

**ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKING: REFLECTIONS ON SOCIAL  
RELATIONS AMONGST A GROUP OF STUDENTS, UNIVERSITY OF  
THE FREE STATE, BLOEMFONTEIN**

by

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## **DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that this dissertation submitted in completion of the degree Magister Societatis Scientiae (Sociology) at the University of the Free State is my own, original work and has not been submitted previously at another university, faculty or department.

I furthermore concede copyright of this dissertation to the University of the Free State.

Sello Jan Sele



Bloemfontein, South Africa

December 2017

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this dissertation to MYSELF, for I started this walk and finished it; I upheld positivity, diligence and self-esteem at all times, conquered fear, despair and challenges faced. Tanki **'Mzhlana'**!

## **SUMMARY**

Online social networking (OSN) as an activity carried out through social network sites (SNS) is without a doubt, a predominant interaction mechanism which best characterises the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The advent of SNS has acutely penetrated almost all areas of our social and professional lives. Thus, SNS are woven inextricably into the fabric of individuals' everyday lives, most especially the lives of students. This study therefore aims to broaden an understanding on how the students of the University of the Free State (UFS), Bloemfontein campus perceive, feel, experience, respond to, and make sense of the interactions and social relations via OSN in their everyday lives. Various sociological theories are applied to make sense of the participants' lived experiences within the context of OSN.

Three theoretical frameworks are used in this study: phenomenology, existentialism and reflexive sociology. Phenomenology assists in looking at how the target population makes sense of the OSN activities both on subjective and intersubjective levels. This theoretical framework is also concerned with how individuals construct reality within their lifeworlds — the OSN realm in this case. When taking a look at existentialism, the emphasis is more on the issues associated with the role of affect and a human's sense of self in society. This theory sheds light on how emotions are expressed through SNS and how the users assert their individual identities in these virtual spaces. Moreover, reflexive sociology is the theory which seeks to bring together the aspects of objective and subjective approaches in studying social reality. This theory rejects the sociological paradigms which overemphasise the importance of either the objective or subjective dimension of phenomena while the other dimension is downplayed. Hence, this study explores both the objective and subjective aspects of OSN in order to broaden an understanding thereof.

This study assumes a mixed methods approach to social inquiry — both quantitative and qualitative approaches were used to collect, analyse and present the data. Although this research adopts a mixed methods approach, it is predominantly interpretive. Aspects of a quantitative design serves two main functions in this study: firstly, this method was used as a means to lead to appropriate recruitment of the sample for one-on-one interviews. Secondly, it is used to back-up the qualitative data. A quantitative survey as the first phase of data collection was conducted among 100 (50 respondents for each gender) students of the UFS to which closed-ended questionnaires were administered. In-depth interviews as the second phase of data collection were conducted on 6 participants. Audio-recording devices were used as data collection instruments for participants' narratives. Lastly, a focus group was conducted on 4

participants selected from those who participated in the individual interviews. Before the data were collected, approval letters from the UFS Ethics Committee within the Faculty of Humanities and relevant university authorities were obtained.

The findings presented in this study are based on both quantitative (chapter 4) and qualitative (chapter 5) analyses. However, more attention is dedicated to the qualitative aspect of this study as it is considered to be the cornerstone of this research. Amongst the most important variables measured, as presented in chapter 4, is the time spent on SNS by student respondents. The results indicate that the respondents spend a considerable amount of time online. The statistical data also reveal that the most preferred SNS by the respondents are WhatsApp and Facebook — presumably the sites where students spend a lot of time.

When looking at the qualitative findings, a common sentiment amongst the participants regarding their involvement in SNS is that they cannot imagine their lives without these online platforms. They believe that OSN is the most effective tool for social interaction in their lifetime. When coming to the issue of identity, most participants claim that the identities they portray online are different from the ones they portray in real life. Thus SNS allow them to be autonomous over their projected identities. Although participants interact and construct relations through open SNS such as Facebook and Twitter, some of them strongly disregard interacting with strangers they come across in those SNS. Their disapproval of interacting with strangers stems from past personal experiences (undesirable) with strangers. Moreover, the participants also express a great deal of knowledge and experience regarding the ramifications that come with SNS. These repercussions are related to identity theft, defamation of character, hackings and online victimisation.

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## **KEY WORDS**

Phenomenology

Existential phenomenology

Reflexive sociology

Lifeworld

Mixed methods approach

Online social networking (OSN)

Social network sites (SNS)

Social interaction

Social support

Identity

## INTRODUCTION

The topic of social change has long been of interest to most sociologists. Social change can take its course on different social institutions, including technology. The world has seen a heightened advancement in technology since the 20<sup>th</sup> century up to date — the period that sociologists use terminologies such as *'modernity'*, *'postmodernity'*, *'late-modernity'*, *'liquid-modernity'* (Branaman, 2010: 136-137) and other related constructs to describe. With the modern technology came an explosion of social media. Social media is an umbrella word which refers to websites and applications that allow users to create and share content through social networking on online platforms. The form of social media which can be said to be popular and influential to the society at the moment, most especially to young adults, is that which is known as *'social network sites'* (SNS) such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and Instagram (Tang et al., 2015: 102). Tertiary education students have been identified by previous studies, as a cohort of young adults that engage the most with SNS. This research finding relates to the fact that students spend a considerable amount of time on the internet, social networking (McCuddy and Vogel, 2015: 169).

Numerous studies concerning SNS in general, as well as where students are the subjects of the study in particular, have been conducted in different parts of the world. However, many issues around SNS are studied quantitatively using self-report questionnaires as data gathering instruments. Self-reported data from questionnaires are often inaccurate and incomplete, and may also alienate the subjects in a sense that their feelings, sentiments and opinions are ignored by the closed-ended, structured questionnaires (Interaction, 2016: 1). *'Why'* and *'what'* questions are often limited to those issues structured by the researcher. He/she decides and assumes what is important and what is not, hence important information might be missed (Ackroyd and Hughes, 1981: 26). Processes such as those involving interactions and social relations among individuals do carry a substantial amount of qualitative information and depend on the understanding of individuals' *'lifeworlds'* (Overgaard and Zahavi, 2009: 93).

It is therefore the aim of this research study to progress largely from the interpretivist tradition to social inquiry. The ultimate goal is to attempt to understand how students of the University of the Free State, on the Bloemfontein campus perceive, feel, experience, respond to, and make sense of the interactions and social relations via online social networking (OSN) in their everyday lives. These internal conditions are explored through the students' personal subjectivities, their shared intersubjectivities as well as the objective facts obtained from

statistical data (Overgaard and Zahavi, 2009: 93). This research is guided by the theoretical '*lenses*' of phenomenological sociology (Overgaard and Zahavi, 2009: 93), existentialism (Kotarba, 2009: 139), and reflexive sociology (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992:11).

The following broad research questions are pursued in this study:

- Why students are involved in SNS?
- With whom do they develop and form relations and interactions?
- How does OSN play a role in their everyday social lives?
- What benefits and satisfactions are derived from using SNS?
- Is there a difference in the ways in which they express themselves and their identities online as compared to offline settings?

This dissertation consists of five chapters, and below is the layout of these chapters:

Chapter one consists of two important parts which are: philosophical assumptions of interpretivism (juxtaposed with philosophical assumptions of positivism) as the theoretical basis of this study. The first part which is based on the philosophical assumptions entails aspects such as the ontological, epistemological, axiological and methodological issues which inform how this study is carried out. The theoretical framework as a second part of chapter one provides an overview on the sociological theories that guide this study. These theoretical perspectives are phenomenology, existentialism and reflexive sociology.

Chapter two focuses on a review of the literature available on SNS and OSN. This chapter begins with a description of the evolution of OSN and SNS as well as the elaborative definitions of these two central concepts. The discussion then progresses into exploring the motives of SNS users for engaging in these online platforms. The processes of social interaction and relations formation as main issues of concern in this study are also dealt with in this chapter. As the interactions unfold on SNS, the users derive certain social benefits, one being different types of social support which are also common in offline settings. Hence, this chapter looks at how social support is exchanged and maintained online. Other important conceptual frameworks which form part of the literature review are identity and self-presentation on SNS. SNS are objective social structures that can have an effect on the identity construction of the interactants and the manner in which they should act on online platforms. As much as OSN has its perks, it also comes with ramifications. Hence the focus of the last section of chapter two is on the problems inherent in SNS and their impact of these ramifications thereof.

Chapter three describes the methodological process undertaken to make this study practical. This study adopted a mixed methods approach in a sense that both qualitative and quantitative designs are amalgamated in order to meet the research objectives. Although this study opted for a mixed methods approach, it is predominantly qualitative. Amongst other reasons, the quantitative dimension of the study is used to complement the qualitative findings. This chapter further discusses issues regarding how the quality and rigour of the data are enhanced as well the ethical procedures employed to ensure that this study is conducted with the outmost integrity.

Chapters four and five of this dissertation present the findings generated from the quantitative survey, in-depth interviews and the focus group conducted amongst a group of students of the UFS. Chapter four serves to provide the profile of the respondents and the brief statistical data on the topics which are dealt with in chapter five (containing the presentation of qualitative data). In these chapters, findings are linked to relevant aspects of theoretical frameworks and the literature review to establish more understanding of the data. This dissertation ends with the concluding remarks.

## Chapter 1: Philosophical and theoretical basis

The theoretical framework is one of the crucial constituents of the research process in social sciences. Different theoretical frameworks encompass different *'lenses'* in terms of which one can look at social reality. These different frameworks or lenses can also be seen as *'paradigms'* which serve as the guidelines for a researcher to follow, and therefore utilised, when engaging in the research project. Georg Ritzer (1975: 7) defines a paradigm as “...*a fundamental image of the subject matter within a science. It serves to define what should be studied, what questions should be asked, how they should be asked, and what rules should be followed in interpreting the answers obtained*”. A paradigm therefore, means the use of sets of rules that inform the trajectory of the investigative process. Paradigms within social sciences inform the practice of research which in simplistic terms, is often dichotomised into two types, namely qualitative and quantitative research.

According to John Creswell (2007: 39), a qualitative study is a form of inquiry through which a researcher interprets what she/he senses — by hearing, seeing, as well as understanding and eventually offering a holistic account of the issue under study. A qualitative inquirer should be the one who seeks, and be interested in *'digging up'* the richness of the data from the subjects under study as opposed to merely describing the issues being investigated (Creswell 2007: 39). In delving for rich data from the research participants, qualitative methodology endows a researcher with the methods that establish intimacy between the subjects of the study and the investigator — a distance between them should be avoided (Neuman, 2006: 151). The researcher's presence and involvement with the research subjects should be explicit. This should be the case since the product of the research project will be the researcher's own personal interpretation of the participants' perspectives. During the investigative process, the approach that a qualitative researcher is directed to is nonlinear, otherwise known as an application of *'logic in practice'* (Neuman, 2006: 151). This means that the research process is cyclical and reiterative, and the logic develops throughout an ongoing practice (Neuman, 2011: 151).

In contrast, a quantitative study is a form of inquiry whereby a researcher describes or explains the phenomena by concentrating on a direct, observable relationship between phenomena being investigated (Babbie and Mouton, 2001: 24). Simply put, the aim of the quantitative research is to account, based on causal laws, what are the underlying causes of human behaviour. A quantitative inquirer needs not to understand the issue under study, but

rather explain it with the aid of empirical and numerical data. The ultimate goal of the quantitative researcher is to obtain rigorous, accurate and objective research results which can represent external reality as opposed to the internal or subjective reality of human behaviour (Neuman, 2011: 95-96). In quantitative research, objectivity is maintained by trying at all costs to create a distance between researcher and the subjects under study (Neuman, 2006: 153). The manner in which quantitative research unfolds should be explicit in its rules and formal procedures and techniques should be adhered to. Such a process is termed by Lawrence Neuman (2011: 167), the '*reconstructed logic*' of research. The researcher should follow a linear path which consists of a fixed succession of steps leading in mainly one direction (Neuman, 2011: 168).

The research approach (qualitative or quantitative) which a social scientist decides to adopt when engaging in a study usually falls within either of the two commonly known paradigms, namely interpretivism and positivism. Those who adopt a quantitative research approach normally adopt a positivist point of view to social reality, whereas interpretivist worldviews are for those who adopt a qualitative approach. In this study, the aim is to largely understand how students of the University of the Free State (UFS), Bloemfontein, perceive, feel, experience, respond and make sense of interactions and social relations that take place on social network sites (SNS) in their everyday lives. For this reason, the main paradigmatic lens adopted for this project is the interpretive one. In addition, to complement the reading of the interpretive, this project also includes a quantitative aspect of the study which provides the '*social physics*' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 7) which Pierre Bourdieu speaks of and which provides a context for the narratives.

Although this study did not make use of qualitative approach exclusively, the mere fact that the interpretive paradigm serves as the main guide for this research, deems it (the interpretive paradigm) the most important theoretical context for this project. The subsequent section deals with four main philosophical assumptions held within the interpretive tradition. To provide a better understanding and to make provision for the use of a quantitative theoretical basis as well, the philosophical assumptions inherent in the interpretive paradigm will be juxtaposed with that of the positivist paradigm.

### **1.1. Philosophical assumptions of interpretivist thinking**

According to Creswell (2007: 16), the term '*philosophy*' refers to the use of abstract ideas and beliefs. As we start to engage in our research projects, we bring along certain beliefs and

philosophical positions that are inherent to the paradigm(s) of our choice. These philosophical positions influence the type of questions we need to ask. They also influence how we collect the data and how do we inform our choices with regards to the theories that guide our studies (Creswell, 2007: 16). Philosophical assumptions deal with issues of ontology, epistemology, axiology and methodology. The following sub-sections focus on these issues and the manner in which they mould this dissertation.

### **1.1.1. Ontology**

The concept ‘ontology’ is related to the question of “*what kind of things are there in the world?*” (Benton and Craib, 2011: 4). In other words, ontological questions seek to answer what exists or what is the nature of reality — what the fundamental categories of reality are (Neuman, 2011: 92). The worldview about the nature of reality differs across the various paradigms in sociology. For instance, the positivist worldview about the nature of reality is different to the interpretivist worldview.

The positivists or realists see reality as something that exists on its own and which human beings should discover (Neuman, 2006: 82). They believe that human perception, intellect, ideas, subjectivity or interpretations may be flawed and will contaminate our contact with reality (Neuman, 2011: 92). This is to say that, a human’s subjective attributes are incapable of capturing the reality. Any attempts to do so will only lead to a distorted reality. Early positivist thinkers such as August Comte and Herbert Spencer argue that the order and laws that govern natural sciences should also be applied in the social sciences (Babbie and Mouton, 2001: 21). That means, a social scientist who adopts the positivist tradition should utilise the scientific methods (mostly quantitative) that would help him/her produce empirical data based on applied logic of order and patterns (Neuman, 2006: 82). In this way, the ontological assumption undertaken by positivists is objective in the sense that they view social reality as independent from human influence.

In contrast, the interpretivists, also known as idealists or nominalists (Neuman, 2006: 82; Neuman, 2011: 92) maintain that reality is the world as we perceive it, and we comprehend the fundamental nature of the social world at the level of subjective experience (Burrell and Morgan, 1979: 28). The philosopher René Descartes and other idealists “*think that their experience of their own inner, conscious life is the thing they can be most certain of. If one begins with this, then it can seem reasonable to think of the material objects and other bodies one encounters as constructs of one’s own inner thought process*” (Benton and Craib, 2011:

4). The emphasis is on the idea that individuals strive to understand the reality and the world in which they live and work by developing subjective meanings of their experiences (Creswell, 2007: 20). The aim of the researcher who adopts the interpretivist tradition is, as much as possible, to embrace the notion of multiple realities based on the participant's narratives and views of the phenomena under study (Creswell, 2007: 20-21). This school of thought is inclined to be antipositivist, voluntarist and '*ideographic*' in nature (Burrell and Morgan, 1979: 20). It advocates that there are few universal or objective truths in social reality — individuals' subjectivities construct large parts of social reality. It is also against the form of knowledge derived from positivist facts coming from so-called empirical evidence and which is regarded as objective social reality. The ideographic nature of the interpretive paradigm highlights that methods (mostly qualitative) used by social interpretivists are aimed at dealing practically with unique individuals, with unique experiences and with unique life histories (Neuman, 2011: 92).

Max Weber's concept of '*Verstehen*' (Babbie and Mouton, 2001: 31), which means to understand, captures the role of the interpretivist paradigm in social sciences. Instead of explaining human behaviour, a social scientist should engage himself/herself in empathetic understanding of human experiences so as to later apply the process that Wilhelm Dilthey and Max Weber termed '*hermeneutics*' — to examine and interpret a text or narratives of the participants with the purpose of discovering the meaning and ultimately come to an understanding (Babbie and Mouton, 2001: 30- 31; Neuman, 2006: 87).

