversation is the polysemy of a text which invites multiple readings. This is the moment of interpretation in the technical sense of textual exegesis. It is also the moment of the hermeneutic circle between understanding initiated by the reader and the proposals of meaning offered by the text. The most fundamental condition of the hermeneutical circle lies in the structure of pre-understanding which relates all explication to the understanding which precedes and supports it (Ricoeur 1981:108).

The site-in-life of a text (Ricoeur 1981:108) is the place where, and the time when, the text first was created. This moment in time is significant because of the enormity and complexity of what might be reflected in the text presented to the reader.

The happenings and events of the author's world and the offered meaning put forth are captured in the text that is presented. In being free from the site-in-life paradigm, the reader of the text is able to interpret what is presented differently from

what the author may have intended. Gadamer (2004:187) states that the interpretation of text involves a critical examination of the matter of the text; that it is "not to be understood in terms of its subject matter, but as … a work of 'artistic thought.'" Ricoeur (1991:430) further explains, "the meaning or the significance of a story wells up from the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the reader." Free from the site-in-life paradigm, the text becomes open to being appropriated in the present world of the reader and might be understood in relation to the reader's own history. Explicit in Ricoeur's (1991) concept of interpretation is the notion of the interconnectedness between the author, the text, and the reader.

Text: Multiple Meanings

Words may have a variety of meanings; therefore, a text may have multiple meanings (Ricoeur 1981:108). This idea is perhaps most applicable to the interpretation of visual texts, such as symbols, works of art, or photographs. Bernstein (1983:123) writes of the interpretation of visual images, "there is a dynamic interaction or transaction between the work of art and the spectator who shares in it." The offered meaning of an image is sometimes not clear, thus presenting the opportunity for interpretation based on the interaction between the visual text and the viewer. The text that is created by others invites the viewer to understand and interpret. Mezirow (1991:85), in speaking of understanding, reminds us that "attempting to understand requires an openness to different perspectives so that a learner becomes reflective or critically reflective in the course of interpretive activity." When this occurs in a way that is free from the temporal constraints of the author's offered meaning and with the awareness of the polysemy of a text (Ricoeur 1981:108), the interpretation of text may

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lead to multiple understandings. Beyond understanding, the interpretation of text opens

up a new world for the reader (Herda 1999; Ricoeur 1991, 1981). Ricoeur (1991:431)

writes, "a text is not an entity closed in upon itself; it is the projection of a new

universe, different from the one in which we live." Interpretation and imagination may

influence readers to shift their paradigm and envision new possibilities and new

opportunities that may, in turn, lead to a new understanding.

Research Category Two: Identity

Identity is temporal in nature; the events of the past, most especially the actions,

life experiences, and interactions that one individual has with others, all serve to shape

personal identity. According to Ricoeur (1992:119), personal identity is the sameness

of the person, often referred to as character; or "the set of distinctive marks which

permit the reidentification of a human individual as being the same." The character of

the individual is exemplified by specific habits and traits that serve to define that

particular person over time (Ricoeur 1992:121). There is a quality of "inflexible

rigidity of a character" (Ricoeur 2004:81), a sense of sameness reflected in the personal

identity of the individual. This sameness, what Ricoeur (1992) refers to as *idem*

identity, is based on life history and experiences. The sameness of the individual's

character, or idem, has the quality of "permanence in time" (Ricoeur 1992:116); a

permanence that reflects a static identity that never changes. In essence, idem identity

is most similar to an individual's true self; the values, norms, and actions reflective of

the enduring character of that person.

Implicit in this description of character is the idea that habits and traits are

ascribable to a particular individual only in relation or comparison to another (Ricoeur

1992). The identification of an individual by the differences in character as related to the other is significant in that the act of identifying acknowledges the recognition of the other (Ricoeur 1988). The personal identity, in addition to being representative of character and sameness, must also be reflective of self in relation to the recognized other. Ricoeur (1992:121) reminds us that "one cannot think the idem of the person through without considering the *ipse*." Whereas character exemplifies the sameness of the individual, Ricoeur (1992) posits the act of promising as being reflective of self in relation to both the sameness of the individual and in relation to the other. He defines promising as "keeping one's word," and notes that doing so "expresses a self-constancy" (Ricoeur 1992:123). Ricoeur (1992) goes on to state that the identity of the individual is discovered in the to and fro between idem and ipse, between the sameness of self and the self in relation to the other.

Narrative Identity: Between Same and Self

According to Ricoeur (1992), the narrative identity serves to mediate between the idem (same) and the ipse (self) identities. There exists a play between idem and ipse identities; in discussing Ricoeur, Herda (1999:4) notes, "the narrative identity [is] not a stable and seamless identity." There is a back and forth relationship between character and the act of promising (Ricoeur 1992). Character is reflective of idem identity; it is associated with the habits and traits of the individual that always stay the same. The correlation to idem is the ipse identity, the identity of self that is continually refigured in relation to others. This self identity addresses Ricoeur's (1992:42) notion of promise, "which [plays] a decisive role in the ethical determination of the self." In making a promise, individuals establish otherness and differentiate between same and

self. The utterance "I promise you" (Ricoeur 1992:42) establishes self (I) in relation to the other (you).

Furthermore, "keeping one's promise … is keeping one's word" (Ricoeur 1992:124) and thus reflects character. Ricoeur (1992:147-148) writes, "the narrative constructs the identity of the character, what can be called his or her narrative identity … it is the identity of the story that makes the identity of the character." The stories we share of ourselves give understanding to others by allowing them to interpret who we are. Shahideh (2004:vii) further explains, "to tell a story is to both remember and create who one is … story mediates our understanding of identity." The narrative function, beyond mediating and sharing identity, also serves to give meaning and order to the story shared.

Identity in Story

Ricoeur (1992) states that when guided by the temporal constraints of history and through the use of plot, a life becomes a story. Within critical hermeneutics, the concept of a story, or a narrative, is especially important because it engages the reader and helps people sort out the questions that exist about themselves and about others (Kearney 2002). Ricoeur (1992:147-148) writes, "the narrative constructs the identity of the character … in constructing that of the story told. It is the identity of the story that makes the identity of the character." Early anthropologists (Boas 1986; Benedict 2005; Malinowski 2004) documented the importance of story in everyday life. From the preservation of history and the imparting of knowledge to entertainment and fantasy, stories engage the reader and capture one's attention. Kearney (2002) notes that stories are pivotal in helping the reader understand the identity of the other.

When someone asks you who you are, you tell your story. That is, you recount your present condition in the light of past memories and future anticipations. You interpret where you are now in terms of where you are coming from and where you are going to. And so doing you give a sense of yourself as a narrative identity that perdures and coheres over a lifetime (Kearney 2002:152).

In addition, Kearney (2002:153) reminds us that "we are made by stories before we ever get around to making our own." Identity is influenced by the stories told about an individual as much as it is shaped by that same individual's own stories and texts. The reader interprets the story as a text, and in doing so, the identity of the individual within the story may be refigured and imagined in the act of interpretation.

Research Category Three: Imagination

Kearney (1998:1), in discussing imagination, writes that "imagination lies at the very heart of our existence. So much so that we would not be human without it." Imagination is a vital concept in critical hermeneutic theory, especially when considering the relationship between imagination and text. Ricoeur (1991:431) writes, "to speak of the world of the text is to emphasize that trait of every literary work by which it opens up a horizon of possible experience, a world in which it would be possible to dwell." Text presents to the reader possible experiences through the imagination of future possibilities and new ways of being in the world. The reader who encounters a text engages in interpretation; it is in the act of interpreting that the reader might envision, or imagine, a new possibility. Herda (1999:88) writes, "the world of the text … reside[s] in one's imagination. We stand as new beings in front of a text that holds the possibility of new worlds." Imagination presents the reader with new opportunities and new possibilities within a refigured world and also allows for the possibility of a new sense of self in relation to others.

Herda (1999:10) states, "a productive imagination rather than a reproductive imagination in prescribing a new reading of our lives sees that understating one's past is not an end in itself." Understanding of self requires understanding of the temporal nature of identity. Idem identity is the sameness of the person that does not change, it is reflective of the person's character – the person they have been and always will be. Contrarily, the ipse identity is the self that is refigured constantly in relation to others. This relationship between sameness and self is reflective of the person one might imagine themselves to be. Imagination thus presents the individual with not only "a world we might inhabit," but also "different ways of acting and being" (Herda 1999:78) in that world. The power of imagination lies in the actions taken to refigure the present world (Herda 1999) into that which is envisioned.

Imagination through Narrative and Story

The narrative function serves as a means to share stories with others. Herda says that the narrative is "housed in a story, understood in a story, changed and expressed in a story" (class lecture, September 12, 2008). Stories are part of our very beings; they are how we communicate and share our lives with others. Kearney (2002:xii), in discussing the importance of storytelling, writes that a story "enchants us with the sheer magic of imagination." Stories are presented as texts either lyrically through spoken and written word, or visually through imagery that moves the reader and inspires interpretation. Kearney (1998:147) writes that the "power of imagination is primarily verbal." In telling stories, possibilities are presented as new opportunities and new worlds imagined by the reader.

Ricoeur (1991:432) notes that life and story share both have imagination in common; "the reading itself already is a way of living in the fictitious universe of the work; in this sense we can already say that stories are told but also lived in the imaginary mode." Story, be it fiction or one's life narrated, encourages the reader to envision what is possible and to adopt "the paradigm of a new vision" (Ricoeur 1981:292). This new vision is manifested in the reader's imagined world and in new ways of being.

Imagination Influenced by Technology

The presentation of text, in its broadest meaning, offers opportunities for interpreting and for imagining new ways of being. Kearney (1988:252) posits that various developments in technology, most especially the transmission of visual information, have "radically transformed our ability to construct, preserve, and communicate images." These technological advances have made representative images more compelling than reality (Kearney 1988), and as such, have challenged our ability to imagine for ourselves the world offered by the text. Kearney (1988:252), in quoting Boorstin, writes, "citizens of our post industrial society … live in a world 'where fantasy is more real than reality, where the image has more dignity than its original.'" Our ability to imagine something that is different is grounded in our understanding of the present world and the present situation.

The new worlds and new ways of being in worlds, as appropriated through textual interpretation and imagination, can be understood only as in relation to that which is original in the present world (Kearney 1988). The power of technology to disperse textual representations and images instantly and widely may sensationalize

that which is original – the present reality. The influence of this technological power

may be the collapse of imagination in the modern post-industrial society (Kearney

1988:252-253). Social networking profiles, when considered as texts, can overwhelm

viewers with information and images. The need to imagine by interpreting a text

becomes unnecessary when technology eliminates the need to interpret new ways of

how others might otherwise be.

<p style="text-align:center"><u>Research Guidelines</u></p>

In this section I provide information on the guidelines for this specific research.

Within interpretive participatory research, it is the responsibility of the researcher to

create the guidelines as informed by critical hermeneutic theory (Herda 1999).

According to Herda (1999:86), the objective is to "create collaboratively a text that

allows us to carry out the integrative act of reading, interpreting, and critiquing our

understandings." The following sections provide information about and entrée to the

research site, as well as information about the research conversation partners who

participated in this study.

<p style="text-align:center">Research Site Information</p>

Over 100 years after its establishment in 1890, Dominican University of

California remains a small institution still committed to the education and holistic

development of its students. With a total enrollment of approximately 2,200 students,

Dominican offers over thirty majors at the bachelor degree level, and twelve different

programs at the master and professional certification level. Though it is a private

university, the demographics of the student body are similar to many larger public

institutions, both regional and national. The majority of the undergraduate students

<p style="text-align:center">44</p>

come to the University from within the State of California, but there are also students from across the United States and from over twenty foreign countries around the world. In addition, over 40% of the undergraduate population comes from traditionally underrepresented populations, a statistic that is consistent with the demographics of post-secondary higher education in California. Approximately 77% of the students are female, while only 23% are male. This skewed ratio is due in large part to the fact that until 1971, the university was an all-women's institution. Furthermore, two of the largest and most popular academic programs are Nursing and Elementary Education, which traditionally attract more women than men into the respective professions.

In addition to the demographics of the University being representative of the student populations at many other institutions of higher education, the culture of the students at Dominican is also similar to that which exists elsewhere on university campuses. Students arrive on campus aware of the academic challenges that await them; but they also anticipate the extra-curricular programs and the social dynamic associated with the college experience. The students at Dominican, like their peers at other institutions, have certain expectations, needs, and challenges that the University must address and determine what services to provide. In seeking to provide more for students, the University has committed significant resources to growth and development on campus.

<div align="center">

Entrée to the Research Site

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I conducted my research at Dominican University of California. I have worked at Dominican in several capacities since 1996 and currently serve as the Associate Dean of Students where I have direct oversight of several divisions within the area of Student

Life; namely student housing, student conduct and judicial affairs, student activities, and student leadership and government. The work I do with the various organizations and groups on campus affords me the opportunity to engage regularly with many students and to be present within their community. I am a visible and recognized individual on campus, and as such, I am able to interact with, and come to know more about, many students at the University.

Selecting Participants

My position within the Office of Student Life affords me the opportunity to establish relationships with many students at the University. As such, I sought out students who were involved both with online social networking and the physically present campus community, as well as those individuals who I understood either to be more regularly engaged online or those who favored interaction with physically present social groups. These participants were selected based on their coming from various geographical locations and cultural backgrounds. I sought approval from, and was granted permission by, Dominican University of California to conduct this research with the student participants.

Research Conversation Participants

The student participants were all traditionally aged undergraduate students who are part of the millennial generation presently attending college. All students are 18 years or older. In the following table, I provide a complete listing of all research participants including their names, class level, academic major, and their hometown or home country.

Table 1: Chart of Research Conversation Participants

Student Name	Grade	Major	Hometown
Phillipa Armes	Freshman	Dance	Charlotte, NC
Gerard Cabarse	Freshmen	Nursing	Daly City, CA
Rafael Garcia	Sophomore	Occupational Therapy	Los Angeles, CA
Alexa Holm	Freshman	Nursing	Brentwood, CA
Tasha Kahn	Junior	Biology	Glendale, CA
Farah Mohsen	Sophomore	Political Science & English	Baghdad, Iraq
Darryl Morris	Sophomore	Business	Los Angeles, CA
Johan Norden	Junior	Biology	Skövde, Sweden
Jill Rizo	Sophomore	Business & Digital Art	Windsor, CA
Clayton Schuster	Senior	Communications	Fairbanks, AK

The diversity of the participants is representative of the demographics of Dominican University of California and many other institutions of higher education within the State of California. Furthermore, I purposefully selected individuals from a variety of academic disciplines and across grade levels. The section that follows provides general information about each of the conversation participants, including their involvement with the campus community and the extent to which they interact with online social networking.

Phillipa Armes

Phillipa was born in Hyderabad, India to British-national parents where she lived for the first six years of her life before the family moved to Singapore. She attended a private school in Singapore with the children of other expatriates for the next five years, and then moved to the United States at age eleven. Soon after her family settled in Charlotte, North Carolina, Phillipa was naturalized and now holds dual citizenship in the United States and Great Britain. She is a talented dancer in Dominican's BFA in Dance program, a hybrid academic-arts partnership between the University and the Alonzo King LINES Ballet. Phillipa is an avid user of online technologies and has experience with various types of social networking.

Gerard Cabarse

Born in the Philippines, Gerard's family immigrated to the United States when he was less than a year old. His mother and father first moved to South San Francisco and then eventually to Daly City where he grew up and his family still resides. Gerard chose Dominican because of his interest in becoming a nurse, and because being the location allowed for visits with family at home. In addition to being a strong student, Gerard is an extremely talented and gifted musician. He has a passion for entertainment and is involved with the campus social scene; in particular, several of the music performance groups and student bands on campus. Gerard readily admits that he is somewhat addicted to social networking – Facebook in particular – and he regularly engages with others online.

Rafael Garcia

Rafael is a talented student-athlete who was recruited to Dominican from the greater Los Angeles area to play soccer. Since being on campus, he has been involved with several student groups including the student government association and various student clubs. An active participant in campus life, Rafael has established strong connections with his peers and enjoys being part of the social community. His interactions with social networking, however, have been somewhat polar experiences. In high school and during his first few semesters at Dominican, Rafael was actively engaged with others online. However, he has become increasingly more disenchanted with this medium to the point that he no longer uses social network sites to communicate with others.

Alexa Holm

A freshman from the city of Brentwood, California, Alexa chose Dominican because of the reputation of its nursing program. Though she appreciates and enjoys the attention she gets in her small classes, Alexa notes that she can be easily frustrated by some of the drama often found on small campuses. This drama often has to do with the size of smaller institutions; students know most people on campus, most especially those who live in the residence halls. Alexa mentioned that when feeling stifled by the small-school dynamic, she tends to shy away from social events and engage less with the campus social community. Alexa's engagement with social networking is about average and she notes that Facebook is the main site with which she interacts with others.

Tasha Kahn

Tasha is an extremely articulate student with a strong sense of self. Whereas her presence may influence an interpretation that she is outgoing, Tasha expressed that when it comes to physically present interaction with others, she is a rather private and reserved individual. She notes that her aversion to an active and vibrant social life may be due, in part, to her upbringing by multi-ethnic and somewhat culturally traditional parents. Beyond the family dynamic, Tasha is an academically focused young woman with high self-expectations and a tremendous work ethic. She is content spending her time and energy on her studies and undergraduate research projects within the biology program, but she also enjoys online engagement with others. In addition to interacting with some social networking sites, Tasha also has a blog site and plays computer games.

Farah Mohsen

Farah is an Iraqi citizen who fled to Damascus, Syria when war erupted in her homeland several years ago. While in Syria, she was approached by the Iraqi Student Project, a program that offers Iraqi students the opportunity to study at universities across the United States. This is her second year as a Dominican student. In addition to having a unique experience as a student at the University, Farah is 25 years old and thus she is at the cusp of the millennial generation. Farah considers herself an active user of social networking and she is quick to point out that her interest in this medium stems from growing up in Iraq where, essentially, she had no access to participation and interaction with others online.

Darryl Morris

A business major from San Diego, California, Darryl is as engaged with online social networking as he is with the physically present campus community. He indicates that Facebook is his preferred means of interacting with others online, and notes that he regularly checks status updates and communicates with friends through this social networking site. When not engaged with others online, Darryl typically enjoys being in the company of his peers, both at school sponsored campus activities and at impromptu and informal student gatherings that frequently occur around campus. Darryl is an active member of the student government association and has been instrumental in promoting activities and programs for his fellow students.

Johan Norden

Johan came to Dominican University as part of an exchange program with his native Skovde University in Sweden. His initial exchange was in 2008, and he so thoroughly enjoyed his experience that he made arrangements to return to Dominican to continue his studies. Once done with his undergraduate degree, Johan hopes to enroll at Dominican for a graduate degree in biological sciences. Johan indicates he uses Facebook as his primary means of social networking and communication, especially with his friends in Sweden, and is active on the site most every day. Though he does not actively participate in a wide-variety of student activities and events, Johan enjoys attending on-campus gatherings that feature student music and poetry performances.

Jill Rizo

Jill is a two-sport athlete who chose Dominican because of the opportunity to play both soccer and softball. Since arriving on campus, Jill has been involved with other aspects of the university student experience. As a sophomore, she serves as a Resident Assistant on campus where she is responsible for fostering the student experience on a floor of 36 freshmen students. Although she is busy with the time-consuming demands of being both a student-athlete and a Resident Assistant, Jill nonetheless finds time to be active with her peers and to participate in some of her preferred campus activities and events. Her experiences with social networking have shaped her understanding and interpretation of this technological phenomenon as it influences the student experience.

Clayton Schuster

Clayton comes to northern California from a small town outside of Fairbanks, Alaska. Whereas many students choose Dominican because of the small class size, Clayton chose the University because it offered him the opportunity to attend a much larger school; there were only 25 people in his high school graduating class. Though he enjoys some online interactions with his peers, Clayton feels he is less involved with social networking than others. A proponent of face-to-face interaction, Clayton uses online media simply to chat with his friends and those he socializes with in physically present peer groups. In his four years at the University, Clayton has been involved with many different organizations, including serving as a Resident Assistant and being the editor of the student newspaper.

