

**'Perversions of online identity': A critique of identity
representation in social media.**

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Abstract

This theoretical research aims to reinterpret and build upon existing research on identity representation in social media. The main narrative built throughout the body of this thesis centres on the perversion of online identity. Weaving together a range of different key theorists, debates and case studies, the narrative focuses on what are considered the two key perversions of online identity representation; Anonymity and Commercialisation.

Perhaps surprisingly, the latter part of this thesis repositions the argument by providing a counter to what has been hitherto discussed. It calls into question strategies of active resistance, suggesting that users are not without the agency to oppose these perversions should they so desire. In this way, this thesis aims to critically balance between these two conflicting, yet incredibly relevant perspectives. Upon its conclusion, it is hoped that this contribution will have made effective use of a wealth of theoretical perspectives and concepts, in order to illustrate the breadth to this complex debate.

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Introduction

The proliferation of social media technologies in the last decade has seen the emergence of a new online landscape through which people organise their lives. As recently as December 2011 it was recorded that 1.2 billion people – 82% of the world’s Internet population over the age of 15 – had logged onto a social media site (van Dijck 2013: 4). This figure is in sharp contrast to the 2007 figure, which showed just 6%. Yet what is social media? The term is very broad and cannot be reduced to one, fixed definition. One useful way of looking at it is proposed by boyd and Ellison (2007). They posit that social media platforms are ‘web based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of users with whom they share a connection and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system’. Social media represent the latest online spaces in which individual’s can represent themselves, alongside a long history of interest in online identity. Several academics have recognised the democratic potential of social networking sites, citing them as venues for breaking down barriers and connecting people. Hinduja and Patchin (2008: 131), for example, praise these sites as ‘largely unconstrained spaces that advocate socialisation and the assimilation of cultural knowledge’. In this way, we see the tendency to view social media as spaces for free self-expression, with many accounts adopting a celebratory position in relation to social media (Berson et al 2002; Ybarra and Mitchell 2004). In this thesis I aim to disrupt this celebratory rhetoric by exploring what I call the ‘perversions’ of online identity in these platforms. There is a need to critically address the balance between the predominance of celebratory discourses, alongside some of the more detrimental aspects of Web 2.0 (Zittrain 2008: 150).

In this thesis, I adopt a theoretical approach, rather than an empirical one. There is a wealth of theory around social media practices and how they link to identity representation. My aim, therefore, is to contribute to this field by weaving these different concepts together, in order to reach a balanced perspective on the extent to which online identity has become perverted by elements of the social media landscape. The notion of online identity is the central component in this thesis, with social media being used as a productive framework through which to explore the debates around the perversion of online identity. In this way, this thesis will begin by unpacking some of the key debates around identity management. I will draw upon the theoretical contributions of Erving Goffman, whose seminal work on identity management within a traditional, offline context is a useful grounding upon which to explore notions of online identity. Other key literature will also be assessed in this section, such as that of Liesbet van Zoonen, who adopts a fairly critical stance on the direction in which online identity management is headed.

This thesis will then split into two separate parts. The first part of this thesis will be broken down into two sections, each of which addresses perversions of online identity in social media, but in very different ways. To begin with, I will evaluate anonymous interaction online, drawing on key concepts and a series of case studies. Central to this section is the emergence of anonymous social networks. These phenomena target young people, and lead to the danger of an establishment of permissive norms in which young, and therefore socially inexperienced people, are unaware of the potential reach and consequences of their digital speech. It will be argued that these anonymous social networks lead to young people feeling a sense of infallibility in their online behaviour,

which can cause them to lose sight of managing their online identity. Thereafter, the narrative will shift and consider the issue of commercialisation. This second section will examine how commercial forces are increasingly influencing the construction of online identity. It will begin by identifying some of the key theoretical standpoints relating to the corporate exploitation of social media, looking specifically at surveillance and social sorting. Both surveillance and social sorting are considered to be perversions of online identity that result from its commercialisation. I will then introduce the notion of self-branding, Drawing upon theorists such as Alison Hearn (2008), I will discuss how social media companies interpellate users within the capitalist structures of society, giving rise to the ideas of the branded self within a reputation economy.

The second part of this thesis will reframe the debate around online identity by identifying some of the limitations to the argument that I have put forward. Spaces of resistance have opened up which challenge the extent to which online identity is perverted by aspects of social networking, suggesting that there are ways to actively opt out of these ills. This section will begin by exploring the concept of a risk society. In this way, I discuss whether the dangers associated with social media use and identity construction are perhaps manufactured as more of a risk than they in fact are. Following this, I will unpack the notion of 'nonymity'. The key element to this part of the debate, though, will be around commercialisation. Having acknowledged that the structural forces around social media are capitalist by nature, this does not conclusively mean that users are without agency. Individual human subjects have a degree of agency and can be seen to utilise this, as opposed to being passive victims to these corporate structures. A range of contemporary examples will be drawn upon to illustrate this.

Chapter 1 - Introducing Identity Representation.

It is crucial to begin by mapping out some of the key literature and debates that surround the notion of online identity. Discourses around identity are a major currency of contemporary culture. According to Jewkes and Sharp (2003: 8), within postmodern analyses identity is neither inherent nor fixed, but is rather an ephemeral, fluid entity which is open to constant negotiation, change and manipulation. In this way, identity is presented as multidimensional and amorphous (2003: 2). As Thompson (1995: 215) observes, individuals are increasingly dependent 'on a range of social institutions and systems to provide them with both the material and symbolic means for the construction of life-projects'. It is important to signpost that debates about identity existed long before the emergence of digital networked media. In this way, a useful starting point for examining the notion of identity is the work of Erving Goffman. Goffman's framework of (self) staging and image maintenance addresses key debates around identity, which remain equally relevant and applicable within the age of new media. Building on Goffman's analysis, this section will provide a concise overview of some of the key theoretical positions around online identity. These debates provide important context against which the body of this thesis is reflected.

Erving Goffman's work (1959) on self-representation, which he defines as a ritual process of everyday social exchange, is considered seminal by many commentators in the field of identity management. Baym and boyd (2012: 323) maintain that Goffman 'laid the groundwork for thinking about how even the most private of selves are formed

in relation to diverse others, and how the challenges of differing audiences can complicate self-presentation'. He defined the process of identity performance, interpretation and adjustment as impression management, part of a larger process where people seek to define a social situation through their behaviour (boyd 2007: 11-12). Goffman's theory was obviously developed within the context of traditional, face to face situations. Schmidt (2011) however, insists that his argument can be carried across to the current online environment, and applied to spheres of mediated interpersonal communication:

The manner in which something is done and how the players go through the form of their interactions in relation to given situations, how people set the stage with reference to the anticipated structures of expectation, indicates how the players want others to see them and the situation. With regards to the negotiation of self image, it can thus be stated that it is not people and their physical manner of expression that are meeting, rather constructs in media that act as personal representatives. It is in this sense that we are talking about well-composed, deliberate and excessive expressions of self (2011: 137)

Upholding Goffman's notion of performance, Schmidt (2011: 138) points to the power of these social forums, describing how they are 'inherently designed to construct gripping images, update stereotypes and hold them on centre stage'. The advancement of Web 2.0 technologies such as social media are one such example of this. 'Social media spaces collapse diverse social contexts into one, making it difficult for people to manage identity presentation and impressions' (Marwick and boyd 2010: 123). More than with any other medium, the traditional relationship between physical context and social situation becomes undermined, as place and time are transcended. Social media represents an ever-changing communication structure, which offers space to present

oneself in a stylised way, reinforcing the concept that contemporary life exists within a world of spectacle, narcissism and performance (Jewkes and Sharp 2003: 2).