As mentioned at the beginning of the current section, this study relies mostly on the interpretive paradigm because the scientific methods employed to meet the objectives of this research, form tenets of this school of thought. The interest is to understand the unique individual experiences of each participant in order to grasp the views about the nature of reality within the cyber-world they are involved in. The ultimate goal is to interpret these experiences and perceptions. However, some aspects of the positivist's worldview are included in this study because of the objective data which was gathered through a survey. The premise for implementing the quantitative aspect of research is that the social institution of the social media which is a form of technology, informs the subjectivities of the SNS users. Hence it is insufficient to assume that reality about OSN is merely subjective.

### 1.1.2. Epistemology

Whereas ontology relates to issues of the nature of social reality, epistemology is concerned with the way in which knowledge can be generated (Neuman, 2011: 93). This concept is most commonly referred to as the *'theory of knowledge'* (Benton and Craib, 2011: 5). If we take a look at the positivist epistemological position, we notice that knowledge is produced through careful observations and the collection of empirical evidence which can verify or falsify our ideas or assumptions about reality (Neuman, 2006: 85). By producing empirical evidence about the issue under study, a researcher gets in a position where the truth can be distinguished from myth based on produced objective knowledge (Babbie and Mouton, 2001: 24; Neuman, 2011: 93). The quantitative aspect of this study requires me to produce empirical evidence which is objective in its nature. Before going into the field, one has his own ideas and assumptions about the experiences of students regarding their OSN activity. These ideas can either be consistent with the evidence or refuted by it. Evidence or results generated by an empirical survey — as I have conducted — can be generalised to the whole student population of the UFS, and provide me with an empirical background as part of the external reality about certain aspects of OSN.

When coming to the epistemological standpoint of interpretivists, their knowledge is derived from people's experiences of reality which is *"the outcome of a constant process of actions and interpretations that take place in particular locations and times"* (Neuman, 2011: 93). In order for a researcher to produce knowledge from the subjective experiences of the participants, he/she needs to get as close as possible to them (Glicken, 2003: 31). This approach is referred to by Creswell (2013: 20) as the minimisation of *'distance'* or *'objective separateness'*. As the proximity between a researcher and research participants is maximised, the process of co-construction of social reality unfolds (Creswell, 2013: 36). It was important in this study for me to get as close as possible to the research participants. This is done by means of the execution of data collection methods found within the qualitative research approach. In contrast to the quantitative aspect of this study, the findings produced through the employment of qualitative research methods are not easily generalised to the whole population of the study. The ultimate goal, however, is not generalise, but to understand the lived experiences of the participants who participate in the study and to report these as findings. This approach can be regarded as inductive and idiographic — it is a symbolic representation of *'thick description'* of data (Neuman, 2011: 105).

### 1.1.3. Axiology

Whenever a research study is executed, the researcher's own values are implicated. The assumption about the role of the researcher's values and how they are dealt with is referred to as '*axiology*' (Creswell, 2013: 20). The manner in which a researcher deals with the values he/she brings into his/her research project is determined by the paradigm adopted. For instance, a social scientist whose research study operates within a positivist worldview will largely embrace a '*value-free science*' (Neuman, 2006: 86). That is, a researcher has to eliminate or control his/her values, beliefs, opinions and attitudes in practice (Creswell, 2013: 36). Positivists believe that social sciences are capable of operating independently of the socio-cultural and/or socio-political forces that affect human activity (Neuman, 2011: 99). They argue that social sciences should apply a strict form of rational thinking and systematic observation in a manner which surpasses personal values, biases and prejudices (Neuman: 2006: 86). The role of the researcher in this regard is to be what Neuman (2011: 100) calls a "*disinterested scientist*". In this study, my only direct contact with the research respondents who participated in the survey section was during the process of data collection when I distributed the data collection instruments to them — and no values played a role in this regard. The obtained statistical results are not the reflection of my own interpretation but can only be regarded as the product of the objective data.

On the other hand, the interpretivists posit that personal views, values and feelings form part of the process of studying others (Neuman, 2011: 107). The role of the researcher is to empathise with and share in the socio-political and socio-cultural commitments or values of the participants under study (Neuman, 2006: 94). During the data collection process, a researcher has to actively report his/her values and biases together with the value-laden nature of the collected data — he/she positions her/himself within the study (Creswell, 2013: 20). Hence the interpretative tradition adopts the stance of '*relativism*' which is a principle that "*no single point of view or value position is better than others, and all are equally valid for those who hold them*" (Neuman, 2011: 107). The qualitative dimension of this study, which is the core dimension of the dissertation, places me in an indispensable and important position which requires my active personal involvement in the research process. The data collection methods that I use, particularly the one-on-one interviews, are, in an important way, shaped by my feelings, personal views and biases. This is the case because the questions I asked and probed are often subjective in nature. Also the raw data that I analysed and later

interpreted reflect my own personal subjectivities. Hence, this study acknowledges that this research undertaking is value-laden and biases are present.

#### **1.1.4. Methodology**

The methodological assumption of the study is related to the use of methods of inquiry available to a researcher. This study adopts the methodological beliefs held in a pragmatist framework where the research process concerns both quantitative and qualitative approaches to data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2013: 37). When one takes a look at quantitative methodology, deductive methods such as beginning with ideas, testing of theories and specifying important variables are important (Wagner et al., 2012: 55; Creswell, 2013: 36). The quantitative aspect of this study is informed by Bourdieu's framework of '*social praxeology*' which emphasises that social phenomena consists of an objective dimension known as '*social physics*' as well as of a subjective dimension known as '*social phenomenology*' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 7). This will be discussed extensively in section 1.2.3.1. This research is an example of how the inductive approach is applied in this study: using a deductive entry point — the questionnaires — to proceed to an inductive analysis by means of the qualitative interviews.

While quantitative methodology is mainly guided by deductive reasoning, qualitative methodology makes use of inductive methods in the research process (Creswell, 2013: 36). A researcher relies on emergent ideas obtained through interviews, observations and analysis of the text (Wagner et al., 2012: 56; Creswell, 2013: 36). This process is also referred to as a '*bottom-up approach*' to a study (Creswell, 2007: 19). At times, the research questions can be modified in the process and new ones can be created in order to understand the phenomenon under study better (Creswell, 2007: 19). There was a point in this study where I had to reformulate some of the questions and also add new ones to my interview schedule with the expectation that they may yield a better understanding of participants' narratives. In this study, the narrative approach as way of understanding as well as inquiring how humans experience the world through the recounting of their life stories, is adopted (Moen, 2006: 2). The aim is to understand the subjective experiences of students who are active in OSN and to understand how they reflect on the interactions and relations that exist within SNS platforms. In order to reach this aim, the narrative inquiry serves as a suitable tool in a sense that it provides me with an opportunity to discover unique and multiple views on the same phenomenon.

## **1.2. Theoretical framework**

In this section, the theoretical frameworks for this study are scrutinised in order to identify components, dimensions and issues that help me to contextualise my research. These different frameworks consist of phenomenology, existential sociology and reflexive sociology. Components, dimensions and issues of these theoretical lenses will collectively constitute a way in which the ideal image of social reality regarding my study is considered.

### **1.2.1. Phenomenology**

Phenomenological sociology, like other interpretivist frameworks, emerged as a reaction against the existence of the huge impact of the natural science methodology on human perceptions and understanding of social reality (Farganis, 2014: 244). It was felt that such impact needed to be counteracted and defied by those who believed that the social world is fundamentally distorted when we derive our knowledge by mainly using natural science methods (Farganis, 2014: 244). Therefore, it was necessary for the founding social thinkers to take a different route which was opposite from that used in the natural sciences' principles to study social reality.

Hence, phenomenological sociology became known as a '*subjective*' or '*creative sociology*' — and its main concern is to understand the world from the viewpoint of the actor and not of the scientific observer (Overgaard, 2007: 21). In this sense, the phenomenological approaches to social life endeavour to understand how particular individuals and groups perceive and understand the world from their own points of view (Inglis, 2012: 86). Since the main purpose of these approaches is to engage in the examination of individuals' subjectivities and consciousness (Babbie and Mouton, 2001: 19), the role of feelings and emotions as well as the importance of the individual or group experiences should be taken into account. In this study, the main aim is to attempt to understand from the points of view of the participants: how they perceive, feel, understand, think and respond to interactions and relations within the context of OSN.

#### **1.2.1.1. Making sense of the world through daily activities**

The main focus of phenomenological thinking is directed at the everyday lives of ordinary people in a social reality where they (the people) share aspects of the same culture, language, and a set of meaning structures that allow them to negotiate their daily lives (Farganis, 2014: 245). It further examines how shared meanings are created through actions and interactions

and how the contexts of everyday life enable those actions and interactions (Inglis, 2012: 86). Human beings are guided by certain abilities that make it possible for them to create meanings in as far as their encountered experiences are concerned — and such abilities comprise creativity, interpretations, definitions, explanations, justifications and rationalisations of their actions (Babbie and Mouton, 2001: 28). These aspects of phenomenological thinking provide a theoretical context for my research. Students in contemporary society spend a large part of their ordinary lives on OSN activities. It has become part of their new cultural practices in addition to the ones they ascribe to or are born into. SNS are channels through which they create meaningful interactions and relations.

But we as human beings do not just create meanings and interactions independently. As James Farganis (2014: 246) asserts, we come to understand our social world as a natural order and as existing prior to our emergence in the world and as the world that will continue to exist after we depart. Our perception about the world is in what Sokolowski (2000: 42) calls the *'natural attitude'*. The natural attitude is an inherent focus that we are involved, in *"... our original, world-directed stance, when we intend things, situations, facts and any other kinds of objects... the default perspective, the one we start off from, the one we are in originally"* (Sokolowski, 2000: 42). This is in line with what David Inglis (2012: 87) refers to as the *'practical consciousness'* which is the idea that most of the time we as people think and act in semi-conscious ways rather than fully conscious. Having said this, one has to come to an understanding that the way people attach subjective meanings to social reality is spontaneous in a sense that they do not have to contemplate much as they, day by day, continue with their life projects.

#### **1.2.1.2. The lifeworld**

The concept of *'lifeworld'* is one of the important terms within phenomenological sociology and can be regarded as very central in the work of Alfred Schütz. Schütz is often regarded as one of the main importers of phenomenological sociology into the field of sociology, and his ideas were initially inspired by Max Weber's interpretive sociology (Overgaard, 2007: 98). While Weber's central topic for the social sciences was meaningful action, his emphasis was more on the importance of an explicit thematisation of the meaning that an individual as an actor attributes to his/her own action. Weber was not primarily interested in the social meaning, and did not examine the fundamental questions in the epistemology and theory of meaning (Overgaard, 2007: 98). Hence it is this gap that Schütz attempts to fill by conjoining Weber's sociology with Edmund Husserl's phenomenological methodology (Overgaard,

2007; Inglis, 2012: 89). When situating the concept of lifeworld in this study, SNS can be regarded as a lifeworld for the cyber community (those who interact via internet including SNS. SNS serve as the constituent of their everyday life where social relations and interactions are established and maintained).

Schütz's phenomenological sociology is concerned with the "*mundane, everyday world in which people operate*" which he termed '*lifeworld*' (Inglis, 2012: 90). Lifeworld is made up of the ways in which actors view their world as well as the ways in which they carry out their actions within it (Overgaard, 2007: 99). It is created by the culture of particular groups of people, and this culture creates the commonsense ways in which people experience the world (Rogers, 1983: 51). The culture of OSN amongst the students (which forms a group of people) constitutes their lifeworld that influences how they experience the social reality. People act commonsensically because that is how they make sense of and experience the world around them within their cultural context (Inglis, 2012: 90). These ways of understanding, perceiving and experiencing our environments are generally so natural and familiar to us that we never pause to reflect on them or even criticise them (Farganis, 2014: 247). They are '*taken for granted*' ways of doing things in the sense that their validity is not subjected to scrutiny (Farganis, 2014: 247; Overgaard and Zahavi, 2009: 97). This uncritical and unquestioning attitude to our environment is called by Schütz, as aforementioned in section 1.2.1., the '*natural attitude*' (Sokolowski, 2000: 42), which can be seen as the habitual sense of the world that people has (Inglis, 2012: 90). People never get to reflect on how OSN affects their lives, or how much they are '*glued*' to it. They just carry on with the action as part and parcel of their lives.

The natural attitude is some kind of mental disposition that we as human beings have most of the time. It is how we see things as they are; as normal and unexceptional (Inglis, 2012: 90). However, our natural attitude is not immune to revision in the sense that, if it becomes defeated or disrupted, we typically revise it (Overgaard, 2007: 100). For instance, when students get to realise that spending a lot of time online can have a bad impact on their studies, their discursive consciousness can override their natural attitude. But we use our natural attitude most of the time as it underpins our actions and thinking (Overgaard, 2007: 101). Within the context of the lifeworld, one comes to discern the vital role played by culture in creating and moulding the lifeworlds of human individuals or particular groups of people. Therefore, the role that culture plays in the lifeworlds of individuals should not be underestimated.

### 1.2.1.3. Intersubjectivity

The concept of intersubjectivity is as important as the concept of subjectivity in phenomenological sociology. One of the soundest reasons why intersubjectivity is important is that it goes beyond the notion of human subjectivity as the only source of truth about individuals' perceived social reality. The notion of intersubjectivity highlights the fact that there is a connectedness between the self and other selves (Overgaard and Zahavi, 2009: 96). Individuals do not experience, interpret and perceive their lifeworlds independently, but share the same lifeworld with others. Schütz (1970: 163) asserts that "*the world of my daily life is by no means my private world but is from the outset an intersubjective one, shared with my fellow men, experienced and interpreted by others; in brief, it is a world common to all of us*". The world in which we as individuals find ourselves is historically given; it is a world of nature and it is the socio-cultural one that has existed before our births and will continue to exist after we die (Schütz, 1970: 164). In this light, intersubjectivity can simply be understood and defined as a condition of social life that enables two or more individuals to share the same perceptions, understandings and expectations (Johnson, 1995: 146; Munroe, 2007: 2400). Through OSN, students share ideas, perceptions, feelings and so on. It is the platform through which they mutually influence each other.

As individuals, we share the lifeworld with other members belonging to our society or social groups. During this process, we develop a sense of belonging which makes things look real to us (Cavalcanti, 1995: 1338). Not only do we share the same empirical or material world as others, but we also share the same consciousness which makes it possible for mutual interaction and functioning to take place even though we might come from diverse social and personal backgrounds (Appelrouth and Edles, 2012: 520). According to Robert Sokolowski (2000: 152), in the presence of others, the world takes on a quality that transcends our own subjective understanding of it, and we come to appreciate it as something that is perceived by others from perspectives that enable them to experience the very same world differently to how we would. For this reason, the way we interpret our lifeworld is subjected to a drastic change when we take into consideration the existence of other experiencing individuals. When we put aside our own subjectivities, we come to a realisation that the world can at any given moment be perceived from a myriad of standpoints. People emerging from different racial, economic and social backgrounds are brought together by SNS and share the same lifeworld. This is where research participants can derive a sense of belonging as they become part of one big online community brought together by internet connection.

#### 1.2.1.4. Typifications in the lifeworld context

The experience of the lifeworld is also characterised by process of a *'typifying'* which allows us to make sense of the lifeworld (Heap and Roth, 1973: 361). "*We employ a repertoire of maxims and recipes; a type of practical 'know-how' — for understanding and dealing with the world and other people*" (Overgaard, 2007: 10). Hence, without typifications it would be almost impossible to deal with daily occurrences as well as with other people. Inglis (2012: 91) describes typifications as the "*working models that get at what the thinking going on in a particular lifeworld looks like*". This process takes place at the level of first-order categories (Schütz's first-order construct) of the lifeworld and are used by individuals all the time (Overgaard, 2007: 104).

For instance, if you see a dog; that is, if you recognise an object as being an animal and more precisely as a dog, you anticipate the behaviour on the part of this dog: a typical way of eating, of running, of playing, of jumping, and so on. The next time you see another dog, you may expect it to show the typical characteristics you witnessed from the dog you seen before. In other words, what you have experienced in the actual perception of one object is apperceptively transferred to any other similar object or organism, perceived merely as its type (Schütz, 1970: 72). In that way, as human beings we have this type of immediate knowledge acquired from previous experiences which we both have had ourselves and those transmitted to us by others (Overgaard, 2007: 104). When two people *'chat'* in any of the SNS, the manner in which they exchange texts with each other can reveal the type of person one is chatting to. If I send you a text and you reply after a long time or you do not reply at all, I can typify you as a rude person. The next time I chat with the same person, demonstrating the same behaviour, I will also typify that person as rude.