Data Collection and Text Creation

The conversations with participants served as the data for this research project. The researcher met with participants individually and these one-to-one conversations were audio recorded and then transcribed, at which point they became data in the form of a text (Herda 1999). A letter of invitation was given to students identified as being familiar with online social networking – those who may have shared concerns and expressed interest (Herda 1999:97). (See Appendix A for sample letter of invitation). I secured each conversation partner's permission to record, transcribe, and analyze the data as part of this study. Following the transcription of each conversation, each participant was sent a thank you letter (see Appendix B) and was also given the opportunity to review and reflect on the text and to offer any changes or corrections to the data.

Research Journal

In addition to the data collected through conversations with the students, I kept a research journal with recorded observations and personal notations. Herda (1999:98) describes this journal as "the life-source of the data collection process for in it goes the hopes, fears, questions, ideas, humor, observations, and comments of the researcher." Throughout the data collection process, I used this journal to record ideas, make notes regarding the relationship between data and theory, and to capture my reflections on conversations with students. The journal was helpful in revisiting ideas and notes collected during conversations and in reflections, and ultimately, it served to enrich the data analysis process of this research.

Timeline

I conducted my research conversations at the end of the spring 2010 academic semester at Dominican University of California. Most of these conversations took place in early May; however, given the constraints of the academic calendar, two conversations were scheduled and completed in early June when the participants returned to campus for summer classes. I transcribed each conversation soon thereafter and analyzed the data after finishing the conversations and the transcribing. The first draft was completed in February 2011.

Data Analysis

Transcribing conversations into text creates distance between the data and the researcher. The text creation allows the researcher to reflect on the conversation and then return to the data to analyze it using critical hermeneutic theory. Ricoeur (1981:53) notes that the "text must be unfolded, no longer towards its author but towards its imminent sense and towards the world which it opens up and discloses." Herda (1999:98-99) explains that data analysis happens in the following stages:

- The recording and transcribing of research conversations with participants;

- The identification of quotes to develop themes which are then placed within the identified research categories;

- The examination of the themes as related to the critical hermeneutic theoretical framework, including remaining open to the possibility of new themes as interpreted within the data;

- The opportunity, when appropriate and available, for further conversation with the research participants in analyzing the developing text;

- The discussion of the research issue as related to critical hermeneutic theory;

- The uncovering of implications.

Through this process, the researcher analyzed and interpreted the conversations as texts in an attempt to come to a new understanding of the research issue. This new understanding challenged the researcher's prejudgments and, through praxis, informed the creation of a new paradigm.

Research Questions

Data in this research was revealed through conversations with millennial generation students that unfolded using guiding questions informed by critical hermeneutic theory and the identified research categories. Below are research questions that guided the conversations with the research participants.

Category: Text
1. Tell me about your experience with online social networking? What specific sites do you interact with most frequently?
2. What do you typically post on your social networking profile? How and why do you choose what you post?
3. Give me an example of how you have used social networking to keep people informed about what is happening in your life. How do you do this when not online (face-to-face interactions)?

Category: Identity
1. Who are you online? Tell me about differences between the online/real you.
2. How do you identify with social networking sites? How is your posting a representation of yourself?
3. If your profile is seen by others, how do you feel about people peering into your life? Do you think that they are judging you?
4. How have you used this technology to get to know other people – either before or after meeting them in person? Give me a specific example.

Category: Imagination
1. Tell me about what you envision about an individual when you look at his or her social networking page or site. How is this influenced by access to so much information (postings, images, etc) about the other on their social networking profile?

2. What are your thoughts on people embellishing their online postings? Give me an example of a time when you, or someone you know, did this.

These questions were intended to guide the conversation and to allow for open discussion between the researcher and the participant. Questions were not asked in any specific order; rather, they were grouped together within each of the categories noted above. The exchange of ideas that occurred in the dialogue that took place determined the course of the conversation. Some conversations required the researcher to move away from the guiding questions and to ask different questions so that there was a better understanding of the information provided by the participant. The discursive nature of participatory critical hermeneutic inquiry requires that the researcher to be an active participant in the conversations so as to promote better collaboration with the participant in an effort to collect data necessary for a better understanding of the research topic.

The Research Pilot Project

I carried out a pilot study in fall 2009 that served as a field testing project where I was able to become more familiar with asking questions and engaging a participant in a conversation (Herda 1999). In the following section, I provide a description of the pilot project and my experience, including information about my conversation partner, synthesis of the data collected, and an analysis of data as related to my proposed research categories.

Research Participant

In considering students for my pilot conversation, I felt it necessary that the selected individual be someone with both longevity and experience at the university and that this person also be an avid user of social networking sites. Longevity, or time

spent at the university, is important in that I wanted to work with someone who had experience in being involved and engaged in campus activities, organizations, and peer groups. Molly Yee, a senior nursing student at Dominican University, agreed to be my conversation partner for this pilot study. In her time at Dominican, I came to know Molly quite well. Two of her close friends were student employees in my office and she would often visit while they worked. During these visits, Molly and I would talk and share stories and over time, we learned more about one another. Molly is originally from Orinda, California and the story of her experience in coming to Dominican made having a conversation with her much more compelling because of her experience in socially interacting with others and establishing connections with others. Rather than entering the University with a specific cohort of peers, like most freshmen students do each fall semester, Molly transferred to Dominican from a nearby community college. Upon enrolling at the University, Molly participated in an orientation that included an overview of academic, co-curricular, and social programs and offerings on campus. She moved into the residence halls not knowing anyone on campus, but with a determination to meet people and establish new relationships.

In her three years at Dominican, Molly found several good friends and engaged with many others in her peer community. She is involved with various campus organizations and participates in many of the social activities sponsored for students. Molly is a member of the Dominican Nursing Student Association (the largest co-curricular student club on campus), and in addition to this co-curricular organization, consistently looks into the other groups on campus to determine if she has any interest in their programs and events. In addition to being an active and engaged member of the

student community, Molly is also an avid user of online social networking sites. She is a self-professed Facebook addict; she visits the site daily and often remains logged in for several hours in the evenings when watching television or doing homework. Her established connections with campus organizations, the peer community, and the online social network suggested that she would be a student with a story to share.

Research Conversation Data Presentation

Molly and I agreed to meet after her Tuesday afternoon class, before she left campus for the day. She came to my office and sat down on one of the large oversized chairs, like she usually does when she drops by for a visit. My office is the place where many students come to discuss their concerns, talk about events in their lives, or simply escape for short visits between classes. Molly typically comes in and makes herself comfortable, at which I usually jokingly ask if I can get her some refreshments while she sits and watches me work. When Molly arrived for our conversation, I asked her where she would feel most comfortable. She smiled and nodded downward, indicating she was content in her usual seat. There are a handful of students at Dominican who have transitioned from being students to being my peers and I imagine Molly will one day be one of those select few individuals.

In recent years, I have been challenged in my work environment by several conduct issues involving students misusing social networking sites and misinterpreting postings and comments made on these sites. Though I was interested in discussing Molly's experiences and thoughts on social networking, my own prejudices about students' use of this technology has influenced my pre-understanding of this phenomenon to the point that I initially was surprised by Molly's candor and her

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opinion that social networking profiles are representative of the identity of students. Molly said, "generally anything that is online – on my Facebook or anywhere – is fair game. You put it out there; people are going to look at it." Initially, I interpreted this comment as her somewhat matter-of-fact understanding about the openness of social networking sites, as if she was suggesting that she had no concerns about what gets posted by or about her. However, Molly qualified this statement by explaining that although there are postings individuals put forth for people to view and comment on, there are times when others put up images or postings that may be unflattering or unauthentic textual representations of self. She said, "it kind of sucks because other people can post stuff about you," and indicated that there have been times when people have put up comments or photos of her that caused concern for how others might prejudge her.

Molly also noted that she is cautious about what she posts on her Facebook page when she said, "everything I put up, I do not do it thinking or worrying about how people are going to interpret it. But, whatever I put up, I think am I okay with people looking at it and knowing this bit about my life." She was careful to explain that, from her experiences, social networking sites allow for a cursory glance of people's profiles, which may influence interpretations based on superficial information about their peers. Molly noted the postings are not representative of the true identity of those persons.

> Facebook is not a good representation of your life. I do not put up many pictures from my childhood, and I do not put up boring stuff like me working in the hospital, or studying with classmates. I mean, the majority of the pictures that go up are when people whip out their cameras; parties, big events, things like that … That is what people put online, the fun stuff. You do not really get to see the everyday things, the rest of their life.

Molly did share my understanding of the accessibility of information posted on social networking sites. She confirmed that once a posting is made, "it is something that is up for everyone to see."

Molly's comment about interpreting online postings merited further conversation. She shared stories about her experiences with using social networking as a means to find out information about other people. She told of a time when a male student requested that she find him on Facebook, suggesting that she would like what she saw and would take an interest in him. She dismissed him when it happened, but then admitted to doing exactly the same thing when she met someone in whom she was interested. I asked her if she used Facebook connections as a way to glimpse into the lives of others and try to get a better understanding of the person they might be. Molly replied, "there are very few people that I meet, and I know right away that … I want to pursue a friendship. If I am going to go add you on Facebook, it is because I want to talk to you." I asked Molly her thoughts on profiles being used to evaluate the identity of another person. She echoed her earlier statement about social networking profiles being representative of the individual and noted, "you choose what you put up – especially about yourself." Molly emphasized that when it comes to the comments and images that are posted by the profile author, that individual is in complete control of what they put forth. In this way, self-postings are "representative of what type of person they are and what they are like in person."

The evaluation of the other's identity by means of an online profile raised questions about these interpretations being superficial and prejudicial. Molly noted that in her experiences, what she encounters online is often supported with information

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shared by friends who have actually met the individual and understand them on a more personal level. She stated that although she tries not to judge individuals she does not know well, she "probably would if I did not know anything about them. But to have someone I trust tell me this is a great person … I am going to interpret what I see in a different light." Within Molly's circle of close friends, there is a strong sense of trust and fidelity to her peers. She commented that when a new person is brought to the group, that individual is received openly and warmly so long as a member of the peer group has vouched for that person's character. Molly said that although she and some of her peers may have never met that individual, because there was a pre-understanding based on a reference and a promise of good faith, the group would "adopt them into [the] circle of friends." I found the parallels between the superficial reviews of online profiles and the unequivocal acceptance of the referred individual to be strikingly similar despite their glaring differences. The quickness to pass judgment based on the cursory review of the profile paralleled Molly's willingness to accept the other into the group based solely on a friend's recommendation.

I was both concerned with and perplexed by Molly's description of judging online profiles but openly accepting referred others into the circle of friends. On one hand, the cursory review of a profile leads to prejudgment, whereas the attestation by a trusted friend leads to immediate acceptance. My concern stemmed from the authenticity of what students might be posting online. Though the information posted might be factual, it might also be creative and imaginative in that it intentionally could be skewed so as to allow the authors of the postings to create a new or different story, or imagine themselves differently based on what they choose to post. When asked

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about the potential for inauthentic posts, Molly was quite frank in her response: "some people, I read what they write, and I think they are lying about it … I do not know if it is true or not, but I just do not believe it sometimes." Molly commented that she thinks "people embellish," and said people online will "make a super sexed up comment … and they put it out for the world to see." She also noted in her experience with online social networking, students exaggerate their postings or embellish their comments "as an attention thing."

These comments seemed to contradict other statements about social networking sites being representative of the author and reflective of their character. In follow up conversation, Molly clarified the difference. She noted that although the profiles and the text posted do belong to the author, "you may only be getting half the story." Additionally, she said that when it comes to interpreting social networking profiles, "you cannot know the whole person … it only represents a part of their life." To exemplify her point, Molly spoke about her own personal growth in recent years. Though she feels that her character has not changed, she is definitely more outgoing and not as quiet and shy as she was a few years ago. She said that her friends from high school, who she has not seen in five years but know her as being more reserved, "will think of me differently because … they may see the party pictures of me and think I am someone totally different now," even though she deems her profile to be an authentic reflection of herself. Their understanding of Molly as she once was – quiet and shy – would seem to contradict their interpretation of Molly's online identity as being a more social individual.

The conversation shifted from stories of actual experiences and interpretations to how Molly imagined and envisioned things might be. Molly had spoken already about how certain postings might influence others to prejudge her or imagine the person she might be in the real world. I still was intrigued by her comments about accepting friends of friends into her circle of peers. She pointed out that because a close friend had shared stories of the other individuals and because there was some pre-understanding of them based on Facebook profiles, there was little concern about these individuals not fitting in with the group. Molly was confident that the stories shared by peers, coupled with the information posted online, was enough to help her envision a different way of being regarding the friendships. She said, "I feel like if I were to meet them, they would be someone I would want to be friends with … I ideally would have found the same friends." I shared my concerns about not completely being familiar these individuals, to which Molly replied, "I really do not know them but we would all be comfortable with one another." The stories shared of these individuals were enough to help her imagine what might be in a different world.

Research Conversation Data Analysis

The research conversation was most interesting in that what was shared by Molly both supported and challenged my prejudgments regarding the influence of online social networking in the lives of students. Not being a part of the millennial generation, but in interacting with these individuals on a daily basis, my prejudgments were informed by my experiences with what I understood to be challenges with social networking, as well as by the reality of my being an outsider to the millennial community. In sharing her experiences and stories of being a socially engaged member

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of the millennial generation – both online and offline – Molly presented data to inform my analysis of the research conversation. The following is a brief overview of the data organized into select themes as related to critical hermeneutic theoretical framework (Herda 1999.)

Social Networking Sites as Text

The representative qualities of online social networking sites allow students to put forth information to share with others. The functionality of this technology allows for students to post images, make comments, and post messages on their profile pages and those of others. These profiles might be considered as a text put forth by the author (Ricoeur 1981). The profile, as a text, is thus open for interpretation by other students who encounter these profiles online. As such, the text shares a narrative of the identity of the author. However, the viewer's interpretation of the text may be different than the author's suggested meaning. In the conversation, Molly shared her experiences with this technology where students will look at profiles and interpret that individual based on the information seen online. Social networking, by nature of the lack of physically present dialogue with others, may be challenging in that the interpretation of identity of the other by means of an online text, may differ from the interpretation that occurs when individuals are engaged in meaningful dialogue (Bernstein 1983).

Identities Online

The notion of the online interpretation of the identity of others by means of a representational text was evident in much of the research conversation. This interpretation may be influenced by what students choose to post on their social networking profiles. Molly was careful to point out, however, that in her experiences

with social networking, there may be times when students intentionally embellish the information on their profile pages. As such, the text put forth may not be an entirely authentic representation of the identity of the author. Ricoeur (1992) writes about the need to remain open to different interpretations of the other. Students who engage and interact with others online by means of social networking sites should be aware that the idem identity, or true character (Ricoeur 1992) of the author, may not be reflected in the online text. Furthermore, when considering that the purpose of social networking sites is to connect students with others, the identity of the author may be more reflective of the ipse identity; that which is constantly refigured in relation to others.

Imagination and Technology

In the research conversation, Molly discussed visual images, such as photographs, as being examples of narrative texts that inspire imagination. She noted that when interpreting certain pictures seen online, she imagines what that person would be like if she were actually to encounter them one day in the real world. The concept of imagination, beyond a way of envisioning a different way of being, is also connected to the concept of identity. Narratives, as stories, help one to envision and emplot a refigured world (Herda 1999) and a new identity for both the reader and the author. Students share their experiences in the online world for others to see and interpret; this interpretation may lead to envisioning how things ought to be or how students would respond or act in reference to the stories shared. However, Kearney (1988) notes that technology may influence our ability to imagine and to interpret new ways of being. Much like mass-media, online social networking allows students to share information on a large-scale and to communicate with others virtually

instantaneously. As such, millennials may not be able to step away from the text, interpret what they see, and then come back to the text or to the conversation with a refigured understanding.

Reflections on the Pilot Project

I began this particular conversation with Molly concerned that I might stray from the guiding questions I prepared in advance. At first, the conversation felt clinical; much more of a question and answer session than an actual dialogue with discourse between the two of us. I reminded myself to allow the dialogue to happen and to let the conversation unfold. The entire research conversation lasted approximately 40 minutes and I left feeling better informed by what Molly and I discussed (see Appendix C: Pilot Project Transcription). I found myself reflecting on our conversation for several days, most especially about the stories Molly chose to share. In revisiting the conversation during the transcription process, I realized that I was not as engaged as I initially had thought. I asked many questions of Molly, but noticed that my voice could have been more present during some of the discussions. However, by being somewhat more passive in the conversation, Molly may have opened up and willingly shared stories and experiences. I think that Molly felt that the conversation was more reflective of our regular visits, not necessarily a research conversation where she needed to provide specific answers. In preparation of the other research conversations, I made sure to focus on being more present in the dialogue and to share with the students my understandings and interpretations so that from the conversation might come new and different understandings.

The three categories used in the pilot project – text, identity, imagination –

served me well in understanding and interpreting the relationship between online social

networking and millennial generation students. The research questions tested in the

pilot study initiated meaningful and insightful conversation with the research

participant. A question specific to students' understanding of identity online was added

to the same guiding questions used in the pilot study. I was pleased with the overall

conversation with the research participant, and used the same categories and questions

for further research.

Background of Researcher

I serve as the Associate Dean of Students at Dominican University of California.

An alumnus of Dominican, I began my professional career at the University in 1996

immediately after graduating with my Bachelor's degree. For the next five years, I

worked in the Office of Admissions and eventually became the Director of

Undergraduate Admissions before transitioning to the Office of Student Life in 2001

where I now serve as the Associate Dean. My duties include oversight of student

housing, student activities, student clubs and organizations (including the Student

Government Association), and judicial affairs and student conduct. I pride myself in

being a visible presence on campus; I try to get to know as many students as possible

and strive always to be approachable for students with questions and concerns. To an

extent, my title assumes a certain degree of leadership responsibility on campus,

especially when working with students. I want students to understand that not only am

I a valuable resource in helping to shape their university experience, but also that I have

the authority to influence changes that might help them in their growth and development – both as persons and as students.

I strongly believe that the college environment provides excellent opportunity for teaching moments when working with young adults. My experiences have taught me that the social community of a college campus provides both the challenges and support necessary for students to learn and to grow as they prepare to become active participants in larger society. My understanding of the recent phenomenon of online social networking is that it might be influencing both individual student development and their relationship with others in community. As such, my interest in exploring virtual social networking in the lives of students stems from my desire to help students with their own identity development and in forming meaningful relationships with others through involvement with the campus community.

Summary

My understanding of the actions of university students is based on my interaction and involvement with them as an administrator, as well as my pre-understandings and prejudices as influenced by my own experiences as a student many years ago. I came to the research conversation interpreting and understanding online social networking to be a negative influence on individual student development and the overall student culture. Herda (1999:77) challenges us that in order to "overcome the pre-understandings that separate us from the new understandings that carry us beyond the current order of our lives … we [must] reflect and distance ourselves from our prejudices." However, our capacity to understand is influenced by our own experiences and our prejudices. Gadamer (2004:278) writes that it is "the prejudices of the

individual, far more than his judgments" that shape the reality of an individual's world. The research conversation and my reflections and interpretation that followed helped me to understand this phenomenon differently. I am more aware of the student paradigm as it relates to online social networking and by interpreting what I have learned, my intent is to remain open to the possibility for different understandings of this phenomenon.

The Chapter that follows captures the many voices of the research conversation partners and presents them as a single configured text (Herda 1999:127) that illustrates the significance of online interaction and social networking in the lifeworld of the millennial student. In addition to providing examples shared with me by the students of their frequent and regular interaction with others online, I also present data about online engagement and social networking that emerged from the conversations as it relates to the research categories of text, identity, and imagination.

CHAPTER FOUR: DATA PRESENTATION

<u>Introduction</u>

The students currently enrolled in colleges and universities are members of the millennial generation who, as part of the academic community, engage with others in online spaces and in real-world interactions. As a researcher and as a student affairs administrator, I am not part of this community and thus I am unable to share the same experiences as the students. In an attempt to understand the significance of online interaction in their lives, I engaged the students in conversation about their experiences with social networking. Herda (1999:127) writes that the research conversation "provides the opportunity for learning." The participants share their stories, and these narratives become a text rich in data related to the research topic. Herda (1999:127) further explains that this newly created text, and the data within, includes "the reading and reaction of the participants … that tells a story." As such, the data presented are the voices of the conversation participants refigured and ordered by the researcher so as to create a new narrative that tells of the issue at hand (Herda 1999).