A key contribution to this discussion is that of Liesbet van Zoonen, whose research into the field of identity management has yielded a number of interesting insights. She builds on this idea of identity as being something that we do, rather than something that we are. van Zoonen's (2013: 44) work comments on how 'recent innovations in these theories have further intensified the understanding of identity as a relatively flexible outcome of specific social and cultural acts'. The context of the Internet that once celebrated discourses of multiplicity has been, according to van Zoonen (2013: 45), 'annihilated by constructions of duplicity'. The field of identity management then, as it is currently emerging, is pervaded by structural tendencies towards controlled identities. van Zoonen (2013: 48-9) asserts that this needs to be recognised as a danger, or perversion, within the current regimes of identity management.

Chapter 2 - Anonymity: A Perversion of Online Identity.

Having addressed some of the fundamental arguments around online identity, I will now move into the first part of this thesis' core argument, looking at anonymity as a perversion of online identity representation. This part of the thesis will begin by tracking some of the historical debates around anonymity, exploring how it was widely celebrated in the early days of the Internet for how it broke down barriers. I will then

give voice to these debates in relation to the social media environment of today, before adopting a more critical approach to online anonymity today. Here, I will consider a range of relevant theory on the dangers of anonymity. Three case studies will then be considered which illustrate the emergence of anonymous social networks that are aimed at targeting young people and the spreading of online gossip. These examples will explore how this culture of anonymity can lead to young people feeling a sense of infallibility online, which can cause them to lose sight of managing their online identity. I will draw upon the social theory of deindividuation to illustrate this argument. This section will conclude by examining the potentially dangerous consequences that lurk behind young people's seemingly harmless engagement with these anonymous social media platforms. In this way, I will examine the case of Liam Stacey.

The construct of social identity presented by anonymity has long been of interest to social psychologists and other social scientists. Christopherson (2007: 3039-40) offers up a traditional conception of anonymity as 'the inability of others to identify an individual or for others to identify one's self'. Historically, it has been proposed that Internet technology presents a more equal playing field by means of anonymity. This has been termed the 'equalisation hypothesis' (Dubrovsky et al 1991). Unlike in face to face interactions where physical appearance is obvious, it is assumed that one can act completely free of these physical cues in computer mediated communication (CMC). People treat each other differently based on factors such as gender, race, age, ethnicity, disability and attractiveness, thus CMC acts as a filter through which these physical social cues are stripped away (Christopherson 2007: 3045-6). Researchers have deduced that in the absence of the cues, individuals that traditionally possess less

power in society and are perhaps marginalised, can demonstrate increased power in an online environment. In this way, individuals are unable to project stereotypes upon others and, therefore, the behaviour upon which these stereotypes are founded should diminish. Furthermore, anonymity has been described as central to the enhancement of interpersonal trust (Friedman et al 2000: 38-40). Take, for example, a gay teenager in an intolerant family or community who may rely on the anonymous characteristics of the web in order to find like-minded peers. Anonymity is a powerful tool that allows users such as this control over the visibility of their personal information. In this way, individuals are shielded from the potential harm and ills of others, thus cultivating a climate of trust through these greater safeguards.

These celebratory arguments, to a certain extent, hold true within the social media environment of today. Salter and Bryden (2009: 112), for example, state that for the majority of social media users anonymity is perceived as an empowering tool. The cloak that anonymity provides in terms of a shield of identity promotes freedom, whilst simultaneously breaking down inhibitions. There have been studies into this area, such as that of Scott et al (2011: 322), which illustrate there to be a positive correlation between anonymity and participation. They suggest people find it easier to relate to anonymous others online, being able to express themselves within a nonjudgmental atmosphere. Having considered these perspectives, however, it is important to stress that the issue of anonymity in social media is a complex, multi-faceted debate. It has many aspects to it which need to be critiqued in relation to the construction of online identity, as I will consider below.

There is a range of scholarship today which adopts a more critical stance towards anonymous interaction online. Anonymity and the construction of online personas that do not reflect offline identities have been proposed as risks of social media use (van Zoonen 2013: 45). Jewkes and Sharp (2003: 2) illustrate the danger that anonymity can pose as a hallmark of online communication. They stress that the potential to interact anonymously and free of consequence can result in users feeling daring, liberated and infallible. van Zoonen (2013: 45) remarks that anonymous spaces are 'where the confines of the individual and social identities can be left behind, and where new and creative modes of anonymous interaction can transgress offline gender, ethnic and other divisions between people'. In this way, users can 'conceal stigmatised aspects of their "real life" identities, whilst simultaneously facilitating the establishment of identities that are fantastic, fraudulent and exploitative' (Jewkes and Sharp 2003: 3). These debates are particularly interesting to apply to young people's engagement with anonymous social media. As Mclaughlin and Vitak (2011: 300) identify, 'the social norms regulating behaviour in an offline context tend to be well established and ingrained in children from an early age. In an online context, however, such norms evolve with the technology itself'. This is not to say that there are not norms that guide social media use. Rather, the point is that these norms are in constant flux and, in this way, are far more complicated than in face-to-face communication. There is a sense of detachment from reality posed by the nature of computer-mediated communications. What we tend to see, therefore, is an arena where young people who feel constrained by social norms and expectations in offline communication, become more inclined towards aggressive and anti-social behaviour, knowing that their identity is concealed. In order to develop these ideas further, the following part of this thesis will consider three different cases of anonymous social networks.

Case Studies

The first of these cases is a site called Little Gossip. After being launched by web developers in Belize, Central America, Little Gossip quickly became a popular platform throughout UK schools and colleges in November 2013. Without even the need to register or provide any personal details, users select the institution of their choice from a drop down bar on the homepage. Within seconds they find themselves on the dedicated page of their school, free to post anonymously on the forum 'wall'. Users type in either the topic or person that they wish to talk about, normally the latter, write their content and post it live instantly. There is no administer or approval system, anything goes. Accordingly, other users are then able to either 'thumb up' or 'thumb down' the material in a perverse voting system, thus determining the prominence of the post on the institution page. Initially, the network was viewed by many as the next online social phenomenon. It seemed to be a harmless forum for adolescents to exchange trivial banter, but the words exchanged soon became malicious, vindictive and highly targeted towards certain individuals. It is, however, not just the author of the post and the victim who are involved in this process. Albeit playing a more implicit role, those who are sadistically ranking these comments are also implicated in this perversion.