Schütz (1970: 73) points out that typifications are already formed by others such as our predecessors or contemporaries as appropriate tools to come to terms with things and other people, accepted as such by social groups into which we were born. Therefore, typifications are not objective constructs that need to be formulated anew each and every time we encounter a particular social phenomenon. We are born into the world that has already been interpreted and bestowed with meaning by those who were here before us. The knowledge of these typifications and of their appropriate use is an integral element of the socio-cultural heritage passed on to the child born into the group by authoritative figures such as parents and teachers (Schütz, 1970: 74; Schütz and Luckmann, 1973: 228). Thus, typifications are socially derived. Nevertheless, although typifications are basically social constructs, they are

viewed by individuals as objective and completely natural (Schutte, 2007: 342). Human beings accept typifications as they are — they take them for granted, hence do not really question them.

#### **1.2.1.5. The social construction of reality**

Later in the mid-1960s, the ideas of Schütz were taken up by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann in their book *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Overgaard, 2007: 15). Berger and Luckmann attempted to apply the theoretical perspective of phenomenology to crucial ideas such as identity, socialization, social roles and language (Overgaard, 2007: 16). They believe that the task of the sociology of knowledge is to analyse the societal conditions for the formation and maintenance of various types of knowledge, scientific as well as quotidian (Heap and Roth, 1973: 355). The core of their work lies in the idea that social reality cannot be viewed as only an objective entity, a non-human or supra-human thing. Rather, social reality is a product of human action (Ritzer, 1983: 211); it is not biologically determined or determined by the facts of nature in any other way (Inglis, 2012: 93). They view social order as '*an on-going human production*' which enables action and interaction to take place (Inglis, 2012: 94), but at the same time being produced and reproduced by these over time (Farganis, 2014: 246).

In this light, Berger and Luckmann believe that a key social process that is perceived to be one of the essential aspects of all human life is '*habitualisation*' (Inglis, 2012: 94). "*All human activity is subject to habitualisation. Any action that is repeated frequently becomes cast into pattern, which can be reproduced with an economy of effort and which...is apprehended by its performer as that pattern...*" (Inglis, 2012: 94). As human beings carry on with their everyday activities, these patterns become part of their lives due to frequently repeated actions and interactions.

As it has already been mentioned in a discussion of Schütz's ideas (cf. section 1.2.1.4.), people produce typifications which tell them how to do certain things in a given world. And this is one of the ideas that Berger and Luckmann incorporate in their work. Just to retrieve the concept of typifications, its essence lies in the notion that as people, we perceive experience and understand in accordance with normal and typical structures, models and patterns which were inscribed by our previous experiences in our subjective lives (Overgaard, 2007: 18). Hence, we do not have to learn every-now-and-then how to do any given thing in our lifeworlds; our repeated ways of doing things become habituated. For instance, I do not

have to learn anew each time how to login to Facebook, I just do it. Berger and Luckmann termed these habituated ways of doing things the *'recipes'*: *"they are formulas for doing certain things in certain ways"* (Inglis, 2012: 95). Typifications and recipes are seen as located in the commonsense of each and everyone of us (Ritzer, 1983: 210).

However, like Schütz, Berger and Luckmann assert that humans are not often placed in the positions where they have to reflect on their practical consciousness. For that reason, typifications are often experienced as totally natural and not as products of human actions and interactions (Inglis, 2012: 94). For instance, most people claim that it is natural for females to cry when they are hurt and it is not appropriate for men to cry when they are hurt — one of the African proverbs says that *"a man is a sheep and does not cry"*. They view this issue as something innate and biologically determined and that is the way it is. When a male person goes on Facebook and cry about something, he is likely to be remarked on negatively. Thus, Berger and Luckmann argue that typifications and recipes drive human behaviour as *'alienated'* products of previous actions and interactions (Overgaard, 2007: 17). Subsequently, these human constructs begin to be real.

As aforementioned in the previous sections (cf. section 1.2.1.2. and 1.2.1.3.), although human beings experience society as an objective reality, to Berger and Luckmann society is a combination of objective and subjective reality. In his *The Sacred Canopy*, Peter Berger claims that *"...society is a dialectic phenomenon in that it is a human product and nothing but a human product, that yet continuously acts back upon its producer...It has no other being except that which is bestowed upon it by human activity and consciousness"* (Farganis, 2014: 248). This fundamental dialectic process of society consists of three moments or steps: externalisation, objectification and internalisation (Farganis, 2014: 249). Overgaard (2007: 16) states that, to provide an account of how human beings, through various forms of interaction, create and shape social structures and institutions which may initially have the character of a common, intersubjective reality but ultimately become *'externalised'* and achieve the objective reality, is the task of social theory. Farganis (2014: 249) describes the process of externalisation as the *"ongoing outpouring of human being into the world, both in the physical and mental activity of men"*. The attainment by the products of this activity of reality that confronts its original producers as an external truth to and other than themselves, is *'objectification'* (Farganis, 2014: 210). One of the main objectified realities that are found to be social reality, is language (Inglis, 2012: 95). Language becomes clear and elaborate over time as it initially starts off as a mere set of sounds aimed to communicate (Ritzer, 1983:

210; Inglis, 2012: 95). There is a certain type of informal language that SNS users use to communicate. For instance, I can ask you “*Hud*” instead of “*How are you doing*” or text you “*Lol*” to show you that I am laughing out loudly. The language used by SNS members appears so objective that people tend to be oblivious that someone out there actually constructed that style of language.

Moreover, it is through the process of objectification that human activity is subjected to social control; the social structures which are constructed by humans define what is normal, and through these social structures sanctions are established to maintain social order and avoid digression and societal breakdown (Overgaard, 2007: 18). Examples of social structures include family relations, gender relations, relations of authority, subordination and so on. Social media — which include OSN — also qualifies to be added to the list. Social structures are seen by Berger and Luckmann as nothing but alienated, objectified human products (Inglis, 2012: 94). As time goes on, these institutions appear as inevitable and hence objective. People view institutionalisation as the only way in which things are done (Heap and Roth, 1973: 362). In the process of institutionalization, to everyone of us the world becomes so real in “*an ever more massive way and it can no longer be changed easily*” and it seems to be what Berger and Luckmann refer to as a ‘*paramount reality*’, which defines the world as a completely unavoidable realm in which one lives (Inglis, 2012: 96). Many people, young adults in particular, cannot imagine their lives without SNS. OSN has become a paramount reality which they cannot escape from easily.

However, social reality should not only be seen as a human product constituted by externalisation and objectification, but as something that acts back on us. That is, we are shaped by it (Farganis, 2014: 19). It does not become something that a human being feels as an oppressive external force that he/she cannot resist. Rather, it occurs as something (social reality) which an individual ‘*internalise*’ (Overgaard, 2007: 20). Human beings are not raised outside the society, but are raised within it (Overgaard, 2007: 20) as our parents, through the process of socialisation inculcate typifications and recipes in us, and we consequently think and act in ways that help reproduce the lifeworld (Inglis, 2012: 97). In a nutshell, it is through externalisation that society becomes a human product, then through objectification that society becomes real and through internalisation that a human being ends up becoming part of society.

### 1.2.2. Existential phenomenology

While the foci of the mainstream phenomenological thinkers (Alfred Schütz, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann) whose contributions have already been discussed in the previous section, were on the sociality of everyday life, the existentialist sociologists became more concerned about individual existence in the world (Kotarba, 2009: 140). The core issue in this philosophical thinking is an orientation to the everyday lifeworld inhabited by individuals. According to Joseph Kotarba (2009: 140), a key element of experience in the world is change, and to existential sociologists change is a constant feature of people's lives — their sense of self, their experience of social reality, and the culture that bestows meaning to social reality.

In simple terms, existential sociology can be understood as the study of human experience in the world in all its forms (Kotarba, 2009: 140). In a more detailed description, Johnson and Kotarba (2002: 4) elaborate on existential thought as “...a sensibility, a way of life, a passion of living, an orientation to the flux and emergence of actual lived experience”. The nature of questions asked by this thought include questions such as: “*Who am I? What is the nature of human life and experience? What is my place and purpose in these larger schemes of things? How should I understand the world?*” (Kotarba, 2009: 141). Therefore, it becomes clear that existential sociology is more orientated to the experiencing of the human individual in the society as opposed to how an individual exists as the integral unit of society as a whole.

Existentialist sociologists can be seen as the principal opponents (like other micro sociological perspectives) of the macro and structural sociologists, commonly performed by classical sociologists such as Emile Durkheim who were advocates of sociologism. ‘*Sociologism*’ is the term associated with seminal Durkheimian thought which asserts that individuals do not matter very much since social reality transcends human interpretation and agency (Kotarba, 2009: 142). Social structures and institutions are seen as the impetus behind the human action and thought in a very influential manner. From this perspective, social structures are independent of individuals’ wills, intentions, choices and decisions (Kotarba, 2009: 142). Such perspectives which over-emphasise the objective reality originate from classical sociologists such as Durkheim and have dominated academic thought for quite a while in the history of sociology.

In contrast, the existential thought varies distinctly from the structuralist thought in the sense that, as it has already been mentioned earlier on in this section, it focuses more on the

individual. Existentialist thinking places a greater emphasis or focus on individuals by concentrating on human conscious aspects such as people's choices, responsibilities and decisions (Kotarba, 2009: 142). It was because of this polarisation of both structuralist and existentialist thought that Edward Tiryakian's *Sociologism and Existentialism* work of social theory came forth as an attempt to resolve these two different ways of viewing human sociality and existence (Kotarba, 2009: 142).

Two major collections of essays can be regarded as amongst the most influential work towards the contribution of existentialist thought. The first collection comprises the work of Jack Douglas and John Johnson (1977) *Existential Sociology*. These thinkers defied structuralists and other cultural determinists by stressing the relative scope of freedom that individuals have, and they propagate a certain degree of independence that individuals have from social and cultural forces (Kotarba, 2009: 142). Similar to other interpretivist standpoints, they believe that social and cultural situations are not determined, but rather, they are the outcomes of individual constructions. Individuals are active in exercising their own agency and will in determining meanings.

The second collection is that of Joseph Kotarba and Andrea Fontana (1984) *The Existential Self in Society* which focuses mostly on the notion of 'the self' (Kotarba, 2009; 143). In this collection, the authors describe multiple strategies used by individuals to construct their self within the complexities of social and cultural contexts and the ways in which feelings and emotions influence the process of self-construction (Kotarba, 2009: 143). Both of these collections served as major and influential works in the development of existential sociology as an important interpretive theoretical framework.

#### **1.2.2.1. Affect existing in everyday life**

The greatest part of mainstream sociology has not been much interested in studying the individual's feelings and emotions as major factors in the construction of everyday social reality. Although phenomenological sociology does consider the role of human feelings and emotions as part of a human's subjectivity in making the lifeworld a possibility, it has never paid satisfactory attention to the study of feelings and emotions *per se*. The recent philosophical study and analysis of emotions and feelings can be associated with Jean-Paul Sartre in his writings about the place of emotions and feelings, and their place in human life (Kotarba, 2009: 143). Another important figure in the study of affect is Jack Douglas, who views life as an over-rationalised reality (Kotarba, 2009: 143). He strongly views

enlightenment thinkers as ignorant for the mere fact that they supremacised reason over affect (Douglas, 1977: 3). He brings awareness to other sociologists to take into account the notion of *'brute bring'*, which is the central feeling of our innermost being (Douglas, 1977: 3). He argues that our feelings such as anger, lust and hate are semi-conscious emotions that reside in the inner core of selves and that constitute *"the 'darker' side of human experience"* (Douglas, 1977: 10), and are capable of overriding reason and our instilled values that we uphold in the society (Kotarba, 2009: 143-144). OSN plays a major role in expressing affect. When we are angry and sad, we often go to our SNS to express our feelings through status messages, *'emoticons'* (SNS facial expressions that represent one's current mood) and also demonstrate our behaviour at that point in time to people we interact with on SNS.

More contemporary writings have shifted focus to the existence and value of positive feelings of everyday life such as *"self-sacrifice, caring for others and myriad acts of micro-heroism that protect and promote others at our own expense"* (Clark, 2002: 155 cited in Kotarba, 2009: 144). Hence, emotions such as love, respect, concern, sympathy and empathy all bring about social cohesion and bonds as opposed to emotions such as greed, hate, envy and anger which carry potential deception, harm, interpersonal abuse as well as violence (Kotarba, 2009: 144). People show positive emotions through SNS. Asking a friend how he is doing everyday via WhatsApp can stimulate a wonderful feeling inside that person — thus such acts foster social cohesion and strong bonds. In that light, feelings and emotions can be both positive and negative influences in our lives. That is, they are capable of destructing us while simultaneously fostering social order and cohesion.

#### **1.2.2.2. The existential self and embodiment**

Another important concern of existential sociology, other than the study of human affect, is the movement towards emergent interest in the concept of self (Kotarba, 2009: 144). Kotarba (2009: 145) provides two reasons or explanations for the renewal of interest in the self-concept in this era: firstly, such interest results from the dramatic spike of interest in self-actualisation and development that occurs within popular culture. Secondly, researchers and analysts across disciplines discovered that traditional methods and models of conceptualising the self are flawed. Hence they have been seeking new methods in an attempt of understanding the self. Such methods include those that are used by social psychologists who study the concept of self by means of objectified scales and measures that are quantitative in nature (Kotarba, 2009: 145). Such methods cannot effectively provide an account for the

complex nature of the self. Hence there was a need for a new approach of studying the self-concept.

The advocates of existential sociology feel that this new approach of studying the self-concept will be able to account for the constantly and ever-changing contemporary social life. Kotarba (2009: 145) argues that, contemporary social life is characterised by constant changes in social rules, values, institutions and lifestyles which orientate exploration and innovations in the social life of individuals. In this sense, the focus of existentialist thinking has been directed especially to many individuals who are not content or satisfied with their own sense of self and societal prescriptions of who they should be (Kotarba, 2009: 145). Having said that, the concept of existential self can be understood as referring to “... *an individual’s unique experience of being within the context of contemporary social conditions, an experience most notably marked by an incessant sense of becoming and an active participation in social change*” (Kotarba, 2009: 145). Young adults, such as students, often use SNS to assert their identities in their own right. SNS are platforms through which they become what they want to be seen as, rather than what their respective societies want to see them as.

The existential self is further characterised as embodied (Kotarba, 2009: 146). This means that the self is lodged within the human body. Whatever feelings or emotions we experience, we experience them through our bodily sensations. For instance, whenever we feel stressed, hurt, angry or sick, our bodies experience the physical discomfort caused by such feelings and emotions. When an individual experiences such affects he/she may decide to communicate them to other social beings in order to seek help to remove or alleviate such physical discomfort (Kotarba, 2009: 146). SNS also serve as platforms where social support is exchanged (Trepte et al., 2015: 75). Types of social support as the form of human interaction through which emotional concern, instrumental aid and information are realised, are also shared in online contexts (Trepte et al., 2015: 75). Since the self is regarded as embodied, should a SNS user seek some information online that can help him/her alleviate the physical discomfort, other users will provide the informational support regarding what to do, to ease that pain. Therefore, “*the embodied self negotiates the appropriateness of social reaction according to its own feelings and sensations*” (Kotarba, 2009: 146). It is undisputable that we cannot deny bodily feelings for the mere fact that our bodies are primordial experiences of human life.

### **1.2.2.3. The existential self is becoming**

Another central idea in existentialism is that of *'becoming'* and can be associated with Jean-Paul Sartre in his philosophical as well as literary writings (Kotarba, 2009: 147). Sartre challenges the idea that humans have freedom. He believes that we are not free to choose who we are because existence *per se* is empty and meaningless (Kotarba, 2009: 147). However, in the view of philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, our becoming should be placed in the real world if we strive to be effective in dealing with the immediate world (Kotarba, 2009: 147). Hence an individual is driven by the brute nature of life to acquire some distinctive strategies and styles of realising his/her maximum potential that will enable him/her to cope with social reality (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 437 cited in Kotarba, 2009: 147). This means that, as individuals we have freedom to the extent that it only allows us to control the goals of our attempts to use them for our own personal benefits and self-growth (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 437 cited in Kotarba, 2009: 147). Such portrayal is referred to as the *'self-to-society relationship'* — where the self is confronting the society (Kotarba, 2009: 147). As Kotarba (2009: 147) puts it: *"we constantly attempt to shape and manipulate society — that is, society as we experience it — in order to have it as a resource for fulfilling our most basic needs and desires"*. Furthermore, the self can also be seen as being actualised through social roles which must be moulded and created to meet the needs that come forth as the self confronts itself (Kotarba, 2009: 147). This is because the self is located in a constant condition of becoming. For instance, as an individual, our social roles change as we grow up, the roles that we are responsible for, at the moment, will change in the next coming years. Students who are very active on SNS will probably be less active when they adopt new social roles such as becoming family men or women, career men or women or just growing up to be more mature adults. Hence they will undergo the process of self-becoming.

