



Social-networkers of the world, unite and take over: A meta-introspective perspective on the Facebook brand

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 March 2010

Received in revised form 1 August 2010

Accepted 1 February 2011

Available online 26 March 2011

Keywords:

Introspection
Social networks
Facebook
Life-casting

ABSTRACT

Every marketer knows that the hottest barometers of popular culture are social networking sites like Facebook. Along with other forms of computer mediated communication, they have transformed consumers from silent, isolated and invisible individuals, into a noisy, public, and even more unmanageable than usual, collective. At the same time, grappling with social media strategies has been difficult for many companies. By adopting a meta-introspective approach, this paper attempts to synthesize the insights garnered from a large collection of introspective essays about Facebook penned by the very consumers for whom it was invented. Ultimately, the paper illuminates the dynamics of the Facebook brand, and illustrates how a meta-introspective approach can potentially be of utility to consumer researchers.

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1. You talk, we listen

Now that the terrain of social encounters has shifted into the virtual realm, every marketer knows that the hottest barometers of popular culture are social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter (Holzner, 2009; Shih, 2009). While traditional face-to-face greetings are hardly under threat, they are increasingly appended by a new world of screen-based communication on computers, and increasingly, mobile phones. With four hundred million active users on Facebook (Coudert, 2010), and conservative estimates suggesting that 60% of Americans use social networking sites (Snyder-Bulik, 2009), it is fair to say that most, young people especially, have an insatiable appetite for the social nourishment that these sites provide. Social networkers of the world have become lifecasters who are happy to share the previously private and deeply personal detritus of their lives. They upload movies, photographs, dear diary moments, details of personal triumphs, and the occasional rash comment, blissfully unaware, for the most part, that they are forfeiting ownership of these items, not to mention giving the social networking sites unprecedented access to their political affiliations, consumer preferences (listing favorite music, book, movies and TV shows is common practice), likes and dislikes, fears and prejudices, hopes and dreams (Dumenco, 2009). Little wonder then that marketers are redirecting considerable portions of their marketing spend into social media initiatives.

Until recently, the general approach to marketing communications, despite the rhetoric of relationship marketing, was 'we talk, you listen'. The thrust of typical campaigns or product launches was 'here is the

advert, please absorb its message', or 'here is the product, we hope you like it'. With the advent of social networking this one-sided exchange has been entirely upended, giving rise to a new — 'you talk, we listen' approach (Eisenberg, 2009). Without listing a complete inventory of the new marketing activities this shift in communications has instilled, among other things, consumers have been encouraged by marketers animated by notions like 'Crowdsourcing' (Howe, 2009), to actively contribute to the creation of the brands they admire, perhaps by putting together their own adverts using little more than a webcam and a laptop or by mashing-up or remixing existing ones (Beale, 2009). To this end, the most liked and discussed adverts of the 2010 Super Bowl were all created, or suggested, by consumers rather than professional advertising agencies (Elliott, 2010).

In addition, many companies have engaged with the direct feedback loop of social media. Samsung, as a case in point, has used online consumer reviews of its flat-screen TVs to modify the position of speakers (Klassen, 2009). Some companies have also begun to document their activities using corporate blogs in the hope of engendering a direct relationship with their customers. McDonald's maintains a blog entirely dedicated to its corporate social responsibility policy (Fieseler et al., 2010). Finally, the celebrity brand de jour — Lady Gaga — owes much of her incredible popularity, to the millions of loyal fans that follow her on Facebook and Twitter, where she, and not some imitator or stand-in from the record company, as is often the case, communicates openly and honestly with them, sometimes several times a day. Remarkably, in just 18 months she has surpassed as many milestones of success as that stalwart of pop culture, Madonna, did in a decade (Hampp, 2010).

At the same time, however, consumers have also been quick to pour scorn on the brands that displease them, releasing negative reviews in the blogosphere, and generally causing an almighty public ruckus until

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their particular grievance is given a sympathetic hearing. There are manifold examples of consumer discontent on the web. Virtually every company of international renown has had its fair share of negative postings to combat. Among the most infamous is the 'Dell Hell' story where a single disgruntled customer created a mountain of negative PR and galvanized a community of like-minded Dell haters to share their tales of horrible customer service.

Then there was the salutary lesson for United Airlines who failed to reimburse Dave Carroll, a Canadian singer, when they damaged his Taylor guitar. It was a bad mistake, for the customer slighted was a professional singer and song writer. Following a short interlude, he wrote an amusing song and produced an accompanying video which entertainingly outlined the inconsiderate customer service he had experienced. It went viral on YouTube. As a consequence of the furor, United Airlines lost 10% of its share value and suffered a serious dent to its brand image (Nasaw, 2009). Clearly, in this new consumer-controlled landscape of social networking, blog posting and chat rooms, brands need to tread very carefully lest they ignite a tinderbox of tweets or ferment a group of fuming Facebook friends (Liodice, 2010). Customers then, are no longer passive recipients of product promotions and press releases. Today, more than ever, they are likely to cast a cynical eye over the best efforts of marketers, and if wronged, or offended, they are inclined to fight back with spleen and vitriol, and quickly market this malice through their membership of social networks.