Following widespread protests from parents, schools and anti-bullying campaigners, the site supposedly took safeguards to restrict access to over 18's only, in late 2010. When it emerged that over 75 schools pages were still active in early 2011, a further backlash ensued which led to the site's supposed termination. Contrary to this, the site

remains live today. Although it is fairly inactive now, various schools and colleges still have pages with disturbing comments written on them (See Appendix), demonstrating the long lasting effects of digital speech. The anonymous nature of these attacks resonates with idea of 'relational aggression', which refers to a covert type of communication which allows offenders to remain undetected and avoid possible retaliation from victims (Delveaux and Daniels quoted in Werner et al 2010: 609). Here, we see the danger of the removal of identity on the dynamic of online communication, with users feeling more daring and infallible given the removal of the social norms that constrain face-to-face communication.

The second example worth considering is that of FormSpring. Following a similar model to Little Gossip, FormSpring offers a slightly more comprehensive user experience. Users direct comments and questions towards each other into a private mailbox and it is at the user's discretion as to whether they ignore the content, respond to the content, or respond to the content and publish it to their own 'wall'. The nature of communication is still anonymous, but it feels more targeted and direct through this inbox feature. The success of these sites seem to lie in adolescents' perverse desire to hear the truth about what people think of them. For example, one young girl was asked what she would do if someone was throwing rocks at her. She said that she would run, but could not run away from reading what people think of her online, regardless of the pain (Lewin 2010). In March 2010, abuse towards one particular seventeen-year-old girl is believed to have been the cause of her taking her own life. Not only did Alexis Pilkington commit suicide, but following her tragic death FormSpring was utilised as an

anonymous means of tainting her memory, facilitating the sharing of dark messages and graphic images about her death.

Finally, it is worth briefly noting the emergence of AskFM. Mirroring the popular question and answer style model adopted by FormSpring, in 2010 AskFM became the most recent anonymous social phenomenon to mobilise young audiences. As recently as 2012, two Irish adolescents took their own lives, these tragedies believed to be a direct result of cyberbullying on AskFM. In light of these tragic events, AskFM did not show any signs of tightening their stance on abusive behaviour within their platform (Burke 2012).

Relating this back to the overall argument around online identity, it is productive to explore these three cases alongside the social theory of deindividuation. In terms of describing the effect of anonymity on behaviour, Dr Phillip Zimbardo's (1969) deindividuation theory is highly influential, even within today's new media environment. Deindividuation is described as 'a state in which individuals are not seen or paid attention to as individuals' (Festinger et al 1952: 382). Thus, under the anonymity that is provided by being part of a larger group, it is likely to occur that people feel a reduction of inner restraints. In this way, Christopherson (2007: 3044) explains how the deindividuated state implies 'a decrease in self-observation, self-evaluation and concern for social comparison, leading to weakened internalised controls such as guilt, shame and fear'. Sassenberg and Boos (2003: 406) echo this conception, mentioning that by being submerged in a group, conditions such as lower

awareness and reduced self-regulation become heightened. Applying this theory to the cases considered above, it seems evident that there is 'less adherence to group norms where there is low group identity' (Amaral and Monteiro 2002: 578). As such, we can seem to correlate the anonymous conditions of interaction in these platforms with the creation of social norms around anti-social behaviour and hateful attitudes.

My reason for considering three of these similar cases, as opposed to just say one, is to illustrate the dangerous cyclicity of these anonymous social networks. Little Gossip may have run its course, but then FormSpring emerges as an alternative platform of anonymous gossip. When the FormSpring craze died down, AskFM emerged and presented new spaces for anonymous interaction, and so on. What is so concerning is how the constant recurrence of these anonymous phenomena can lead to the danger of an establishment of permissive norms around online behaviour. Through engagement with these anonymous social platforms young, and thus socially inexperienced people, may start to feel infallible and invisible within social networks where their identity is not concealed. One particular example of this is the case of Liam Stacey.

In March 2012, teenager Liam Stacey catapulted himself from unknown Welsh university student to national hate figure in the space of a few tweets. He became infamous within a matter of hours for his alcohol induced Twitter assault on Fabrice Muamba. Muamba is a Premier League footballer that experienced cardiac arrest mid-way through a football match. Stacey, underestimating the power of Twitter and the potential reach of his words, proceeded to racially abuse Muamba in a series of

deplorable tweets. Upon realising the extent of his comments Stacey hastened to erase the tweets, but by this point the Twitter community had exposed his remarks to the police. The consequence of Stacey's brief moment of notoriety was a conviction for a racially aggravated public order offence, for which he received a 56 day prison sentence. Furthermore, he was expelled from Cardiff University during the middle of his degree, and ultimately will have a criminal record against his name for life.

This example is one of many cases of users seeming not to understand the potential reach and consequence of their digital speech, emphasising this idea of a detachment from reality whilst participating in social networking. Rowbottom (2012: 366) points to the danger of individuals such as Stacey 'reaching the attention of people beyond their intended audience'. Baym and boyd (2010: 322) develop this point, stating that as people use these media they juggle multiple layers and kinds of audience, thus complicating the notions of visibility and obscurity around these acts. Audiences are not discrete. When we talk we have an imagined audience and may conceive that we are only speaking to the people in front of us, but this is in many ways a fantasy (Marwick and boyd 2010). Technology complicates our metaphors of space and place, including the belief that audiences are separate from one another. Although the example of Liam Stacey occurred on Twitter, where identity is not concealed, it is still of key relevance to this section overall. Cases such as Stacey illustrate my argument that these anonymous phenomena can lead to the dangerous establishment of permissive social norms around online behaviour. Whilst Stacey is conscious that he is identifiable and his tweets are public, the nature of communication on sites like Twitter leads to an inevitable decrease in self-observation and social inhibitions. This relates back to the idea of

deindividuation. As self-evaluation becomes reduced, we see the tendency for internalised controls such as guilt, shame and fear to subside (Christopherson 2007: 3044). Through social networks such as Twitter, therefore, utterances that were previously expressed offhandedly are 'released into a public domain where they can have far reaching and long lasting effects' (van Dijck 2013: 7).

Taking all these case studies and critical concepts into consideration, it seems fair to conclude that anonymous interaction on social media can be seen as central to the perversion of online identity. Not only in the ways demonstrated in the three case studies, Little Gossip; FormSpring and AskFM, but also in how it shapes young people's online norms around identity construction in dangerous ways.

Chapter 3 - Commercialisation: A Perversion of Online Identity.