### **1.2.2.4 The inner self and individual agency**

The self can also be seen as the realm of continuous conflict between the individual and society because it is the central point of all aspects of being such as values, creativity and emotions (Kotarba, 2009: 149). And the fact that the self now operates in a complex, ever-changing, postmodern world dominated by the media makes it more complicated (Kotarba, 2009: 149). Nevertheless, existential thought argues that the real experience of the self, the *'inner'* self remains personal and to some extent a primordial phenomenon despite the sophisticated social contexts within which it is found (Kotarba, 2009: 149). Douglas (1967 in Kotarba, 2009: 150) argues that, the inner self serves as a set of general principles that

orientate an individual towards the world and others, and at the centre of the inner self is the experience of the brute being which consists of complex feelings and primordial emotions that form the essence of life. Hence emotions and feelings are deeply rooted within the inner self.

Moreover, one of the focal points of the existential self is the individual's ability to perceive situations and respond to them in a rational manner. The concept of '*agency*' recaps this complex nature of human potential (Kotarba, 2009: 150). Within the existential sociology, agency is not equated to the fashionable expression of free-will used in most sociological theories. Rather, the term refers to human action devoid of the social, historical, political and cultural forces in operation in the everyday life (Kotarba, 2009: 150). Existentialist thinking views an individual as an active social actor who attempts to overcome and conquer everyday dilemmas by seeking meanings such as values, rules and attitudes from others to supplement deep feelings in order to deal with whatever dilemmas he/she might be faced with (Kotarba, 2009: 151). SNS are platforms through which users exercise their agency. That is where they develop new values, rules and attitudes other than those they are accustomed to. Through those meanings they can deal with the everyday dilemmas they face. Online social support is one of the mechanisms through which these meanings can be derived (Trepte et al., 2015: 75). The concept of social support is discussed in more detail in the literature review chapter (see chapter 2, section 2.5.).

#### **1.2.2.5. The existential self and social change**

The existence of a social being is also moulded by the relationship between social change and the individual. The concepts of '*culture*' and '*role*', which are both subjected to social change, are important when discussing this relationship (Kotarba, 2009: 151). In this context, social change can be perceived as the significant modification of the cultural content (Kotarba, 2009: 151). Therefore, social change can be seen when some aspects of culture undergo some noticeable changes which can also require the self to readjust to new social conditions. In the process of social change, the self is regarded as an active agent (Kotarba, 2009: 151). This is because social change is generated largely by the individual's concern with self-becoming within the context of perceived uncertain social circumstances. Such changes can take place at the level of technology, attitudes, values, rules and other spheres of social life (Kotarba, 2009: 152). In such circumstances, the individual has two choices: firstly, an individual may decide that the uncertain social circumstances leave no room for existing modes of self-actualisation. Secondly, an individual may conceive new ways or

possibilities for self-realisation that comes out of changing social circumstances (Kotarba, 2009: 152). Either way, an individual is obliged to find new means of self-realisation in order to adapt to new social circumstances.

Social media is one of the drivers of social change itself. It fosters social change at the technological level and everyone who is actively involved in this form of technology (social media) plays a role in furthering the course of social change. The advent of social media has had a great impact on communication and interaction in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The world has seen a shift from conventional modes of communication (calling, SMS, e-mailing, etc.) and interaction to online social networking. This shift does not only unfold at the individual level, but also at the institutional level. Universities, churches, large corporations, politics, economic institutions, now rely largely on SNS for marketing, communication and other purposes that involve interaction between people.

### **1.2.3. Reflexive sociology**

This section focuses on the last theoretical framework that will be applicable to the study, and is commonly known as Pierre Bourdieu's reflexive sociology. Like Anthony Giddens, Roy Bhaskar and Margaret Archer and other social scientists, the main concern of Bourdieu's reflexive sociology is an attempt to resolve the antimony between social physics and social phenomenology (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 7). That is, he attempts to go beyond the "*debilitating reduction of sociology to either an objectivist physics of material structures or a constructivist phenomenology ...*" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 5). He does this by developing a sociological method rather than a theory, commonly known as '*social praxeology*' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 11). Social praxeology is a method that attempts to merge structuralist and constructivist approaches. It is a *modus* which aims to generate knowledge produced through social research that can be transferred between objective and subjective approaches to social inquiry. This is done by firstly looking at the objective structures which define the external constraints influencing people's interactions. Secondly, the lived experiences of agents are looked into in order to expound the categories of perceptions that structure their actions from inside (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 11).

Related to social praxeology is the concept of '*total science of society*' which, according to Bourdieu, must reject both the structuralist notion of turning an agent into a passive organism, and the micro sociological paradigms which overemphasise the agency of an individual as transcendent to social structures (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 10;

Harrington, 2005: 221). Hence the ultimate goal of total science is to embrace social praxeology as a method that can be used to overcome the antimony that exists between social physics and social phenomenology. In this study, I apply both the objective and subjective aspects of social inquiry as part of my theoretical framework. The methodological implications hereof will be discussed in more detail in the following sub-sections.

#### **1.2.3.1. Double reading**

The idea of a *'double reading'* underscores that social sciences should be thought of as bi-dimensional “*system of relations of power and relations of meaning between groups and classes*” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 7). The first reading is concerned with *'social physics'* which emphasises an approach to social analysis by means of quantitative measurements, statistics and observations — all of which are independent of human representations (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 7-8). The second reading is that of *'social phenomenology'* where society appears as emergent product of the decisions and actions of cognisant individuals (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 9). The idea of perceiving a social universe as living a double life calls for what is known as *'methodological relationalism'*, as opposed to all forms of methodological monism of which the goal is to emphasise the ontological priority of either structure or agent, either system or actor, either the collective or the individual (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 15).

As aforementioned, this study is guided by this theoretical framework in the sense that it attempts to embrace social praxeology by applying both the objective and subjective aspects of the study. It is within the scope of this study that both quantitative and qualitative approaches towards generating an understanding on how a sampled group of students reflect on their interactions and social relations which take place in online platforms, is conducted. This was done by firstly looking at available statistics (from the literature) on the usage of SNS globally and locally (in South Africa). The second way of employing the quantitative aspect of research was by carrying out a survey consisting of closed-ended questionnaires amongst students of the UFS, Bloemfontein, in order to generate the statistical data. With regards to the qualitative dimension of this study, in-depth interviews and a focus group session were conducted in order to materialise a subjective dimension to the study.

#### **1.2.3.2. The field and the habitus**

With his concepts of *'field'* and *'habitus'*, Bourdieu attempts to overcome the subject-object impasse (Harrington, 2005: 221). He uses the terms of field and social space to replace the

notion of 'society' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 16). The field refers to an independent structure of social relations in which a human being is located (Harrington, 2005: 223). As an individual occupies the field, he/she is placed in a space where particular values and principles are prescribed to her/him (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 17). This structure can be seen as pre-existent to individuals and it dictates their struggles (Harrington, 2005: 223). Depending on the position an individual occupies in the field, the challenge or the struggle is to either change or preserve its (field) limitations and form (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 17). In this way, the field can be seen as having an objective status. Bourdieu affirms that *"what exist in the social world are relations — not interactions between individuals and intersubjective ties between them but objective relations which exist 'independent of individual consciousness and will', as Marx says... In analytic terms, a field may be defined as a network, or configuration of objective relations between positions"* (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 97).

The habitus, on the other hand, plays a vital role in linking an individual to his/her position in the field and ensures that he/she acts in appropriate ways that reproduce it (the field) (Harrington, 2005: 223). Habitus consists of mental and perceptual structures within human bodies which organises the manner in which individuals perceive the world and act in it (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 16; Harrington, 2005: 22). Individuals draw, from habitus, the strategies that enable them to cope with the ever changing and unforeseen situations they find themselves faced with at a particular point in time (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 18). Bourdieu (1977 cited in Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 18) sees habitus as *"a system of lasting and transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions and makes possible the achievement of indefinitely diversified tasks"*. The manner in which the habitus operates can be seen as analogous to the concepts of typifications and recipes, which are discussed in section 1.2.1.4. Moreover, the realm in which the habitus operates is within the limits of the field. Hence, the concepts of habitus and field are seen by Bourdieu as relational in a sense that they function fully only in relation to one another (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 19). In his words, he argues that *"to think in terms of the field is to think relationally"* (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 19).

Social media can be seen as an independent structure where social relations take place. People who are involved in OSN (students in this case) are thus located in it while in the process of acting in accordance with the rules and principles of SNS. The field of social

media is hence an objective structure within which the SNS users operate. Their habitus plays a role in making sure that they internalise the principles prescribed to them by OSN activity — hence they reproduce it through a repetitive process of those principles. In a sense, the subjective experiences of the participants can be seen as relational to the objective structure of the social media. There is discernible interplay between the objective and independent status of SNS which influence the subjective perceptual processes of an individual.

### **1.2.3.3. Epistemic reflexivity**

The concept of '*reflexivity*' is usually used to point to a social analyst's ability to exert efforts of minimising all kinds of biases inherent during a research study (Harrington, 2005: 221). Even though Bourdieu is not the only nor the first social scientist to use the notion of reflexivity, his brand of reflexivity is unique in a sense that it goes beyond the responsibility of the lone researcher to limit the impact of his/her values during the research study (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 36). For Bourdieu, reflexivity is "*a requirement and form of sociological work, that is, as an epistemological program in action for social science, and as corollary a theory of intellectuals as the wielders of a dominated form of domination*" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 38).

While still on reflexivity, it is important to state three types of biases as suggested by Bourdieu — that may "*blur the sociological gaze*" (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 39). The first bias involves the researcher's own biographic profile such as race, class, gender, etc. The second one concerns the researcher's position in the context of the academic field since most of the time the researcher is situated in the position of power. The third bias is the '*intellectual bias*'. This bias induces the researcher to perceive the world as something to be observed or spectated rather than something impregnated with problems to be solved practically.

Although, according to Bourdieu, a social analyst has to be aware of his/her social origin and coordinates, it would be almost inevitable to produce findings with some degree of bias given the interpretive nature of this study. As far as the second bias is concerned, it is important to be careful not to allow my position as researcher to influence the narratives of the participants in fitting the intellectual position offered to me at a given moment. Hence it is important to leave all preconceptions behind when one enters the field.

### **1.3. Conclusion**

This chapter discusses the various theoretical frameworks in conjunction with the philosophical assumptions which guide my exploration of the participants' lived experiences regarding the study in question. These include phenomenological sociology, followed by existentialist thinking, and lastly Bourdieu's reflexive sociology. The main issue in phenomenology is the premise that a human's subjectivity or viewpoint is important in pursuit of understanding certain lifeworlds. It focuses on how people make sense of the world through their daily activities since they share aspects of the same culture, language and sets of meaning structures which help them to negotiate their daily lives. This study explores how students reflect on their interactions and relations in online contexts. Their personal narratives are useful in understanding how they construct meaning within these platforms.

With regards to existential sociology, attention is drawn to the question of who one is. From this perspective, the key element of experience in the world is change. Change is a constant feature of humans' lives, their sense of self, their experiences of social reality and culture that bestows meaning to social reality. Young people such as the student research participants use SNS to assert their identities in their own right. They use OSN as a platform through which they become what they want to be seen as, rather than what their respective societies want to see them as. The ultimate goal is to try and establish the sense of who they are.

This study adopts a mixed methods approach in order to produce both objective and subjective data. This is done through conducting a quantitative survey, individual in-depth interviews as well as the focus group session. These approaches are guided by Bourdieu's reflexive sociology where the emphasis is on merging structuralist and constructivist approaches.

## **Chapter 2: Literature review**

### **2.1. Introduction**

Whereas the aim of chapter one is to discuss the philosophical and paradigmatic standpoints which guide this study, the literature review chapter seeks to highlight what others have contributed to the knowledge pool relevant to the topic of this research. The purpose of the literature review is not just to find out what already exists, but to also provide an understanding of the subject under study to both the researcher and the reader. The objective of this chapter is to share what the existing insights regarding the phenomenon of online social networking (OSN) are.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the evolution of OSN and social network sites (SNS) as well as how they are conceptualised. This will provide an understanding as to where OSN comes from. Following that will be an exploration of the reasons why people engage in OSN. Since the main purpose of this study is to understand the relations and interactions that take place online, the concept of social interaction will be explored and scrutinised as to how it relates to OSN. This discussion will be followed by looking at how social support is transmitted, given and acquired on the online platforms and how it is different or similar to social support given in physical settings. Moreover, another important concept that is worthy of a discussion is that of identity in conjunction with the concept of self-presentation as they relate and apply to this study. The last part of this chapter deals with the dark side of SNS. That is, the problems that come with OSN.

### **2.2. The evolution of online social networking and social network sites**

Before one can describe the nature and background of OSN as an activity performed through SNS, it would be of crucial importance to provide a background of its origin. Although OSN is a recent phenomenon which enables users to access it through their portable modern electronic mobile devices such as smartphones, tablets and laptops (Tang et al., 2015: 102), it originates from what is referred to as computer-mediated communications (CMC) (Rheingold, 2000: xix). The fact that OSN started off as a computer-mediated communication method denotes that it was only accessible through computers. The reason for this is that basic computers were there before modern electronic mobile devices were invented.

Therefore, OSN cannot be understood as a substantial contemporary phenomenon which influenced and penetrated almost all areas of our lives instantaneously and overwhelmingly. OSN has been present for the past two decades since the advent of the internet (Placencia and

Lower, 2013: 617-618). As Steven Jones (1998: xii) claims, “*the Internet, World Wide Web (WWW), Usenet, electronic mail, messaging and bulletin board services (BBSs), intranets; these are the words that probably best define the late 1990s*”. More than 30 million people in the 1990s were already having access to internet through their computers (Jones, 1998: xiii) which denotes that they were part of the group involved in CMC — which is a form of OSN. Alongside with traditional media tools such as telephones and televisions, internet became widely embraced into the fabric of people’s everyday lives (Bagozzi et al., 2007: 77) and is “*crucially shaping the interactions people have with one another*” (Beneito-Montagut, 2015: 537; Henson et al., 2011: 254). Through its emergence in CMC, internet prevailed, and still prevails to foster social interactions by bringing people together for different purposes in different contexts such as education, work, social support or leisure (Bagozzi et al., 2007: 77-78).

People who use the internet for OSN motives are often classified as ‘*virtual communities*’, ‘*online communities*’ or the ‘*cyber society*’ (Rheingold, 2000: xii-xiii; Preece, 2000: 8 and Jones, 1998: xii). These concepts can be used interchangeably to refer to “*...a group of people who may not meet one another face to face, and who exchange words and ideas through the mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks*” (Rheingold, 1994:57-58 in Preece, 2000: 11). Although this definition excludes other recent electronic devices which enable people to interact in online platforms, this does not disqualify the owners of such devices from being classified as online communities. Similar to the situation in CMC, smartphones, tablets and laptops enable us to “*... chat and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, perform the acts of commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friends and lose them, play games and meta-games, flirt...*” (Rheingold, 1994: 58 in Preece, 2000: 11). I therefore, in this research project, acknowledge the SNS users who possess any internet device as part of virtual communities, online communities or cyber society.

Having provided a background and the origins of the OSN as a point of departure towards the conception and obtainment of basic knowledge regarding such phenomenon, subsequent sections focus on OSN as a recent phenomenon performed through SNS.

### **2.2.1. Defining online social networking and social network sites**

One of the characteristics that best describes the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the heightened use and access of advanced technology across the globe, be that in the developed or developing world.

Amongst the most fascinating occurrences in this era is a significant preoccupation of people who are engaged with modern electronic mobile devices which are compatible with internet use. It is palpable that people are now living large portions of their lives online — from online gaming, e-mailing, internet shopping to OSN with the aid of these devices (Bagozzi et al., 2007: 78; Placencia and Lower, 2013: 617-618) irrespective of one's physical location or environment. Virtual settings (internet devices) have now become the places where more aspects of mundane socialising activities among consociates (friends, family and relatives) take place instead of previously face-to-face encounters (Placencia and Lower, 2013: 618; Johns 2010: 499).