Naturally, these new technologically driven forms of consumer engagement have many marketers seriously worried. No one likes to lose control, least of all marketers who have been charged for decades by a succession of critics most notably the Frankfurt School writers, albeit sometimes unfairly, with manipulating and hoodwinking consumers into buying useless products (Blumberg, 1989; Granter, 2009). So now that the situation is reversed, now that consumers seemingly call the shots, perhaps marketers have had their deserved comeuppance? Delicious irony for critics of capitalism or not, marketers are reeling from the rise of the Twitterati. In addition to suffering the humiliating indignation of having their best efforts bettered by inexperienced and amateur consumer ad creators, they are so concerned about the potential damage to their brands, that a new industry which monitors the online chatter surrounding a particular brand and offers suggestions to counter any negative publicity has arisen. Using these techniques brands have made progress in listening to and conversing with their customers. Drinks Company, Red Bull, has already collected almost 1.5 million fans on Facebook by providing a steady stream of interesting articles, videos and audio content focused around the activities of their sponsored athletes and musical acts (Neff, 2010a). Despite such pioneering initiatives, it is true to say that many marketers hoping to garner consumer opinion on their brand, all too often ignore the readily available consumer discourse on Facebook, Twitter and online review sites, in favor of commissioned survey research (Neff, 2010b).

Furthermore, existing attempts to monitor online brand conversations, worthwhile though they undoubtedly are, tend to be based on simple quantitative counts of how many times a brand has been mentioned. An exception perhaps is the market research firm Motive-Quest, which has developed an interesting approach involving the analysis of terabytes of social media data in order to create what it describes as a 'general mood data set', augmented with snippets from actual posts (Eisenburg, 2009). So while marketers are beginning to make use of social networking as a platform for exchanging opinions and comments, they tend to do so, on a piecemeal basis. Certainly few of these existing approaches advocate a deeper or consensual understanding of the discourse posted on social networking sites through, for instance, textual analysis, and rarely do they engage with the original consumer following publication of their comments, or acquire direct permission to mine the data. The exception to this rule is the growing body of netnographic consumer research championed by Kozinets (2009). In fact, he actually acknowledges the potential of auto-ethnography, a methodology similar to introspection, as a means to study online communities,

since it offers "a more participative and autobiographical style of netnography that attends more closely to first hand personal reflection" (Kozinets, 2009, p. 181).

This paper attempts to address this oversight by using a meta-introspective approach to analyze the almighty brand community that is Facebook. The paper will begin by presenting some background information about the rise of Facebook. It will proceed with a brief elaboration of the introspective method, and then present the common themes that emerge from the collected data set. In doing so, a narrative framework that links the themes together, while at the same time, recounting the meaning and significance of Facebook in relation to the social identities and social practices of the consumers that use the site, will also be constructed. Ultimately, the paper, not only illustrates the merit of meta-introspective projects, but also challenges the dominant social networking narrative predicated on increased connectivity and communication.

2. Facebook facts

With much the same mindset as millions of other male Facebookers that would eventually register as members, Zuckerberg, had one thing on his mind back in 2004 when he invented Facebook – using it as a tool to woo women (Kimberley, 2009). Needless to say, he has now achieved this aim, and in the process created what is currently ranked as the fourth most popular website in the world. It is the number one social networking website in most countries, except in China (where it is predictably banned) and in Spain which is surpassed only by the indigenous, Tuenti. Nonetheless, Facebook's growth has been truly astonishing. Its ubiquity is so universal that not having a Facebook profile can label anyone under thirty as a technologically-challenged, backward-thinking, cave-dwelling nobody. Not to be on Facebook, is not to exist, so it seems. The site's sheer popularity is also a self-perpetuating, self-sustaining process, for as its membership balloons, and more and more members coalesce and connect, the site becomes increasingly useful. Thus like the gravitational field of a large planet, it literally pulls people into its orbit. If ever there was a contemporary illustration of Gladwell's (2000) tipping point thesis, Facebook is it. And contrary to recent reports, when it comes to revenue generation, the site's income is in fact worth Twittering about. Thanks, in the main, to the extremely targeted advertising it provides to brands, projections suggest that the company made 635 million dollars in 2009 – and could be set to make 1.1 billion dollars by the end of 2010 (Johnson, 2010).

For such a brand behemoth, Facebook has surprisingly few employees: just over a thousand or so (Dumenco, 2010). This, of course, is because, the site content is almost entirely consumer created. For the uninitiated, the types of activities consumers engage with can be categorized as follows.

- *Status Updates* are short public declarations in response to that question that Facebook perennially asks when you log in: "What's On Your Mind?" Some people never announce anything; others update their status by the hour.
- *Facebook Messages* are essentially like emails, just that they automatically link the message to the profile of the sender which omits the need for long introductions. On University campuses across America and Europe, Facebook messages are swiftly becoming the preferred means of communication. E-mail still gets used, though, only to check one's Facebook notifications and to communicate with "grown-ups," professors, potential employers and the like (Shih, 2009).
- *Facebook Wall Posts* are publicly broadcast messages that appear not only on the recipient's profile page "wall" but are also inserted into the News Feed. Commonly, these are used to congratulate, wish happy birthday, or share other newsworthy items.
- *Facebook Pokes* are a playful Facebook element that simply reminds someone that you exist. There is no content, just notification that you have a poke. The only thing to do in return is either poke back, ignore it or contact the person by another mechanism.