The data are organized according to the research categories of text, identity, and imagination that emerged in the preliminary analysis of the conversations. Prior to discussing the data related to the research categories, I present data about students being engaged online. Following the information about the pervasiveness of online technologies, I present data as related to the specific research categories as follows: the social networking profile as text, which shows how the online social networking profile is reflective of a text created and put forth by the author; virtual reality and a real identity, where I present data as related to identity formation and interpretation among

the student members of the millennial generation; and imagining others and different ways of being, which presents data about imagination in the virtual and real spaces occupied by the students. Within each of the categories are sub-categories that introduce and expand upon specific themes that emerged from the conversations and the preliminary analysis of the data.

A Generation Engaged Online

When beginning each of the conversations with the students, I felt it important that I understand how often each of the individual participants interacted with others online, and the significance of this technology in their daily lives. As discussed in Chapter Two, the literature indicates that millennial students are frequent and heavy users of online communication comfortable interacting with others in virtual spaces, and data presented in this section further supports the notion of millennial students being actively engaged with online technologies. The students shared with me examples of interactions with social networking and, in doing so, they demonstrated the pervasiveness of this technology as a medium for communication with others. Farah noted that she checks her social networking accounts on a daily basis, and Phillipa shared an example of classmates she describes as being "really crazy about checking in all the time; they check what people are saying and they monitor it." Though she does not engage others online as often as her peers, Jill commented she still will go online "once or twice every two weeks" or when she is bored and needs a distraction. These comments reflect the literature in that each of the students discussed a particular aspect of online social networking – be it posting to Facebook or engaging others in online chats – as being a regular activity in their daily lives.

Communication in Virtual Spaces

The attraction to, and pervasiveness of, social networking is also a significant influence in the way millennial students interact with one another. For the majority of the students, Facebook is the preferred social networking site for communicating with friends. All the student participants have experience with this particular social networking site, although some are more active online than others. Farah commented, "Facebook is more for interacting with friends, especially when they update their activities or statuses. It keeps me updated on how things are." The ways in which students interact with the site – viewing photos, commenting on postings, and direct communication via chat or email – suggest a relative ease of use and opportunity to engage others. When asked about Facebook, Darryl spoke about the attraction of millennial students to this particular social networking site.

> DM: It is easy to use; you can connect with people a lot easier. You do not have to wait until they are home … You can do it on your mobile phone and take it everywhere with you … You get to connect at a quick rate. I use it mostly for finding people I have not seen in years. I have a lot of friends in middle school that I can talk to.
>
> PR: Do you use it to communicate with people?
>
> DM: Yes, that is my primary use, for communicating … I use Facebook on a casual basis for networking or communicating.

Whereas Darryl discussed social networking as a place for casual conversation with others, Alexa noted that given a choice between in-person and online communication, she would prefer using social networking to communicate with those whom she knows only casually. She uses Facebook to communicate with "those people I do not hang out with regularly." Tasha shared that "there are some people I can only get in contact with

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through Facebook" when she spoke about a friend who uses this technology in place of text messages and email communications. In addition, Gerard and Phillipa commented that they use Facebook to contact friends, both those who live some distance away and those who are peers at the university. As an individual who regularly engages with various forms on online interaction, especially social networking, Phillipa acknowledged that it is "definitely online communication" when asked about her preferred means of reaching out to others.

When considering that so many millennial students participate in online communities, using these technologies to communicate is pragmatic. Johan is drawn to social networking because it allows him to keep in contact with friends in his home country with minimal effort or cost. The embedded email, instant messaging, and video chat systems essentially make long-distance communications inexpensive and easy. Beyond communication with existing peers, these sites also allow students to reach out to those with whom they may have lost contact. Jill said, "if I want to get in contact with people who I have not seen in a long time, whether it is teammates or classmates, I can go to one place and send them a message." These actions whereby students engage with some form of online social networking because of the ease in interacting with others, support information in the literature about this technology being ubiquitous in their daily lives.

Whereas social networking provides easy access to others, several of the students noted that the amount of time they spent socializing online differs from that of their peers. Important to note is that each of these students is engaged with some type of academic endeavor or co-curricular programming, be it a leadership role or

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involvement with a student organization. In discussing online communication with peers, Clayton said, "I can come to it and go away from it and I can associate with the other person at my convenience." He further explained that when he is preoccupied with studies or other projects, he communicates with others only when it is convenient for him to do so. Sharing a similar view, and noting that she participates in online socialization on a less-frequent basis than many of her peers, Jill commented, "for me, once or twice is kind of what I am able to do without going overboard and getting too caught up with it … I would love to sit around all day and talk to people, but I'd get nothing done. I get online, do whatever I need to do, and then I get off." Beyond spending less time communicating with others online, Tasha discussed interacting less with social networking now than she did earlier in her college experience. She noted that during high school and her transition to her college experience, social networking was part of her daily routine. However, since becoming a more established student with increased demands and commitments, there are times when she will go several weeks without posting information on her social networking profile. Although these students are not as engaged with this technology compared to other students, it is important to note that they nonetheless continue to interact, albeit to a lesser degree, with others in online spaces.

Differences in Virtual and Real Communication

Considering that these students are part of the generation that has grown up with computers as part of their daily lives (Prensky 2001a), their use of this technology to communicate with others seems somewhat presupposed. However, the students revealed that despite their affinity for engaging others in online spaces, they also enjoy

interacting with peers through physically present interactions and conversations. The

students commented that although the various means of communication available on

social networking provide fast and easy ways to connect with peers, they understand, as

Farah pointed out, that "personal interaction is different from virtual interaction."

Gerard echoed his understanding of the differences, noting, "I spend more time with my

Facebook friends in real life than online … it is not the same." There exists a more

personal connection when engaged with others in face-to-face interaction, and the

students are keenly aware of this difference.

Implicit in the desire for physically present interaction with others is the notion

that face-to-face communication is deeper and more meaningful, and as such, is

preferred more than online interactions because of the subtle nuances that happen in

conversation. When speaking with Clayton about his preference for in-person

engagement, he explained that tone and reactions are significant for him in how he

communicates with others.

> CS: I like knowing people's reactions. Even with instant messages, sometimes
> I do not like it simply because I cannot gauge people's reactions, their
> tone. I am a big tone person. I would not do well in a language that is not
> tonal. I am a good reader of people's tone.

> PR: In a way, tone reflects what they are really thinking.

> CS: Exactly. You can get the gist of it in text, but it is not as much fun.

This understanding that the nuances of physically present discourse influence the

interpretation of the conversation exemplifies the students' awareness of the differences

in communication that happen in real and in virtual spaces.

Though face-to-face dialogue presents the opportunity to interpret a

conversation differently, online communication does present individuals the

opportunity to share that which they may not be comfortable revealing in real-world situations. In discussing the advantage of the privacy of the computer screen (Turkle 1995), Farah said, "you can tell something about yourself but you do not have to live with the facial reactions you get when you say something about yourself when people are around." In a similar vein, Rafael noted that online communication presents opportunities to not only share information about yourself, but also thoughts and feelings about others; especially those which the students would prefer not to express in a face-to-face conversation. He said, "I think on Facebook it gives you more freedom to slander someone or throw out certain punches. But when it is real life, you have to second guess what you say, because someone could be watching you." The safety and security provided by the anonymity of online communication presents an opportunity for individuals to be less guarded in the information they share about themselves and , more authentic in sharing their interpretations of others.

The Social Networking Profile as Text

Considering that the Internet is a ubiquitous part of the millennial students' lives, sharing information with others by means of an online text is common action. Ricoeur (1981:108) speaks of the text as being a place for the recognition of the other. As such, students create online texts not only to communicate with peers, but also to share information about themselves with others. The students revealed in conversations that they are comfortable posting information, and while some choose to share more than others, all understand, accept, and participate in this medium of online communication with peers. In putting a profile online, students share a text that captures the time and place of the author, and create an opportunity for the reader to

interpret and to understand the other (Ricoeur 1988:112-113). My pre-understanding of this phenomenon of social networking, as informed by what I had seen posted on various Facebook pages, was that students openly shared online with little to no filtering whatsoever of any sensitive or personal information. I specifically asked students about what they chose to post on their social networking profiles because I wanted to understand better what they were putting online for others to see and to learn their reasoning for choosing to share this information.

A Cursory Overview of the Other

My prejudgments about students being carefree with the information they shared in their online profiles were summed up in a comment Rafael made during our conversation. He said, "I had nothing bad to hide, so I was not concerned about what went up," indicating that when he engaged others online, he was open with the information he posted. Several of the students commented that they, too, share openly with others, but that they are less cavalier in that the information put online tends to be more mundane than revealing. The students acknowledged that whereas they put forth information about themselves online, these profiles, according to Jill, tend to be more of "a quick glance or overview." In several of the conversations, the students discussed there being little depth to the information put on their social networking profiles.

In discussing this idea of a profile being a text representative of a person's intent and their identity (Gadamer 2004:191; Ricoeur 1981:91), Johan said, "it can be considered shallow. It is a very quick overview of people. It is superficial." The conversation with Alexa supports the idea that the students post cursory information within their social networking profiles.

PR: What do you typically post on other people's sites and your own site?

AH: On my site, usually what is going on in the day; how much homework I have or what I am doing for the weekend.

PR: So superficial stuff?

AH: Yes, mostly. On other people's pages, if I am not commenting directly on something they have posted, then I will say, "hey, have not talked to you in a while."

PR: How do you choose what you put on your site? You commented on general superficial stuff, but what goes on in your mind when you post things?

AH: Usually to inform people that I do not normally see … I will say stuff like "in the library all night."

Her comments, similar to those of the other students, suggest that postings and status updates are generic and intended simply to keep peers updated on daily happenings and activities. Having seen postings by students where they have posted more than mundane details about their lives, I asked Alexa if she uses this medium to share other news with her peers. She confirmed that she puts some "big and exciting" news online, noting that she posted her acceptance to college, her good grades from the previous semester, and her mom getting remarried as examples.

When asking Tasha a similar question about how she chooses what information to share, she mentioned that whereas some of her postings are unexciting, others could be interpreted as being more imaginative and creative. Tasha reminded me that when it comes to interacting with others on a social networking site, "people are on it all the time" and they are checking it regularly. As such, she sometimes posts information and comments intended to engage others or elicit some sort of response.

TK: Generally, because I know somebody is going to read it, I try to make it witty. Or it might be something I said in a conversation earlier that I thought was really funny … Other times I will have a really nostalgic moment and that will be a status. Other times it is as simple as "work week number 2" which is what I did this morning.

PR: When you post something witty, are you looking to engage people?

TK: A little bit. Part of it is just the validation of my wit. I know people are on it all the time, so hopefully they are going to comment and we can start up a not-too-meaningful conversation with someone I have not talked to in four years.

My initial understanding of the comments made by Alexa and Tasha was that in crafting the online text, the students openly shared information and then freely presented it with the intent to interact with others in virtual communities. However, the students shared that they have reservations and concerns about posting personal information online for the world to see. In pointing out that she rarely puts up anything on her profile page that could be interpreted as being negative by random other people perusing her profile page, Alexa said "I would not put it up there if I did not want them to know [about it]." Sharing a similar concern, Tasha discussed being diligent in making sure that pictures of her are not put online; "you post something on a Facebook wall and the entire world sees it." These concerns about how others might interpret them based on their online profile both surprised me and challenged my prejudgments about them being comfortable openly sharing information on the Internet.

Several of the conversation participants also noted that despite sharing information online, it is not uncommon for them to edit the content of their postings. Ricoeur (1991, 1981) discusses the idea of a text, when interpreted, as an opportunity for new and different ways of understanding others. Recognizing the potential for their profile to be interpreted differently, the students shared their experiences of guarding

personal information by choosing not to share it online. When she initially began using social networking sites, Farah was careful about anything personal shared with others. She told me, "I am careful about what I write and what I post. I think I was worried about that at one time, but not anymore. I have become comfortable about what I post and what I put out there." As this medium became more significant in her life and her familiarity and comfort with it grew, she became more open with what she chose to put forth and share with others.

However, not all of the students shared Farah's sentiment; some students have concerns about posting anything personal online. In speaking with Jill, I was able to understand better the reservations for being somewhat guarded online. Jill said, "the way I think about it is that if you are important enough to know what is going on in that moment in my life, then I would tell you in a conversation or you should have an idea. But I will not post it for millions of people to see." The notion that social networking is intended to offer users a glimpse into the lives of others is not lost on the students; they understand that what is put online will be seen by everyone who encounters it, and as such, they are not entirely comfortable with individuals other than close personal friends having the opportunity to interpret these online texts.

A Representative and Superficial Text

Whereas the research conversations supported the findings in the literature that millennials actively participate online, I nonetheless had concerns that the online text was not an authentic representation of the identity of the author. I was surprised to learn in the conversations that the students shared my same thoughts and concerns. In discussing that her profile is representative of her only on a superficial level, Alexa

said, "you may know what I did last night, or where I am from, but you do not really know me." These postings, though cursory overviews, are not entirely shallow. As Gerard stated, "all the information, at least, is uploaded by that person, so there is some reflection of themselves in their profile." His point is significant in that he suggests there is some thought to what is posted online and that that thought reflects the person behind the profile.

Jill further touched on this particular point, noting that her postings help her to share her story with others.

> For me, if I put something on a page for others to see, then it has to have meaning or be of some sentimental value. You do not put up a meaningless picture. You have to look at what you pick and choose to put online, and consider that when you start to try and understand someone else. If they feel something is important to them, then that is a way to piece things about others together.

Jill's approach to social networking suggests that her postings are more accurate and authentic representations of her life, and as such, the online text reflects her identity. Phillipa, who has significant experience with various forms of online communication with others, stated, "I would not put anything out there that would lead them to the conclusion that what they see is completely so far off from what actually is." Farah is a relative newcomer to the social networking phenomenon, and as an international student, she is experiencing much of the millennial culture for the first time. She said, "I am being influenced by all that is around me. All of that is very much reflected in my Facebook and my online networking." The pervasiveness of social networking in the daily lives of millennials suggests that regardless of the superficiality or significance of the information posted online, their profiles are representative, to some extent, of their identities.

<u>Virtual Reality and a Real Identity</u>

I went into the research conversations with the idea that the online profile as a text could be representative of the author's identity (Ricoeur 1981:90-92); a text open to interpretation of the author by the reader who encounters it online. An impetus for this research was my concern for how interpretation of the other might potentially be influenced based on the information put forth in an online text. Although several of the students echoed Gerard's comment that "Facebook is kind of a shallow way to find out who somebody is," they also noted that there is some authentic representation of that person within the online profile. Jill pointed out that students "do not have to spill their life story on a page, but you can see what is important based on what they post." The conversations revealed a sort of duality in how the students interpreted these online texts; despite there being superficial information posted online, some part of the social networking profile is reflective of some part of the author's identity. Seeking further understanding, I asked the students to share with me their understanding of identity in the online world.

Who Are You Online?

My concern with the aforementioned duality of understanding identity in the online texts raised the question about students' interpretation of their own social networking profiles. Specifically, I was unsure if their understanding of the superficiality of information posted online related to their being more authentic with the information they themselves put forth in the text. I asked the students the question, "who are you online," in an attempt to understand better the relationship between their identities as represented by their online social networking profiles and their personal

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and authentic identities by which they are identified in the real world (Ricoeur 1992:121). The students' comments reflected the different interpretations and the ways in which they interact with this technology.

Several of the students discussed their virtual and real identities as being one and the same. Tasha commented, after some thought, that she was "not sure if there is a significant difference" between the online text and her understanding of herself. Gerard explained how the superficiality associated with an online text and the way others might interpret it contributes to his understanding of his own online identity.

> I would say that my Facebook is both an accurate and inaccurate reflection of me. Right now, my profile picture is of me, but my friend doctored it up on his iPhone and I posted it because it was funny to me. People who know me are like, "Damn it Gerard," but people who do not know me are not sure what to think. People who are more familiar with me understand it is a joke. Online I am normal; I still use correct grammar. There is nothing that I would do online that I would not do in person. I will not message someone and say something inappropriate. My Facebook me is pretty much the same as me in person.

Gerard's comments reflected another concern I had related to interpreting a representative text, that of students embellishing their identity or creating an online persona. When asked about the relationship between her online and real-world identities, Phillipa noted, "I am myself. I write/put-out who I am in real life. I do not create a persona." Like Phillipa, all but one of the other conversation partners believed their online profiles to be authentic representations of their identities.

Rafael, the lone voice to the contrary, shared with me his story of intentionally creating an online identity. An active and engaged student athlete on campus, he assumed a different persona when he interacted with others via online social networking sites. When asked who he purported himself to be online, Raphael said, "I took on this persona that I was always playing online games, so I got used to the lingo

of it and it was easy to carry on the online geek." Acknowledging that his online

identity was not reflective of any qualities by which he could be recognized (Ricoeur

1992:121), Raphael treated social networking like a real-life version of the video game,

"The Sims," where he was able to "alter things about myself" to fabricate an online

identity. Embellishing his profile to influence others' interpretation of the online text

touched on my prejudgments that students were intentionally posting information that

did not accurately or authentically represent their idem identity – their true character

that stays permanent over time (Ricoeur 1992:122). As such, I asked students to share

with me their experiences and thoughts regarding embellished online postings.

Online Identity: Embellished and Authentic

The question of embellishing social networking texts opened up the discussion

about millennial students' understanding of this particular phenomenon, and their

acceptance of this action as a norm in online engagement. Jill summarized this issue,

telling me "people do it. You can tell in real life when people do it because they boast

about themselves or talk a lot about themselves. I guess it is the same online … it is an

easy way to create a different person online." I found this candidness perplexing; there

was little concern with the idea that by embellishing their social networking profiles,

students effectively were lying about themselves. However, the students did not share

my concerns. As Darryl explained, students embellish their profiles "to get as many

friends as they can to make themselves look cool. I think people play themselves up

quite a bit on Facebook." The students' understanding of enhancing their online

information was not that they are lying; rather, they refigure their profiles in an attempt

to influence others' imagination and their interpretation of identity based on the text put

forth. In asking the students to elaborate on this notion of embellishment for the purpose of influencing a favorable interpretation, I was reminded that the entire construct of online social networking – a medium to reach out to others and establish relationships – supports such actions.

The millennials' familiarity and comfort with this technology suggests that embellishing a text and influencing interpretation is easier to do online than if trying to do the same when engaged in the physical present with others. Several students discussed the idea of posting photographs with the intent to influence others toward a different, if not specific, interpretation. Photographs are powerful in that, as texts, they can inspire multiple interpretations and different understandings of others (Ricoeur 1981:108). Farah said that based on her experiences with social networking, students "beautify their image online because it is observed and seen by thousands … people in general put up interesting pictures that will attract others to look at their profile." Supporting this notion, Johan commented, "people will always pick the best picture for their profile. They have to have a certain persona. I think people just want to put their best side forward." Gadamer (2004:135) discusses pictures as being representative of more than what is captured in the image. Alexa said, "people only post pictures that make their life seem exciting." The blatancy and intentionality of students embellishing their profile pages suggest, as Phillipa reminded me, that in the creation of a social networking profile, students "are trying to put out what they want the world to see. So you have to think that what you are looking at is what they want you to see about them." Beyond the potential for an online text to influence the viewer's

interpretation, crafting the online text with certain embellishments or imagination might also suggest a desired interpretation.

Although some of the students understand and accept that embellishing social networking profiles does happen, others are bothered by these actions. Not one to tolerate any sort of embellishment of a profile, Tasha commented, "if they feel the need to validate themselves in our peer group with that sort of cacophony of pictures, I feel no need to friend them. They are a fake person and I do not have the patience for fake people." This bias toward authenticity in online texts was repeated in other conversations. When asked about his online identity and the authenticity of his profile, Clayton said, "it is definitely the real me, but at a level that only my close friends would understand because we have had that face-to-face interaction." Phillipa pointed out that her close friends "are pretty authentic about themselves online." Once again, the conversations reveal a sort of duality in understanding of this particular phenomenon. As Farah suggested, "some people, online, are who they are in real life. Other people are not." The pictures and comments put forth online could be intended to influence the interpretation of identity by embellishing the text, or they might well be authentic representations of the students.

Interpretation of Others Online

In the conversations, the students reminded me that although they understand their own online profiles to be authentic representations of self, ultimately it is others' interpretation of the text that informs the understanding of identity. Farah said, "I like to think that I am reflecting who I am, but depending on who knows me and who sees my profile, they may make a different comparison." When asked specifically how they

felt about being judged by others based on their social networking profiles, the students shared mixed thoughts, but all understood that prejudgments of the text as a "condition of understanding" (Gadamer 2004:278) is something that happens with social networking. Phillipa said, "I think you have to take into account that judgment does happen on all levels, even in real life." Whereas the students understand the reality of judgment in their everyday lives, they nonetheless have concerns about what others might interpret based on what they see posted on the profile.