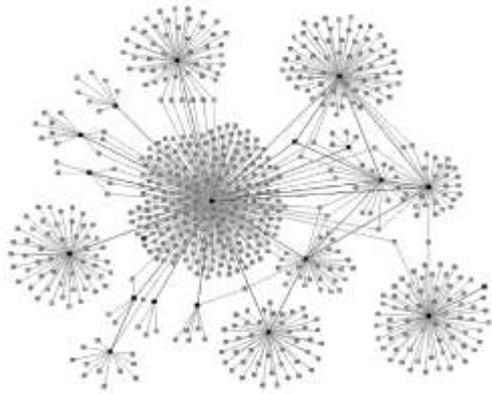
Some researchers believe that it is because of the advent of these modern devices mentioned earlier on that people get to spend considerable amounts of time engaging in OSN through SNS such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram (Tang et al., 2015: 102; Tazghini and Siedlecki, 2013: 827). The world has seen a proliferation in user participation of these internet systems over the years (Johnston et al., 2013: 200). Already in 2011 the total number of SNS users world-wide was projected as exceeding the population number of every country in the world except India and China, and it was estimated that this number continued to grow annually (Henson et al., 2011: 253-254). It has been revealed that adolescents and young adults form a large population which spend most of their time interacting digitally through SNS (McCuddy and Vogel, 2015: 169-170). They do not necessarily engage in OSN during their free time. Instead, some of them perform manual tasks while staying online at the same time. According to Sarah Tazghini and Karen Siedlecki (2013: 827), tertiary education students have been identified as a group of people that engage the most with SNS (Thompson and Hickey, 2005: 126). OSN modified the composition of the users' social networks (people whom they have relations with) in a sense that they typically have larger online networks in comparison to their offline personal networks (Bosancianu et al., 2013: 52; McCuddy and Vogel, 2015: 169-170). Friendships and social relations of the cyber society are no longer constrained to traditional geographic boundaries of neighbourhoods and educational institutions (schools, colleges, universities) (McCuddy and Vogel, 2015: 169-170).

Given the nature of OSN, it is crucial to first understand what is meant by the concept '*social network*' before it can be understood in the online context. A social network includes "*the total web of an individual's relationships and group memberships*" in which we fulfil many of our social roles as social beings (Thompson and Hickey, 2005: 126), or "*a configuration of people connected to one another through interpersonal means, such as friendship, common*

*interests, or ideas*” (Coyle and Vaughn, 2008 cited in Jin, 2015: 503). The web of an individual’s relationships encompasses both the relationships in online platforms and those in offline contexts. Hence, our social networks range from the relationships we have with our consociates (families, friends, relatives) to our contemporaries (colleagues, doctors, taxi drivers) and all other people and groups with whom we have ongoing interactions and relations (Thompson and Hickey, 2005: 126; Jin, 2015: 502-503). Having provided a description of the concept of social networks both in the offline and online contexts, SNS can be understood as “*web-based ‘communities’ that allow users to create profiles and virtually interact with other members*” (Henson et al., 2011: 254). Chang-Hyun Jin (2015: 502-503) and Kevin Johnston et al. (2013: 201) outline SNS as firstly, allowing individuals to create a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, secondly, articulate a list of other members whom they have a connection with, and lastly, view and navigate their list of connections and those made by others within that particular system. Users construct their profiles by displaying biographical and personal information about themselves such as their sex, date of birth and age, contact information such as e-mail address, cell-phone numbers and physical address (Henson et al., 2011: 255). They provide such personal information in the form of their required user profile. Once an individual has created a profile or account for any SNS, he/she automatically becomes a member of a virtual community within which networking with other members or *‘friends’* (a term used mostly on Facebook) can take place. (Henson et al., 2011: 253; Tazghini and Siedlecki, 2013: 827).

Through these SNS, users can *‘login’* for an unrestricted number of times a day to post their photographs and videos, update *‘status messages’*, send *‘invites’*, comment and *‘like’* (other users’ posts), *‘tag’* and chat with other members from around the globe (Henson et al., 2011: 253-254; Johnston et al., 2013: 201; Placencia and Lower, 2013: 617-621). They can also receive invites, media files, *‘wall’* or inbox messages from their friends throughout the day while online (or offline). Figure 2.1. below illustrates an ideal representation of online social networking that takes place within the cyber society.

Figure 2.1: An ideal representation of OSN



Source: Research to Action (2011 in Bank and Tat, 2014: 1186).

The web structure above represents the complex connections amongst virtual communities around the globe. It illustrates the extent to which one individual can expand his/her social network (people) to a broader society through online connections. SNS such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram make it possible for one individual to connect with hundreds (or even thousands) of people who also have their own network of people through invites and *'following'*. These online network connections become so complex and intricate to a point whereby the users share many common friends (also known as mutual friends), which is unlikely to be the case in one's physical or offline social circles.

### **2.2.2. Popular SNS: Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and Instagram**

The following sub-sections give an overview of the popular SNS around the globe as well as in South Africa. It provides an idea about what type of SNS the students are mostly attracted to, and eventually make part of their daily lives. These SNS are Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and Instagram.

#### **2.2.2.1. Facebook**

This social network site was invented by Mark Zuckerberg, Dustin Moskovitz and Chris Hughes in February 2004 as a site for Harvard students only (Valenzuela et al., 2008: 5; Henson et al., 2011: 254). It then expanded to almost every college student, later spread out to high school and work networks, and eventually to internet users in general around the globe (Valenzuela et al., 2008: 5 Placencia and Lower, 2013: 620). In 2016, Facebook consisted of around 1.25 billion users worldwide (Miller et al., 2016: 15) and approximately 14 million active users in South Africa (Goldstuck, 2017: 1). According to Munienge Mbodila et al. (2014: 117), between 85% and 99% of tertiary students use Facebook. Hence

Timothy McCuddy and Matt Vogel (2015: 169-171) conclude that Facebook is the most popular SNS for tertiary students by far. In addition, a study conducted by Fuseware (2016: 1) acknowledges that Facebook has become the biggest SNS in South Africa. Facebook is therefore favoured by most South Africans as compared to other popular SNS.

In the same way as other social media sites, Facebook provides a formatted web-page into which the user can enter personal and demographic information such as gender, birthday, hometown, political and religious views, contact information and physical addresses, relationship status, activities, interests, favourite music and movies, educational background and the personal profile picture (Valenzuela et al., 2008: 6). Figure 2.2. below illustrates the pictorial representation of a Facebook profile and other components that are within it.

Figure 2.2: Pictorial representation of Facebook profile page



Source: (Google images: 2017).

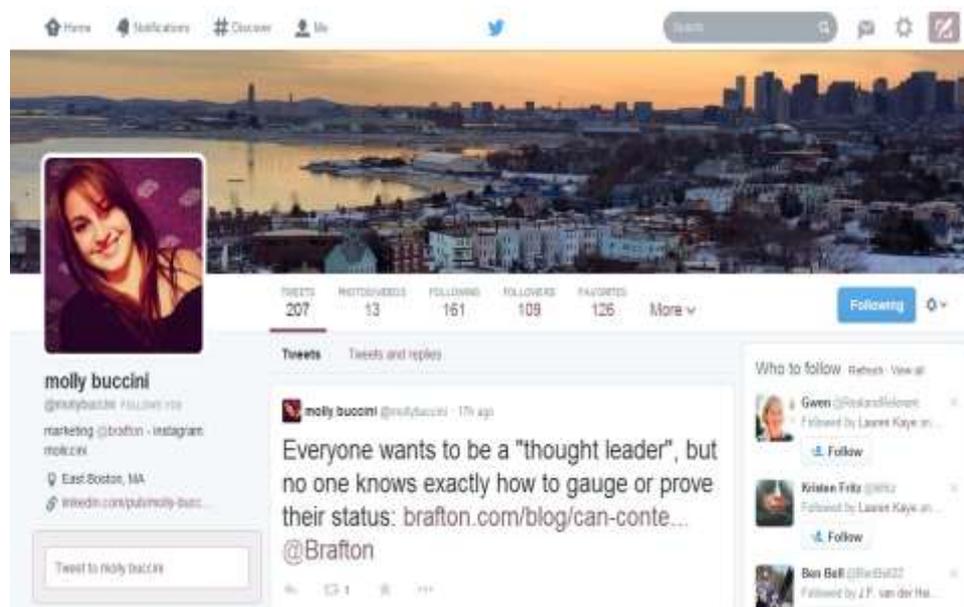
### 2.2.2.2. Twitter

Twitter is regarded as more amenable to constant public dialogue than Facebook because it is mainly a micro blogging platform which enables users to share their ideas, thoughts and information, and to also communicate privately with others — like in most SNS (Junco et al., 2010:3; Johnston et al., 2013: 202). It is a blog which is restricted to only 140 characters per post (Junco et al., 2010: 3). Which means any 'tweet' about any topic cannot exceed this number of characters. Unlike Facebook where members are referred to as 'friends', Twitter

consists of *'followers'* and the *'following'* (Johnston et al., 2013: 202). The former is a group of people who chose to receive and view tweets from certain people and the latter is someone whom the person chose to follow and receive tweets from (most of the time, a public figure) (Johnston et al., 2013: 202).

Coming after Facebook, Twitter consisted of 659 million users globally in May 2017 (U.S. National Archives, 2017). In South Africa too, Twitter saw a high growth among other major SNS: from 6.6 million to 7.4 million users in 2016 (Fuseware, 2016: 1). In the same way as Facebook and other SNS, Twitter requires one to provide personal and biographical information as well as other information about the user. Figure 2.3. below illustrates the pictorial representation of a Twitter account with some of the components that are within it.

Figure 2.3: Pictorial representation of Twitter page



Source: (Google images: 2017).

### 2.2.2.3. WhatsApp

WhatsApp is a messaging application that can be downloaded to any modern portable electronic mobile device such as smartphones, iPads, tabs, etc. to send instant messages to other users with compatible devices (Hedlund, 2013: 1). In contrast to traditional text messages sent using SMS or airtime, WhatsApp uses one's device's data or Wi-Fi connection to send text messages and media files such as voice clips, music, videos and pictures. WhatsApp was rated the most globally popular SNS application with more than 800 million active users in 2016 (Miller et. al, 2016: 15). According to Fuseware (2016: 2), WhatsApp is

presently the most popular application in the Android, Apple and Windows applications stores. Facebook is the runner up in the Android and Windows applications stores. Figure 2.4. below illustrates the pictorial representation of a WhatsApp account and some of the components that are within it.

Figure 2.4: Pictorial representation of a WhatsApp page



Source: (Google images: 2017).

#### 2.2.2.4. Instagram

This is a newly emerged application which is used to capture and share mobile photos and videos (Hu et al., 2014: 1). Users capture photos and record videos from their mobile devices and upload images '*instantly*' through Instagram application with the intention of connecting and sharing their life moments with family members, friends, colleagues and other users with the similar interests (Herman, 2014: 1; Hu et al., 2014: 1). It offers the users a platform to post large and creative photos (Herman, 2014: 1) which are better than those in other SNS mentioned previously. Instagram has attracted more than 700 million active users with an average of 40 billion photos uploaded daily by the users around the globe (Aslam, 2017: 1). While Facebook is used by a quarter of all South Africans, Instagram also continues to grow

in South Africa. The number of Instagram users in South Africa saw an increase of 32% this year (2017) which amounts to 3.5 million users (Goldstuck, 2017: 1). Figure 2.5. below illustrates the pictorial representation of an Instagram account profile and other features that are within it.

Figure 2.5: Pictorial representation of Instagram page



Source: (Google images: 2017).

Amongst the aims of this study is to understand the reasons that lead students into joining these SNS. Hence, the following discussion attempts to answer this question: why do people engage in online social networking?

### **2.3. Why do people engage in online social networking?**

There are many reasons and motives behind the involvement of people in OSN. Different people can provide different reasons and purposes for why they became part of the virtual community. However, previous studies have revealed that people are driven by common social forces that motivate them to use SNS (Beneito-Montagut, 2015: 538; Placencia and Lower, 2013: 617-618). In offline contexts, people usually, consciously or unconsciously, form and maintain social networks for functional reasons. These may include the advancement of their careers, social support and promotion of other needs and interests (Thompson and Hickey, 2005: 126; McCuddy and Vogel, 2015: 169-171). In the same way as in physical settings, OSN involves the building and maintenance of relationships for social

and professional reasons (Beneito-Montagut, 2015: 538). Users build relationships by making friends, participating in social organisations, online communities and engaging in some of the most trivial interactions and exchanges (Tang et al., 2016: 103; Jin, 2015: 501) such as gossiping. Therefore, the most common and fundamental reason for engaging in OSN is to communicate and interact with one's social networks.

Furthermore, studies report that young adults maintain their interpersonal relationships with consociates that were already part of their social system before they can interact online (Sponcil and Gitimu, 2013: 4-5; McCuddy and Vogel, 2015: 171). SNS has become a platform in which young adults, including students, keep in touch with their families and friends in a convenient manner (Sponcil and Gitimu, 2013: 4-5; Placencia and Lower, 2013: 617-618). Perhaps one of the reasons is because SNS are more efficient and cost effective. However, keeping in touch with pre-existing social networks from offline contexts is not always the case. For instance, SNS such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram allow users to meet strangers online whilst they already have their acquaintances as their friends (on Facebook) and followers (on Twitter and Instagram). SNS such as WhatsApp, which are mainly instant messengers, are the ones that are usually used to maintain pre-existing social networks. As aforementioned, SNS users also engage in some trivial activities while online — just passing time and the sheer entertainment are some of the examples (Sponcil and Gitimu, 2013: 4-5). Moreover, students also spend time engaging with the content posted by others rather than posting their own content (McCuddy and Vogel, 2015: 171). The study conducted by Tiffany Pempek et al. (2009 cited in Sponcil and Gitimu, 2013: 5) reports that the majority of respondents indicate to be spending time on going through other users' profiles, reading news feeds, or just looking at the photographs rather than communicating with their close ones. This raises a question of: What exactly do students spend most of their time doing online? Keeping in touch with their close ones or engaging in trivial activities?

It is within the scope of this study to answer those questions through understanding how the students of the UFS, Bloemfontein, reflect on the interactions they engage on in these online platforms. The interpretive worldview as the major framework of this study is useful in this regard as it allows a researcher to explore the participants' experiences related to the research questions. The section that follows focuses on aspects of social interaction and relations which take place on SNS.

## **2.4. Social interactions and relations**

SNS serve as the platforms which allow a high level of interaction and the formation of social relations online. They are channels through which members of the online communities fulfil their communication and interpersonal relations. Megan Sponcil and Priscilla Gitimu (2013: 3) view OSN as a convenient communication method which enables users to stay connected with their acquaintances, but at the users own pace and time. That means, they manage or operate their interactions in line with their own schedule by being able to decide when they want to read and respond to others (Sponcil and Gitimu, 2013: 3). In defining the concept of ‘social interaction’, it can be understood as “*the mutual influence of two or more people on each other’s behaviour — that profoundly affects our lives*” (Thompson and Hickey, 2005: 129). A definition provided by Panos Bardis (1979: 148) describes social interaction as “*the way in which personalities, groups or social systems act toward and mutually influence one another*”. Hence the role played by social interaction qualifies it as one of the building blocks of the entire social order (Thompson and Hickey, 2005: 129).

### **2.4.1. Patterns of social interaction**

Sociologists acknowledge that, among groups, organisations and societies there are five basic patterns of social interaction as distinguished by William Thompson and Joseph Hickey (2005: 129-130). These include exchange, cooperation, competition, conflict and coercion. I deal with these five basic patterns in the following sub-sections.

#### **2.4.1.1. Exchange**

This can be regarded as the most rudimentary form of social interaction. This form of social interaction is based on the norm of ‘reciprocity’; that is, we help and not harm those who also help us (Gouldner, 1960 cited in Thompson and Hickey, 2005: 129). The norm of reciprocity establishes the expectation that gifts, recognition, love, and many other favours, will be returned. On a daily basis people exchange smiles, waves, hugs, ‘*blow kisses*’ and other courtesies with each other. Exchanges of this nature are taken for granted until people fail to meet others’ expectations. This is where the norm of reciprocity adopts its negative side, such as hostilities, threats, social slights (impolite acts) and other harmful acts that can be reciprocated. Friends on Facebook ‘*like*’ each other’s pictures, status messages and also comment on them. Since Facebook also notifies the users about other user’s birthdays, wishing others happy birthday is one other courteous act which can be reciprocated.

However, hostility is likely to occur if I wish you a happy birthday but you do not wish or write a birthday message on my timeline when it is my turn.

#### **2.4.1.2. Cooperation**

This is a form of interaction in which individuals, groups and societies work as collectivities to strive to achieve common goal(s). Without cooperation, social order and life would be impossible. It is basic to human survival. It plays a major role when people are involved in intimate relationships, make a living, raising children and protecting themselves. Students usually create SNS groups for academic purposes such as group discussions, for instance. Cooperation has to be valued if group members wish to complete their tasks successfully.