- *Commenting* is enabled on every single news item on Facebook such as a friend's photograph, a status update, a change in their relationship status and so on.
- *Games and Other Applications* available to use on Facebook, which are developed by external companies, number well in the thousands. Creating such an application is so popular that there is even a Dummies guide to the subject (Wagner, 2008). Applications allow users to do a multitude of things like take quizzes, such as 'Which Disney character are you?' or 'Pick your top five celebrities', in addition to throwing virtual sheep, sending virtual cupcakes, giving virtual hugs, and playing Scrabble (Shih, 2009).

3. Contemplating the inner consumption experience

The ideal methodology to investigate a social networking site that continually asks its members, 'what is on your mind?', and that continually asks them to externalize their thoughts would surely be introspectively inclined. Needless to say, in the discipline of marketing and consumer research, still dominated by fundamentalists who believe that their scientific methodological outlook is the only academically viable path a credible researcher can tread, convincing them of introspection's merits is difficult, if not impossible (see Wallendorf and Brucks, 1993). This is hardly surprising in light of that small matter, the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century, which according to Mathews (2005 p. 8) inculcated a thoroughly secular view of empirical reality across all academic disciplines, such that "The object of our observations is expected to unfold in a lawlike way, undisrupted by dialogue with its observers or eruptions of poetic self-disclosure or promptings of inner will." Scientific revolution aside, all trustworthy research efforts thus militate against moments of transcendent understanding that various authors have described in their own terms. For Virginia Woolf, it was a "moment of being"; for James Joyce, an "epiphany"; Ezra Pound, a "magic moment"; Walter Benjamin, "shock"; and for T. S. Eliot, the "still point of the turning world" (Olson, 2009). Introspection then, hamstrung with what most scientific scholars, and indeed consumer culture theorists, would consider a too small sample, never had a chance, which is a shame given its inherent potential to capture the transcendental moment (Gould, 1991; Brown, 1998).

Nonetheless with the launch of this special issue, and a rejuvenated interest in the subject in psychology and consciousness studies, perhaps the contemplation of the inner consumption experience through the primacy of introspective data does have a place in consumer research. The way that this paper proposes to use introspective data is no more contentious than employing multiple interview transcripts to construct an empirical paper. The basic methodology is similar to protocol or cognitive response, which according to Gould (1999, p 468), involves having a person "state or report thoughts and various aspects of cognitive processing concurrently or retrospectively." It will thus use introspective accounts much like in-depth interviews or reader response, where a researcher solicits numerous introspections in order to analyze them as one would in any qualitative data set (Brown and Reid, 1997; Patterson et al., 1998; Patterson, 2005; Baron et al., 2007).

To further this aim, 134 individuals were recruited, each of whom are considerably closer to the epicenter of the phenomenon than most, given that the website was originally designed for their exclusive delectation. Each of them was an active member of the Facebook community prior to the beginning of this study. These undergraduates were asked to write introspective essays about their relationship with the Facebook brand in the hope of discovering "personal experience unknowable to anyone else" (Stern, 2000, p. 72). The degree of instruction provided to the respondents by the researcher was quite limited. By way of preparation, they attended a lecture outlining the history, purpose and potential of introspective research. Examples of other introspective projects, unrelated to this study, were also made available in order to help them better understand the nature of the task. They understood that they were not to eschew reflexivity but to embrace it, and that the purpose of their

introspection was to textually articulate either concurrently or retrospectively their thoughts on Facebook. Beyond that they were given few direct instructions about what elements of that usage should be included or excluded, accentuated or minimized, praised or criticized. In respect of the time period for data gathering, students were told to reflect on their interaction with the site for a period of two weeks using it just as they normally would. Priming or training students to be especially attentive to certain cues was felt unnecessary, and indeed would have been inimical to the open-ended, creative and idiosyncratic nature of introspective research. The students had complete sovereignty to judge the Facebook experience as they saw fit, using whatever criteria they liked.

In total 409 pages of introspective text were collected. Analyzing the data set was a matter of combining my theoretical focus on Facebook alongside the usual tractable conventions of netnographic research (Kozinets, 2009). It involved four stages. First, each introspection was read and reread. Sections of the written introspections that seemed commonplace were extracted and pasted into separate files. Second, the emergent first-order themes were grouped together to see if any second or third order themes were evident. As a rough rule of thumb each first-order theme contained a significant number of entries. At the third stage, I made a preliminary categorization of these themes, on a paragraph-by-paragraph basis, guided by the literatures on social networking and Facebook, and the principal message of the textual passage. Finally, by carefully reviewing the applicability of each data set, I settled on a final choice of themes and selected introspective extracts to illustrate each of them. The themes that emerged through this process relate to Facebook addiction, personal branding, Facebook stalking and brand relationships.