Again, there exists duality in the comments made by students. They accept the norm of posting embellished information on profiles that thus many not be authentic representations of the author, but some take issue when others prejudge them based on the information seen online – especially when the interpretation may be construed as being negative. Understanding that "everyone judges everyone's profile," Alexa commented, "I do not want people to see bad things about me." She went on to say that if she feels bothered by someone having access to information about her, she would take action; "if I think that somebody should not be able to see my stuff because they will judge me or I do not want them to have insight into my life, then I will block them." I found this comment particularly interesting. Rather than removing the information from the online text, thereby eliminating the possibility of any future pejorative interpretations, Alexa chooses to leave the profile intact and block access to particular people. Her actions suggest that information found in the online text is reflective of her identity, and as such, she prefers to keep it posted and available for others to see and interpret differently.

This notion that students protect their identity by guarding against the prejudgment of others was discussed in several of the conversations. Whereas Alexa restricts access to her social networking profile, Tasha is cautious about what she puts forth online and monitors the information about her and images of her that others may post.

> I am very aware that it is not only my friends who see my Facebook. I have a somewhat private profile, but I let the network see me too. Employers might be able to see me, or even professors; there is no way I am going to have anything on there that is going to make me look like some tart walking around campus, or some lush.

Tasha's reasoning for editing her profile is pragmatic; the purpose of this social phenomenon is for both random connections and mutual friends to have some access to information about others within the larger network. Depending on how students have configured access to their profile, these connections could be between a few dozen individuals or millions of unknown others. Employing a protocol similar to, but more stringent than Tasha, Clayton chooses to post little personal information on his profile. He says, "I generally do not put stuff online that I would be comfortable having a stranger see … I do not feel comfortable knowing that other people who I do not know could be looking at my Facebook." When asked to explain further why he did this, Clayton commented, "part of it is just a general paranoia about other people. Another part of it is having a resident look at it and see something that they could spread around campus; a combination of both of those really." Both Tasha and Clayton are cautious in that they post only information that they deem acceptable, thereby inhibiting the potential for any negative or prejudicial interpretations that would inform the understanding of others (Gadamer 2004:278-279).

Though not as diligent in the monitoring of his profile page as the other students, Gerard understands that pejorative interpretations of online texts happen. However, unlike his peers, he is not as concerned with these prejudgments.

> Everyone is judging me, and everyone judges everyone. It has gotten to the point that with some people I care and with others I do not care. There could be people looking at my Facebook page daily and I do not know them but they might be judging me. I do not care. I will probably never meet them and they are not big enough in my life to bother me.

Like Gerard, Darryl understands that the interpretation of his identity is influenced by prejudgments of his profile, and he also does not allow it to bother him. He says, "do I worry or do I care? I do not care if they judge me. That is who you are and this is what I do, it is not anything bad so if they judge me I have no control over it. Am I worried? It depends on who sees it." Initially, I interpreted these comments to reflect an indifference to the prejudgment of online texts. However, in reflecting on what was said, I reinterpreted their comments to mean that although the students do not care for prejudgment, they acknowledge that it is part of the online social networking paradigm.

Willingness to Prejudge

Whereas the conversations with the students revealed their displeasure in being prejudged by their social networking profiles, several commented that they have done the same when encountering others online – despite the understanding that social networking profiles are often superficial and embellished. Nonetheless, the students consider them as representative texts to be interpreted, and as such, they prejudge others based on the information posted. Several of the students, in particular, shared examples of being harshly critical of the information posted online.

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Clayton, a self-described "harsh judge of people," spoke about perusing through others' profiles and looking at their interests and activities. He said, "there have been times when I have seen what people like and I have had a pretty low opinion of them," and noted that he would be unlikely to remain open to further encounters with that person based on their postings. Also one to be critical, Tasha noted that she judges others based on what she sees posted online. When asked if these prejudgments would influence her interactions with others in the real world to the point that she would not remain open to imagining new opportunities (Kearney 1998:148-149) with these same people, Tasha replied, "if I have met them, I will give them a chance in real life. If I have not met them, I feel no real need." Clayton and Tasha did point out when encountering people in the real world they have found them to be different from how they imagined them to be based on their prejudgments. Tasha said, "if we end up by being compatible, then I will try to overlook what is hidden under the rug. Though I will know it is always there, I will care about it only to varying degrees depending on the situation." Her comments suggest that her initial prejudgment of the person is likely to contribute to further interpretations of that same individual, regardless of how she reinterprets them in real-world interactions.

In discussing the significance of the online text in influencing the interpretation of others, Darryl noted that the prejudgments that happen online reflect those that occur in the real world. Considering that online interaction with others is such a pervasive and accepted norm in the millennial community, I found Darryl's comments to be quite telling.

> As an example, somebody walking around who is very "goth" in terms of their
> style and clothing, well that is kind of the same thing. I see that and I probably

would not approach that person, but if I see someone who dresses similar to me or is at the same events as me, then we probably have common interests. But that is all based on outer appearance. I would not judge them, but I would not be as likely to approach them.

Just as first impressions can influence interpretation in face-to-face interactions, the information seen online in a social networking profile can do the same. He further clarified, "I am not judging them, but if there are no similarities then I am probably not going to look too much more into that person." Darryl also shared a particularly interesting point regarding initial impressions and prejudgments of others online. Whereas I was concerned with the online interpretation being pejorative and the students being unwilling to pursue a real-world connection with the other, Darryl reminded me that there are times when the opposite holds true. He said, "you meet someone online and they seem to be this type of person who is very genuine, but when you are in the real world they might talk behind your back or say things about you to others. That is not the person they pose as on the Internet, but in real life that is who they really are." These comments suggest that although social networking profiles are a significant influence in how millennial understand and interpret others, these online texts are not entirely reflective of the identity – the sameness of character – of the author (Ricoeur 1992:117-118). Going to the online text in an attempt to try to discern something meaningful about the other will influence the viewer's understanding in such a way that the identity interpreted online is different from the real-world identity.

Online Interpretation Influences Real-World Interaction

The propensity for prejudgment based on information put forth on a social networking site is significant, as is the potential to encounter a text that is or is not reflective of the true character of the author (Ricoeur 1992:119). Nonetheless, the

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students reminded me that what they see online contributes to their wanting to know more about the real-world identity of others. Specifically, Jill commented that she enjoys interacting with these online texts because they present to her the opportunity to learn more about the person, and connect with them online, before having to encounter them in person.

> JR: It is nice to get an idea of who the person is and what they have done. At school, I can see their major or where they live on campus. I think that is beneficial, especially if someone is timid. It is easier to start a conversation and get to know people before having to go up to them and talking to them. That is a different level of comfort. It is nice to reach out online before putting yourself out there.

> PR: In that sense, Facebook is a way to reach out, like an icebreaker. From your experiences, though, it should be an icebreaker to the real world, not solely an online thing.

> JR: Yes, but it depends on the person you are. If you are more timid and shy, you are probably going to have a longer introduction or conversation online before talking to someone face-to-face. I think you cannot solely rely on that or base your opinions on that; you need to leave it somewhat open-ended to make your own assessment about people when you actually talk to them or see them face-to-face. You cannot be completely open when you meet them in person, because you are judging them based on what they have put on a page and not on who they really are.

Prior to participating in the research conversations, my pre-understanding was cause for the concern that when students encountered the profile of another person online, especially someone they did not know in the real world, they would be more apt to adversely prejudge that person based on the postings and as informed by their own pre-understanding (Bernstein 1983:140). However, the students commented that not all of their interpretations of others are critical. Interpreting the cursory information posted on social networking sites text presents opportunities for new and different understandings of others in the real world.

When asked about judging information posted in online profiles, Alexa commented that although she can be prejudicial at times, she is also openly inquisitive. She said, "I do not know if it is as much judging as it is wanting to know more about them." Her comments affirm the intent of online social networking; individuals create a profile for others to see that might ideally lead to some sort of connection. Rafael also spoke about this idea of remaining open to others, especially after seeing certain things online. He said, "I try really hard not to judge people, because it is not my place and I do not like it, so why be a hypocrite … I try to ignore what I have heard and in a sense, give them the benefit of the doubt." Though more apt to prejudge, the students also recognize the need to resist being prejudicial toward others and remaining open to a real-world relationship.

Darryl noted that in his experiences, if there is potential for a real-world meeting with another person, he is less likely to judge others based on what he sees online. He shared the story of receiving information about his roommates when he prepared to come to Dominican, and then finding them on Facebook. He said, "if I had judged them beforehand I would have said I had nothing in common with them and would probably not have gotten to know them or spent much time with them. [But] those guys were perfect roommates; funny and cool." Farah, unlike Darryl, commented that profile information will influence how she interprets unknown others. She said, "if I just met them on Facebook, that would influence my interpretation … I do not know them in person so the only things I know about them are what I see on their Facebook page. My judgment will be based on what they put online, not on who they actually are." However, she went on to say, "but if I have a friend who I know in real life, I may

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or may not take seriously what they post on Facebook." Offline relationships and interactions significantly influence how students interpret what they see posted online. Among members of the millennial community, there is the understanding that the interpretations of others that occur online are different when there are preexisting real-world shared experiences, face-to-face interactions, and meaningful dialogue.

The Significance of Face-to-Face Encounters

The idea of learning more about others offline and establishing personal connections with them pervaded many of the conversations, and several students addressed the importance of remaining open to others in the real world. In discussing the interpretation of others solely by means of social networking, Alexa said, "you do not see the whole person." The online profile does not adequately encapsulate all there is to know about that person. Phillipa commented, "there is only so much you can put online. Writings and pictures only tell so much; it is just a snapshot of them." Keenly aware of this reality, Johan commented, "I do not think you can get to know someone just by reading the basic on-paper stuff, compared to talking to someone in real life." He went on to say, "I put more stock in what I learn in real life as opposed to what I see on Facebook." The cursory overview that is the social networking profile does not offer the students a breadth of information about the other person, nor are the online interactions meaningful enough to present their depth of character reflective of identity (Ricoeur 1992:117-122).

The students spoke about the need to move beyond the online profile and encounter individuals in the real world. When asked how access to online information

about others influenced his interpretation of other people, Darryl spoke of the need to remain open to different interpretations of others.

> I am more of a person that thinks I do not really care what I see unless I talk to you. I am more of a get to know you type of person. On Facebook I can see what you are into, but I still do not know you and I will not go hang out with you just because I saw your page unless I talk to you personally or extensively through a chat. But I do not make my judgment of a person off of information they have on their profile, or all their pictures.

For some of the students, there are fundamental differences in the ways in which they interact with social networking technology. On the one hand, there are those that have no qualms about prejudging others based on what is posted on line, and on the other hand, there are students, like Darryl, who prefer to withhold any judgment until they are able to interact and interpret the other in a face-to-face environment. The willingness to remain open to others, despite what is posted online, can be attributed to the real-world encounters with others that occur prior to interpreting the online profiles of these individuals. Johan noted, "I do not friend people I have not met in real life. When I meet people on campus, then I will add them on Facebook." Sharing a similar thought about connecting online only with those he knows offline, Gerard commented, "I only connect with people I know; I will not add someone as a friend just to meet them in person. That is kind of a cheap way to meet people. There is no courage in it." This comment, in particular, echoed a conversation with Rafael about finding the courage to move away from computer-mediated connections with others and forcing himself to be open to others in the real world.

The conversation with Rafael was a significant moment in the research process in that it helped me to understand better the students' desire to have face-to-face interactions with others. An individual who was once so engaged with social

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networking that he intentionally manufactured an identity so as to connect with others, Rafael informed me that it had been five months since he last used Facebook and he recently had deleted his profile. He discussed that prior to meeting someone for the first time, social networking was valuable in helping to alleviate some of the pressure of that initial encounter. Rafael said, "you already knew each other in a sense, or at least had a feel for them, and it kind of took away some of the pressure of being vulnerable." However, he added quickly that though a useful medium, he was becoming reliant upon it for reaching out to others and was spending far too much time in the online community. Rafael said, "I am not going to hide from real life. That is why I got rid of Facebook, because I was not living the true experience of life." To a certain extent, the virtual world of social networking was becoming his reality, and as such, he was compelled to make a change.

The following is an excerpt of the conversation with Raphael where he shares his experience of moving away from online social networking. He illustrates the significance of being engaged with others through face-to-face interaction, and in particular, he comments that he is often able to interpret and understand better the character of the other by means of physically present discourse.

> RG: I find a lot of people use Facebook to try and determine who the person is, but I found is that it is not really who they are. Like I said, I had an online version of me, but then in reality once you meet outside of Facebook, they turn out to be pretty cool.
>
> PR: Talk more about that – the idea of the person in real life may not be the same as who they are online.
>
> RG: Since I stopped judging people on Facebook, I am more relaxed and open to getting to know people for who they really are. Especially here on campus where people post pictures and a lot of drama gets stirred up. I choose to deviate from that, because I know Facebook is a way to connect

to certain people or groups. But when you meet them in real life and in the real world settings, you get to know who they really are and you have to know that person as they are instead of from behind the screen where they can be whoever they want to be.

PR: Do you find that when you meet the person initially in real life and you engage them in conversation in the physical present as opposed to behind the screen, you get a better idea of their authentic self?

RG: Yes, you get to see more of what their thought process is like and how they react to certain things you say. You have to guess where they are coming from and who they are.

Raphael noted in particular that when not able to prejudge based on images, comments, and photographs found online, it takes some time to understand and interpret the other when encountering them in the real world. His comment about not living an authentic life and creating a fabricated persona online further suggests that the desire to understand oneself – and oneself in relation to others – is significant to the millennials ways of being in the physically present community. Raphael discussed having to "guess" about the character of those he encounters in face-to-face situations; this guessing contributes to how he might imagine relationships with others to be. Beyond interpretation and understanding, encountering others and engaging them through physically present discourse and dialogue creates a space for imagination.

Imagining Others and Different Ways of Being

Encountering others through online social networking may contribute to prejudgments based on the information they put forth in the profile, but these same encounters are also significant in that they influence the students to think about new expectations and different relationships with others as based on experiences (Ricoeur 1988:213). The students talked about shared online experiences as being influential to imagination. Although his friends are not actually together in the same place, Clayton

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commented that he considers online interactions as being imagined shared experiences in which all of his friends can participate.

> I will usually be searching the web and if I come across something funny I can instantly share it with other people. When I share things like that with other people, which is actually what I spend most of my time doing in terms of social networking, I feel like I am hanging out with them because we both have that same experience.

Similarly, Darryl noted that by simply posting pictures and stories online, his is able to give others "a better idea of what Dominican is about" and, by sharing his experiences, help them to imagine a real-world connection. As such, the relationship between online interaction and imagination of reality is inextricable.

Imagining Real-World Relationships

In the conversations, I asked students the question "what do you envision about an individual when you look at his or her social networking page or site?" Their comments not only told of the significance of imagination in influencing their relationships with others, but they also reflected the students' understanding of the need to engage others through real-world connections. Several students spoke about the relationship between a social networking text and imagination. Gerard discussed that once he has seen online profiles and started interpreting the texts, he sometimes wonders "if [others] are really like that in the real world." His question of how others might be, based on his interpretations, may influence his decision to imagine and further pursue a real-world connection. Alexa shared similar thoughts, noting in particular that her encounter with an online text makes her wonder "who is this person, and if I could see myself being friends with them." Because of what she sees posted in the online profiles, especially the pictures of people in larger social groups, Alexa

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commented, "I could not see myself being friends with any of their friends." For some students, their pejorative interpretation of the online profiles influences their ability to imagine a connection, let alone a meaningful relationship, with others in the real world.

Other students, however, remain open to imagining new possibilities and different ways of being with others (Ricoeur 1988:158-159), especially when the online profile piques their interest. Clayton commented, "I know that if we like the same kind of movies, then on some level we are probably going to get along." Earlier in our conversation Clayton discussed being critical of others based on what he sees online. He reminded me that he only pursues online connections with those whom he has had a real-world encounter. Because of the existing familiarity with that person, Clayton pointed out that when looking at their profile, he imagines "what it is about that person, what they are like and what they do like, that will lead to a real-world interaction." Though unsure of the potential for a meaningful connection or relationship, he nonetheless remains open to the possibility. In also trying to remain open to others, Darryl commented that encountering a text and imagining new possibilities (Herda 1999:88) is an exciting part of getting to know someone. He said that prejudging others based on their online profile "takes away the excitement of meeting the person if you do not really know them," and that by doing so, "you have that exterior wall already … it makes that connection a little difficult." He understood that the online text is a powerful medium for influencing different interpretations of others and imagination new possibilities.

Despite the students' different views on how social networking is influencing imagination, they all were aware of their actions in encountering an online text and

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interpreting and imagining a connection with others in the real world. As such, the

social networking profile should not be understood as a summary that is fully

representative of the other; rather, it can be interpreted as the highlights of their life that

influence ways to imagine others in reality. Phillipa said that when she encounters a

text and imagines a connection with the other person, she often tries "to piece together

their life up that point," but also commented "it is more difficult if the person has less

stuff to look at." Jill spoke of her interpretation of social networking profiles, and how

she envisions connections with others based on what she finds posted online.

> I try to get a sense of who the person is and what they have done recently. I
> think it is harder to put together something on a larger scale or timeframe
> because people change; different things happen and they are different people.
> For me, [Facebook] is a quick glance of what they have done recently where I
> try to put together who they are, but that is hard to do without their history being
> there as well.

Implicit in Jill's comment is the idea of there being more to the other person's identity

and story than can adequately be captured in the small snippets of an online text.

Whereas the social networking profile put forth by the author influences both the

interpretation by, and imagination of, the viewer who encounters it, the amount of

information posted – and to some extent the viewer's capacity for imagination – also

plays into how the text is appropriated and refigured to understand the identity of the

other (Ricoeur 1988:158).

Social Networking Influencing Imagination

Beyond my concerns with the differences in how students might interpret others

based solely on their online profiles, I also questioned how the social networking

phenomenon was contributing to the students' capacity to imagine differently from that

which they see posted within online texts. Kearney (1988:251-252) discusses the idea

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of mass media as a contributing factor in the collapse of our ability to imagine, and in reflecting on his writings, I understood social networking to be a relative phenomenon. The communication systems embedded into social networking, in particular the capability to instantly and immediately share pictures, videos, and commentary, make this technology – much like television and other forms of mass media – a pervasive norm in the daily lives of millennial students. As such, I was compelled to explore how social networking was influencing imagination within the millennial generation.

In the conversations, several of the students shared similar ideas about the potential for social networking to be used as a medium for marketing oneself to others. Again, this is an intended action of social networking; putting forth an online profile for others to view that will generate some interest and a possible connection. Whereas Clayton chooses not to use social networking for this purpose, he nonetheless commented, "I know some people who use it as a marketing tool for friendship." Similarly, Alexa noted that based on her experiences with Facebook, people post certain comments and photographs because they want "positive feedback" and hope that doing so will make them more accepted. By creating an exciting or interesting representative text online, the students are influencing how others might imagine them to be in the real world.

Social networking, as a medium for marketing oneself to others, seems both pragmatic and disconcerting. Considering the purpose social networking is to interact with others, posting information that accurately reflects the authentic self could be helpful for students to reach out to others and begin to establish connections and relationships in new communities. Rafael commented that when engaged online, he

used Facebook as a "way to get out a bit and market myself." Despite the practicality of utilizing this technology to meet others, I had concerns with the students marketing themselves online and how it might be influencing how they imagined ways of being with others in the physical present. Farah shared with me her understanding, noting, "it could be either positive or negative. But, people purify their image … so that others accept them. When you meet them in person, they are less acceptable than how they appear on Facebook." I understood Farah to be indifferent to this issue. She clarified that although people may market themselves online, she tries to understand the differences between online texts and the real person, and feels her imagination is not influenced significantly by what she encounters online.