#### **2.4.1.3. Competition**

In this pattern of social interaction, both individuals and social groups strive to achieve common goal(s). The difference — from cooperation — is that, in competition, individuals or groups contest to achieve valued goals, acknowledging that society's benefits or prizes are limited and only specific groups or individuals can attain them. SNS for instance, are platforms where jobs are advertised and circulated amongst users. Friends who might be interested in applying for jobs will be automatically competing with each other since some will get those jobs whereas some will not.

#### **2.4.1.4. Conflict**

Conflict is a form of social interaction in which individuals or social groups get into disputes and disagreements. Robert Nisbet (1970 cited in Thompson and Hickey, 2005: 130) states that: *“There is no group or relationship, however small or intimate, in which conflict does not occasionally occur”*. People often consider conflict as detrimental to human interest, harmful for social order, unhealthy for social life and something to be avoided at all cost; it must be resolved as quickly as possible once it occurs. SNS users are often in conflict against each other whenever they have opposing views, thoughts and ideas. Conflicts that involve a large number of people in online platforms often take place on SNS — such as Facebook and Twitter. Some of the *'hot'* issues that often stir conflicts are those that relate to politics, religion and racism.

#### **2.4.1.5. Coercion**

Coercion as a form of social interaction mostly occurs in situations where people are compelled to interact with each other. It involves the actualisation of the threat or force that

those with power or authority use to achieve their end means. Some of the verbal exchanges that people encounter in their everyday lives — such as ridicule, gossip, silent treatment and withdrawal of affection — are minor devices (though might be quite hurtful) people use in their day-to-day interactions with others. Coercion is further characterised by a dual power relationship consisting of the superordinate and the subordinate in which the former dominates the latter. Coercion is not often exercised on SNS since users are able to control who they want to interact and not interact with. However, instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp where private chats between two users take place, allow for some form of coercion. For instance, an older male person who is employed and dates a younger female student can withdraw affection or wilfully ignore his girlfriend (who might be financially depended on him) on WhatsApp by consistently refusing to reply to her texts. Such action demonstrates a superordinate-subordinate relationship often present in cases of coercive behaviour.

The relevance of the different patterns of social interaction with regards to OSN shows that online interactions are similar to offline ones. This further makes us aware that OSN forms part and parcel of our mundane everyday social interactions and relations.

#### **2.4.2. Social capital and tie strength**

Social capital, along with other types of capital such as economic and cultural capital, is a familiar concept within the field of sociology. Pierre Bourdieu describes economic capital as the financial resources that one has to his/her disposal, whereas cultural capital may refer to either educational qualifications or knowledge of, and appreciation for complex artistic works accumulated by an individual. According to Chang-Hyun Jin (2012: 503), social capital is *“an investment in social relations on the part of individuals through which they gain access to embedded resources to enhance expected returns on instrumental or expressive actions”*. Xin-An Lu (2011: 52) defines social capital as *“capital or resources acquired and accumulated through the creation of relationships”*. The emphasis is on the idea of resources that are available to people through their social interactions (Jin, 2012: 503). By identifying such resources, one can help explain how social capital is produced and allocated as well as how people benefit from social networks (Jin, 2012: 503).

OSN is an attractive and popular means of interaction to many people who are members of a cyber society because it helps them to develop and maintain social capital as a crucial resource in their interpersonal relationships (Lu, 2011: 52). Through SNS people keep in

touch with broader networks of people who are currently a part of someone's life and with people from the past by fostering bonding and bridging of social capital (Miller and Munday, 2015: 188). Chris Julien (2015: 365) contends that, OSN affects an individual's stock of capital and "...does not remain unchanged in its adaption to internet culture and communication". This means that online social interactions contain and extend social capital because of the ubiquitous accessibility of the internet (Julien, 2015: 365). The high frequency users of Facebook make a large number of friends within a relatively short period of time through invites and friend requests received from others. This is highly unlikely to be achieved in an offline setting for an ordinary person. Hence, through SNS interactions, people make expressions of social capital that precisely affect and extend their relationships (Julien, 2015: 365). This newly emerged type of social capital that is facilitated by OSN can also be referred to as '*digital social capital*' (Julien, 2015: 365) since it is carried out with the aid of digital devices.

The strength of users' connections to their online friends is one of the important factors with regards to how interactions unfold on SNS. The amount of connection a user has with his or her online friends is referred to as the '*tie-strength*' (Wilcox and Stephen, 2013: 91). Tie-strengths of one's social network (people) vary between strong and weak polarities. The concept describes the extent to which one is involved in a given social relation. It captures the degree to which a person feels close to another person or social group, and the degree to which he/she values that relation (Wilcox and Stephen, 2013: 91). Jin (2015: 503) asserts that strong ties (or bonding social capital) represent those friends with whom an individual shares a close or intimate personal connection, whereas weak ties (or bridging social capital) represent people with whom an individual have a more distant relationship. Close friends, family and relatives may constitute for individuals' strong ties whereas people such as '*just*' friends, business associates or strangers may constitute weak ties. Therefore, the contexts of online social relations vary in scope from strong to weak tie social networks (Hunt et al., 2014: 238).

Although it might be easier to connect with both bonding and bridging social capital in social networks, the flow of information within any of the types of social networks (offline or online) usually depends less on the number of ties or friends than on the tie strength (Wilcox and Stephen, 2013: 91-92). According to Mark Granovetter (1973 in Wilcox and Stephen, 2013: 91-92), individuals with a small number of strong ties can transmit information more effectively than individuals with a large number of weak ties. The reason for this is that

strong ties have a stronger influence over their network of friends than weak ties (Wilcox and Stephen, 2013: 91-92). Jin (2015: 503) argues that since OSN enables interaction to take place within a larger network of social connections, it is more inclined to increase the number of weak ties than strong ties into one's social network. However, with regards to transmission of information amongst one's social network in online settings, one can be able to transfer that information to both weak and strong ties effectively and in the same manner. Offline settings make it harder for, or limit individual's capacity, to transmit information to weak ties for the mere fact that these (weak ties) are people with whom an individual does not have strong relations and interactions. For instance, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram enable the information to reach the entire virtual community existing within one's SNS all at the same time. You post a status message or tweet once, and 500 people are able to view it simultaneously.

Nevertheless, some SNS foster higher social relation maintenance with strong ties than weak ties. Hence it is not surprising that people are more intensely involved with, and usually pay more attention to friends who constitute strong ties (Wilcox and Stephen, 2013: 91-92). For instance, on WhatsApp, people are quicker to respond to texts of people who they consider important to them. These can be people such as a lover or a family member. Usually when the user has to transmit certain information, he/she will start with strong ties.

Whenever people interact and form relations with each other, they usually manifest certain behaviours towards each other. Hence the following section will focus on how members of a virtual community behave while online. This will enable us to comprehend the extent to which online behaviours differ and/or resemble those that are displayed in offline contexts.

### **2.4.3. Online social behavior**

Previous studies reveal that SNS users have a tendency of interacting more frequently with those they share similar interests and lifeworlds with (Lu, 2011: 53-54; Bosancianu et al., 2013: 50). These are people the user has already met in offline settings — peers, fellow classmates, family and relatives. In this sense, OSN functions as a means to support the already existing relationships (Sponcil and Gitimu, 2013: 4-5; Miller and Munday: 2015, 188). People are not usually motivated to initiate new relationships which are completely virtual — they tend to convey offline relationships towards the SNS to extend these face-to-face interactions and connections (Lu, 2011: 54; Ivcevic and Ambady, 2013: 298). Although people tend to interact more with people with whom they share similar characteristic and

interests, some studies uncovered that OSN facilitates interactions and relations that could have otherwise been unsuccessful in normal face-to-face contexts (Bosancianu et al., 2013: 50; Ivcevic and Ambady, 2013: 298). Through OSN, relations between socially diverse people with respect to aspects such as age, gender, or social status are easier to maintain (Bosancianu et al., 2013: 52). Some students or other young adults tend to follow their favourite celebrities (musicians, actors/actresses, politicians, etc.) on Twitter and exchange texts with them (if they are lucky). Sometimes they invite these celebrities to social events organised at the university (UFS) to perform or deliver speeches as guest speakers. This exemplifies how SNS can enable interactions and relations to take place between people who are socially diverse in terms of the social statuses they occupy.

Furthermore, OSN that takes place on SNS has a potential of migrating to offline contexts (Bosancianu et al., 2013: 52). When people become more attached to their online contacts they subconsciously take their interactions and relations beyond their online environment. These relationships that are forged on SNS evolve to the point where online friends can call each other by means of telephones and/or cellphones rather than merely exchanging texts online, and/or even establish face-to-face interactions (Bosancianu et al., 2013: 52). As stated earlier, friends that the users meet online are usually representing weak ties and those who are already a part of the individual's offline social network form part of the strong ties. However, once the users become more attached to each other, and sense a mutual social connection, they are likely to establish bonding social capital. Thus, weak ties turn into strong ties. This process reveals that people naturally bring some of their offline habits and inclinations to the online world (Bosancianu et al., 2013: 52).

One of the objectives of this study was to investigate which kinds of benefits are derived from online social relations and interactions. The consulted literature reveals that receiving and offering social support online is amongst the benefits afforded by SNS to their users. Hence, the subject of social support is dealt with in the subsequent section.

## **2.5. Social support**

SNS can serve as platforms where social support is offered and exchanged. Social support is a multidimensional construct that can be understood as a *“behaviour involving human interaction through which individuals express, perceive, and receive emotional concern, instrumental aid, or information”* (Trepte et al., 2015: 75). Cobb Sidney (1976 in Tang et al., 2016: 103) defines social support as the *“information leading the subject to believe that he or*

*she is cared for and loved, that he/she is esteemed and valued, and he/she belongs to a network of communication and mutual obligation*". For the purpose of this study, I rely mainly on the first definition of social support as human interaction through which emotional concern, instrumental aid and information are expressed and perceived, while at the same time not ignoring the latter definition. I do so because such definition can be applicable to both online and offline contexts.

Social support is a social construct that can be divided into four components as outlined by James House (1981 in Tang et al., 2016: 103). In the following sections I briefly discuss these components.

### **2.5.1. Emotional social support**

This type of social support includes the feelings of loving, caring and sympathy (Tang et al., 2016: 103). It affords one an opportunity to talk and communicate feelings with others. The study of *'helpful'* and *'unhelpful'* support attempts to reveal that talking to others about emotions is one of the most helpful mechanisms of social support (Trepte et al., 2015: 75).

### **2.5.2. Instrumental social support**

In this type of social support, provision of material aid or behavioural assistance is offered (Tang et al., 2016: 103). It can also be an expression of a positive affect or affirmation (Trepte et al., 2015: 75).

### **2.5.3. Informational support**

This includes provision of guidance, advices or any information useful for solving problematic situations (Tang et al., 2016: 103). These can be issues regarding one's social life, professional life or problems that face society at large.

### **2.5.4. Social companionship**

This type of social support is also known as *'positive social interaction'* and involves spending time together with others and engaging in recreational activities together (Tang et al., 2016: 103). Social companionship can be exchanged between family members, colleagues, friends, schoolmates, sport team members, church members, etc.

OSN is also useful in offering all of the above mentioned forms of social support. According to Sponcil and Gitimu (2013: 6), social support received from other members of a virtual community is important in maintaining existing relationships and this has been found to

improve the quality of life among tertiary education students. Receiving positive responses such as comments and *'likes'* on pictures and wall postings from others improve the individual image that tertiary education students are striving to have for themselves (Sponcil and Gitimu, 2013: 6; Hunt et al., 2014: 238). Hence OSN can be regarded as the communication method that can help people manage and cope with uncertainty as well as to improve well-being through different types of social support. The following paragraph answers the question of how online social support is like when compared to offline social support.

SNS users usually tend to reach a high number of online friends through their postings and other related activities. However, as previously stated, these friends can be categorised into diverse social groups — family, relatives, friends and colleagues. Others may be friends of friends whom the user has befriended online and whom he/she does not know personally (Trepte et al., 2015: 78). All these online friends that emanate from different social contexts form an aggregate of one broad audience which creates what Sabine Trepte et al. (2015: 78) call *'context collapse'*. Thus, posting a request that has to do with a certain type of social support in online settings becomes different from asking for assistance or help from a single person or a group of people that one shares the same lifeworld with, in everyday offline contexts. Because of the ubiquitous nature of OSN, interactions are independent of both time and location. SNS bring together different cultures, social groups and people from different professional and social backgrounds from around the globe at any time, as one network (system of people) addressable with only one posting (Trepte et al., 2015: 78).

Previously, adolescents and young adults passively engaged in activities such as watching television or listening to music in order to cope with feelings of sadness, loneliness and hopelessness (Leung, 2011: 382). However, there has been a gradual shift from resorting to such activities to online social interaction for receiving the emotional support and affectionate companionship (Leung, 2011: 382). In the qualitative study of 18 adult SNS users conducted by Trepte et al. (2015: 76), subjects who were part of the study reported that they felt emotionally supported by other users in relation to life experiences which are hardly shared with offline support networks.

In terms of informational support, presumably, a collapse of contexts and connections denotes that online communities have a multitude of experiences to share (Trepte et al., 2015: 78). The broader expertise of knowledge and experience available on SNS due to the collapse of social contexts should, therefore, provide more informational support than can be

anticipated in offline contexts (Trepte et al., 2015: 78). There are two more advantages in online settings with regards to informational support: Firstly, the spatio-temporal absence (the absence of distance travelled and time spent doing something) nature of SNS influences how effective the support can be transmitted. SNS are more capable of providing advices or answer(s) to a question quickly due to their accessibility and availability in time as compared to offline social networks (Trepte et al., 2015: 78). Secondly, online interactants are more easily reachable than offline ones. Thus, the information is most likely to be received by a broader circle of the cyber society (Trepte et al., 2015: 78). Therefore, the effectiveness of SNS fosters the individuals to invest their trust on the knowledgeable of their online friends as the sources of information.

Irrespective of the context in which social interactions and relations take place, be that online or offline, individuals' identities are in the process moulded. It is important for this study to understand the influence of SNS on the identities of participants and the way they present themselves on these platforms. The concepts of identity and self-presentation are dealt with in the next section.

## **2.6. Identity and self-presentation on social networks sites**

The concept of identity within the context of modernity has become one of the central topics in contemporary social theory. Contemporary social analysts such as Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Anthony Giddens and Zygmunt Bauman are amongst those who contributed to the social theory of modern identities. These scholars have unique and different worldviews regarding the subject of modern identities.

For instance, Foucault views the emergent modern self as the product of institutions and discourses that are aimed at producing a highly disciplined and self-monitoring subjectivity (Branaman, 2010: 135). He argues that modern institutions which he refer to as '*disciplinary technologies*' have created deep selves as the means of control (Foucault, 1965,1977 cited in Branaman, 2010: 140). In *The History of Sexuality* (1978), he contends that the modern myth of '*true self*' only deepens self-scrutiny and self-judgement, and that these are ultimately forms of social control (Branaman, 2010: 140).

When taking a gaze at Baudrillard's ideas, people's identities are diminished by a complex '*hyperreal*' environment which can be said to have been created by media explosion in the twentieth century (Branaman, 2010: 141). He views media and its '*intoxicating*,

*prepossessing and rapidly shifting images*” as becoming dominant realities within our immediate social realities (Branaman, 2010: 141).

As for Giddens (1991, 1992, 2000 cited in (Branaman, 2010: 141), the *‘late modern era’* as he calls it, requires the self to live reflectively. That is, people have to live their lives strategically, thoughtfully and anxiously in all spheres of their lives. The lifestyle choices that people adopt should constantly be under revision. His concept of *‘reflexivity’* captures sentiments about the self in the modern era.

Like most contemporary social analysts, Bauman views the perilousness of modernity, which can also be referred to as *‘liquid modernity’* (Branaman, 2010: 142). He believes that this is characterised by uncertainty, contingency and ambivalence as compared to the modern era (Branaman, 2010: 142). According to Bauman (2001 in Branaman, 2010: 143), the changes in society require the self to also change. Should the self remain unchanged, it will be “... *failing to catch up with fast moving events...* ” (Bauman, 2001 cited in Branaman, 2010: 142).

OSN exists within the epoch of late modernity which came along with the vast explosion of media. These discussed ideas of the contemporary social theorists on the modern identities (above) serve to explain how the selves have changed over time. And amongst the factors which facilitate that change, the role that the media play is crucial. In this study, the concept of identity will be viewed as a social construct which the period of modernity has had a huge impact on, and where the role of media (including social media) is paramount.