The principal advantage of employing this meta-introspective approach is that casting numerous introspective perspectives over a marketing phenomenon allows scope for capturing different subjective responses, rather than relying on a solitary perspective. The term meta-introspection is analogous to the notion of a meta-analysis, but whereas a meta-analysis or meta-ethnography is concerned with synthesizing studies written by different researchers, the goal of a meta-introspective approach is purely to synthesize the multiple insights garnered from the individual introspective essays commissioned purely for this project. It involves culling information from the multiple introspections and providing a layer of interpretation in the form of an overarching narrative. Following this approach methodologically grounds the findings and provides additional rigor that other introspective studies cannot claim.

To further complement the framing narrative which presents the main themes of the student introspections, the paper also includes a researcher introspection (see Table 1.1). The purpose of including this reflexive section is simply to acknowledge that the researcher writing these words, the 'I' of this article, is not an intangible abstraction but is instead a participant in the Facebook community himself. Writing this introspective mini-essay helps situate my "self" within the research since it reveals the prejudices and values that help create the text. It also demonstrates that this project is not just about conducting research *on* people; it is about conducting research *with* people (Thomson, 1997).

4. Looking at Facebooking

Analyzing the Facebook introspections, crafted by my students was an enlightening and eye-opening experience. Aside, from a few errant efforts that failed to fully grasp the introspective mode, the overwhelming majority of introspectees, wrote entertaining, vivid and insightful accounts detailing their relationship with Facebook. It is easy to forget too that this generation of students were mostly born after 1990, so computer-mediated communication has always been an essential part of their lives. They are, in effect, digital natives. It is highly probable, for instance, that their first date was arranged online, and that they have already communicated with a multitude of friends in the virtual environment long before Facebook ever came along, so its arrival readily slotted into and complemented their existing pattern of online behavior. Certainly, their enthusiastic embrace of the

Table 1

Researcher introspection: You know it's all about me.

Yes, my face is on Facebook too. I enjoy telling my students that I'm an incredibly popular Facebooker, before revealing what I think is a great punchline, "I have five friends, with three pending." Ta, da! It rarely musters more than a few faint smiles, but I insist on retelling the joke every year. The truth is, though, that I have about 130 friends, slightly less than the average punter, and many of them, I would happily delete just to get a BK whopper, or just for the hell of it. I'm not sure why I keep so many of them as friends, these onetime acquaintances, these throwbacks to childhood, these complete unknowns that I can barely remember adding. I know I'm long overdue a pal purge. But I'm reluctant to do so, since it might make me look less popular, less in with the in-crowd.

While I'm never more than a click away from my Facebook account, and happily admit that I login several times a day, each and every day, in work, at home, in transit on my phone, I'm still a Facebook tourist compared with my in-the-thick-of-it students. I'm not a proactive participator, broadcasting my news to the world and its sister. I'm a reactor. I'm aware I badly need a new profile pic. The last one I uploaded was over a year ago. I don't, in normal circumstances, go looking for more friends to add (though I have suffered the indignity of having my friendship request rejected). My profile is deliberately incomplete. I list very few details of my personal preferences. I never ever use the chat function, preferring to be shown as offline, even when I'm online. I never allow an application to access my details, regardless of the friendship status of the invitee. I think part of my rationale for not participating too much is my personal theory that a Facebook member's activity is inversely proportional to a person's state of well being and contentment. Thereby, the more posts you make, the less happy you are. Nonetheless, if someone writes on my wall, I'll usually respond, or adds a comment to one of my very few pictures, I'd thank them for their kind or witty observation, while carefully crafting an equally humorous reply. I find the few people who care enough to publicly interact with me, to be very supportive and kind, and never malicious, just mildly deprecating in the way that friends often are. There are rare occasions when I will be proactive and participate, when I feel moved enough to engage in a conversation. I have been known, for instance, to discuss a movie recommendation or a web link to an interesting news story. What is more, when I travel somewhere exotic or distant, I sometimes announce where I'm going. Unfailingly, someone replies expressing mock jealousy at my enviable international lifestyle, and I feel pleased and vindicated that I made the post in the first place. If someone announces the death of a loved one or has the need of a shoulder to cry on, I'll sometimes, if I know them well enough, offer a comforting word or two. My key aim in these exchanges is to always come off smelling of roses.