In asking other students about their understanding of how social networking influences imagination, there was, once again, some polarity in the comments shared. On the one hand, there are those students like Tasha whose ability to imagine new ways of being with others is inhibited by the mass-media functionality of social networking. She said, "I guess I judge people a little bit from the tenor of the comments on their walls. Do they drop the F-bomb every other sentence, do they have more photos of themselves drunk and vomiting than they do hiking or going to the movies?" The propensity for certain actions suggest to Tasha that others are not likely to be different from what she interprets online, so there is little she can imagine as being different. On the other hand, Gerard discussed the potential for social networking to stimulate imagination through interpretation. He said of online profiles, "that is what they are putting out there, so that is what they want people to see of them." Irrespective of what

is presented in the online profile, students have to imagine that other person and what interactions with them might be like in the real world.

Once again, the conversation with Rafael provided a better understanding of how social networking is influencing imagination. Raphael's own experience with this technology has been so polar – from being highly engaged with Facebook to now moving completely offline – that it makes his insight to the phenomenon that much more compelling. He commented that his experiences with social networking significantly influenced his ability to imagine both new interpretations of others and new ways of being with them in the real world.

> PR: In your opinion, how does mass media – social media as an example –
> influence your interpretation of other people?
>
> RG: I already had a predetermination of what to expect from this person. For
> example, on Facebook, I knew they were probably outgoing since the
> point of it is to connect with friends. In my mind, I already had an idea
> that people wanted to be your friend. With social networks the idea is
> that people are out there to be your friends so you can already trust them.
>
> PR: So once you look at that profile, and see the pictures and comments, in
> your mind you have already prejudged who they are?
>
> RG: Yes, it makes you lazy to be your true self. You can put up some stuff
> and they can probably get an idea of who you are, but it makes you lazy
> in having to be who you want to be.
>
> PR: How does that influence spending time with that person in real life – or
> would you not because now you think you already do not like them?
>
> RG: When you meet that person it is kind of awkward because you have spent
> so much time through the screen, what do you do in real life? You
> already know so much about that person online that I sometimes feel it
> might be easier to just go back online. It makes you lazy in
> communicating and in being a human.

Raphael's last comments are particularly interesting. Whereas some of the students discussed pejorative interpretations online and others commented on wanting to learn

more based on more favorable interpretations, he suggests that social networking influences not only the ability to imagine new interpretations, but also the desire to seek out new ways of being with others in real-world encounters. With a plethora of information available for interpretation online, there is little need for students to venture from behind the computer screen and engage with others in meaningful dialogue in real-world relationships.

Summary

In this Chapter I presented the conversations with the millennial students whose experiences with, and understandings of, social networking revealed the data about the significance of this phenomenon in their daily lives and their interactions with others. Beyond sharing their stories, I also included my own reflections as noted in my research journal, and my observations and interpretations of their stories and the experiences they shared with me. The data presented by the students suggest that social networking, as the literature supports, is ubiquitous and a powerful and pervasive medium for communication with others. Moving beyond the literature, the data from conversations suggest that the creation of the online text is influenced by polar views; some students prefer to put forth one that is representative of their true character, while others are comfortable embellishing their identity in an attempt to influence different interpretations. The encounter with these texts, the interpretation of the identity of the author, and the imagination of different ways of being with others also reflects the divergent views of the students and their interactions with this influential medium.

CHAPTER FIVE: DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

In Chapter Five, I interpret the data presented in Chapter Four using the critical hermeneutic concepts of Text, Identity, and Imagination. Through my own narrative, I explore how these three concepts are interwoven into understanding the significance of online social networking in the lifeworld of the millennial student. Students' affinity for online social networking is an issue that is particularly vexing for me as a student development administrator. The fundamental concept of this technology is that users create an online profile, volunteer and post personal information, then search through others' profiles and establish connections in much the same way that peer groups form among physically present individuals. The difference is that social networking happens virtually and the communication that occurs among those in the community is by means of an online text. Implicit in the lack of physically present discourse in the online world is opportunity for different interpretations of text, as well as the author's identity as reflected in the text. Within the interpretation of text and identity, there exists imagination. The online world requires envisioning much of what is read or posted in social networks, from the idea of what a physically present relationship would be like to how a peer would act or what they would say in person. Until physically present relationships can supplement those that exist in a virtual world, participants who engage with social networking must imagine how the other might be in reality.

Profiles as Text

The online profiles created by students on social networking sites provide the opportunity for one individual to encounter another by interacting with this technology.

Whereas these profiles do allow for interpretation of the other, this encounter happens in an online environment devoid of physically present conversation and discourse. On these sites, students communicate through the various technological media, but there may be no contact or interaction with the other outside of the online world. This lack of physical presence between individuals in online networks, coupled with students sharing information about their lives by way of online postings, suggests that the profile pages that exist on social networking sites serve as texts created and put forth by students. In addition, millennial students often share the events that are happening in their lives by means of updates, comments, and photographs, all of which, when posted online for others to view, are considered to be texts put forth. Bernstein (1983:62) reminds us that there are "differences between the dialogue that we have with texts … and that which occurs with other persons." In emphasizing these differences, Johan commented, "you get to know people to certain degree, but again it is shallower than if you did not have Facebook and people had to hang out at the café more or something like that." Millennial students engage with one another beyond the boundaries of cyberspace, and they are aware of – and understand the differences between – communication that happens online and that which takes place in the physical present.

Beyond differences that exist between virtual and physically present communication, the social networking profile as a text put forth with the author's offered meaning, becomes open to a reinterpretation that may differ from the original intention of the student who posts the information. Herda (1999:75) writes, "to understand the meaning of the text calls for interpretation." The student who creates a profile page online and submits it for others to see may do so without fully being aware

– or concerned – that those in the network who come across their profile may appropriate their own meaning (Ricoeur 1981:94) from the text put forth. When the online text is interpreted, it is done so without the complementary physically present dialogue necessary for there to be deeper meaning and new understandings. As Jill commented, when students communicate – be it online or in person – there is a level of uncertainty about "how people are going to perceive you … you have to be careful what you say and how people interpret it." Online communication, though ubiquitous in the lives of millennial students, is both intrinsically different from, and relatively similar to, conversations among those engaged in the physical present, in that as texts, social networking profiles are open to different, if not prejudicial, understandings and interpretations of others.

A Text Open to Interpretation and Prejudgments

Ricoeur (1981:108) speaks of the site-in-life of a text put forth and reminds us to remain open to a text that is free from the world in which it was created. Beyond the temporal constraints of interpretation of text, we must also remain open to the various forms of text – especially when presented with the technology of online social networking. These online profiles often include visual images such as pictures and video in addition to textual comments and status updates. Visual texts are open to a variety of interpretations and may be reinterpreted differently by the same person with each encounter. As Gerard pointed out, when looking at images posted on social networking sites, "sometimes their pictures do not portray them in the best light, and I am thinking is this really what you want to show people? Is this what you are all about?" Gadamer (2004:399) comments that in order to understand a text, we must

"apply it to ourselves and to know that, even if it must always be understood in different ways, it is still the same text presenting itself to us in these different ways." During the research conversation, several of the students noted that in their experiences, it is not uncommon for them to look at the postings or photographs of others, and although what they see may relate to their own life experiences, the students will interpret these texts differently based on their pre-understandings or prejudgment of the other person.

Gadamer (2004), in discussing text, writes about the significance of prejudgments and pre-understanding in informing the viewer's interpretation.

> A person who is trying to understand a text is always projecting. He projects a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text. Again, the initial meaning emerges only because he is reading the text with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning (Gadamer 2004:269).

Our prejudgments inform and influence how we interpret the online text of others. More specifically, as Gadamer (2004:398) writes, "the text is made to speak through interpretation." The pervasiveness of online interaction in the lives of millennials suggests that there is no temporal distance from social networking texts – the instantaneous access makes the text always present, all of the time. This phenomenon precludes students from being able to "make conscious the prejudices governing our own understanding, so that the text, as another's meaning, can be isolated and valued on its own" (Gadamer 2004:298); thereby influencing students capacity to distance themselves from the text and to interpret or to understand differently that which is put forth by others online.

Ambiguity of Identity in the Online Text

Several students discussed the significance of textual interpretation in seeking to understand the identity of the online other. Gadamer (2004:191) writes, "better understanding [is] the understanding of what the author meant and expressed." However, as noted in Chapter Four, the superficiality and questionable authenticity of the online text suggests that understanding the author's intended meaning of the text – and, as such, the true character of the author – is open to different interpretations. The students noted that in their experiences, there are there are times when they feel others embellish – if not sometimes lie about – the information they put on their profile pages. Darryl said, "I think people play themselves up quite a bit on Facebook." Furthermore, Clayton commented, "I think how we are taught, in real-world situations, to evaluate that information and what emphasis we are supposed to put on different information." Deciphering the important information to interpret becomes a significant challenge when concerns exist about its authenticity. Considering that the only connection between students may be their online social network, it makes validating information without physically present discourse and meaningful dialogue somewhat difficult.

Furthermore, the interpretation of an embellished text creates uncertainty about the other's authentic identity, especially when engagement online leads to a real-world connection. Phillipa commented, "it comes down to wondering if my interpretation was incorrect … based on what they are putting out there." The online social networking profile influences an initial pre-understanding of the other, but this understanding can be different when the viewer encounters that same individual in reality and prejudgments are challenged by meaningful discourse. Shahideh (2004:37) writes, "our

interactions are affected by and are driven by our knowledge of self, which is exercised through interpretation." The millennial student who puts forth a text authentically representative of their own identity is more likely to question their interpretation of others when presented with differences between the online and offline identities.

Though superficial and perhaps not entirely authentic, the online profile is nonetheless a text representative of some part of the author's identity. Kearney (2002:154) states, "what we consider communicable and memorable is also what we consider valuable." Jill pointed out, "what you put online has some value to whoever is posting it," echoing the notion that the information put forth in a text is meaningful to the author, and thus reflective of some part of their identity and their story. Gadamer (2004:225) writes, "just as a word can be understood only in terms of the whole sentence, and the sentence fully understood only within the context of the whole text," so can the interpretation of the other's identity based on an online profile be understood within the context of their broader life story. In conversation, Jill spoke of the importance of the totality of a life story not being captured in the cursory glimpses of information found in a social networking text.

> I think about my brother … he is getting married and having a kid … he is maturing and his priorities are changing. His Facebook reflects that; his interests have changed from screwing around with his buddies to spending time with his wife and playing softball. If Facebook was around when he was younger, and if you could go back and see all the comments and postings then as compared to now, you would have that history and see how he has changed as a person. What is important has shifted [to that which] is relevant to his life now.

The students recognize that a social networking text is not representative of the entire life story of others, and they also acknowledge that what is put forth online is representative of some context of the author's identity.

This dilemma of the social networking profile as being both a superficial and authentic representation of identity can be understood as follows. On the one hand, Darryl pointed out that those who encounter him online "are not going to know me through my Facebook." He is suggesting that his profile does not provide a thorough overview of that sameness of character, his idem identity (Ricoeur 1992:115-121). As such, the viewer who encounters the online text may interpret a certain "distinctive sign" (Ricoeur 1992:121) reflective of the author's identity, but the entirety of one's character cannot be understood in the glimpse that is the online social networking profile. On the other hand, these interpretations as informed by the information posted online should not be understood as being entirely superficial. Farah commented that in her experience with social networking, "people think twice before they type something on Facebook versus when they say it out loud. Conversation is not as filtered, especially for college students." There is a degree of thought and intention that goes into an online posting that suggests the text is, perhaps, more reflective of identity. Once put forth, it is "rendered autonomous with respect to the intention of the author" (Ricoeur 1981:108), and is open to interpretation by those who encounter it.

Identity Online

The students' affinity for social networking is both a means for communication and also a medium for presenting themselves online to others. Gadamer (2004:108) writes, "all presentation is potentially a representation for someone." Despite the tension surrounding the question of the online text being an embellishment or accurate reflection of the author's identity, there exists a degree of awareness and intentionality in posting information to share with others. Gerard commented, "whenever I post

something, there is definitely some thinking that goes into it." He further suggested that putting forth a text online makes it easier to relate to others, noting specifically, "Facebook is a way for my life to be relevant to other people." A text put forth with the intent to relate to and connect with others also presents those who encounter it the opportunity to interpret the identity of the author and imagine new and different ways of being with that person (Ricoeur 1992:121-123).

Beyond being a text that is presented to the other, social networking profiles present a narrative about the students who create them. Usher et al. (1997:102) say of the text put forth, "representations of the self can be seen as narratives or stories about the self." The many images, comments, and postings put forth online speak of the identity of the author. Kearney (2002:154) writes, "we are made by stories before we ever get around to making our own." However, the reader's interpretation of the narrative may be different from what the author intended when sharing the information. Jill said, "I think about what is going to happen when somebody goes online; can they really see who you are? I do not want somebody to jump to a conclusion about me that is totally wrong and it ends up affecting my life down the road." By creating a social networking profile and then posting it online for their peers to view, the students create a space that allows for interpretation of self by the other. Huelin (2005:217) writes, "interpretation always occurs in an encounter between a reader and a text; it takes place in the space between the text and the reader." The student's intent behind the postings, as well as their narrated identity, may be refigured in that encounter between the text and the reader.

Social networking sites allow for some liberties when interpreting the identity of the virtual other; an interpretation that might be different from one emerging from a dialogue between two physically present individuals. As was noted in conversation with the students, the connections established online in virtual communities can be based solely on the information shared in the online community. Ricoeur (1992:107) asserts that we are always in community with others, and "the actions of each one of us are intertwined with the actions of everyone else." The conversations revealed that students who engage with one another in online social networks may never have encountered one another in the physical present, or they may use this technology to supplement existing real-world connections with peers.

Interpreting the identity of the other as informed solely by the online text is different from an identity that is established based on the action and communication that happens in physically present communication. Recognizing the significance of face-to-face discourse in interpreting others, Clayton said "I still know that I will never know somebody until I talk to them. I think that is something that you need to always keep in mind." In addition, Darryl commented he "would never not get to know someone based on … their status for the day." The students' desire to engage others outside of social networking stems from concerns with the aforementioned authenticity of the online profile. Implicit in this issue is that there is some ambiguity regarding the integrity of users' profiles, specifically the understanding and interpretation of the other based on online information that may be significantly embellished. Through face-to-face conversation and real-world interactions, students can challenge their

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prejudgments and expectations, come to different understandings, and establish new relationships with, others (Gadamer 2004:269; Ricoeur 2004:104; Ricoeur 1981:68).

Idem and Ipse Identities in the Real and Virtual Worlds

Ricoeur (1992:355), in telling us of "the need to maintain a certain equivocalness of the status of the other," reminds us that we must remain open to more than one interpretation and understanding of the other. This concept is pertinent when considering the interpretation of others through an online text and by means of face-to-face conversation. The students noted that the connections that exist on social networking sites are not limited only to virtual reality; many students interact and communicate through social networking to complement established relationships with peers in everyday life. Clayton said, "I go on social networking sites to enrich my relationship with people I already know, not in a way where they know me on a deep level, but in a way where I already have a deep connection with them." As such, students at the university who are avid users of social networking sites exist as members who traverse between two worlds: the real world that is the university campus where conversation happens by way of physically present discourse and dialogue; and the virtual world where interaction is online and communication requires technologies such as emails, instant messages, and profile postings. Students exist in both worlds and will find different identities associated with each.

My initial understanding of identity as related to online engagement and the millennial student was that participation in the real world might be interpreted as the idem identity, the part of them reflective of character that stays the same throughout their lifetime (Ricoeur 1992:117-121). Gerard commented that although he enjoys

interacting with others via online social networking, he prefers face-to-face contact because "that is how you see their true colors … you see them for who they are." Conversely, in the online world of social networking, where profiles are representative of the physical being and what is posted is always interpreted in relation to others, the identity of the student is more reflective of the ipse (self) identity. Ricoeur (1992:121) reminds us "one cannot think the idem of the person through without considering the ipse, even when one entirely covers the other." There is a back and forth relationship between idem and ipse identities. This play between the two identities happens when students encounter one another in the physical present as well as in the online communities provided by social networking.

Further analysis of the conversation data reveal that the ubiquity of social networking in the lifeworld of the millennials is such that the real-world (idem) identity and online (ipse) identity transcend their respective boundaries of reality and cyberspace. On the one hand, Clayton commented, "there is always going to be more to a person," suggesting the true character of the other is evident more in face-to-face conversation than in interpreting the online text. On the other hand, Jill discussed the notion that the social networking profile is a text representative more of the author's idem identity and true character than their self in relation to others (Ricoeur 1992:3). She noted specifically that the postings and comments put on a profile page "may be reflective of who [others] really are." Ricoeur (1988) discusses this tension between the sameness of self and self in relation to others.

> The difference between idem and ipse is nothing more than the difference
> between a substantial or formal identity and a narrative identity. Self-sameness,
> "self-constancy," can escape the dilemma of the Same and the Other to the
> extent that its identity rests on a temporal structure that conforms to the model

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of dynamic identity arising from the poetic composition of a narrative text. The self characterized by self-sameness may then be said to be refigured by the reflective application of such narrative configurations. Unlike the abstract identity of the Same, this narrative identity, constitutive of self-constancy, can include change, mutability, with the cohesion of one lifetime (Ricoeur 1988:246).

The temporality of identity – those distinguishing characteristics (Ricoeur 1992:122) that perdure over time (Kearney 2002:152) – contradicts the ever-changing nature of social networking where millennials engaged online create, modify, and manipulate their online identities as represented in the text they put forth.

When asked the question, "who are you online," the student comments indicate their identities are reflective of the play between sameness and selfhood, thus suggesting that the identity encountered through social networking is reflective of the narrative identity of millennials. Ricoeur (1992:3) writes, "oneself as another suggests from the outset that the selfhood of oneself implies otherness to such an intimate degree that one cannot be thought of without the other [and] instead one passes into the other." Whereas several of the students noted their online and real-world selves are one and the same, others commented that engaging others online presents the opportunity to market themselves and create an online persona intended to attract others and establish connections. Essentially, the online identity, like the narrative identity, mediates between the character of the individual and the temporality of their life experiences, and the projection of themselves as the person they want to become in relation to others. As Jill commented, "your past kind of leads up to who you are." Ricoeur (1984:97) writes, "understanding – even the understanding of another person in everyday life – is never a direct intuition but always a reconstruction." Understanding the online other requires that the viewer of the text reconstruct that person's past history

in an attempt to interpret and make sense of their present condition. However, the authenticity and the embellishment of the online text put forth in social networking must be further explicated.

A Manufactured Identity

Analysis of the conversations revealed that information posted by students in the online text is both an authentic representation and a superficial embellishment of the author's identity. Understanding the sameness of character or recognizing oneself in relation to others (Ricoeur 1992:121) presents a significant challenge in interpreting the identity of the online other. The students' editing, or guarding, of the personal information posted online for others to see also presents an additional hindrance in that it further influences the viewer's interpretation. Beyond idem and ipse, and the narrative identity that mediates between the two, I propose that within the realm of online social networking, there also exists a manufactured identity.

The students understand that the purpose of social networking is to share information with those who also participate online. Sharing a text that is authentically representative, slightly embellished, or creatively fabricated, presents them with the opportunity to manufacture an online persona emplotted in a narrative. Shahideh (2004:vii) writes, "to tell a story is to both remember and create who one is." This narrative, reflective of identity, when put forth online, is the creation of a new story. Ricoeur (1988:247) writes, "the story of a life comes to be constituted through a series of rectifications applied to previous narratives … subjects recognize themselves in the stories they tell about themselves." Fusing their idem, ipse, and narrative identities into a coherent and unified manufactured identity presents millennials the opportunity to

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imagine themselves in new and different ways, both their sameness of character and their relationships to others. In our conversation, Jill discussed the relationship between the individual and the manufactured identity, saying, "there is almost an online person and the real life person. It is how far you stretch that; they can be different but they are still the same." She added that by embellishing their online profile, social networking becomes "an escape from real life" whereby students can create an identity and become, albeit virtually, the person they choose to be. Kearney (1999:26) writes, "identity is fundamentally narrative in character." Gerard commented that manufacturing an identity housed in the stories within the online text creates a space for the author to present him or herself in a way that "they want others to see them." As such, the manufactured identity is a pragmatic medium for students to escape the confines of their reality and be someone different in the virtual realm.

The creation of a new and different identity is also a necessary action whereby students can avoid having to recognize their true selves or the person they are becoming in relation to others. Ricoeur (2004:81) writes of the "fragility of identity" that some must face when challenged to interpret their own understanding of themselves.

