Considerable research has been devoted to online communities and consumers’ anonymous participation in these sites but research in the area of social networking sites has only begun to attract attention. The aim of our study was to explore how and why consumers incorporate social networking sites into their daily lives. Our findings revealed that friendships are being managed both online and offline, although they are not mutually exclusive. More importantly, we propose that the Facebook environment is no different to the offline environment in terms of one’s need for acceptance and social affiliation.

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Considerable research has been devoted to online communities and consumers’ anonymous participation in these sites but research in the area of social networking sites has only begun to attract attention. The aim of our study was to explore how and why consumers incorporate social networking sites into their daily lives. Our exploratory study employed an interpretivist methodological approach because we were interested in exploring our participants’ lived experiences (Crotty 1998). Using the snowballing technique, whereby each interviewee is asked by the interviewer to recommend other potential participants for the study (Spreen 1997), purposive sampling took place. However, to avoid possible network bias, we used multiple starting points when recruiting participants (McMahon 1995). Fourteen participants ranging in age from 22 – 38 years were recruited; comprising of five males and nine females, and representing four major social networking sites. Interviews varied in length ranging from 45 minutes to two hours, and were semi-structured. During the analysis phase, thematic analysis was used to analyze the texts. This was initially performed individually but later all researchers discussed and resolved issues of disagreement. The goal of the analysis was not to seek a single truth, but rather to ensure that the data was trustworthy, and the interpretations plausible (Wallendorf and Belk 1989).

EMERGING THEMES

Several themes emerged from the data but due to the paper constraints, only one theme will be discussed: Making Social Connections, which can be defined as the social dimensions of Facebook; those factors that link people to each other whether they are direct interactions, e.g., the Facebook user interacts with another Facebook user, or indirect interactions, i.e., the Facebook user browses another Facebook user’s profile.

Some researchers have surmised that Internet users are becoming increasingly removed from meaningful social relationships and as a result are spending less time with their offline communities (Stroll 1995; Davis 1999) – our study would indicate otherwise. We found that social networking sites, such as Facebook, made it easier for people to manage their offline friendships, as well as reconnect with friends from the past.

Secondly, we propose that Facebook consumption benefited our male participants more because they were able to get a closer glimpse of their friends’ lives, than they normally would have in a face-to-face encounter. Traditionally, it has been widely accepted that there are differences between how males and females communicate (e.g. Tannen 1994). However, we would argue that social networking sites, such as Facebook, enable some people to communicate more openly and freely than they normally would, regardless of language barriers or gender differences.

Thirdly, we propose that the Facebook environment is no different to the offline environment in terms of one’s need for acceptance. As SIT contends, individuals are constantly trying to maintain a positive social identity, which should lead to positive evaluations of the self. The need to validate a positive aspect of oneself via group membership is one way to achieve this. When some participants invited individuals to be their friends on Facebook, there was a degree of apprehension in terms of whether the invitation would be accepted or not. The fear of rejection ties in with one’s need for affiliation. When one invites someone to be a friend, one makes this decision based on pre-existing social categories because Facebook users already have knowledge about the individuals that they choose to invite.

METHOD

Our exploratory study employed an interpretivist methodological approach because we were interested in exploring our participants’ lived experiences (Crotty 1998). Using the snowballing technique, whereby each interviewee is asked by the interviewer to recommend other potential participants for the study (Spreen 1997), purposive sampling took place. However, to avoid possible network bias, we used multiple starting points when recruiting participants (McMahon 1995). Fourteen participants ranging in age from 22 – 38 years were recruited; comprising of five males and nine females, and representing four major social networking sites. Interviews varied in length ranging from 45 minutes to two hours, and were semi-structured. During the analysis phase, thematic analysis was used to analyze the texts. This was initially performed individually but later all researchers discussed and resolved issues of disagreement. The goal of the analysis was not to seek a single truth, but rather to ensure that the data was trustworthy, and the interpretations plausible (Wallendorf and Belk 1989).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social identity theory (SIT) is a useful framework to use when exploring social networking sites such as Facebook. It has been defined as ‘those aspects of an individual’s self-image that derive from the social categories to which he perceives himself belonging’ (Tajfel and Turner 1986, p16). As Ashforth and Mael (1989) state, people tend to classify themselves and others into social categories, which can be based on a number of factors such as age, gender, religious affiliation and so on. This categorization process serves two purposes. Firstly, it enables one to define others because it provides a systematic means of segmenting and ordering the social environment. Secondly, it enables one to locate or define oneself in the social environment (Ashforth and Mael 1989, p21), hence providing a partial answer to, “Who am I?” type questions (Turner 1982).

Within a social networking site one automatically makes decisions about who to accept or ignore, and which networks to join. Interestingly, Hogg and Abrams (1988) suggest that social categories actually precede individuals because individuals are born into an already structured society. Hence, once individuals enter society, individuals develop their identity or sense of self mostly from the social categories that they all ready belong to. One could therefore suggest that Facebook also has pre-existing

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categories to which that person is perceived to belong to. Consequently, when an individual is not accepted into a group it can affect one’s self-esteem and sense of belonging in society. At the same time, maintaining positive self-evaluations was also evident when it came to accepting invitations. Participants didn’t want to appear “mean” by rejecting new contacts, so they would reluctantly add these contacts to their social network despite knowing they would probably never meet and/or socialize with these people in person.

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