A small portion of my Facebook activity goes on beneath the radar of my so-called friends, in the private world of the Facebook messaging service, that massive submerged portion of the social networking iceberg that no one beyond the sender and recipient can access. Sometimes people send me private messages that essentially amount to long e-mails, and if inclined, I respond in kind. Sometimes good things come from these exchanges that spill over into my real world. I have had several dates and relationships that initially burgeoned on Facebook. And, of course, while these secret messages are passing to and fro, the rest of the Facebook community remains entirely oblivious to my activity, and that is just the way I like it. There are things, which I still get up to that I don't want either the wider Facebook community, or indeed my mum who is also a Facebook friend, to know about. For the most part though, I'm a participant observer. I get considerable enjoyment out of reading or seeing the lives of my friends unfold, seeing their latest photographs, hearing about their escapades, and reading their ridiculous posts. Often I'll ring up my non-virtual friend, Damian, who is not a Facebook member, and tell him about a story I garnered from the site, some piece of salacious gossip, some uncompromising photograph or someone we know or whatever. And helpfully Facebook seems to know who I'm interested in, and tends to highlight my newsfeed with updates from these people, rather than from the people I'm less attached to, either that or my inbuilt gossip aggregator does it for me. And I'm also a fan of some brands. One in particular, Dragon Naturally Speaking, periodically posts great little stories which I enjoy reading, about innovative ways their products have helped people to improve the quality of their lives. So yeah, there is much on Facebook that keeps me revisiting, refreshing, constantly refreshing, several times a day.

For all its hooks, there is also much that niggles about the site. The constant makeovers it undergoes are a particular bugbear. The attempts Facebook makes to get me to create content: the entire site, after all, is consumer-created. I especially dislike the constant prods to help other less active users find more friends, or alternatively to add the friends suggested by the site simply because 5 of my other friends have 'friended' this same person. Another annoyance is with the content itself. I hate that all the attractive girls have an identikit set of photographs of themselves on holiday in Egypt smiling serenely beside a 6 foot something charmer; I hate that the most active users make the most inane pronouncements; I hate, for instance, that one of my friends has literally just announced that she is "currently wearing jimmy jams, sipping pink champagne in a lovely hotel room"; and I could go on. The biggest irritant of all, however, is that Facebook has begun to intrude on everyday events. No one, it seems, can climb a mountain, go out for a night out, take a snowboarding lesson, eat a meal, or do anything remotely cool without stopping midway during the activity to either broadcast the event immediately online or record footage and take photographs with the view to uploading them later. It seems to me that the immediacy of the event, the sheer enjoyment of being in the moment is being ruined by obtrusive and self-conscious attempts to record the moment, and upload it for all. It is as if the uploading of the event is more important than the event itself. As if the actual event is nothing more than an opportunity to publicly sell the self on any given social networking platform.

site underscores how well it equated with their consumer needs. They took to it like proverbial ducks to water, and quickly found it an extremely useful utility, as the quotes below demonstrate:

Facebook is my connection to everyone and everything. It keeps me organized, reminds me of events and most importantly reminds me when to send out those previously often forgotten birthday wishes. Essentially, Facebook has managed to cut down my phone bills, help me with assignments, keep me informed, and remind me when to be where. (Female 22)

My relationship with Facebook began a few years ago when I was living in Mexico. I was there as a missionary for two years and my main form of communication with my family and friends back home was email; however I was then introduced to Facebook. The ability to post photos, send emails and videos in one easy to use website was so appealing that I soon stopped using Hotmail altogether (unless it was to check on whether I had any new notifications). (Male 18)

4.1. Addiction

Nonetheless, the most striking theme to initially emerge was how deeply immured, how intractably integrated Facebook had become in each of their lives. To say that many of them displayed symptoms of near psychotic dependence on Facebook akin to that of a drug addict, would not be to overstate the case. The site's addictive nature was specifically mentioned no less than 131 times in the data set. Getting a daily, hourly, even minute by minute, Facebook fix was incredibly important as the following extracts attest:

I was soon logging on daily (maybe out of pure boredom too) to check how many friend requests, messages or events I'd got, often refreshing the page every minute to see if I had an update. I had become addicted. My inbox was inundated with emails from Facebook informing me someone has left me a message, or I had been invited to an event. I couldn't wait any longer I found myself waiting in anticipation for the page to load which just added to the excitement of what it could say. The buzz of receiving friend requests, messages and event invitations is indescribable and when you log on and see it reads "6 friend requests"; it sends a shoot of popularity through your veins. The questions start popping into your head 'who is it? I wonder who they know. What do they look like?' This Facebook phenomenon was worsened when Facebook was introduced onto your mobile, I found myself checking my Facebook near about anywhere: the bus; lectures; on nights out and before I went to bed. (Male 19)

I am that addicted that I actually do not do anything outside the computer screen except being on Facebook. It has become a big part of my life because if you go onto my page, you'll get to know me well very quickly as I have about 800–900 pictures on my page. Facebook has changed me for the worst than before, when if I do not use my computer I would just switch it off. Now I leave it on 24/7 without ever really switching my computer off unless it has malfunctioned. I would keep refreshing the page to see the updates my friends have and to see my own notifications as well. (Female 21)

I admit I am one of those constant Facebookers who have it minimised in their taskbars almost 24 hours a day, alongside BBC iplayer, itunes and an important assignment in Microsoft Word. The urge is constantly there for one to refresh the Facebook homepage for the 11th time that hour to see who's written on who's wall and who's statuses are different to what they were a whole three minutes ago. It's got to the unfortunate point at which I hear the Facebook chat pop sound when I'm not even in the vicinity of a computer. (Male 20)

What is more when they were not on Facebook, they were most probably talking about Facebook. Maybe discussing a conversation they

previously had with someone online, laughing about pictures from nights out, or talking about an upcoming event that has been posted on Facebook. As one girl states: “When friends come over, each and every one of them asks ‘can I check my Facebook?’ And by checking I mean that they spend the next couple of hours amusing themselves. So much for them coming over!” That these introspectees were so imbibed in social media is in keeping with the findings of other recent reports on social media usage.