### **2.6.1. Identity**

As mentioned in the preceding paragraphs of this section, identity is one of the major areas of concern in social sciences — including in sociology. However, up to this day, there is still no objective definition of what identity means due to, amongst other social factors, our ever-changing modern world. Nevertheless, it is not the aim of this study to dwell much on identity politics. For this reason, simplistic definitions will be used to bring an understanding to begin with, before the concept of identity can be discussed further.

Daphna Oyserman et al. (2012: 69) define identities as “*the traits and characteristics, social relations, roles, and social group memberships that define who one is*”. They focus on what used to be true of one in the past, what is true of one now in the present, what one aspires to be or becomes in the future, the person one feels he/she is meant or obliged to become, or the person one fears he/she may become (Oyserman et al., 2012: 69). Hence identity involves

what comes to mind when individuals think about themselves; how they were, how they are and how they can be. While a definition provided by Oyserman and co-authors emphasises identities as products of the past, present and future, Warren Kidd and Alison Teagle's (2012: 7) definition is more focused on identity as a product of the present time. They think of identity as related to how people think about themselves, how they think about other people around them, and what they imagine other people think of them (Kidd and Teagle, 2012: 7). As they put it: "*Identity means being able to 'fix' or 'figure out' who we are as people*".

SNS can be seen as platforms where adolescents and young adults experiment with their identities. The study by Patti Valkenburg et al. (2008 in Leung, 2011: 382) revealed that over half of 9 to 18 year old SNS users pretend to be somebody else while they are communicating or chatting through instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp. Although such an act is mostly prevalent among adolescents who are probably still in high or intermediate schools, there is a good chance that some of the young adults at tertiary level educational institutions also engage in such activity, or they were, during their adolescent years. According to Louis Leung, (2011: 382) and Ahn (2011: 1438), young people spend considerable time online posting photos, videos and personal information on SNS to reveal their identities. Internet technology is proliferating and is changing over time and it bestows young people (and other groups) with opportunities to have more ownership over their identities than in spontaneous offline or face-to-face contexts since they have time to figure out what they want to say and how they want to present themselves online (Leung, 2011: 382; Sponcil Gitimu, 2013: 5-6).

Furthermore, most SNS users are in these online social networks for popularity in order to be admired by others (Sponcil and Gitimu, 2013: 6). A study by Pempek et al. (2009 in Sponcil and Gitimu, 2013: 6) reveals that young adults have an average of 358 Facebook friends and at least 200 are those whom the users met face-to-face prior to connecting with them online (West, Lewis and Currie, 2009 cited in Sponcil and Gitimu, 2013: 6 ). Adding as many Facebook friends and followers on Twitter and Instagram as possible, denotes how hungry young people are for popularity and attention.

### **2.6.2. Self-presentation**

Self-presentation is another performance that SNS users find themselves enacting in, on the online platforms. In his theory of dramaturgy, Erving Goffman (1957 in OpenStax, 2013: 92) claims that a person is like an actor on the stage; people use '*impression management*' to present themselves to others in the ways they want to be perceived. People take on different

roles everytime they find themselves in different situations, and this is referred to as ‘*role performance*’ (OpenStax, 2013: 92). The role a person decides to perform depends on who is the ‘*audience*’ at that point in time. For instance, the way young people behave around their friends, or the way they talk to them will be different from the way they behave and talk to their teachers or lecturers. Thus, they perform different roles to different audiences in Goffman’s terminology.

Another important concept related to self-presentation is that of the ‘*looking-glass self*’, a concept coined by the American sociologist Charles Cooley (OpenStax, 2013: 92). According to this theory, people align their images with what they think other people see — they imagine how they must appear to others and resultantly act in terms of this assessment (Cooley, 1902 cited in OpenStax, 2013: 92). For example, you find young people wearing certain clothes (most of the time the ones that are relevant to current fashion), preparing their hair-styles in impressive manner, and wearing make-up. They do all of these with the idea that the way they present themselves will influence other’s perceptions about them. They further anticipate certain reactions and responses from others, and if fortunate, they get the ones (responses and reactions) they desire and hence feel good about them. However, above all of that, Cooley claims that people’s reactions to us are similar to a mirror in which our images are reflected (Cooley, 1902 cited in OpenStax, 2013: 92). In that way, we form an imagination of how we appear for others and draw inference based upon their reactions to us. Self-presentation can therefore be regarded as “*the process through which individuals communicate an image of themselves to others, is a central element in the construction of one’s self and efforts to establish a reputation within a social context*” (Yang and Brown, 2016: 402). This process is directly linked to the concept of identity formation.

Moreover, presentation of oneself is regarded as “*a specific and more strategic form of self-disclosure*” (Yang and Brown, 2016: 403-404). Young adults disclose personal information about their identities and preferences on their SNS profiles (Ahn, 2011: 1438). Their profiles summarise what there is to know about them. Through their personal profiles, they present themselves with the inclusion of a selected amount of information about themselves. (Sponcil Gitimu, 2013:5-6). And one of the interesting facts about SNS is that they enable users to add and reject people they want or do not want to be friends with (Ahn, 2011: 1438). This means that they have a decision-making power and autonomy over the type of people they would like to self-disclose themselves to, in order to successfully present the images they desire.

Hence self-disclosure can be regarded as a strategy for young adults to open up their own identities as to how they want to be perceived by others.

One of the previous studies reveals that wall postings on Facebook by the individual's friends certainly affect others' perceptions about this individual user (Lu, 2011: 53-54). Wall postings affect how the observers or audience rate the owner's profile credibility and social attractiveness (Lu, 2011: 53-54; Ahn, 2011: 1438). This means that wall postings that display the user's socially accepted behaviour are likely to contribute positive views about the user. On the other hand, postings that allude to the user's deviating social behaviour damage positive views. Postings that project content such as philandering, for instance, can be viewed in a negative light by the user's friends. The user's attractiveness is not only influenced by the information that directly defines the user, but also the information that has an indirect link with the user (Lu, 2011: 53-54). This can be the physical attractiveness of the user which can be seen via image posting. It is not surprising that most of the females (usually young adults) in SNS such as Facebook and Instagram always try to post perfected images of themselves which show their beauty (usually fabricated through editing software applications) and sexiness. Nowadays, because of the availability of beauty manipulating software programmes that can be downloaded from the internet, the users of mobile electronic devices (smartphones, laptops, tablets, etc.) tend to edit their photographic images in order to improve the quality as well as to look more physically appealing than they are in real life.

As much as OSN and SNS afford virtual communities with all sort of benefits, they usually come along with problems that can be disruptive to individual's lives. The subsequent section which is also the last, deals with the problems that can be caused by OSN.

## **2.7. The dark side of virtual communities: problems in online social networking**

The ramifications which can be caused by OSN will be discussed in this section. It comprises the sub-headings of: online addiction, threat to social relationships and social capital and also online interpersonal victimisation.

### **2.7.1. Online addiction**

Our contemporary world is faced with many problems including the addiction to substances such as alcohol and drugs. Besides these conventional and familiar types of addiction (alcohol and drugs) that we know, not so many years ago, the main issue was once television addiction manifested by teenagers and young adults (Abdulahi et al., 2014: 135). However, the world of today is facing a new type of addition which is internet addiction (Abdulahi et

al., 2014: 135; Das and Sahoo, 2015: 225). This type of addiction is identified amongst students around the world who form part of virtual communities (Abdulahi et al., 2014: 136). Studies reveal that, a transition from normal to addictive OSN occurs when individuals see SNS as platforms or mechanisms that can help them relieve stress, loneliness, depression or bring about a sense of belonging (Griffiths, 2013: 1; Abdulahi et al., 2014: 136). Mark Griffiths (2013: 1) and Lucian Lu (2011: 53) contend that, those who frequently engage in SNS are often considered to be poor at socialising in real life. Because of that, SNS provide them with continuous rewards such as self-efficacy, self-esteem, satisfaction, all of which need to be fulfilled over time (Griffiths, 2013: 1). As this type of behavior develops, it leads to many problems such as ignoring real life relationships, work or educational conflicts, and many other problems (Griffiths, 2013: 1; Abdulahi et al., 2014: 136).

Scary incidents resulting from online addiction have been reported by previous studies. Biswajit Das and Shankar Sahoo (2015: 225) share a story of Alexandra Tobias, a mother from north Florida in the United States of America who killed her own boy because he was crying and obviously making noise — that made her angry because she was busy playing Farmville (an online game) on Facebook! Another shocking story is the one of Salum Kombo (18 years) from London who was stabbed to death by his best friend over an argument that started over Facebook (France, 2009 cited in Das and Sahoo, and 2015: 225). Such incidents serve as a proof that OSN can create very detrimental consequences over taken-for-granted incidents and conflicts that can otherwise be solved, avoided or dealt with differently in the physical world.

It is noticeable that these addictions emerge primarily from the use of Facebook. As stated earlier on, Facebook is the leading social network site in terms of the number of its users. Hence it is unsurprising that such incidents arose from its addictive usage. Online social networks, Facebook in particular, can have a negative impact on different components of an individual's being (physically, mentally or emotionally) and various areas (social and professional dimensions) of someone's life. A study conducted amongst 1000 people across the United States and which objective was to measure people's addition to SNS discovered that 56% of SNS users check Facebook at least once a day while only 25% can stay merely for a few hours without login (Das and Sahoo, 2015: 225). This study further reveals that individuals under 25 years of age are more likely to lose sleep while dilating their eyes going through their friends' posts ("People's addition to", 2010 cited in Das and Sahoo, 2015: 225). Even as much as 17% is reported to be reading Facebook messages while engaging in sexual

intercourse and 63% while on the toilet (“People’s addition to”, 2010 cited in Das and Sahoo, 2015: 225). With regards to impact on social and professional life, one of the studies reported a case of a young adult female who was using Facebook at least five hours a day instead of working, and consequently, was dismissed from her job (Kuss and Griffiths, 2011: 69-70). This example shows how OSN can, to some degree, destroy people’s lives.

Moreover, it has been argued that people who are addicted to OSN experience symptoms similar to those experienced by individuals suffering from substance addition (Hormes et al., 2014: 2079-2080). These symptoms comprise: “*mood modification (i.e., engagement in SNS leads to a favourable change in emotional states), salience (i.e., behavioural, cognitive, and emotional preoccupation with the SNS usage), tolerance (i.e., ever increasing use of SNS over time), withdrawal symptoms (i.e., experiencing unpleasant physical and emotional symptoms when SNS use is restricted or stopped), conflict (i.e., interpersonal and intrapsychic problems ensue because of SNS usage), and relapse (i.e., addicts quickly revert back to their excessive SNS usage after an abstinence period)*” (Griffiths, 2013: 1). Development of addiction can be stirred by a number of characteristics related to SNS, including the reinforcement from new material posted online and the presence of notifications that alert the user, and the availability of a new content (Hormes et al., 2014: 2080). In SNS such as WhatsApp and other instant messengers, the more people send texts to a person, the more that person stays online. This leads to reinforcement or development of more addiction.

### **2.7.2. A threat to personal relationships and social capital**

One of the important questions that one may ask is, as more people engage in OSN, will there be a blur between online and face-to-face communication? Other important questions asked by Jenny Preece (2000: 21) are: “*how do online relationships affect individuals, their families, and their local communities?*”, “*can people really develop strong ties with strangers they have never met face-to-face?*” or “*...is the internet merely enabling us to reach further into the world while we neglect to build relationships with the next-door neighbours and our local community?*” These are some of those questions one needs to ask when rethinking OSN. According to the view of Batya Friedman (1997 in Preece, 2000: 21), instead of building new kinds of communities, these online technologies often create a false sense of connection and intimacy. This account carries the notion that while people are busy connecting with a lot of people who they never met — they are not aware that such connections are not real but illusionary, while in the process, their real offline relations suffer.

Anecdotes tell us that, although people are travelling the world to physically meet new friends they met online which eventually become their strong ties, sometimes some of those relationships become utter disappointments (Preece, 2000: 21). One of the reasons is the fact that people present themselves more favourably in their SNS profiles — presentations which are false in the real life. Examples include: lying about age, appearance, or weight (Lu, 2011: 54; Preece, 2000: 21). Usually people who lie about their identities on SNS are those who may otherwise not succeed in building relationships with people whom they interact with online, in physical settings. The perceived failure to develop a relationship, especially an intimate one might be inherently disqualifying personal qualities such as the younger or older age. For instance, research by Tomoko Kanayama (2000 in Lu, 2011: 54) discovered that senior male Japanese internet users find it easier to communicate with females through internet. The time factor may play an important role in building online relationships in the sense that users can re-read and make edits in their texts and images while interacting — they find more time to engage in a range of cognitive activities such as understanding, reflecting and empathising, all of which allow a person to present him/herself as ideal as he/she can (Lu, 2011: 54).

Some studies attest that some of the members who are part of cyber society and are addicted to online relationships, reduce their face-to-face contacts (Das and Sahoo, 2015: 224; Rajeev, 2015: 12; Bank and Tat, 2014: 1187; Preece, 2000: 21). The study that was conducted in the mid-1990s by Carnegie Mellon University on 169 people in 73 households over a two year period, suggest that greater internet usage is associated with a small, but statistically significant decline in social involvement as measured by communication within the family and the size of people's local social networks. This study also discovered that over-usage of the internet can be associated with increased loneliness and depression (Preece, 2000: 21; Lu, 2011: 53). The main concern with spending a lot of time online is that people do so at the expense of face-to-face relationships with their closed ones (Preece, 2000: 21; Lu, 2011: 53; Bagozzi et al., 2007: 88-89). Thus, the time spent on SNS may substitute the time that ought to be spent on social activities.

### **2.7.3. Online victimisation**

Another dark side of OSN is the victimisation of others through SNS. Online victimisation can take on different forms including harassment, threatening behaviour, hateful messages, defamation of character, cyber-bullying, etc. (McCuddy et al., 173: 2016). The fact that a user can secure his/her anonymity on SNS encourages that user to commit devious acts and

misbehave online (Bank and Tat, 2014: 1187; Das and Sahoo, 2015: 225). Some of the conniving acts include those that a normal person cannot commit in the

real physical world. An example of this is a case that involves a 19 years old Wisconsin (north-central United States) boy who posed as a girl on Facebook and convinced his 30 fellow female classmates to send him naked photos. Later on, this boy was blackmailing the victims for sex by using those photos and videos (“New Berlin teen”, 2009 cited in Das and Sahoo, 2015: 225). This incident proves that anyone is capable of anything on SNS. One does not need to be powerful to commit unlawful acts online. Das and Sahoo (2015: 225) report that even Third World countries such as India are faced with similar problems as First World countries in as far as SNS are concerned. According to Indian Central Crime Branch, cyber-crimes on SNS such as Facebook and other SNS include posting objectionable content on someone’s profile, creating a fake profile to defame a person and also hacking into other people’s profiles (Das and Sahoo, 2015: 225; McCuddy et al., 174: 2016).

One form of online victimisation which is said to be growing especially amongst adolescents is cyber-bullying (Dredge et al., 2014: 287). According to Tokunaga (2010 in Bank and Tat, 2014: 1187), “*cyber-bullying is any behaviour performed through electronic or digital media by individuals or groups that repeatedly communicate hostile or aggressive messages intended to inflict harm or discomfort on others*”. Although this type of bullying increases mostly amongst teenagers, it does not mean it is not taking place amongst young adults and middle aged adults.

Several studies have revealed that cyber-bullying is more severe in its impact as compared to conventional or traditional bullying (Dredge et al., 2014: 287). Some researchers conjecture that, one of the reasons why cyber-bullying is considered more harmful compared to physical bullying is because of some features that are embedded within SNS — one being the online anonymity (Bank and Tat, 2014: 1187; Dredge et al., 2014: 287). Cyber-bullying is more acute when the perpetrator targets a victim from an anonymous social network site profile or one that is not personally known to the victim (Dredge et al., 2014: 288). To add to that, public textual message exchanges between the perpetrator and the victim lead to a more harsh impact than private textual exchanges (Dredge et al., 2014: 288). Public exchanges can take place on SNS such as Twitter and Facebook, whereas private exchanges often take place via instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp and Facebook messenger.

## 2.8. Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the way online social interaction and relations take place on SNS and several aspects concerning OSN are examined in detail in order to understand the phenomenon in question. Section two of this chapter provides an overview on how OSN evolved up to the point where recent SNS such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and Instagram currently are. In this study SNS are defined as web-based communities which allow the users to create personal profiles and ultimately connect with other members.