In the last part of this thesis I explored the debate around online anonymity as a perversion of social media identity. This section will now turn its attention to the issue of the commercialisation of social networking spaces. This section will start by addressing some of the key literature and debates around commercialisation, considering the idea of corporations' exploitation of users in alignment with their own commercial interests. The first part of this section will explore two interlinked aspects within this notion of commercial exploitation; surveillance and social sorting. The second part of this section will critically address the notion of self-branding. I will

consider the rise of a reputation economy in which self-presentation should be understood alongside the forces of capitalism which are guiding these practices of self-branding. Both of these parts are considered to be perversions of online identity which result from its commercialisation.

One of the more salient critiques of online identity within the new media landscape relates to tensions around commerce. The commercialisation of online culture has attracted widespread criticism from academic theorists, such as Cohen (2008: 18) who points to the 'extension of processes of commodification, capitalist social relations and market forces into multiple aspects of social life'. It has been argued that as internet access becomes evermore necessary for participation in social life, corporations will continue to shape the online architecture in such a way as to suit their own narrow, commercial interests (Milberry and Anderson 2009: 1). Whilst recognising the pioneering nature of new social media technologies, Milberry and Anderson (2009: 6), condemn how they mark a new commercial incursion into social life'. They conclude that through companies such as Facebook injecting customised advertisements into the steady stream of user activity, 'the commodification of an arena not yet colonised by capitalism has taken place: personal interaction' (2009: 6). The role of users in the social media environment is not simply as content providers, but data providers. Whilst uploading content, users volunteer important personal and behavioural information to site owners and metadata aggregators, which can be mined for commercial purposes (van Dijck 2009: 47). This leaves users powerless as to how their data is distributed. Whether they are active creators or passive spectators within their social media community, all contributors form an attractive demographic to advertisers.

Considering all this, there is a growing body of academics that suggest that these corporate structures are exploiting users. Petersen (2008) is one theorist who illustrates these dark, exploitative forces. He states that when the technological infrastructure and design of these sites is combined with capitalism, the architecture begins to oscillate between participation and exploitation. Petersen suggests that for the owners of large social networks the emphasis is not so much on the content that is acquired, rather the data produced by users and communities. In this way, the architecture of participation subverts into that of exploitation and enclosure, transforming users into commodities that can be sold in this social marketplace. Another key theorist who contributes to this discourse is Jose van Dijck. van Dijck recognises social media as a double-edged sword, stating that whilst it can be intensely empowering for users, it is equally disturbingly exploitative. She (2013: 18) posits that 'sociality is enjoyed and exercised through precisely the commercial platforms that also exploit online social activities for monetary gains'. Platform owners have become acutely aware of the valuable resources that stream through their pipelines daily (2013: 40). The way in which these influential platform owners monetise online sociality is defined by Van Dijck as a transformation from 'connectedness' to 'connectivity'.

Out of the interconnection of platforms comes the emergence of a new infrastructure, 'an ecosystem of connective media with a few large and many small players' (van Dijck 2013: 4-5). What these large players, such as Facebook, have done so effectively is to gradually normalise the culture of sharing through which commercial exploitation is then made possible. Over time an implicit change in the notion of data has occurred. According to van Dijck, we are sharing so much data that it does not really seem like an

exchange any more. One such example of this normalisation is the Facebook 'like' function. The way in which this has been universally adopted 'epitomises the profound modification of a social norm' (2013: 49). The like function has become ubiquitous in Facebook use, with the small thumbs up symbol becoming iconic across social media and beyond. At the same time, however, it has turned personal data sharing by third parties into an accepted practice. In this way, companies such as Facebook are exploiting the valuable by-product of peer production that users do not intentionally deliver; behavioural and profiling data (2013: 16). van Dijck stresses that through the commoditisation of social relationships, platforms such as Facebook have developed a corporate model in which they can exploit social networking as a thoroughly commercial and consumptive act (2013: 159). In order to further examine this corporate exploitation argument, I will consider two aspects; surveillance and social sorting. Both are key proponents in the debate around online identity tied to commercialisation, and ought to be treated separately.

Surveillance

I will begin by exploring how surveillance technologies are pervading social media use. In van Zoonen's (2013: 47) extensive work on social media identities, she notes how everyday offline activities such as work, consumption, leisure and health are pervaded by surveillance technologies. This is becoming increasingly the case within commercial Internet surveillance too, where users produce content, social relations and transaction data. All this unpaid labour, according to Fuchs and Trottier (2013: 44),

goes towards 'the creation of data commodities (a collection of individuals with specific user demographics) that are sold to advertisers'. Let us look, for example, at the video-sharing platform, YouTube. YouTube has made the already close relationship between content producers, advertisers and consumers even more intimate (van Dijck 2009: 47). It is often lauded in so much as it allows users to assert their creative authority and identity through content production. The caveat to this, however, is that users often 'lose grip of their individual agency as a result of technological algorithms tracking their behaviour and refining their profile' (van Dijck 2009: 49). What is key here is that any theory which focuses on user agency from a content production perspective, rather than data manipulation, 'effectively downplays the tremendous influence of new media companies in directing user agency'. In other words, whilst users might perceive themselves as active agents due to their involvement in content production, the reality is that their personal information is ultimately in the hands of a large corporation. van Dijck (2009: 54) views YouTube as exemplifying the transformation of user-generated content within an era of commercialisation, noting how it has 'evolved from a small start-up site driven by user communities into an important node in an ecosystem of media conglomerates dominated by Google'.

One social network that is intriguing to scrutinise in terms of surveillance is Facebook. As Fuchs (2011: 156) posits, the surveillance, identification and appropriation of personal data are essential activities used by Facebook, serving economic purposes'. Like any corporation, 'Facebook has the aim of accumulating ever more capital, hence their interest in securing as much information as possible into the interests, tastes and behaviours of customers' (Fuchs 2011: 144). What is so unique about Facebook, though,

is their tactful approach to this process. Facebook engage in mass surveillance but succeed in doing so on a personalised level (2011: 148). They stress the individuality of a user by providing them with tailored advertisements. Ironically these adverts, which appear personal to the user, are in fact based on comparison mechanisms, which strip users of their individual identity and place them into specific user interest groups, as I will explore further in the next section. In this way, it can be argued that 'under capitalism privacy is permanently undermined by corporate surveillance into the lives of humans, for profit purposes' (Fuchs 2011: 144).

The implicit manner in which Facebook exploits user identity is exemplified in its privacy policy. There is lack of transparency and clarity in Facebook's policy. Turow (in Fuchs 2011: 150) states that privacy policies on commercial sites are 'often complex, written in turgid legalese but formulated in a polite way as to cover up the capturing and selling of data'. Fuchs argues this stance to be firmly applicable to Facebook. He (2011: 150-151) believes that Facebook avoid speaking about user data and behaviour, instead using the phrase sharing information with third parties; 'a euphemism for the commodification of user data'. In fact, the terms "sell" or "selling" do not appear once in Facebook's policy, whereas the term "sharing" appears 59 times in the 6911 long policy (Fuchs and Trottier 2013: 49). Out of all this comes a rather cynical picture of Facebook, described by Fuchs (2011: 152) as 'an advertising and economic surveillance machine that wants to store, assess and sell as much user data as possible in order to maximise profits'. In this way, Facebook cunningly utilise user consent through this complex policy, legitimizing the surveillance of user activities and thus masking the commodification of data as consensual. I will now build on this narrative around

surveillance by exploring the intersecting notion of social sorting. Having discussed both of these aspects, I will then draw a link back to the central theme around perversions of online identity.