According to Snyder-Bulik (2009), the average social networker visits social sites five days a week and checks in about four times a day for a total of an hour each day. A super-connected 9% are permanently logged in and are continually checking out what is happening. This inordinate amount of time spent on Facebook, caused many introspectees, despite the overwhelming need to visit the site, to acknowledge that it is a tremendous waste of time that distracts them from real world activities. Facebook caused them to be less productive, and ironically, less social. Facebook becomes not so much about networking as not-working, as the following introspective extracts illustrate:

It's an almighty distraction from any form of university work or revision. I find that I try my hardest to write about the development issues currently existing in Latin America but all of a sudden I stop. I had better, after all, see if Nick has replied to the message I sent him 5 minutes ago, I begin to think, and more often than not it is what I end up doing. And I end up doing this 6 times an hour (that's an average of 1 every 10 minutes!) (Male 18)

I think Facebook can be a drain of time and a huge distraction as when revising or researching (like I have been doing for this introspection) you find yourself having a quick check on Facebook to see if you've got any new messages or notifications, and BANG...your distracted and off on an aimless journey of waste. I also don't like the fact that it is very distracting, there is even a Facebook group that says – “I started doing homework and ended up on Facebook” which is very true! (Female 19)

Once I click on one thing I just can't stop. One thing always leads to another, it's such a distraction. Every time I sit down to do coursework or essays I do everything in my power to put it off, being on the computer alone is a start, so one look at face book won't hurt or so you think. Well, it become such a distraction to me that it actually became quite annoying. That is why I took the bold step of deactivating my account and no longer be a part of Facebook. Fifteen minutes later I reactivated it. Damn. (Female 18)

4.2. Personal branding

A startling Facebook preoccupation, aside from the expected checking up on friends, sending them private messages, writing on their wall, chatting with them, or playing games and applications with them, is the very conscious and deliberate act of marketing, selling or branding one's self to the network of friends at one level and then to the wider world at another. Interestingly, one popular application called, “Buy Your Friends”, has friends playfully bidding on each other's monetary worth. Further, it does appear that most of the introspectees invest substantial effort into the careful and considered construction of their social network personas.

On a positive note these personas give them a considerable satisfaction when they are well-received, as one girl comments: “Since the introduction of social networking, we have been given the ability to be whoever we want. There are no accents, skin colors, wrinkles, or unsightly fat formations attached to our online persona, or there should not be so long as you know how to photoshop and detag.” More negatively, such elaborate micro-managing of self-image, causes considerable anxiety in respect of what conclusions people might draw by exploring your profile and how they might pass judgment upon you. In

keeping with this theme, Angelopoulos (2010, p. 65) argues that “virtual life is less about connectivity than self-branding...Paranoid about how we'll be perceived, we spend hour after hour trying to avoid the virtual consequences of being uncool.” Considerable evidence among the introspections confirms that Facebook does encourage a heightened individualism, since many profiles are as calculated as an advertising image:

I do genuinely believe that some people from their profile pages take social networking to be so dressed and serious, with every last articulate detail carefully sculptured in order for others to preview their image in the way they want. When I first logged in the first task was to leave the brand of social reject behind and get away from the zero friends status displayed on my page. (Female 21)

I'm the optimum social being, an artist that can paint his Facebook canvas today, any day, with whatever shade and content I see fit. With every character created, companions and foes alike will be stunned; with murmurs of my tales spreading to foreign groups and chat conversations of the heavens I have lived and of the perils I have endured; people shall gaze down upon my profile page with envious eyes, digesting my legacy, one wall comment at a time, through the global phenomena of Facebook. (Male 18)

I do confess to pitching myself and selling the Healey brand; using photos, comments and status updates to remain popular within certain spheres of influence i.e. getting one over on the ex. Users are frequently guilty of packaging themselves misleadingly to as a far greater entity and more exciting than what they perhaps are. Profile pages represent this front and can be manipulated for individual discretion; the removal of floors and blemishes upon profiles is simple with the delete feature whilst valuable comments from popular figures or photos can be easily highlighted. (Male 20)

Most people have hundreds of photos of themselves on their profile, an accumulation of what they've been doing for the past few years, with the option of de-tagging you can create the perfect image of your life and project this fun happy outgoing and popular version of yourself to the rest of your friends. (Female 22)

Facebook then is a curious medium. On the surface, it purports to be principally about building relationships with so-called friends, but actually a considerable portion of a user's attention is concentrated on the narcissistic cultivation of self. Hipps (2010: 73) insightfully notes that Facebook, in effect, is “a mirror masquerading as a window.”