> Is our identity so fragile that we are unable to bear, unable to endure the fact that others have different ways … of understanding themselves, of inscribing their own identity in the web of living together? This is so. There are indeed humiliations, real or imagined attacks on self-esteem … that turn a welcome into rejection … this is the relation that the same maintains with the other (Ricoeur 2004:81-82).

Ricoeur (2004:81) goes on to state, "the temptation of identity … consists in the retreat of ipse identity into idem identity." The experiences of the students suggest that specifically within the realm of online interaction and engagement, there is movement

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from idem toward a manufactured ipse so as to gain membership to the community of others.

Farah spoke about being influenced by her surroundings and her experiences to the point that she started embracing her ipse identity – that of becoming more American. These changes began to surface in comments and postings on her Facebook page and were recognized by family members who understood and interpreted her by her idem identity – that of an Iraqi national. Concerned that she would upset her family, she chose to manufacture an online identity more reflective of her idem – the identity her family understood – in order, as she stated, to "keep up appearances." Recognizing that "it was too much pressure for me to have to create an image they approve of," Farah eventually removed her family members from her social network and subsequently refigured the online text to again reflect the changes in her own understanding of herself as part of a new community of others. Rafael, who also manufactured an online identity, did so because he sought-out attention and acceptance by his peers. When asked why he embellished his online profile, he said, "I did it out of fear because of being judged. Some people do it because they want to be accepted. We all strive to be accepted by everyone." He added that when engaged online he was aware that his authentic self was not present and he worried that others might see through the façade. Rafael stated that when he participated in social networking he questioned "if others actually know who I am. I wonder if they can dig deeper and see that this is not really me." Similar to Farah, Rafael eventually experienced a return to his true self; only he took significant action by completely eliminating his social networking profile.

Whereas Farah and Rafael created the manufactured identity to share with others, Clayton spoke about encountering and interpreting a manufactured identity. Gadamer (2004:304) states, "if we put ourselves in someone else's shoes … then we will understand him – i.e., become aware of the otherness, the indissoluble individuality of the other person – by putting ourselves in his position." Again, the phenomenon of online social networking presents a challenge to this notion when considering that upon encountering the other in a face-to-face conversation and becoming aware of differences, the viewer must seek to understand that person differently from their manufactured identity as informed by a refigured interpretation. Clayton expressed his frustration with having to reinterpret the other, stating, "I think that [embellishing online postings] shows a lack of self-esteem … people who are trying to portray themselves in a light that may not be entirely factual are people who are generally afraid of who they are and of people not liking them for who they are." His comments suggest that there is an inherent risk of not being accepted by others when creating an online persona that is understood to be different from the identity interpreted through interaction in the real world. Ricoeur (2004) writes, "it is true that identity is opposed to diversity, to difference, by an act of comparison by the mind, as it forms the ideas of identity and difference … identity is, to be sure, a relation." Students have a desire to be accepted by others; in manufacturing an online identity, the students are able to mitigate differences that divide and separate them from others and promote, or create, those similarities that establish relationships with their peers.

The manufacturing of an online identity, specifically the employment of imagination to create a virtual self, raises concern about the ethical challenges in

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creating a new narrative to share with others (Kearney 1998:241). Implicit in the

embellishment that is part of the manufacturing process is the danger of losing the real

self to the new virtual identity. Rafael commented, "I lost control, somewhat, of my

real person or my real being, in a sense." Ricoeur (1992:127) states, "to imagination is

attributed the faculty of moving easily from one experience to another if their

difference is slight and gradual, and thus of transforming diversity into identity."

However, when the transition is not gradual – the manufacturing of an identity online

that is significantly different – the virtual identity has the potential to influence the

actions of the real person. In our conversation, Jill shared her understanding of this

particular phenomenon.

> JR: It is being able to distinguish between what is real and what is not. In real
> life, it is like lies. Do you lie and embellish so much that you lose
> yourself or do not really know what happened because you have to keep
> building on those lies.
>
> PR: That is a great point. You do not know who you really are.
>
> JR: Yes, you embellish on so many things you lose reality or you start to
> believe things that did not happen.
>
> PR: And that speaks to the idea that who you imagine yourselves to be vs. how
> others imagine you to be.
>
> JR: It gets back to when you start connecting the dots and try to figure them
> out online, you can be completely wrong because of the differences, the
> lies.

There exists an interesting dynamic within the manufacturing of identity; those who

create an embellished and inauthentic identity are potentially influenced by their own

creation and imagination. They are not shaping their own identity online so much as

the manufactured identity is influencing them and their relationships with others in the

real world.

Imagination Online

Embellishing the information posted online, as well as intentionally modifying the social networking profile to enhance or create a manufactured identity, though ethically questionable, is nonetheless an act of imagination. Herda (1999:88) reminds us, "the mode of being opened up by the world of the text … reside[s] in one's imagination." The narratives that exist as online texts help us to imagine a different way of being. The embellishments and exaggerations of profile postings are ways of envisioning a situation, or oneself, differently from the present condition. Although not entirely authentic, a manufactured identity can be considered as part of one's "narrative imagination" in that it helps students to emplot new opportunities and new ways of being with others (Ricoeur 1992:168).

The students discussed their willingness to imagine and to remain open to new interpretations of the online text and the real-world other. Rafael commented, "when you meet them in real life and in the real-world settings, you get to know who they really are and you have to know that person as they are instead of from behind the screen where they can be whoever they want to be." Ricoeur (in Kearney1999:13) states, "there is a permanent tension between … the space of experience and the horizon of expectation." The person who engages with social networking as a medium to identify less with their own narrative identity and more with their own expectations as created in the manufactured identity is thus confronted with this tension. The students understand that embellishing or creating an identity is a core construct of the social networking paradigm, but they also recognize that the identity is created with the intent to reach out and establish meaningful real-world relationships with others. Alexa said,

"I still believe that while you think you may know them on Facebook, it is different meeting them in person," suggesting that despite their proclivity for social networking and the questionable authenticity of the online other, millennials look forward to opportunities for face-to-face connections and imagining new possibilities with others in the physically present community.

The idea of face-to-face communication and interaction as being a more significant relationship between individuals and members of a community was also presented in the data. Several students noted that online interaction is devoid of the emotional connection and relationship found in real-world dialogue and engagement with others. Jill commented that she prefers face-to-face interaction with peers and said that she would "rather have that kind of connection than something online." Rafael shared with me that when he recently deleted his Facebook profile his relationships had become "a lot deeper and richer … more real." The impetus for his move away from social networking was feeling that his relationships with others were beginning to be based too much on his interpretations of the superficial information posted online and less on his own capacity for imagining new and different ways of being with others.

In the conversation with Gerard, he spoke about social networking being a medium for establishing connections and forming relationships with others, and also made a rather telling comment about how this ubiquitous medium should be understood.

> Of course, with great power comes great responsibility. People can use
> Facebook the wrong way and start drama or scams. If there is drama to be dealt
> with, Facebook is not the medium to go to because nothing will get done. But
> for me, Facebook has been a pleasant experience. It helps me keep up with
> people I want to keep in touch with, and it gives me an opportunity to connect

with people after I meet them in person. Facebook can and cannot be enjoyable; it depends on what you make of it.

On the one hand, there is an understanding that as a medium for encountering others in online spaces, social networking is an enjoyable way to reach out to others. On the other hand, the students recognize that this ubiquitous medium can be a powerful and significant influence in their lives. Despite the pervasiveness of social networking, the students are keenly aware of the importance of face-to-face discourse in understanding others. Rafael commented, "since losing Facebook, my emotions are more real … you see the person for who they really are. They could be putting up a front, but that's the risk, that's human – we all do that." These comments reveal an understanding that encountering others and imagining new ways of being also requires a certain degree of vulnerability and personal discomfort associated with putting oneself out into the world for interpretation – and hopefully acceptance – by others in their community.

The Influence of Social Networking on Imagination

The phenomenon of online social networking as a pervasive medium in the lifeworld of the millennial student raises questions about how this technology is influencing the concept of imagination among members of this generation. Considering the significance of the Internet in the lives of millennials, we must consider the question posed by Kearney (1988:298) of whether "it will be the human imagination which plays the computer game or the computer game which plays the imagination." The manufacturing of an online identity, coupled with the massive amounts of information and images posted online, suggests this technology influences millennials' ability to appropriate and understand the past history of the other, and to imagine and configure new possibilities and ways of being (Ricoeur 1988:158-159).

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Social networking has the potential to inspire imagination in that it promotes those engaged online to move beyond the confines of virtual reality and connect as members in the physically present community. Gerard spoke about his enjoyment of interacting with people online, but noted his preference for meaningful interactions in community with others.

> I prefer to figure people out on my own. Like you said, with Facebook comments and the myriad of pictures, I used to think it was easy to figure someone out. They were a friend or they were not a friend. Through figuring someone out on your own through face-to-face interaction or experiences shared, it seems that friendships are fostered through experiences.

When asked how the massive amounts of pictures and information available online influences his interpretation of others, Darryl stated, "I do not really care what I see unless I talk to you. I am more of a get to know you type of person," suggesting he prefers face-to-face interaction to online engagement trying to understand. He also noted that from his experiences, social networking and online interaction in general contributes to an undermining of imagination in that "it takes away the excitement of meeting the person if you do not really know them." In discussing the phenomenon of the influence of technology in our present society, Kearney (2002:11) comments, "computers can certainly copy and simulate, but the question remains whether they can create in a way comparable to a human narrative imagination." The experiences of students, captured in their social networking profiles, form narratives that when shared through online texts and interpreted by others who come across these profiles, diminishes the desire to remain open to the other in the physical present and the potentiality for imagining new and different ways of being with others in community.

Several of the students shared the importance of face-to-face communication in interpreting others and for imagining different ways of being and new relationships. Phillipa discussed with me the idea that although she does not actively try to imagine a relationship with others based on what she sees online, she is open to looking "for some commonalities" that may result from physically present discourse. In addition, Jill noted that she prefers face-to-face interaction because "you can see more in actions and reading their temperament" which further contributes to students imagining new and different ways of engaging with others in real-world situations. In discussing the need to remain open to others and imagining new possibilities, Darryl said, "you must have an open mind for everything. If you do not, then you are closing something out and that is half of a story that is gone and you need a full story to form a full opinion." Kearney (2002:3) writes, "stories are what make our lives worth living. They are what make our condition human." The concept of imagination is dependent on the stories we share in conversation with others.

Being in community with others suggests there is discourse and dialogue where ideas are challenged and new ways of being are considered among the members engaged in the dialectic. The technological capabilities of online social networking runs counter to the notion of community discourse; most especially within the student culture. Kearney (1988) raises concerns regarding technological developments and the influence of mass communication on critical discourse.

> We seem to have entered an age where reality is inseparable from the image, where the original has been replaced by its imitation, where our understanding of the world is preconditioned by the electronically reproducible media … in which every 'live' event or performance is capable of being mechanically recorded and retransmitted ad infinitum (Kearney 1988:251-252).

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Students use social networking to share significant events or happenings in their lives as well as the more mundane updates about daily activities. They communicate with their peers on a massive and viral scale; one status update on Facebook has the potential to reach thousands of others through connections on the network because of the exponential communication of information. Each time another comment is posted, everyone connected to that individual making the comment is able to see all of the other postings online as well as the original profile and information. The communication that happens between physically present individuals is more conversational than the one-sided blasting out of status updates and comments that happens via social networking. As such, appropriating new ideas and interpreting a conversation-text is influenced, if not limited, by the viral nature of online communication. Students using social networking are not presented with the opportunity to step away from the text, interpret what they see, and then engage in refiguration through conversation and dialogue (Herda 1999:77-80).

The Collapse of Imagination in the Online Generation

The conversations with the students reveal a particular issue that, after further analysis and reflection, raises a significant concern about imagination within the millennial generation. As the data indicate, millennials both recognize the superficiality and embellishments in online social networking texts and they accept this action as an established norm within the community. However, despite this recognition and acceptance, millennials seem incapable of resisting the influence of this ubiquitous digital media that is part of their being in the world. Kearney (1988:297) writes, "for most people today the computer system is something mysterious, amorphous and

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remote, an entity whose power … has grown to such proportions that one is no longer likely to give full credence to Lady Lovelace's reassuring dictum that 'computers can only do what they are told to do.'" Written twenty years ago, Kearney's position remains relative to the millennial generation in that these young adults are so intrinsically linked to online engagement that they may not be able to distance themselves from this technology and recognize the significant influence it has in their lives and the ways in which they relate to others. Gerard, unaware of the profundity of his understatement, commented, "Facebook was just an easy route to connect to people." The pervasiveness of social networking is more significant than being simply a medium for connecting with others; this technology has contributed to the collapse of imagination (Kearney 1988:253) in that those engaged with this technology may not recognize its influence on their capacity to imagine by interpreting and refiguring a text so as to see the other, and the world, differently.

The proposition I stated previously – that within online social networking there exists a manufactured identity – helps in understanding the potential for the collapsing imagination. Whereas the narrative identity serves to mediate between the idem and ipse identities, Kearney (1998:164-165) discusses the "narrative imagination" as "the reader's reception of the text" and the emplotment of new and different way of being through "the creative power of the reader's imagination." Following the position that the manufactured identity supplants the mediating function of the narrative identity in the lives of millennial students, the influence of online social networking on the narrative imagination is also significant. When engaged online, millennials present an identity that is intended to be partly reflective of their sameness of character and

created to be interpreted as themselves in relation to the other, but in actuality this manufactured persona is representative of neither their idem nor ipse identities. Online interaction allows for the participants to share an identity, but the interpretation and understanding happens in digital spaces that, unlike the physical present, are devoid of the meaningful discourse that informs imagining and emploting new and different relationships with others.

The students shared their understanding of social networking as being useful in communicating and connecting with others, but these digital networks of peers should not be considered as substitutes for the relationships that exist in physically present communities. Recognizing the ease of this technology in connecting with others, Johan cautioned, "I think it both broadens and closes you off a bit. It broadens how you can interact with people, but you also get a bit cut-off from real life." The concern with this ubiquitous medium in the lives of millennials is that, as the possibilities grow for more sophisticated and convenient interaction online, so will the time spent with this technology increase. Kearney (1988:298) poses the question, "is what we call imagination becoming no more than an 'epiphenomenon' – a mere 'effect' of an overall systems organization? Or is it still meaningful to talk of a creative imagination … a society constituting a sort of web extending to infinity which no centre seems to control?" The movement among members of society toward more virtual interaction and less physically present discourse thus becomes a distinct reality, and as such, so does the potential for this technology to significantly influence our ability to understand and interpret others and imagine and appropriate new possibilities.

Kearney (1988:363) suggests that in order to move beyond the challenge of a collapsing imagination in a technological world, we must "reinterpret the role of imagination as a relationship between the self and the other." In addition, he presents us with a response for challenging the preponderance of social networking technologies and their influence on our relationships with others and ability to imagine.

> This primacy of the ethical response in no way dispenses us from the task of critical discrimination; it requires it. Without such critical discrimination our ethical response of empathy might be manipulated for unethical purposes. For the sake of others, we must always be discerning in our response to the other (Kearney 1988:363).

The students discussed social networking as both an embellished text questionably reflective of the author's identity, and also as a medium for interpreting others. There is a relationship between imagination, that of envisioning how things might be, and identity – most notably the understanding of self in relation to others. Clayton commented that when he looks at social networking profiles, he is "thinking about how I would interact with that person." He went on to say, "I suppose I am thinking what it is about that person, what they are like and what they do like, that will lead to a real-world interaction." Whereas Kearney (1988:252) cautions that the "representational image" – the online profile of social networks – has the potential "to overshadow reality itself," the ways students interpret others and their capacity to imagine new relationships beyond the boundaries of cyberspace suggests that, among millennials who are aware of the significance of online engagement in their lifeworld, there is a resistance to the influences of technology on the collapsing imagination.

Conclusion

In Chapter Five, I analyzed the data collected during the research conversations. Using critical hermeneutic theory, I presented information about online social networking as shared with me by the members of the millennial generation. Their many stories and experiences with this technology were brought together into a new narrative, and utilizing critical hermeneutic theory for analysis, presented as a new text to provide meaning an understanding (Herda 1999:127-128).

Students on the university campus are presented with new experiences and opportunities to encounter others. For some students, the campus culture may be something foreign that is unlike the past experiences that have helped to shape their pre-understandings. In trying to familiarize themselves with, and adjust to, a new environment and a different culture, students may turn to online social networking. With this technology, students encounter others in the familiar space that is their virtual reality before taking action to become part of the real and physically present campus community. In social networking, the recognition of self and other happens in the interpretation of an ambiguous online text that may be an authentic representation of the author or a manufactured identity put forth by the author in an attempt to be part of the new community. Interpreting the virtual identity of the other by way of the text may lead to an understanding that is different from the understanding informed by real-world interactions and face-to-face dialogue. Ricoeur (1988:148) reminds us, that which is different "lends itself to multiple interpretations," and as such, we must remain open to these differences and imagine new relationships and different ways of being with others in the real-world campus community.

CHAPTER SIX: SUMMARY, FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

In Chapter Six I present the four sections that include The Summary of the research, Findings related to the data presented and the Implications and Actions based on these findings, and Suggestions for Future Research that emerged during this process. Following the presentation of this information, I conclude the Chapter with a Personal Statement incorporating my reflections on, and understandings as informed by, this experience.

Summary

In this research study, I explored the influence of online interaction on the university student culture. Specifically, I sought understanding of how engagement with others by means of online social networking, a pervasive technological force in the lifeworld of millennial students, is influencing the students' identity formation and interpretation, as well as how they imagine new ways of being and new opportunities with others in virtual and real spaces. Technology has become a tremendous resource for student learning; it has simplified the distribution of information and significantly influenced the way students communicate with one another. Online engagement, specifically social networking, has influenced a paradigm shift whereby students engage with this technological medium not only to share information with one another, but also as a means of conversation and as a way of being in community with others.

The development and expansion of the Internet over the past two decades corresponds with the millennial generation's development as individuals and as members of society. This generation, having lived on the forefront of online expansion,

exhibits a certain affinity for participation in virtual spaces. Social networking

technology, as a place for community gathering and communication, may be considered

a lifeworld for students. Mezirow (1991:69) tells us that the lifeworld is "the

symbolically prestructured world of everyday life," made up of "shared cultural

convictions, including codes, norms, roles, [and] social practices." Whereas the

cultural traits specific to social networking exist in the online world, there is concern

about how this technology is influencing the student culture on university campuses.

Benedict (1932:4) discusses the concern of cultural influence on individuals when she

writes of the "distinctive configurations in culture that so pattern existence and

condition the emotional and cognitive reactions of its carriers." The cultural habits and

traits that exist within social networking sites influence the actions and norms of

students in the physically present peer groups and communities found on the modern

university campus.

The pervasiveness of social networking in the lives of millennial generation

students is influencing their understanding of selfhood and otherness, as well as their

capacity to imagine new and different relationships with others (Ricoeur 1992, 1991,

1981). In addition, the students' proclivity for manufacturing an online identity and the

related questions about the authenticity of the text put forth by the students engaged

online, are also of concern. When considering the influence of social networking on

students' capacity to understand and interpret identity, the propensity to engage others

online is significant in that their actions have the potential to recreate the student

culture. Essentially, this technology offers a place and an experience that is similar, but

different, to that of the actual student world. Online representations and images −

which form the virtual spaces found online – have the potential to influence significantly the real-world relationships with others (Kearney 1988:252). When participating in social networking, students interpret others based on their own pre-understandings and prejudgments and informed by what they encounter online. These actions differ from the engagement that occurs in the physically present campus networks where, through meaningful discourse and dialogue, students come to new and different understandings of others in their community.

The concern for university administrators is how this pervasive technology might influence the student culture. Institutions concerned with retention and student satisfaction are keen to understand the challenges that influence student development, relationship formation, and engagement and participation with campus organizations. Herda (1999:13) states, "the critical point is to change relationships among members in organizations and communities. This change does not begin by changing the other, but by changing oneself." Social networking technology may be the latest fad for students, or it may be a phenomenon that becomes a permanent place in the student culture. Whichever the case may be, as university administrator intent on further understanding millennial students and their cultural actions and norms – especially their affinity for online technologies – I engaged in meaningful discourse with the students.