Social Sorting

Whilst some commentators point towards the problem around social media data analysis being solely to do with surveillance, there are other issues which are also relevant. One of these issues is the notion of social sorting. Lyon (quoted in van Zoonen 2013: 47) proposes that the kinds of issues that are raised by social media data profiling extend far beyond the narrow confines of surveillance. He analyses in detail how various technologies and processes of identity management place people in social categories that are decisive for their everyday choices. Lyon frames this idea as social sorting, condemning how identity management undermines the understanding of identity as multiple in how it puts people into certain fixed categories.

Developing this idea, Turow (2011: 3) warns of how websites, advertisers and other companies are continuously assessing the activities and backgrounds of virtually everyone online, with even our social relationships being carefully analyzed. He defines this as the performance of a highly controversial form of social profiling, as our media content is customised on the basis of marketing reputations we do not even know we have (2011: 2). This is reflective of a 'world of intensively customised content, in which marketers package personalised ads with soft news or entertainment that is tailored to

fit both the selling needs of the ads, and the social reputation of the individual' (2011: 7). It is important to note that the significance of these tailored commercial messages go far beyond whether or not the targeted persons buy the product. To understand this further, let us unpack Turow's (2011: 88) concept of 'targets or waste'. It is increasingly the case that marketers use databases to determine whether particular users are classified as targets or waste. Those considered as waste are shunted to other products that are deemed more relevant to their taste or income. Meanwhile, targets are considered valuable, and thus are evaluated further in light of the information that companies store and trade about their demographic, beliefs or lifestyle. In this way, we see a clearer picture of how social sorting works. Advertisements are status signals which alert people as to their social position (2011: 6). For example, if a user consistently receives ads 'for low-priced cars, regional vacations and other products reflecting a lower-class status, their sense of the world's opportunities may be narrower than that of someone who is feted with ads for international trips and luxury products'. In this way, therefore, we see the rhetoric of consumer power losing credibility, replaced instead by technological and statistical knowledge that supports the practice of social discrimination through profiling (2011: 3). Clearly, wide ranging data points which indicate the social identities of hundreds of millions of individuals are 'becoming the fundamental coins of exchange in the online world' (2011: 89).

Having considered these two specific concerns, surveillance and social sorting, within the broader debate around corporate exploitation in social media, some interesting conclusions arise. There are many benefits to the new media environment, such as the spaces and opportunities for freedom, participation and creativity. Turow

(2011: 9) underlines, however, that these must be considered against the 'ruthlessly commercial logic and obscure social profiling practices of the new media buying system, which have come to dominate the emerging digital world'. The way in which companies track people without their knowledge, sell data without securing user permission and use data to decide whom should be targeted and who is mere waste, points to a serious social problem (2011: 7). Linking this back to the central concern of online identity, it is evident that we need to understand the industrial forces that are defining our identities and worth so that we can decide what, if anything, to do about them (2011: 9). Whilst the tools to construct an online identity are still present within these spaces, they are arguably set according to the economic imperative goals of the site. The structures of sites like Facebook, such as the design, functionality and privacy settings, can be viewed as part of larger move towards the increasing commodification of identity through the extending grip of corporate interests (Cohen 2008: 14).

Self-Branding

The first part of this commercialisation section introduced a critical approach to corporate encroachment in cyberspace by exploring the issues of surveillance and social sorting. Now, I will develop these debates around commercialisation by examining how capitalist structures interpellate people as brands. As made evident in the previous section, there is a wealth of theory supporting the shift in power within social media sites which portends a new set of social relations based on commercial exploitation, reorienting users as consumers (Milberry and Anderson 2009: 17). However, it is

imperative to evolve these ideas by discussing how the conditions of the social media environment invite users to contribute to these processes through self-branding. Hearn (2008: 211) argues that social networking sites 'produce inventories of branded selves', with their 'logic encouraging users to see themselves as commodity-signs to be collected and consumed in the social marketplace'. The following section will unpack the debates around self-branding within social media. It will begin by examining the growing trend around digital reputation, and how this has become increasingly tied to capital. It will then move towards looking at specific examples of these self-branding practices.

The construction of online identity tied to capital has become a prominent feature of the social media landscape of today. Hearn (2008: 201) asserts that individual people, just like goods and corporations, are all implicated in promotionalism, and endeavour to generate their own rhetorically persuasive meanings. In this way, she claims that the 'branded self must be understood as a process of highly stylised self-construction directly tied to the promotional mechanisms of a post-Fordist market'. Central to this notion of self-branding and identity management is the rise of a culture around digital reputation. Skageby (2009: 62) asserts that the often quantified display of numbers of friends, views or comments, is an instrumental aspect of social networking sites. We find ourselves within an 'attention economy', where the scarce resource is not information but attention. Arvidsson and Peitersen (2009: 8-9) mention how reputation is almost emerging as a new standard of value. What was once private information has become a public parameter deployed to determine an individual's overall social worth (2009: 18). This links to Hearn's (2011: 429) critique of how the public display and mediation of personal emotion is explicitly linked to monetary value. She alludes to the

abundance of publicly rendered information about a person's affective bonds, giving 'a sense of their total social impact, which can then be measured and represented as their digital reputation'. Taking this a step further, Tara Hunt captures this rising reputation economy with her concept of 'Whuffie'. She states that the social capital which we invest in and exchange within online communities is displacing money, and emerging as an indispensable form of online currency (Hearn 2011: 430). Hunt (2009: 7) goes as far as to suggest that there may come a day where 'social capital is seen as a viable currency in the market economy'. Whilst this may seem a little overstated, Hunt's theory touches on the broader issue of how self-image and identity have become inextricably bound to capital, within a reputational economy.

In order to examine these debates more extensively, the case of the popular microblogging site, Twitter, will be assessed. Self-presentation on Twitter takes place through ongoing 'tweets' and conversations with others, allowing for dynamic and interactive identity presentation to unknown audiences (Marwick and boyd 2010: 116). As such, on Twitter the potential diversity of readership ruptures the ability to vary self-presentation based on audience, and thus manage discrete impressions. The strategic use of Twitter to maintain followers, or to create and market a personal brand, is understood by Marwick and boyd (2010: 119) as 'part of a larger social phenomenon of using social media instrumentally for self-conscious commodification'. Twitter is used to carefully construct a 'meta-narrative or meta-image of self'. By this logic, we value whatever grabs the public's attention, and are interested in what other Twitter users think. Marwick and boyd (2010: 120-1) explain this further with their 'strategic audiences' approach. They determine that this notion of self-branding can be

understood through the lens of the 'micro-celebrity' (Senft 2008). This is a communicative technique in which people attempt to amp up their popularity online. It implies that all individuals have an audience that they can strategically maintain through ongoing interaction, and is a technique embraced by those on Twitter seeking wide attention. In analysing this, the 'micro-celebrity' practice shows an intrinsic conflict between self promotion and the ability to connect with others on a deeply personal level (Marwick and boyd 2010: 128). Some even view strategic audience management as dishonest 'corporate-speak' or 'shameless promotion'.