4.3. Facebook stalking

Another popular activity on Facebook, which also contradicts the dominant social networking narrative of increased connectivity and communication, is the cyber stalking that almost every introspectee confesses they regularly practice. Other studies on Facebook, using different qualitative methods were, in the main, unable to prise this admission from participants (see: Lewis and West, 2009; Ito, 2010). This unwillingness to directly admit to such reprehensible behavior is perhaps understandable, given that in the real world stalking is tantamount to standing outside someone's house in the middle of the night, skulking in undergrowth with only a pair of binoculars and a freshly retrieved pair of underpants retrieved from the subject's washing line for company. Yet somehow introspection, perhaps by dint of its confessional nature, its private construction far removed from the judgmental influence of the lead researcher, was capable of garnering a welter of such confessions. In total, 112 introspectees admitted they were profile stalkers. On this practice, some of the most articulate had this to say:

Facebook is a particularly good stalking mechanism. Let me explain. You log in and all of a sudden you see that your boyfriend has written on another girl's wall. You check her picture out, typical pose with the

visible arm holding the camera and that awful pout. All of a sudden you've worked out how old she is (her birthday is displayed on her profile), where she works, and that she's a fan of Calvin from Hollyoaks. Next thing you're checking what he's written on her wall and the exact times the posts were made. You then see that she's a friend of that girl you went to school with. She was one of those girls who you knew would get pregnant as soon as she left school and end up living in a council house with four illegitimate children. (Female 19)

The truth is that I quite enjoy being nosy, I think most people do. Facebook provides us with the perfect opportunity to be nosy. There is something quite enjoyable about the so called — Facebook stalking. Although it sounds extreme it's not that bad, I promise. I find myself looking at random people's profiles and pictures on a regular basis just to pass time. I often convince myself that it needs to be done and I often do this instead of important things like work. (Female 21)

I can stalk anyone if I really want to. It is sometimes fun to spy on your friends, or even your enemies and form judgmental opinions of them in your mind. If I see the News-Feed about people I do not particularly like, it can completely ruin my day — especially if they were to have news which would make me envious. There are other occasions when I don't feel it is appropriate to become Facebook friends with someone but I do want to find out more about them. I guess this is a bit stalker-ish but when you're stuck in your small, study bedroom with a pile of seminar reading to do it seems much less stalker-ish and far more appealing. Distracting questions such as 'I wonder who my boyfriend's newest friend is? or what does my friend's new girlfriend or boyfriend look like?' lead me to load up that famous blue and white screen once again. (Female 18)

4.4. Brand relationships

Interestingly, over half of the social networking introspectees had 'friended' or become a fan of at least one brand, and it is in these forums that dialogue frequently takes place between customer to customer or between customer to brand manager. Such digital relationships while in the grander scheme of a consumer's life might seem relatively unimportant, but for marketers are crucial in breaking down customer cynicism and building genuine relationships.

I have become a fan of a lot of brands like Nike, Ryanair, Mariah Carey, Italy, and Coke. This allows me to receive up-to-date promotions, products or contests and, to be honest, I am one of the consumers who like to catch up with such promotions. Recently, on Facebook I managed to get an O2 sim card with unlimited text between O2 users. So that Facebook has created a market where consumers and producers can meet up is great news for me. The marketers scratch my back by giving me free promotions, and in turn I allow them to understand a bit about more about me and my habits. Seems like a fair enough trade. (Male 20)

The groups you join can vary from being a fan of football team, the guest list for a new club, right through to a petition to reintroduce the life sentence for first degree murders. I have gained some benefits from joining particular groups. This includes receiving the rota for the forthcoming week in work, information on the forthcoming fixture for the university sports team, links to download new songs for free and invites to be on the guest list for a night out. (Male 19)

Back to the homepage I go, and I notice that I have one new update. These are not as common as the annoying event invitations, so I am actually intrigued as to what it is. I find out that it is from Oasis, saying they were winners of two NME awards on Wednesday night. I am actually a big Oasis fan, having seen them in concert twice and

going to my third concert this June, so I actually click on the link and read the news story. For once I have something that is actually of interest of me, and for that I am glad I decided to go on Facebook today. (Female 19)

5. Discussion

This introspective analysis of the Facebook brand plainly illustrates how without the input of consumers, this virtual brand is little more than an empty shell of virtual nothingness. Branding textbooks inform us, of course, that such a statement is true for all brands, rolling out in the process that old cliché about how if every single one of Coca-Cola's bottling plants were destroyed the company would still be worth billions because of that cerebral foothold the brand has established in the collective consumer psyche (Feldwick, 1996). Nonetheless, brands like Facebook take this notion of consumer involvement to the nth degree.

Arvidsson (2006, p. 95) in his discussion of online brands, explains it well, when he claims they offer: "a virtual promise or anticipation, to be actualized by the active involvement of consumers themselves. In their ongoing production of a common, consumers create the actual value of the brand: its share in meaningful experiences, its connection to social identities or forms of identity". This paper demonstrates how Facebook has become the emblem par excellence of such consumer involvement.