The conversations with the students provided the foundation for this research, and critical hermeneutic theory created a space for analyzing the data presented in the conversations. In conversation, stories are shared and become texts that must be interpreted as we move toward a new understanding. Ricoeur (1981:111) states, "the hermeneutical task is to discern the matter of the text and not the psychology of the

author." As such, it was imperative that I conversed with students – those active participants of the millennial generation – in meaningful dialogue in an attempt to understand and interpret the influence of the online social networking phenomenon in their lifeworld. When we engage with one another, we share stories and experiences; Usher et al. (1997:101) write that it is through experiences that "knowledge of the world is possible." The discourse and dialogue that occurred in conversation was critical to the interpretation and the understanding of this phenomenon and the influence it has on students and the overall university student culture. Exploring the influence of online social networking on university students' identity formation and the ways they imagine new possibilities in their world in relationship to others informed my understanding of millennial students and helped me to uncover ways in which institutions of higher education can better prepare these individuals to become contributing members of society.

As the current generation of millennial students continue to enter and move through colleges and universities, the habits peculiar to their way of being are likely to influence their interactions with others in their communities. Online social networking presents a challenge for both institutions of higher education and society at large in that, as a ubiquitous presence and part of the millennial lifeworld, this technology has influenced the development of a paradigm whereby students regularly – and sometimes primarily – communicate and interact with others in the virtual reality of online spaces. As these young adults leave college and engage others in their world, the influence of social networking on their interpretation of texts, the ways in which they understand and establish identity, and their capacity to imagine new and different real-world

relationships will influence their interactions and ways of being with others. Through meaningful conversation in the academic institution, educators and students might come to a shared understanding of online social networking that will lead to informed action and a refiguring of the current paradigm.

Findings, Implications, and Proposed Actions

In this section, I present the Findings from my research on the influence of online social networking texts on student identity and imagination. In addition to looking at how this technological phenomenon pervades the lifeworld of the millennial students and the relationships with other members of their community, I also explore how online interaction and engagement is influencing the ways these students understand their own identities and imagine new ways of being outside the realm of virtual reality. I outline the Findings, Implications, and Proposed Actions according to the research categories of Text, Identity, and Imagination. Within each category, I present two findings and two implications, followed by a single statement of proposed action. In the category of text I discuss the reflection of identity within the text and the influence of text on the prejudgments of others. Under identity the findings are the embellishment and authenticity of the online identity, and the use of a manufactured identity to connect with others. Lastly, under imagination, I discuss students imagining real-world relationships by way of online interaction as well as the influence of social networking on imagination.

Text

Encountering a text presents the viewer the opportunity to interpret and understand the world of the author presented in what is put forth (Gadamer 2004, Herda

1999, Ricoeur 1988). Beyond representing some part of the author's identity, the text creates the space for different interpretations of the other and new understandings and ways of being. Furthermore, the conversations had with texts differ from those that happen in the physical present (Bernstein 1983:62). In seeking to interpret others as informed by what is presented in the text, we must remain open to different meanings and new possibilities (Ricoeur 1981:108) beyond our own understanding of the text in relation to our history and experiences (Gadamer 2004).

Finding One: Online Texts Represent Some Part of the Author's Identity

The students indicated that although the online profile is reflective of part of the author's identity, these texts do not capture all there is to know about the other. Students post information about days activities and events but they refrain from opening up in virtual spaces by sharing information that could be interpreted as being reflective of their true character. The superficial postings, coupled with questions about the embellishing of the information shared, further suggest that although the online social networking profile does allow for a glimpse of the cursory information put forth, it should not be understood as a representational text that authentically reflects the identity and the world of the author.

Finding Two: Texts Influence Prejudgments of Others Online

Online social networking is a pervasive norm in the lifeworld of millennial generation students; spend significant time engaged online and encountering others in virtual spaces. The textual nature of the online profile presents students the opportunity to encounter others, to view information, and to interpret the other as informed by what is put forth online. The students indicated that when they encounter others online, they

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try to remain open to new opportunities should there be a real-world encounter. However, the conversation with an online text (Ricoeur 1981) does not allow for the discourse necessary to challenge prejudgments and pre-understandings. As such, there is the potential for the students as viewers of the text to affirm their prejudices as informed by what they interpret online. In doing so, they become closed off to reaching different understandings of others that might lead to new relationships.

Implications

1. Online profiles are cursory and superficial but those who encounter an online text should be aware that they are reflective of some parts of the author's identity and life experiences.

2. Prejudging others as informed by social networking texts closes students off to possibilities for meaningful discourse that may influence new understandings and different relationships with others in the real world.

Proposed Action

Workshops on Appropriate Use of Social Networking for Communication:

In an effort to connect with students, colleges and universities create social networking pages and develop their own internal online interactive portals that complement existing technology. Though these online social networking platforms are effective in sharing information and making students aware of various programs and services on campus, they are perpetuating the phenomenon of students being less engaged with organizations and social groups on campus by inviting students to go online, encounter, and interpret others in virtual spaces. As educational institutions, there is a need on the part of colleges and universities to communicate with students,

and also a responsibility to make students aware that social networking is a medium for communication and not a way of being in the world.

The pervasiveness of social networking technology in society suggests that it is likely to become a more permanent part of everyday communications. As such, students should be made aware of the power of online technologies for communicating and establishing initial connections, but reminded that interpreting others as informed by the online text is different from encountering with them in the physical present and engaging in meaningful discourse. Developing workshops that explain university policies surrounding appropriate uses of technology use will be helpful in introducing both educators and students to social networking and in making them aware of how this powerful technology can influence the ways in which they interpret the online text.

Identity

Identity is temporal in nature; our past actions and experiences serve to shape our personal identity, the distinguishing characteristics and traits that make us identifiable as the same throughout our lives (Ricoeur 1992:119-121). In addition to that which makes us identifiable as being the same over time, our identity is influenced also by the recognition self in relation to others. Understanding our identity requires both an awareness of this sameness of self and also the recognition of self in relation to others (Ricoeur 1992). Mediating between sameness and selfhood and playing off the tension between them is the narrative identity (Ricoeur 1992). Beyond the idem, ipse, and narrative identities, within the millennial generation there exists a manufactured identity where those who participate in online spaces are able to imagine themselves differently and create the online persona of their choosing.

Finding One: The Online Identity is Both Authentic and Embellished

Students indicated that whereas their profiles do reflect parts of their character and personal identity (Ricoeur 1992), they also present an opportunity to market themselves to others by altering, if not embellishing, some of the information they put forth online. Online social networking provides a medium for students to share stories that serve as narratives about themselves. These stories are open to being interpreted as intended by the author, or they can be refigured differently thus influencing the viewer's understanding of the author's identity. These stories presented in the online text help students in reaching out and establishing new connections with others in virtual spaces, and also to enhance and supplement existing relationships with peers in the real world. Among members of the millennial community, there is an understanding that online social networking profiles are embellished in an attempt to form connections, and data from the conversations indicate that students try to reserve judgment until there is opportunity for real-world interaction.

Finding Two: Students Manufacture an Online Identity to Connect with Others

Beyond the superficial information shared in the social networking profile and the enhancement of certain postings in an attempt to market themselves to others, the construct of social networking presents millennials with the opportunity to manufacture an online identity. Whereas an embellished text is reflective of some parts of the author's identity, the manufactured identity put forth in social networking profiles presents an opportunity for the author to imagine a new ways of being that may be significantly different from, and not representative of, their authentic self. In using social networking to create an online manufactured identity, the students become the

person they want to be in relation to others, and in doing so, they establish connections

and become part of a community. However, the manufactured identity creates

dissonance between the author's authentic identity in the real world and the persona

they choose to be in the online realm. As such, the conflict between the two presents a

phenomenon of loss of self; the identity embodied in author reflects neither the idem or

ipse identities nor the authentic self.

Implications

1. There are conflicts between the real-world identity and the embellished online
   identity that are likely to influence understandings that differ from those
   informed by face-to-face interactions and interpretations of others.

2. Manufacturing an online identity presents an opportunity for establishing new
   connections with others in virtual spaces, but also the possibility of discord
   between the identity interpreted online and that which is understood and
   informed by real-world experiences.

Proposed Action

Develop Opportunities for Real-World Interaction and Discourse:

Though millennials are comfortable interacting with this technology and do so

often, those who work with this generation and who are not as experienced with this

technology have concerns of how it might be influencing their understanding and

interpretation of others. On the one hand, interpreting others as informed by the social

networking profile requires that millennials distinguish between the information that

authentically represents the other and that which is manufactured, while also having to

question whether their understanding of the other is accurate or if has been influenced

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by the embellished text. On the other hand, this technology does allow those who may have challenges connecting with others in face-to-face environments the opportunity to establish connections online that may eventually lead to meaningful relationships in real-world settings.

Programs should be implemented that allow millennials, and subsequent generations of college students, opportunities to move beyond online social networking and encounter others in structured real-world interactions. Administrators must first understand the significance of online interaction in the lifeworld of students before advising students and influencing change. Whereas this technology provides a space for initial encounters, administrators and students should work together to co-create opportunities for community building. Programs such as a student club exposition or welcome-week activities where students to learn about campus-based clubs and organizations will help them in connecting with various groups and establish relationships with others in the real world. In addition, the implementation of student activity transcripts that documents their co-curricular programming as part of their overall student experience provides the students with an incentive to become more involved in, and to continue to be active with, these campus-based organizations. Engagement in these communities will promote interactions and meaningful conversations that will help students in moving beyond the prejudgments of others that can happen in online encounters.

Imagination

Imagination presents us an opportunity to move beyond present conditions and to envision new ways of being (Ricoeur 1991). There is a relationship between

imagination and the texts others put forth for us to encounter and interpret. The stories

we share with others in the texts we put forth provide a medium to house our

imagination and to inspire those who encounter the text to think differently. Whereas

the text captures the intended meaning of the author, our imagination compels us to

reinterpret the text and to configure our current world and move toward new and

different possibilities (Herda 1999).

Finding One: Real-World Encounters and Relationships Imagined Online

Students who participate in online social networking have a unique opportunity

to both imagine and present themselves differently; be it subtle embellishments of their

actions and life experiences, or more creatively fabricated changes to their identity.

Though there are concerns with embellishing the information shared in the online text,

this medium nonetheless presents millennials with an opportunity to imagine a new

world with new possibilities and refigure their present condition and actions (Herda

1999:78). In putting forth a social networking text, students create stories that

transcend the boundaries of virtual reality and help them to emplot new ways of being

in the world. The students understand that by imagining face-to-face interactions with

others and remaining open to new experiences beyond those that happen online, there

exists the opportunity for new encounters and relationships in the real world.

Finding Two: Social Networking is a Powerful Influence on Imagination

Whereas the students discussed envisioning real-world connections with others,

the pervasiveness of social networking and its underlying construct – access to the texts

of others at al times – suggests that there is little need to imagine differently when

encountering an online text that presents massive amounts of information. The

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omnipresence of this technology diminishes opportunities to interpret, understand, and reinterpret others and to imagine new or different ways of being. The interactions that occur online are inherently different from those that happen in the real world. Namely, there is the propensity for those who participate with this technology not to have opportunity to distance themselves from the text and to come to new understandings through reinterpretation and reflection. As such, there is a paradox in that whereas this technology is intended to create opportunities for reaching out and establishing connections with others in the real world; it also hinders, by way of information-laden online texts, the capacity to move beyond prejudgments and pre-understandings to imagine others differently.

Implications

1. Online social networking presents a space for those who interact with it to imagine face-to-face encounters with others that may lead to real-world interactions and relationships.

2. Online interaction and engagement contributes to a collapsing imagination and the reinforcement of prejudice in that having to reflect on others and think about new and different ways of being is mitigated by the copious amount of information presented through the online texts put forth on social networking sites.

Proposed Action

Reinforce the Importance of Distanciation and Interpretation to Imagination:

As colleges and universities continue to be challenged by students' affinity for social networking and various other forms of online engagement, there should be a

university-wide commitment to raising awareness of the significant influence computer-mediated technologies have in everyday actions. Considering the paradox of online engagement where there is relative ease in connecting with others but also the propensity for prejudgments online, making students aware of the need to distance themselves from the social networking texts and to reflect on their understandings and interpretations is critical to helping them imagine, and eventually to establish, deeper and more meaningful connections with others that will enrich their college experience and, ultimately, their relationships with others.

Online interaction offers a degree of safety and privacy to those who desire some anonymity. However, it also limits the real-world networking and peer group formation that traditionally deepens the college experience. Instead of relying on the Internet to establish connections that might lead to meaningful real-world relationships, students should venture out from behind the safety of the computer and push themselves into situations with others where they may feel vulnerable. Whereas student affairs professionals often work with small groups of students in resolving challenges stemming from social networking issues, campus-wide workshops with the intent of generating discourse about online interaction will help in raising awareness. The dialogue should challenge students to understand differently those they encounter, and by distancing themselves from the conversations and experiences that serve as texts, they can reflect on their interpretations of others and imagine new ways of being in community.

Suggestions for Future Research

The developments of online technologies and growing interest in social networking continue to be a significant presence in the lives of young adults. Beyond a means for communication, this ubiquitous technology is influencing the online texts students put forth to share, as well as how they interpret others and imagine new relationships and ways of being. As such, I suggest that further research be carried out that explores the ways this pervasive technology is influencing their lifeworld.

1. Manufacturing an Online Identity

The idea of the manufactured identity, whereby students create an online persona that they put forth for others to interpret, is a notion that I suggest be researched further. There can be multiple layers of identity, in addition to different identities, created in the online realm. Beyond the superficially subtle embellishments, the intentional creation and presentation of a text that has the potential to influence others' interpretations of identity is a significant and powerful action. Considering students' proclivity to interpret others online despite their awareness of the embellishments that are intentionally put forth in the social networking texts, the manufactured identity may be influencing their understanding of others and their capacity to imagine new relationships and different ways of being as members of a community.

2. Cyber Bullying and Online Harassment

In the process of concluding this research project, several incidents of teens taking their own lives as a result of cyber bullying and online harassment were reported. The media attention increased existing concerns about online social networking, most notably the capability of this technology to cascade information virally across the Internet. The

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tragedies restarted the discussions about not only educating young adults on posting private or sensitive information online, but also making them aware that others may interpret this information differently and use it for nefarious purposes or to unjustly cause malice. This research could explore how online interpretations and communications can be a powerful and potentially destructive force in influencing the lives of young people.

3. **Communication Outside of Online Social Networking:**

The literature suggests, and this research study further illustrates, that college and university students prefer social networking sites for communication with others. Considering the pervasiveness of this technology, and the influence it has on identity and imagination, I suggest further research on the ways in which students communicate outside of social networking. Specifically, the research could explore how communication differs between the online and the virtual and the relationship between real-world communication, identity interpretation, and imagination.

4. **Understanding the Meaning of an Online Friend:**

The idea that millennials claim several hundreds of friends through social networking is perplexing, especially when considering that these individuals may have encountered one another only through online interaction. In addition, the conversation participants commented that purging online friends from their social network is not an uncommon action. As such, exploring how millennials understand friendship may provide deeper understanding of the propensity to embellish their online identities in an attempt to market themselves and attract others.

5. Social Networking as a Means to Garner Attention of Others:

In the course of the conversations, several students made comments suggesting that online social networking can be a medium for those that may be needy or self-centered to draw the attention of others. More specifically, by actively monitoring their profiles and through strategically posting, they can direct much of what is seen online toward them. This research might help to understand further the concerns with student disengagement from campus peer groups and their growing interest and participation in online activities.

<u>**Personal Statement**</u>

In the nineteen years I have spent in higher education, as both a student and an educator, I have come to realize that strong cultures exist among students on university campuses. Within these cultures there are actions and norms common to the breadth of university students, as well as specific habits and traits – what Ricoeur (1992) would refer to as the "character" of individuals – that are peculiar to the students at specific campuses. The presence of online social networking, specifically its pervasiveness and its influence on the entirety of the university student culture, is something that I understand as a challenge facing institutions of higher education and society in general, and as such, this phenomenon was the impetus for my research with the millennial students.

I began this research with the prejudgment that this technology presented significant challenges to those of us who work with students and strive to educate them to be engaged and contributing members of society. However, the conversations with students allowed me to challenge my prejudice, and I am grateful to the student

conversation participants for sharing their experiences and understanding about social networking and the ways it has influenced their lives. I now understand that although it is a pervasive and influential technological force, social networking is a powerful medium for helping students reach out and establish some connections with members of their campus community.

Furthermore, I have come to a new understanding of how millennials understand this technology and the relationship between text, identity, and imagination in their lifeworld. In reflecting on the conversations, I am reminded of Gerard's comment that this technology is a powerful force, and as such, it requires great responsibility. Whereas I see this technology continuing to be a medium for communication and interaction, I also understand that as an educator, I have the responsibility to help students comprehend the importance of face-to-face networking in interpreting the identity of others and the need to imagine new possibilities and ways of being with them in the real world.

Within the past year, social networking sites have expanded their capabilities and improved their technology. The expansion of online communication suggests that engagement with others in virtual spaces will continue to be part of the millennials' way of being. As such, I hope to continue my research in this area of university students and online interaction. The academic community, especially the campus itself, is an environment rich in opportunity for learning and personal development. Online interaction contributes strongly to this experience; it can help students connect with peers and involve themselves in their campus community, but it also can significantly

influence the ways in which they understand and interpret others and form meaningful relationships.

I can say with complete conviction that this experience, especially the research protocol of participatory hermeneutic inquiry (Herda 1999), has helped be to become better at the work I do with students. My conversations are more meaningful, and when presented with a challenge or concern, I am able to engage students in meaningful discourse so that we might come to a new understanding or discover new ways or opportunities for refiguring the present situation in an attempt resolve the issues and imagine new possibilities (Herda 1999). I am confident that as I continue to move forward in my professional endeavors, I will be better at working with students because of the knowledge gained through this research project.

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Appendix A: Sample Letter of Invitation

Date:

Participant's Name
Participant's Address

Dear (Name of Participant),

I am a doctoral student at the University of San Francisco in the Organization and Leadership Program. I am conducting my dissertation research on the influence of online social networking on university student involvement in activities and organizations and involvement with the student community.

My research is grounded in interpretive theory and has a participatory orientation. In place of formal interviews or surveys, I engage university students in conversations using guiding questions directed toward their experiences with social networking. Upon your approval, the conversations are audio and/or video recorded and then transcribed. You may request the recording device be turned off at any time during the conversation. I will send you a copy of the transcript for your review. At that time, you may add, delete or change any of the transcribed text. Upon receipt of your approval, I will analyze the data. Please note that participation in this research, including all data collected, the names of individuals, and any affiliations is not confidential. Before participating in the research you will be required to sign a consent form.

I am particularly interested in discussing how online social networking might be influencing the development of relationships among students, as well as their interest in wanting to participate within the campus community. Some of the concepts related to this study are the idea of social networking sites as online texts, the interpretation of identity online, and how imagination is influenced in the virtual world. The following questions may be used to guide the conversation:

1. Tell me about your experience with online social networking? What specific sites do you interact with most frequently?
2. What do you typically post on your social networking profile? How and why do you choose what you post?
3. Give me an example of how you have used social networking to keep people informed about what is happening in your life. How do you do this when not online (face-to-face interactions)?
4. Who are you online? Tell me about differences between the online/real you.
5. How do you identify with social networking sites? How is your posting a representation of yourself?

6. If your profile is seen by others, how do you feel about people peering into your life? Do you think that they are judging you?
7. How have you used this technology to get to know other people – either before or after meeting them in person? Give me a specific example.
8. Tell me about what you envision about an individual when you look at his or her social networking page or site. How is this influenced by access to so much information (postings, images, etc) about the other on their social networking profile?
9. What are your thoughts on people embellishing their online postings? Give me an example of a time when you, or someone you know, did this.

In my professional role as a student development administrator, I am very interested in learning how certain behaviors or phenomena might influence the student culture. In an effort to better work with students and assist them in their own personal growth and development, I am drawn to the issue of student affinity for online social networking technologies.

If you are willing to participate in this research, or if you have questions about this study, please feel free to contact me. I can be reached via email at paul.raccanello@mac.com or by telephone at (415) 497-4040.

Thank you for considering this request.

Sincerely,

Paul Raccanello
Research Doctoral Student
University of San Francisco
School of Education
Organization and Leadership Program
paul.raccanello@mac.com

Appendix B: Thank You Letter

Sample Thank You Letter

Date

Dear (Participant's name)

Thank you for meeting with me on ***DATE***, and for sharing your experiences and insight regarding your experiences as a university student with social networking. I value the opportunity to speak with you and thank you for your time.