To illustrate the above argument, I will now examine the growing trend of Twitter Account Markets. These are services which seem harmless, advertising themselves as legitimate and in line with all applicable rules. Users can choose between "free" and "premium" versions of the service. Premium customers pay a fee in exchange for followers, whilst free users have to provide personal account credentials to market operators in return for followers. The price for buying Twitter followers on these markets varies from about \$20 to \$100 for 1,000 followers. Within a study conducted by Stringhini et al (2012: 4) specific markets were analysed, with one particular market showing, definitively at least, 1577 individual accounts to have bought followers. When you consider that the cheaper price point for purchasing a batch of 3000 followers on this given market is \$65, multiplying this by the 1577 customers demonstrates the minimum profit made is \$102,505. The fact that customers are spending actual money on perceived Twitter influence reflects the narcissistic obsession around image and self-representation present in these spaces. Whilst it could be countered that brands or companies, rather than individuals, might want to purchase followers in order to launch

a Twitter account with more than a handful of followers, I would contest that this is a still a misrepresentative and somewhat false. In this way, I argue that the construction of genuine identity is becoming perverted through the monetisation of social networking.

Linking this idea of self-branding back to the perversions of online identity, it seems fair to argue that the capitalist structures of the social media environment invite users to construct their online social selves in ways that are increasingly tied to capital. Hearn (2008: 213) asserts how even if users are not self-consciously branding on Facebook, they still 'remain captive to and conditioned by the controlling interests of global flexible capital'. This ties into the overall argument around corporate exploitation, and how we are increasingly seeing the encroachment of profit or status driven techniques into social networking. These techniques are in direct opposition to more traditional, interactional norms, that do not involve the commodification of social ties. This section has ultimately argued that the capitalist structures of today's social media environment impose upon users a culture of self-branding and commercialised identity construction, thus presenting another perversion of online identity.

Chapter 4 – Forms of Resistance: Active User Agency

Thus far, this thesis has focussed its argument around anonymity and the commercialisation of social media as possible perversions of online identity. Taken

together, I have adopted a critical outlook upon how these specific aspects have perverted the construction of online identity. However, this does not tell the whole story. The final part of this thesis wishes to reposition the discussion slightly by considering some of the oppositional perspectives to my proposal hitherto. It is important to highlight that individual human subjects have a degree of user agency, and can be seen to utilise this to opt out of these ills. In this way, this part will approach these ideas around resistance in three ways. Firstly, I will traverse the notion of a 'risk society', as proposed by Ulrich Beck. This section will examine whether risk is manufactured within contemporary society, a concern that has to be balanced against my argument thus far. Secondly, I will address some of the possible limitations around anonymous behaviour in social media spaces. This section will give voice to the range of anonymous platforms, such as Facebook, where identity is performed openly as acts of resistance to notions of anonymity. Finally, this section will turn to look at how users can be seen to reject the capitalist structures of social media sites by enacting new media technologies as acts of resistance. A range of different case studies will be drawn upon in this section, such as Diaspora and Take this Lollipop.

Construction of Risk

The first strand to this will explore the construction of risk. The notion of risk has become 'inescapable in all facets of contemporary society' (Rathmell 2003: 451). A fundamental starting point for approaching this body of theory is the work of Ulrich Beck. Beck's original proposition of a 'risk society' refers to a particular set of social,

cultural and economic conditions that are characterised by the increasingly pervasive logic of manufactured uncertainty. For him, this entails the transformation of existing social structures, institutions and relationships towards an incorporation of more complexity, contingency and fragmentation (Adam and van Loon 2000: 5). The essence of risk is not that it is happening, but that it might be happening. In this way, Beck views risk as manufactured, something that cannot be observed as a 'thing-out-there' because it is suitably constructed (Adam and van Loon 2000: 2). Central to Beck's theory is the role of the mass media in exaggerating this notion of risk. Adam and van Loon (2000: 4) note that the inescapability of interpretation renders risk infinitely open to social definition and construction. In turn, those in positions of key social standing, such as the mass media, are able to define and legitimate these risks. Beck (2006: 332) explicitly critiques the role of the mass media in these processes:

Modern society has become a risk society in the sense that it is increasingly occupied with debating, preventing and managing risks that it has produced itself. Many will object, but it is indicative of a hysteria and politics of fear instigated and aggravated by the mass media. Risk is essentially a power game, particularly within a world risk society where powerful Western economic actors define risks for others. Beck sees the mass media as a risk manufacturing technology, "instrumental in the creation of a public audience and enrolment of actors" (Adam and van Loon: 24).

Taking this a step further, it is crucial to consider the notion of risk construction within the new media context that this thesis aligns itself. Adam and van Loon (2000: 6) emphasise how 'the current speed of technological change has warped the very notion of risk into an entirely different orbit'. They mention how innovative technologies engender unexpected alternative futures, thus casting new shadows of risk (2000: 8).

Computer mediated connectivities have created a virtually organic universe where everything can be transformed into everything else (van Loon 2000: 167-8). Crucially, 'the sets of connections made possible have amplified not only our capacity to transcend many of the physical limitations of spatio-temporality, but also fundamentally transformed the sense of being human to something peripheral to communication technologies'. van Loon (2000: 168-9) asserts that we now live in a world of hypermediation, where the boundaries between real and representation have become displaced. Linking this evidence back to my central argument around identity, we are left to question whether these dangers around anonymity and commercialisation are as real as they seem, or if they are being manufactured as risk factors of social media use.

Nonymity

The second part of this section will look to contest the notion of anonymous identity construction which has been prevalent throughout the thesis by analysing an oppositional stance. As Zhao et al (2008) explore, the online world is not entirely anonymous. Family members, neighbours, colleagues and other offline acquaintances communicate with one another on the Internet. This type of offline-based, online relationship is known as an "anchored relationship", and is thus what Zhao et al (2008: 1818) define as a nonymous relationship, the opposite of anonymous. Identity construction in a nonymous online environment has not previously been well studied. Nonymous interaction does not suggest that there will be no self-presentation in online environments. Zhao et al (2008: 1819) make it clear that identity performance takes

place to some extent even where individuals are fully identifiable, such as classrooms and offices. Rather, it wishes to state that 'self-performances in such nonymous contexts are constrained and tend to conform to established social norms'. Let us unpack this theory further. According to Zhao et al, in a fully nonymous offline world where deviance from established norms will be punished, the masks people wear in everyday life become their real identities, with a person's true self often becoming suppressed. In contrast, in a fully anonymous online world where accountability is lacking, the masks people wear offline are thrown away and their true selves come out of hiding, along with other suppressed identities. Crucially however, the nonymous offline world emerges as a third type of environment, where people tend to express what has been referred to as the "hoped-for possible selves".