Facebook, what is more, has expertly managed to tap into it our contemporary obsession with true life confessions. The intrinsically confessional literary genres of autobiography, biography, memoir and diary, for instance, are achieving record sales and frequently top the best seller lists. St. Augustine of Hippo, of course, was confessing his sins long before the start of the present millennium. Nevertheless, this ruminative inclination seems particularly strongly marked in this age of late-capitalist consumerism where revelations about the private lives of celebrities are routine and confessional practices are ever more commonplace. Our contemporary need for self-obsessive self-expression, an innate desire that Senior (1994, p.28) calls, "the universalization of the obligation to confess", thus seems to have found a perfect mode of expression in the forum of social networking.

Aside from exploiting this confessional vein, what else does Facebook offer? An impoverished or enriched social life? The jury is still out on this one. True, the sentiment expressed by the following introspectees was commonly held:

We no longer need to pick up the phone, or hang out at the pub, because it's all being replaced by one little click of the mouse. Not only have we come to depend on Facebook as a means of communication, networking, socializing, flaunting, and even revenge, but we have lost sight of the fine line between the world of Facebook, and the reality we chose to ignore when we hit the dreaded, yet absolutely essential log in button. (Female 20)

We find ourselves sat looking over peoples profiles looking over carefully crafted photography of nights out that will be forever remembered not for the fun captured within the photos, but for the assembly of the photos and the effort required to get a collection together that would make other Facebook members jealous of their absence. We create these little artificial lives for ourselves and devote so much of our efforts to updating them that we sometimes forget to live. (Male 18)

Furthermore the strength of the actual relationships developed on Facebook was also questioned. Others too have argued that social networking sites foster pseudo-relationships and that the actual "appeal of social networking sites is the ability to simultaneously have hundreds of "friends" without actually risking the emotional investment of a real

human relationship” (Jethani, 2009, p. 145), as the quote below makes all too apparent:

Ten friends very quickly cultivate to two hundred and the connections for which you first joined the site to uphold, become lost within a sea of faces. These faces are very varied in origin, those that you have passed on the street, met on nights out and even those that bare no recognition. You are reconciled with old school acquaintances that at first it would seem nice to keep in touch and become re-acquainted, however very quickly you are reminded of the reason why you held no further contact as you have very little in common and have nothing to say to each other. (Female 18)

But these downsides could equally be offset by manifold introspective extracts, detailing how astonishingly useful the site is to its users in terms of its convenience, entertainment value, and one-stop shop nature. It is hard to disagree with Bloom's (2009, p. 36) contention that, “Life is just better here. I can consolidate myself into quotes, groups and pictures. I can form opinions of people or, more importantly, see how good looking they are before I meet them.” Moreover social network sites are more commonly thought of as merely an extension of the physical world, not a replacement. They provide opportunities to complement existing real world behavior, which is why what is held to be most important in the Facebook world often has an impact in the real one (Palfrey and Gasser, 2008). Consider how important the Facebook declaration that a relationship has become official is to the reality of people's lives:

Firstly ‘it's not official until its on Facebook’, this seems like a stupid saying, but it's actually quite a big step. Telling everybody you have a boyfriend, taking all the comments on what your friends have to say about him/her, letting all those people who you sort of flirt on and off with know that is not going to be happening anymore, and most of all, that you think it is going to work with this person for a substantial amount of time. Because for me, changing my status from relationship to single, receiving sympathy texts or messages from people wanting to know why your back together, gets a little tiring. So to announce that you are ‘in a relationship’, you have to believe that it is going to stay like that for a while, and that when it does go back to single, the sympathy texts will be appreciated. (Female 18)

6.1 Facebooked your mom

Facebook is definitely not just a fad that will quickly pass. Though it has only been around for half a decade or so, it has quickly found a prominent position in popular culture, such that alongside obligatory membership of the Facebook site, phrases like ‘I Facebooked Your Mom!’ have already entered popular parlance, at least among the demographic this paper centers upon. According to Gere (2008, p.9) these dramatic changes in consumer behavior initiated by Facebook and other social networking sites, “are in the process of transforming not just our world, but our very selves, how we understand who we are.” Crucially, for marketers, such behaviors have transformed consumers from silent, isolated and invisible individuals, into a noisy, public, and even more unmanageable than usual, collective (Jenkins, 2006).

Facebookers of the world will undoubtedly continue to comment, chat and consume and orgy of user-generated content, creating what Arvidsson (2006, p. 96) dubs a form of “non-hierarchical participatory engagement” that seems set, despite fears about privacy and the prospect of youthful indiscretions coming back to haunt us, to grow exponentially, year on year (Leadbeater, 2009). The new reality is that consumers are using virtual forms of community to form their own people-powered social and global transformation which is in open rebellion to advertising and corporate speak (Chaney, 2009). As a consequence of this recent consumer democracy, marketers will be challenged like never before to win business. Perhaps then in an age where inner experience and introspective studies are becoming increasingly valued, and where the

sizable data sets from social media sites are so diverse, and seemingly without pattern (Learnmouth, 2009), the meta-introspective approach, could be of some utility.

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**Fonte: Journal of Business Research , Vol. 65, Issue 4, p. 527-534, Apr. 2012. [Base de Dados].
Disponível em: <<http://www.sciencedirect.com>>. Acesso em: 23 Apr. 2012.**

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