Included in this letter is a hardcopy of our transcribed conversation for your review. The transcript is a very important part of my research. I ask that you please review the transcript for accuracy and make any notations regarding changes, deletions, or additions you deem appropriate. I will contact you in the coming weeks to discuss your comments and notations. Once the review and editing process of the transcript has been finished, and upon your approval, I will use the revised transcript for my data analysis.

Again thank you for participating in my research study. Your unique perspective about this topic is a valuable contribution to the research material I have collected. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at your convenience.

Sincerely,

Paul Raccanello
Research Doctoral Student
University of San Francisco
School of Education
Organization and Leadership Program
paul.raccanello@mac.com

Conversation with Molly Yee
October 27, 2009

PR: Do you have an online social networking site?

MY: Yes.

PR: Is there one that you prefer?

MY: Yes.

PR: Which one?

MY: Facebook.

PR: When did you first start using Facebook?

MY: First semester of Dominican, so spring 2006.

PR: Did you use any sort of other, like MySpace or something?

MY: I used MySpace before that, instant messenger…

PR: YouTube?

MY: No.

PR: Did you follow the crowd of people using MySpace in their high school years, then in college you picked up Facebook?

MY: Pretty much. Middle school was instant messaging, high school was … well actually, I did not start using MySpace until a few years out of high school. I mean, I did not know MySpace existed. I still have my account on MySpace, but I only go on it to be nosy on other people that do not have a Facebook page.

PR: Interesting. Did you start using Facebook when you started here at Dominican?

MY: Yes, because everyone else does and it is a great tool for being nosy.

PR: Other than everyone else doing it, was there any particular reason why you joined Facebook?

MY: I guess it is still along the lines of everyone else was doing it, but it was not just because it was the cool thing to do, it was because no one really was using the

other ones anymore. So if you wanted to communicate online with someone and it was not through email, they were not on any of the other networking sites anymore.

PR: It was the one everyone was doing?

MY: Yes.

PR: You mentioned you like being nosy. When you got on Facebook, were you using it to find out information about other people?

MY: Not initially, it took me a long time to figure out what I was doing. But now, especially at Dominican, everyone is on Facebook. People do not really make their profiles private; generally, you can see other Dominican people. I know some people. I know their first and last names but I do not know what they look like, but it is purely because I have seen their name come up on Facebook.

PR: That makes sense. So when you got on to Facebook and started to figure things out and knew what you were doing, did you then start to look at other people's profiles and try to get an idea of who was out there and who was at school?

MY: Yes, especially because I did not know anyone really. At Dominican, especially when you transfer in, you are like fresh meat and everyone and their mom adds you as their friend. I did not know who half of them were. It is a way to … that is how Nate hit on me! We were just talking one time, and he called me, and said, "What are you doing? Oh, you have Facebook? Me too. You should look me up." And so I looked him up and I got to nose through his page, and see if whether or not he had a girlfriend, and who his friends were.

PR: Did you meet that whole circle of people that way? Was that sort of your in to that whole crowd?

MY: Not really. I lived across from them at Edgehill and our windows looked into each other, which was interesting. I think Nate helped a lot since he perused me pretty hardcore. But, it was not necessarily Facebook; although Facebook helps with networking in terms of friends that way, once you meet one of them. For example, say you go to a party and are introduced to twenty other people one time. You will not remember their name the next day. But if they remember you, they will add you as a friend and then you have to say hi to them and buy them birthday gifts, all of that.

PR: So when you go to a party and meet twenty people, you may not remember them, but with Facebook, that introduction is made to all those people and you are sort of connected with them?

MY: Yes, it is annoying actually! I rarely add anyone. Almost all the friends I have added me.

PR: Oh, so you sought them out?

MY: No, they sought me out. I rarely will add anyone; specifically go out, look them up, and add them as a friend. Most of the friends have been those people I have met and they have added me. Because there are very few people that I meet, and I know right away that, yes, I want to talk to you, I want to pursue a friendship. If I am going to go add you on Facebook, it is because I want to talk to you. Most of these people, they do not know me, they just add me, and I think it is really to be nosy. It is not because they actually want to start a conversation and hang out and get to know who I am.

PR: They just want to peer into your life?

MY: Uh-huh, yes.

PR: Do you use Facebook to keep people up to speed as to what is going on in your life?

MY: Kind of … like when Joey died, I just sent out a message and put it as my status. Then people who had no idea what was going on figured it out. I just put it as a status of like "I am OK, we are OK. I 'will get back to you soon, thank you." Because everyone sees it, and if something in your life happens, everyone looks at your page. It is a nice way to send out a mass message.

PR: Do you ever use it for smaller things, like "I am going to the movies tonight?"

MY: No, not really, but I know a lot of people that do. Phil will do that, like every weekend. He posts things like "Hey, what's going down tonight? City! Anyone want to go to the City?" And no one ever responds to him. But I will send out different messages, like for my Birthday. I just do it through Facebook now. I will send out a mass invite to everyone I want to come. It is kind of neat that way because they can see who else is invited; it is just a nice way to send out something to everyone. But for the little things, I generally do not. Because If I am going to send something out to get a response back, then little things like that-people do not always respond back.

PR: I had a conversation with a classmate the other day and she said that she is a "Facebook lurker." She does not post much information about herself but she looks at what everyone else is doing. Do you find yourself doing that?

MY: Yes I do. I think more so because I am on it all the time. I guess the opposite would be those people who update their statuses every 20 minutes. I could be on it the same amount as that person, but I update my status once a week, maybe.

PR: You said you are always on it. Do you feel as if you are constantly exposed to whatever everyone else is posting?

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MY: Uh-huh, totally. They have that mini-feed now where it just constantly updates. I can stare at the computer screen for ten minutes and see all these postings; it is a very good time waster.

PR: Specifically with the people who are posting their information on their profiles, do you think that their postings are representative of themselves?

MY: Sometimes.

PR: For example, take some of your good friends who have Facebook pages. With the stuff that you see on their pages, do you think, "Yes, that's pretty much my friend" or is it "What are they talking about?"

MY: Oh, yes. Jen and Jessica, when I see what they are writing I can hear them saying it; it is definitely something they would say in person. There are other things where I do not want to write certain things or post certain things because I know people are going to judge you. It is something that is up for everyone to see. Like, you may have 300 Facebook friends, and you only really on a regular basis talk to a handful of them, only like 50 of those people. If you were to write something the way you were to actually say it, only a handful of those people would be able to pick up on the little things-the little nuances, that kind of thing-and be able to interpret it the way you want them to. I think if you know them, then yes, it is representative of what type of person they are and what they are like in person. If you do not really know them that well, like some of these people from high school or random freshmen that add you, then maybe not-it is hard to say.

PR: You said, "the people you know well" … so these are your friends in the "real world" so to speak? If you say something, they are more likely to get the meaning behind what you are saying than those random friends that exist in the virtual world? For example, Jen will pick up exactly what you are saying before the random freshman would?

MY: Yeah, because not only do they know your sense of humor, or your sarcasm, they also know what's actually going on in your life. Now that I am working in the ER for my clinical rotation, I am dealing with swine flu and poop. So I came home one night at 3:00am. In the past 36 hours I think I had been in the hospital for like 27 of them, so I was tired and being random and that was my status-"I hate swine flu and poop." Everyone replied saying, "gross" and "sucks working in the ER" and then this one girl from high school writes, "Oh no, I am so sorry. I hope you feel better." She totally did not get what I was saying, that it was a joke. So I had to write her back and say I did not have swine flu and did not have diarrhea!

PR: So she basically misinterpreted what you wrote on your status update – that's a

great way to start the wrong rumor!

MY: Oh, she totally missed it. I do not need people thinking I have got swine!

PR: Is your profile set to private or is it viewable by everyone?

MY: It is definitely private and it is viewable by my network, which is Dominican and San Francisco. Oh, no it is not actually. It is viewable to only the people I add. Mainly because: 1) a lot of the girls here seem kind of bitchy and I did not like that and 2) Andreas is kind of nosy.

PR: Andreas, your ex-boyfriend?

MY: Yes. I do not want him looking into my life and finding things out.

PR: Was your profile ever set to public where anyone could see it, or did you always keep it at different levels of privacy?

MY: Now it is really private, but before … well, it has been private to some degree so that complete randoms could not look at it … that's creepy.

PR: How do you feel about people, even your friends who can see your profile, peering into your life? Even if you are not posting status updates – just them checking out pictures that are posted or the comments people put on your site – how does that make you feel?

MY: I do not really care. Generally anything that is online-on my Facebook or anywhere-is fair game. You put it out there; people are going to look at it. It kind of sucks because other people can post stuff about you, too. People can put up pictures that you do not like of yourself and you cannot take them down, you have to ask them to do it. You can un-tag yourself, but the pictures are still there. Or, somebody writes something. For the most part, I really do not have a ton of enemies so it has not really been a problem. Except if there is a picture that I hate! But it is been kind of a good lesson, because I overanalyze and I am too self-conscious. So having to accept that I cannot control what other people do or put up on Facebook has been slightly therapeutic.

PR: Do you have an example of that?

MY: Uh, Yes! Brittany! She puts up everything! She takes 300 photos and does not filter them. She puts everything up!

PR: That's true. I remember the Palm Springs photos that she put up, and I remember reading a comment one of you made about that.

MY: Ugh, yes! You think she would go through those and say, "Hey, everyone but

me, looks like crap so maybe I will not put this one up." There was one picture of her and Emanuel from my birthday and his eyes were bugging out of his head-he was wasted and he looked awful-but she looked great, so up it went. He was like, "Thanks Brittany."

PR: In terms of using Facebook to meet other people, you mentioned that you use it to be nosy. Do you do this to get an idea of someone before you meet them in person? Have you ever seen someone and gone into their profile to see what they are about?

MY: Generally, I will have met them before I go look them up on Facebook, or I will know something about them from what someone else says. They are never just random people; they are friends of friends, or I have met them one time before. There are some people I have never met before. Like Jessica's friends when she went to Spain. We are all like best friends now – you would think we have known each other for years – but it is purely through Skype and Facebook … Oh, Skype! That's a social networking site too, I guess.

PR: Oh, yes, Skype. I forgot about that one.

MY: So now, yes, all of us are super close.

PR: So these are Jessica's friends in Spain?

MY: No, they are all here. They were on the exchange program with her. They live in Colorado, Chicago – she goes and visits them once or twice a year. I have never actually met them, but you would not know that from our messages back and forth.

PR: So you talk to them pretty regularly?

MY: No, not regularly. Every now and then I will get a message or an update. One of them got engaged and I sent her a message, "I am so happy for you!" and then she replied, "Thank you so much." I feel like I know them because they hear about us through Jessica, and we hear about them through Jessica, and we are all on Facebook. I met one of them one time and felt like I already knew her; her name, her boyfriend, where she went to school-all because I had seen it so many times on her Facebook updates.

PR: So you have never met these people, but you feel like there is a history between you all even though you have never been in the same room together?

MY: I mean, we are not like close where I would message them and talk about why I had such a bad day. I do not know when I am ever going to meet them … Oh, I did meet two of them briefly when I went to New York with Jessica. One of them wrote on my wall, "Oh Molly, I miss you so much; blah blah blah, I love

you." You really would not know that they are Jessica's friends. If we ever meet the other ones – just give us an hour together and you would not know who went to Spain together and who did not. But it is also our group of friends; we mesh with the same type of people so we match pretty well. I feel like I know them already.

PR: When you say you "know them" is it because you know the stories about them, or do you feel like you know what this person is all about?

MY: No, more stories and just what I have heard about them. I trust Jessica's judge of character, and from the little interaction I have had with them, we seem to somewhat be on the same page. I feel like if I were to meet them, they would be someone I would want to be friends with. If I were the one who had gone to Spain, I ideally would have found the same friends.

PR: You said you trust Jessica's judge of character. So you have some idea of who these people are based on the stories told, but would you say you have a really good idea of who the person is and what they are all about?

MY: I guess not. I mean, I have an idea of who they are, but I have not spent enough time with them to really get to know them. You know when you meet someone in person, like when you get together with friends of friends but you do not all know each other? If you were to get together for the whole weekend, probably the first half of the first day is awkward-kind of feeling each other out, making connections, similar interests, things like that. I guess I do not know them, but if we were to go on this weekend trip with them, it is like we have already done that awkward part because we have all heard so much about each other. We have already found the common ground. I really do not know them but we would all be comfortable with one another, because we would have already sized the other group up. We call them "Jessica's other friends" and we have already have kind of figured them out, and I know they have already done the same to us. But it does not matter, we decided that we like them and we are adopting them into our circle of friends.

PR: Even though you have never met them?

MY: Yep, even though we have never met them.

PR: Sounds like Facebook has given you the opportunity to maybe determine the people you would connect with in real life.

MY: Sort of, although what I hear from Jessica helps more than what I would read on Facebook. Jessica's word makes me more open to what I might see on Facebook. I know for a fact that I'd be a lot more judgmental. I mean I do not want to be that girl who judges and makes assumptions, but I probably would if I did not know anything about them. But to have someone I trust tell me this is a

great person, then I look at some pictures, I am going to interpret what I see in a different light.

PR: Because you have that friend who is vouching for them?

MY: Yes, so when I go to that person's page, I go in already thinking this person is awesome and I want to know more about them. As opposed to, it is kind of catty, but as opposed to checking out some random chick at Dominican who I know nothing about and I pull a party girl picture. I might judge them differently and label them as some drunk freshmen doing something stupid. Whereas one of these girls with Jessica could have a similar picture, but I would know that is just her having fun. I would already know from Jessica that she is a cool girl, she is not some dumb chick, you know?

PR: So your pre-understanding of that person is different because of what your friend has already told you or because she vouched for them? I mean, if you see two different people in very similar scenes-say looking sloppy at a party-then the person Jessica told you about is OK by you because you know they are having fun and acting crazy. Versus looking at some random person and thinking, "look at that drunk freshman making a fool of herself."

MY: Oh, yes. I think Facebook is a decent representation of people because you choose what you put up-especially about yourself. If you are the one to put up pictures of yourself acting a fool, well that is kind of telling, you know? That is also why my profile is private, because I do not want people talking shit about me. I am sure if someone looked through my profile they would make plenty of judgments. I mean if you know the person in the crazy pictures and you can interpret what you see with a frame of reference, then you might think differently about them. I mean, people from high school who see me now will think of me differently because I was super shy then and they may see the party pictures of me and think I am someone totally different now. It is not that I am a different person; it is just that I am not as shy, and they have not seen me in five years.

PR: So it sounds like your friends who know you now and know the person you are will see something on your page and but will not interpret it as "this is not the person I know, this is not Molly." They will get that it is still the authentic you because they know you, as opposed to somebody else who stumbles across your page and may not get it because they do not know you as well, or the real you?

MY: Yes, definitely. Facebook is not a good representation of your entire life. I do not put up many pictures from my childhood, and I do not put up boring stuff like me working in the hospital, or studying with classmates. I mean, the majority of the pictures that go up are when people whip out their cameras; parties, big events, things like that. My friend Laura goes out maybe twice a year - New Years and my birthday - so all of her pictures are all party pictures! If you were to go through these pictures, you might think Laura is a total party

girl, but it is not until you look at the dates that you realize that it is 2006, 2007, it is like 3 different events, just a ton of pictures. That is what people put online, the fun stuff. You do not really get to see the everyday things, the rest of their life.

PR: That is a good point. You do not get to see the span of their life, just bits and pieces, unless you comb through every posting and every comment ever made.

MY: Which I have done.

PR: Why is that?

MY: It was Brendan, that guy I dated. I hardcore stalked him on Facebook. Other than being nosy, it was to find out who this specific girl was who was leaving him these random comments on his page that were pretty suggestive. This was when I was trying to figure out if I trusted him, if I liked him, if he was a total sleaze-ball. He was pursuing me, we were just talking and hanging out, but I did not know much about him or if I could trust him. So, when we became friends on Facebook, there were these messages from this girl. You can look at back and forth conversations, and I totally did the stalker move and read all of them and was pretty sure they had a history.

PR: But you were not totally sure of it? You were guessing based on what you were seeing on his page? You never asked him to confirm it?

MY: No, I never asked.

PR: So in that situation, you were really trying to use Facebook to figure out what Brendan was all about?

MY: Which, again, you cannot know the whole person from Facebook, it only represents a part of their life. You have to keep that in mind and take what you see with a grain of salt. Yes, it is accurate in that it is the person's page and they are posting these things, but you may only be getting half the story. You have to keep that in mind.

PR: I want to switch gears. What are your thoughts on the authenticity of what people post on Facebook? Do you feel that people play up/down what they are posting?

MY: Yes! Do you remember Monique? All of her posts were like "I love my life" and "I am so happy" with ten exclamation points. You have to believe that somebody who writes about this all the time is probably pretty miserable if they keep broadcasting it. Some people, I read what they write, and I think they are lying about it. Especially the people that put stuff up that are a run on about how crazy their night was and all the things they did. It is not like you are mentioning it in passing … it feels too exaggerated. Not that they are not telling

the truth, but it just sounds fake. They go on and on about things and they just seem too happy and too wonderful. The things on Facebook, I do not know if it is true or not, but I just do not believe it sometimes.

PR: You interpret what they are posting or writing as being not true, but not a complete lie?

MY: Facebook, postings online, all that stuff, is a good way to get attention. There are plenty of people who are super excited about something and they put it up. But there are some people, I think, who do it as an attention thing. They make a super sexed up comment, or talk about why their day is so horrible, and they put it out for the world to see.

PR: So they may not be embellishing, but they are definitely posting to get a response and draw attention?

MY: Yes, definitely get a response. But I think people embellish. I do not have a specific example. I do not call people and question if something really happened a certain way. But I do not really believe them, I think they are embellishing.

PR: Have you ever done it?

MY: No, well, maybe. But I try to stay pretty accurate and stick to the truth because you look like a jackass if you get caught in a lie, especially if it is on Facebook for everyone to see. You post it out there, and if it did not happen like that, somebody is going to see it. Even if they do not call you out on it, you still look like a jackass. I do not see the point. Anything you put out there is fair game.

PR: When you put something out there, you said "it is fair game." Do you put things out there imagining or envisioning some sort of a response? Have you ever put a comment out there thinking, "I cannot wait to see who responds to this?"

MY: Oh, yes.

PR: Do you have an example?

MY: [pause for thinking]

PR: I can think of one. That posting you had one time when you went to Palm Springs. Something about "stuck in the desert with a hooker trying to score some blow." I laughed when I read that.

MY: Oh my God, I forgot about that one! That was a quote from that movie, "The Hangover." This was right when it came out. Everyone I knew had seen it. So here goes Molly Yee, bookworm student who never does anything crazy, puts

this comment up. Because we were going to the desert, we were in Palm Springs. I did not want to just say, "going to Palm Springs." I like to have fun with what I put up. Not that I am an amazing writer, but for people who are going to get what I am saying, I like to use my sense of humor in my writing when I think people will get it. It is risky on a status page, because everyone can see it. So on that comment, I figured everyone would get it and remember the movie. Then I got a few comments that people were totally confused. "Hookers and cocaine? Molly, are you OK?"

PR: So people missed the quote? They did not understand that you were kidding?

MY: Definitely! My friend Matt thought I was in Vegas and that I was serious, like I was picking up hookers and doing drugs. The funny part is that I did not see the replies to the post for a couple days, and then Jen saw all of them and had to go on and post something about it being the movie quote. I put that one up specifically because I figured people saw the movie. I wanted people to-maybe not get a reaction, but just make people laugh and they'd get the joke. Ha-ha. It kind of backfired. I mean, when I had to explain Facebook to my dad, I told him it is an easy way to keep in touch with people you do not normally talk to. Which is true, because there are so many people I am friends with that I really do not talk to. It is fun to be nosy and see what they are up to now, but I really use it to talk to the people I talk to anyway; the people who already know me and know what is going on in my life. But, when you leave a random comment, like something about hookers and drugs, they just do not know what context to put it in because they have no clue what is going on in my life right now. Everything I put up, I do not do it thinking or worrying about how people are going to interpret it. But, whatever I put up, I think am I OK with people looking at it and knowing this bit about my life.

PR: You do not care how they interpret it; you are more concerned with you being OK that they know this about you?

MY: I do care how they interpret it, but I care more about what information I am putting out there – if I am OK with people knowing something about me. It is more the information itself. If it is something I want to keep quiet and do not want the whole school to know about, then I will just email my friends or talk to them in person.

END OF CONVERSATION