A useful way by which to examine this is through Facebook. Zhao et al (2008: 1820-1) state that Facebook is an ideal platform for examining identity construction in online environments, where relationships are anchored in offline communities. Facebook is a nonymous online setting, where users are required to reveal their real names in a fixed institutional context, which explains why users tend not to treat it as a venue for expressing "hidden selves" or fraudulent identities (Zhao et al 2008: 1831). The findings of their study point to how 'Facebook enables users to present themselves in ways that can reasonably bypass physical obstacles and create the "hoped-for possible selves" they are unable to establish in the offline world'. Such digital selves are real, and can serve to enhance the users self-image. What the results of this study suggest is that identity is not an individual characteristic, nor an expression of something innate in a person. Rather it is a social product, the outcome of a social environment and is hence

performed differently in varying contexts. What we can conclude from this example is that 'not all socially unsanctioned identities are hidden, and some are performed openly, for example, as acts of resistance' (Zhao et al 2008: 1832). Linking this back to my initial argument around anonymity as a perversion of online identity, this account of nonymity illustrates an interesting counter to the perverse nature of anonymous interaction in social media.

Acts of Resistance to Commercialisation

Finally, having previously scrutinised the ideas around commercial exploitation of identity, this section will consider the mobilisation of oppositional, new media technologies. Lievrouw (2011: 1) asserts that 'the proliferation and convergence of networked media and information technologies have helped generate a renaissance of new modes of communication, redefining user engagement'. These alternative new media forms 'employ and modify the artefacts, practices and social arrangements of new communication technologies, thus challenging the dominant or accepted ways of doing society, culture and politics' (Lievrouw 2011: 19). Within this, it is important to note that large corporate actors still exist, but the changing landscape has 'created unprecedented opportunities for expression and interaction which threaten their market prerogatives' (Lievrouw 2011: 1-2). Take, for example, the Facebook 'Beacon' controversy in 2007. The Beacon feature was a tracking function run through Facebook which 44 companies signed up to, allowing them to send data from their websites through Facebook, thus targeting users with advertising. It was deemed highly intrusive

by the Facebook community, and a successful online petition resulted in users being able to opt in or turn Beacon off altogether (Cohen 2008). The service was eventually shut down in 2009. The termination of this service symbolises the possibility of user appropriation and protest. It was not simply an example of a clash between users and owners, rather an example of a platform altering their strategies as a result of these manoeuvres of user resistance, with the very notion of online sociality becoming redefined with it (van Dijck 2013: 160).

Lievrouw is one commentator who has written extensively on the significance of alternative new media forms. One of the more relevant ideas, in relation to this section, which she uses to discuss these oppositional technologies is the notion of culture jamming. This refers to how key images and ideas of mainstream culture become captured and subverted to make a critical point. According to Lievrouw (2011: 73), it is a strategy which turns corporate power against itself by co-opting, mocking and re-contextualizing meaning. Whilst marketers troll subcultures for new products and ideas that will sell, culture jammers hack elements of mainstream culture through the deliberate creation of cultural notions that invert the status quo. In this way, it has established itself as a 'rhetorical and symbolic strategy with considerable power, well suited to the fragmentation and rapid turnover of discourse within a new media context' (Lievrouw 2011: 84). The aim of the following section is to highlight a series of case studies which substantiate these claims around activist new media forms. It will demonstrate that social media users are not passive or indifferent to forces of commercialisation, but rather that they take active steps to resist them. The case studies

considered will be wide ranging, from an open-source social network to a unique expressive interference technology.

The first case in point is that of Diaspora. A project founded in 2010 by four college students, Diaspora is an open-source social network that was widely regarded as having the potential to topple Facebook. The co-founder of the start-up, Ilya Zhitomirskiy, became widely renowned within tech circles. He was even referred to as the 'free culture equivalent of Mark Zuckerberg' (Shaer 2013). In essence they built a decentralised social network controlled by the users themselves. Unlike Facebook who kept its users' personal information on servers and sold this on to advertisers, Diaspora would allow all its users to own their data. The timing was perfect as earlier in the year Facebook had come under fire for surreptitiously changing its privacy settings, meaning people were considering alternative options. In sharp contrast to Facebook's closed, top-down manner, Diaspora offered a wide open platform, that was controlled from the bottom up and was not focussed on monetising content. As Shaer (2013) points out, many users developed a deep ideological connection to the platform and, despite the owners limiting their involvement, the powerful Diaspora community have maintained the network to date.

The next example of cultural resistance being harnessed through social media technologies is that of Take this Lollipop. This is a viral marketing style short film which is accessed through Facebook. Amassing in the region of 10 million likes in less than a month, it quickly became the fastest-spreading application in Facebook's history (Gross 2011). It was a powerful campaign which pointed to the disturbing truths than

underpin social networking, relating to the exploitation of our personal data. Gross (2011) describes the video in vivid detail:

The film features a sweaty, wild-eyed man hunched over his computer in a shadowy basement. He has broken into your Facebook account and is reading your posts as his dirty, cracked fingernails paw the keyboard. Rage builds up, as he rocks back and forth, growing more agitated as pages flash past. He then consults a map of your city and heads to his car...

The film cleverly clashes horror movie tropes with online security fears, providing the viewer with an un-nerving experience. It reorients media audiences and consumers as users and participants (Lievrouw 2011: 1-2), inviting them to consider the role they are playing in the violation of privacy through lax security settings. It forces the user to reconsider how much control they really have over the negotiation of their online identity. I would argue that the way in which tools such as this raise awareness around these concerns are a step in the right direction in terms of resistance.

We know what you're doing (WKWYD) is a unique social networking experiment, aimed at exposing the dangers of over-sharing online. It became an overnight phenomenon when it emerged in 2012, attracting in the region of 100,000 visitors to the site in the first 24 hours since its launch. Coutts (2012) states that not only do some people not understand the risk of over sharing, but do not realise that they are making these comments public in the first place. WKWYD deals with this misconception. 'The site uses Facebook's graph API, as well as publicly available Foursquare check-ins, to automatically generate streams of brainlessness, vitriol, and over-sharing from

publicly available Facebook posts' (Couts 2012). Creator of the site, 18 year old Callum Haywood, expresses that the problem is not with Facebook themselves, whose privacy controls are very good when used correctly. Rather, the problem is quite simply rooted in people's lack of understanding as to the dangers of a permissive culture around online data sharing.

Leading on from the previous example, Please Rob Me can be best described as 'a dressed up page of twitter search results that monitor the latest posts of users sharing their locations via Foursquare' (Fletcher 2010). The premise of the site is not to aid burglary, rather to powerfully illustrate the dangers of volunteering precise location information on the social media. The co-founder of the innovation, Frank Groeneveld, pointed out the irony that 'we are leaving the lights on when we go away on holiday, yet we are telling everybody on the internet that we are away from home' (Fletcher 2010). For him, the danger is in publicly announcing where you are, as this can only leave one place that you are definitely not – home. This example resonates strongly with the notion of culture jamming. Lievrouw (2011: 84) alludes to how culture jamming deploys irony, humour and absurdity as means of exposing social problems, attracting adherents and moving them to action. Please Rob Me effectively combines these elements, such as irony and absurdity, using them as tactics to highlight detrimental behaviour online.

Computer Vision (C.V) Dazzle is perhaps the most poignant example when examining tensions around online identity, and mirrors the notion of culture jamming

hitherto discussed. The award winning design project was set up out of concerns around online surveillance. It has the desire to show how we could adapt to surveillance societies without retreating into anonymity, and in so doing celebrating style and augmenting privacy (van Zoonen 2013: 48). Innovator of the project, Adam Harvey, describes the goal of the technology is to break apart the gestalt of a face or object, rendering it undetectable to computer vision algorithms. It acts as a form of expressive interference, which blends a mix of bold makeup and hairstyling based on military camouflage techniques, with face-detection thwarting design. Given that face-detection is the first step in automated facial recognition, C.V Dazzle can be utilised in any social media environment where automated face recognitions are in use, such as Facebook or Flickr.

Harvey stresses the importance of the idea that surveillance is not bulletproof. He posits that there are many ways to interact with it and aestheticise it. Harvey's activist work is one powerful example of the growing trend towards counter-surveillance technologies. These movements started offline aimed at opposing the proliferation of closed circuit television and surveillance cameras on private property and in public places. With the shift towards online culture jamming, however, Lievrouw (2011: 76-7) identifies how this issue has persisted in new spaces and forms. van Zoonen (2013: 48) is another commentator who considers the significance of this, drawing on these cultural forms as clear 'activism against the control dimension of identity management'.

Finally, The Do Not Track (DNT) mechanism is a 'permanent setting on computer browsers which offers users the choice of whether to allow the tracking of their online activities, or not' (Boscheck 2011: 270). It is a tool for active agency and resistance, offering the preference not to be tracked regardless of the technical details of tracking mechanisms. With concerns threatening the current mechanisms and business models of the web, DNT might be able to help. Providing users trust it, DNT can offer a middle ground between allowing all third-party cookies and blocking them all. It represents an easy way for users to make privacy choices, without being required to master the technical details of half a dozen different tracking technologies. Users will still see ads, however these will be contextual or otherwise untargeted ones.

Hence, what can be drawn from this section is that an abundance of spaces have opened up for users to exert active agency and oppose commercial forces. In many ways, 'social media presents itself as a double edged sword' (van Dijck 2013: 159). Evidently, user participation in social media has shown itself to be a thoroughly commercial and consumptive act, with online identity implicated in this. However, this section has pointed out in counter to this, that many users enjoy their roles as consumer, even if they are aware of the commercial mechanisms involved, and the opportunities of resistance that accompany this role in the new media environment.

Conclusion

To recap, this thesis began by reviewing the key literature and debates around identity, the guiding concept around which the entirety of this thesis is based. In the

first part of this thesis, I critiqued the potential for anonymous based interaction within social networking sites. Specifically, consideration was given to how anonymous social media platforms have developed which target young people and the spreading of gossip online, such as Little Gossip. The way in which these kinds of phenomena conceal identity arguably lead to the establishment of dangerous norms around online communication, in which young people feel infallible. Building on this, I then considered the case of Welsh student Liam Stacey. The thesis then shifted and introduced the corporate exploitation argument. This section approached the commercialisation of social media by examining two specific strands to this concept, that of surveillance and social sorting. Furthermore, I explored how the structural forces of capitalism, within which social media operates, lead to users becoming interpellated as brands. It appears to be the case that self-promotion and the idea of a reputation, or attention, economy, are by-products of the commercial environment within which social media beds itself.

On the basis of the evidence presented in the first part of this thesis, it would seem fair to conclude that there are a number of perversions of online identity. I have drawn upon a diverse range of theories to illustrate this point. However, the second half of this thesis's argument has disrupted this narrative. It has probed at the possible manufacturing of these dangers as risky and the predominant use of nonymous social networks, as well as considering the extensive resistance strategies that can be harnessed by social media users, who are far from powerless. In this way, any straightforward conclusion that may have presented itself from the first part of this thesis has been complicated. Through an approach grounded largely in theory, this thesis has aimed to demonstrate the breadth to the debate around online identity. It is

insufficient to simply consider the perversions of online identity, such as anonymity and commercialisation, without giving voice to some of the acts of resistance that refigure this debate. In this way, this thesis has aimed to balance these equally relevant, yet conflicting perspectives against each other. It is likely that these perversions will continue to permeate the social media landscape, however this is not to say that users are without the agency to resist these exploitative forces should they so wish.

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Appendix

LittleGossip

TYPE YOUR UNI, COLLEGE, OFFICE HERE...

+ Add Gossip

Like 0 Tweet 0 Benenden School

Showing results 1 - 10 of 47

Recent
Truthful
Fake

True	False	Text	Leave Comment	Report
0	0	Someone spread gossip about Bex Ross Bex had a baby girl	Leave Comment	Report
1	0	Someone spread gossip about Freya Cramp Who doesn't want to get on this beauty? stunning gal	Leave Comment	Report
0	1	Someone spread gossip about Rave Harris She is so hot, I just want to be her, love this girl so much.	Leave Comment	Report
2	0	Someone spread gossip about troll teacher Ohhh! I am a teacher and I am a troll. My IP was banned. Because I am a stupid.	Leave Comment	Report
5	0	Someone spread gossip about India Mctaggart they should put a mind the gap sign in her disgusting mouth....its full of howitts	Leave Comment	Report

True 0
False 1
 And that's another one out of the closet, this is becoming a common occurrence

True 2
False 3
 Someone spread gossip about [Matt Denley](#) Leave Comment Report
 His sex life is at an all time high... After attending a year 7 disco and slaying every munt there!

True 10
False 4
 Someone spread gossip about [Alex Grieves Jessica Martin](#) Leave Comment Report
 Am sure they are looking forward to there holiday to magaluf, shame they none of the people going with like them. But then what friends do they have to go with?

True 15
False 1
 Someone spread gossip about [All](#) Leave Comment Report
 Moving House football to first saturday back, haven't you ruined the school enough...?

True 18
False 27
 Someone spread gossip about [Johnny Denley](#) Leave Comment Report
 Couldn't make any 'gains' even if he injected creatine up his arse ... gains? more like nutri-grains

Someone commented on the gossip Report
 Hahahaha 'nutrigains' - not funny, gimp.

True 26
False 4
 Someone spread gossip about [Martin Collier](#) Leave Comment Report
 Expelling anyone he fu(king likes. Does anyone fu(king like him. Let's get a new fu(king headmaster!!