This chapter also explores concepts, definitions and sub-headings which are considered valuable for this study. These include addressing the reasons why people engage in OSN, dynamics inherent in social relations and interactions in online platforms, online social support, identity and self presentation and lastly a discussion about the dark side of SNS.

Following an overview of the above key aspects, the reviewed literature helped me to explore possible reasons why people engage in OSN, especially young adults in tertiary institutions. Maintaining and building relationships for social and professional reasons as well as interacting with one's social networks are seen to be the most common reasons for people to engage in these platforms. In exploring the concept of social interaction a key concept in this study, five basic patterns of social interaction are identified. These patterns include exchange, cooperation, competition, conflict and coercion. Along with these patterns of social interaction, discussions of the key aspects of social capital and tie strength provide an idea how these inform the relations and interactions amongst the members of virtual community and the possible ways in which individuals can behave while online. Different types of social support such as emotional, instrumental, informational and social companionship are elaborated on. These types of social support are regarded as useful in this study since the previous studies found that they (types of social support) are also prevalent in SNS. Moreover, the concept of identity in this research captures the idea of how SNS influence the identity formation of young adults who use SNS. In connection with identity, self-presentation is the concept which explores the way SNS users strive to present their personal images to others. Finally, the aspect of the '*dark side of virtual communities*' focuses on inherent problems in SNS such as online addiction, OSN as a threat to personal relationships and online victimisation and how these impact on the user.

All these aspects and definitions provided a foundation through which I generate the interview questions which help me to explore the perceptions, thoughts and feelings of my

research participants regarding the interactions and social relations which take place in their cyber-worlds. The narratives of these participants provide an understanding on how they reflect on their OSN behaviour and how these platforms can also affect them negatively.

## **Chapter 3: Methodological process**

### **3.1. Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to situate my study within a methodological framework by providing an account of the chosen research methods, and to explain how some of those research methods are executed to address the research questions of this study. Online social networking (OSN) as a contemporary social phenomenon can be studied either quantitatively or qualitatively depending on the research questions and objectives of the researcher. However, it can also be studied utilising both approaches when the researcher's intention is to learn about more than one aspect of the phenomenon. It is for this reason that I opted for a mixed methods approach. Although mixed methods are applied, my research is, however, more qualitatively based.

This chapter is divided into two main sections. The first section of this chapter is devoted to a discussion of the mixed methods approach to the study, followed by a discussion of both quantitative and qualitative approaches which connect back to the theoretical and philosophical foundations of this study. The second section focuses on how the research methods and techniques that underpin this study are employed to yield the practical outcomes. These methods and techniques entail an account of how the sample is drawn and which methods were used to collect the data. The focus is then shifted to the discussion of the techniques used to analyse the data and the manner in which the quality of the data is enhanced. Lastly, a description of the ethical principles upheld during the course of the study is being dealt with.

### **3.2. Mixed methods approach**

The inclusion of the mixed methods approach in the research means that the data have to be collected, analysed and interpreted by means of both quantitative and qualitative techniques in a single study which investigates one underlying phenomenon (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2006: 474; Combs and Onwuegbuzie, 2010: 2). Executing a mixed methods approach in the research comes along with the idea that quantitative and qualitative approaches are compatible, therefore, can be applied simultaneously in a single study. The overall broad aim for this approach in social sciences such as sociology, for instance, is to develop a better, broader, deeper and more comprehensive understanding regarding the phenomenon under study (Greene, 2007: 98-101). As articulated by Anthony Onwuegbuzie and Nancy Leech (2006: 474), the logic of inquiry behind the mixed methods approach involves the use of

*'deduction'*, *'induction'* and *'abduction'*. Deduction concerns the build-up of patterns and categories, and induction involves the testing of theory or theories while abduction is concerned with uncovering of, and relying on the best set of explanations for making sense of one's results or findings (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2006: 474; Creswell, 2013: 45).

Inquiring about multiple dimensions of the phenomenon is likely to produce better understanding as compared to only a one way inquiry. According to Loïc Wacquant and Pierre Bourdieu in *An invitation to reflexive sociology* (1992: 7), the world in which we live is so peculiar in a sense that its structures lead, as if were, a *'double life'*. These structures exist in the forms of objective and subjective dimensions (Wacquant and Bourdieu, 1992: 7). In attempting to produce a better understanding apropos the phenomenon under study, both quantitative (objective) and qualitative (subjective) aspects of this research are explored through the execution of the appropriate techniques and methods discussed in section 3.2. of this chapter.

Moreover, several authors identified five typologies for mixed methods purposes that researchers can use to categorize their studies (Greene, 2007: 100; Combs and Onwuegbuzie, 2010: 2; Combs and Onwuegbuzie, 2011: 4). These typologies are dealt with in the following sub-section.

### **3.2.1. Typologies for mixed methods research**

The five typologies generally identified in literature on the mixed methods approach comprise of: triangulation, complementarity, development, initiation and expansion. When a researcher's rationale for adopting a mixed methods approach is to compare qualitative findings with quantitative results, *'triangulation'* is the most suitable method. Triangulation seeks to corroborate, converge or compare the data obtained from both qualitative and quantitative methods.

*'Complementarity'* as one of the purposes for a mixed methods approach attempts to produce a deeper and broader understanding about the subject under study through the usage of methods that help to uncover different facets of the same complex phenomenon. The researcher would seek to elaborate, illustrate, enhance, deepen and broaden the overall interpretations from one analytical strand (e.g. qualitative aspect) with the results from another analytical strand (e.g. quantitative aspect).

Should *'development'* be the purpose for adopting a mixed methods approach, it means the researcher's intention is to use the results or findings from one analytical strand to help inform another analytical strand. Methods in this type of mixed methods approach are implemented sequentially during data collection. The ultimate goal is to enhance an understanding by capitalising on inherent method strength.

For a researcher whose rationale for conducting a mixed methods approach is to look for paradoxes, divergences and contradictions that emerge from both qualitative and quantitative analytical strengths, *'initiation'* mixed methods serve such purpose. The discovered paradoxes and contradictions might lead to new research questions. In a sense, the researcher is in pursuit of fresh insights, new perspectives and original understandings.

With *'expansion'* as a rationale for adopting the mixed methods approach, the researcher's aim is to expand the scope and range of the study by using different or multiple methods to assess different aspects of the research. The focus of the study is expanded through the extension of method choices to more than one methodological tradition. This enables the selection of the most suitable method for each construct within an expanded set of study phases or foci.

Due to the purpose this study seeks to pursue — which is to understand how the students of the University of the Free State (UFS), in Bloemfontein, reflect on their social interactions and relations via OSN in their everyday lives — complementarity and development purposes are applicable to this study. The implementation of data collection methods such as one-on-one interviews, a focus group session and a survey for instance, are useful in terms of producing a deeper and broader understanding of the phenomenon by uncovering its different facets. With regards to the development of mixed methods as a rationale, quantitative data is used to back up the qualitative data. In this study, the development of mixed methods justifies my intention of having to collect the data sequentially. This means that the first phase of data collection was quantitative, whereas the second phase was qualitatively based. The data collected from the quantitative survey were used in order to make an appropriate selection of the sample for the qualitative individual interviews and focus group. Among other aims, this study strives for *'significance enhancement'* — the concept used to describe the mixing of quantitative and qualitative approaches for the purpose of maximising and strengthening interpretations of the results or findings (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2010: 63). A researcher who attempts to achieve significance enhancement can use quantitative data to augment the

qualitative analysis or use qualitative data to improve statistical analysis. In this particular study, quantitative data is used to enhance the qualitative analysis. The following section is dedicated to a brief discussion of both quantitative and qualitative research designs as they are both imbedded in the mixed methods approach.

### **3.2.2. Quantitative research design**

As already mentioned earlier on in section 3.1., the quantitative research method forms part of this study in conjunction with the qualitative research method — thereby constituting a mixed methods approach. To provide a brief background overview of this research design, it is mentioned in chapter 1 section 1.1.1. of this dissertation, that the ontological origins of the quantitative approach are particularly based within the positivist tradition in social sciences. The main ideas of positivism were developed by Auguste Comte, who is also known as the father of positivism (Neuman, 2002: 68). Comte believed that branches of knowledge undergo three consecutive stages: the theological, the metaphysical and the scientific stages (Babbie and Mouton, 2001: 2). The scientific stage is the final branch of knowledge which is also known as the ‘*positive*’ stage. This stage signifies the idea that knowledge about certain social phenomena can be obtained through direct and systematic observable relations or correlations between phenomena (Babbie and Mouton, 2001: 24; Neuman, 2002: 64). A social researcher that adopts the quantitative research design usually follows the ‘*reconstructed logic of practice*’ otherwise known as a ‘*linear research path*’ to social inquiry (Neuman, 2002: 122; Neuman, 2012: 89). This means that the logic of conducting research is fixed in a sequence of steps which lead to one specific direction. The kind of data which is dealt with is ‘*hard data*’ in the form of numerals (Neuman, 2002: 122; Neuman, 2012: 88). These numerals represent different variables that are measured against the phenomenon of OSN. For instance — the time a student spends on SNS in a normal day.

### **3.2.3. Qualitative research design**

While the quantitative research design is rooted deeply within the positivist tradition in social sciences, qualitative research methods begin with the use of interpretive theoretical traditions in studying the social phenomena (Creswell, 2013: 44). Early interpretive social scientists such as Wilhelm Dilthey and Max Weber believed that the social world is meaningfully constructed through human ideas, values and purposes, and that human behaviour should be understood and interpreted rather than simply being explained and described (Babbie and Mouton, 2001: 30-31).

Inspired by Weber's interpretive sociology, Alfred Schütz — the founder of modern phenomenology — emphasises the idea that human beings continuously engage in the interpretation, creation, definitions and giving of meanings to their actions and behaviours (Babbie and Mouton, 2001: 28; Overgaard and Zahavi, 2009: 100-101). Schütz recognises the importance of the intersubjective world as interpreted by human beings through shared activities (Overgaard and Zahavi, 2009: 101). Phenomenology as the main theoretical foundation of this study, for the implementation of a qualitative research design, guides the main purpose of this research which is an endeavour to understand how students make sense of, feel about, experience and respond to their intersubjective social interactions and relations within the domain of SNS.

While a quantitative approach is mostly applied through reconstructed logic, a qualitative approach normally follows the '*logic-in-use*' kind of research (Maxwell, 2012: 71). In this type of research, instead of following a fixed sequence of steps, the researcher passes through steps by moving backwards and forwards between ideas (Neuman, 2012: 89). The initial plans or ideas of the researcher may change or shift during or after the data collection process (Creswell, 2013: 47). This is because the kind of data which is being dealt with is perceived as '*soft*' (Neuman, 2002: 122). Soft data includes impressions, words, sentences, photos, recordings, field notes and so forth (Creswell, 2013: 22; Neuman, 2012: 88).

In the context of qualitative methods of gathering data, '*narrative inquiry*' is the specific means of data collection for this particular study. Narrative inquiry has become a major new approach of collecting data in qualitative research (Flick, 2014: 263). Qualitative researchers who adopt this approach believe that "*people by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives*" and that the task of narrative researchers is "*to describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience*" (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990: 2). These researchers share an interest in the narrations people tell about their lived experiences, and they also share a belief that people organise and bring meanings to their experiences through story-telling (Willig, 2014: 146). Jean Clandinin and Jerry Rosiek (2007 cited in Clandinin and Huber, 2010: 2) assert that people lived out and told stories about living ever since they started talking. This is one of the ways of filling their lifeworlds with meanings, while at the same time intersubjectively assisting each other in building their lives and societies (Clandinin and Huber, 2010: 2). In order to come to an understanding of the concept of narrative inquiry, it can be defined as "*a way of understanding and inquiring into experience through collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place*

*or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus*” (Clandinin and Huber, 2010: 3). The narrative inquiry is a situation in which the narrator recounts a sequence of events that are significant for him/her. It is important to note that the narrative is not only about story-telling *per se*, but is also connected to the narrator’s socio-cultural and institutional setting (Moen, 2006: 4). Hence the narratives are capable of capturing both the individual and the context in which the narrative is presented.

There are three theoretical developments which support the progress of narrative inquiry in social sciences: Firstly, the narratives play a major role in social life in a sense that they present themselves in different genres (Barthes 1977 in Flick, 2014: 263-264). These genres include myths, legends, fables, tales, comedy, etc. The narratives are also present in every age, every society, every place and every social class (Barthes 1977 in Flick, 2014: 263-264). Secondly, the narrative inquiry has become a prominent mode of obtaining knowledge and presenting experiences, especially in the field of psychology (Flick, 2014: 264). Lastly, narratives are regarded as the way of communicating personal experiences, social events and the issues surrounding political and historical developments (Flick, 2014: 264).

In order to understand better how the narrative inquiry works in qualitative research, Michael Bamberg refers to a new approach which can be distinguished into ‘*small stories*’ and ‘*big narratives*’ (Flick, 2014: 287). According to Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008: 381), small stories comprise of the very recent events that are still unfolding and that are shared. These can be about something that happened earlier in a particular morning or during a particular night. In converse, big narratives, otherwise known as the ‘*grand narratives*’, refer to fully-fledged and mundane story telling (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008: 381; Flick, 2014: 287). A researcher who is interested in the inquiry of small stories is looking at how people use these stories in their interactive engagements to construct a sense of who they are, whereas a researcher who engages in grand narrative inquiry is interested in the stories as representations of worlds and of identities (Flick, 2014: 287; Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008: 382). Phenomenology as a theoretical framework which guides my study, posits that, in order to understand social reality, a social analyst should be interested in the mundane daily activities in which people operate. Thus, my interest is heavily orientated towards the inquiry of small stories about day-to-day interactive engagements of SNS users. Small stories are useful to a researcher who is interested in detailed information of events. This detail might be missed in the narratives of big stories.

### **3.3. Methodological account**

The aim of this section is to explicate how the research methods applicable to the mix methods approach are carried out into the research field. The focus is on the discussion of the strategies employed to draw the sample. This discussion is followed by looking at the methods used to collect the data and how the data are analysed. How the quality of data is enhanced, and the ethical considerations applied in this study, are also looked into.

#### **3.3.1. Sampling**

One of the most crucial steps to begin with when carrying out a study is to identify and select the relevant research sample from the population which will help one fulfil the objectives of the study. Before discussing the practical aspects of the sampling methods, it is important to provide a description of the desired target population. In this study, the target population is identified as the students of the UFS who are between the ages of 18 and 30 and are in their first, second and third year of study. The sample for this study includes representivity in terms of both the variables of gender and race. The rationale for selecting students as a study population is related to the fact that the literature confirms that students form a cohort that spend a considerable amount of time online. Students are therefore likely to be a social group that is actively involved in OSN (McCuddy and Vogel, 2015: 169; Ivcevic and Ambady, 2013: 290).

I made use of non-probability sampling to draw a representative sample of 100 students from all the categories of *'year of study'*. *'Convenient sampling'*, also known as haphazard sampling, was used to draw the sample of these 100 students. The primary criteria for this sampling method are to select the cases that are conveniently and readily available (Neuman, 2012: 147). This means that the students available during the course of recruitment were selected and those who were unavailable did not affect the study. For the purpose of individual interviews and in order to get a focus group, *'quota sampling'* was executed in selecting 6 participants from 100 respondents which took part in the survey. Quota sampling is used when the researcher wants to gather a pre-set number of cases in each of several predetermined categories that will reflect the diversity of the population (Neuman, 2000: 197). I opt for this sampling method because the aim was to maintain the balance in terms of variables such as sex, age and race. The most suitable candidates (a total of 6 students) were systematically chosen to participate in the individual interviews. This was done by going through all the questionnaires in order to scrutinise the responses of those who completed

questionnaires. An equal number of 3 males and 3 females, whose responses (from the questionnaires) indicated that they are more active on SNS in comparison to others, were selected as participants. For the focus group, 4 individuals (2 males and two females) who participated in the one-on-one interviews were selected. Their selection was based on their ability to express themselves during the interviews and on their agreement to form part of the focus group session.

### **3.3.2. Data collection**

The first round of data gathering was done with a view to the quantitative aspect of the study. The survey technique was employed by means of self-administered closed-ended questionnaires amongst a group of the target population — the students of the UFS, Bloemfontein Campus. In a quantitative survey, the researcher asks people questions in a written questionnaire or by interviewing (Neuman, 2000: 34). In this study, I distributed the questionnaires amongst the target population and their task was to answer the questions asked. I am aware that one of the challenges of a self-administered questionnaire approach is to get people to return the questionnaires (Fowler, 2002: 61). To avoid a low return rate, I urged students that questionnaires have to be answered and returned after completion. At that stage, the goal was to obtain the objective data which, amongst other reasons, have to prove that students are indeed active members of a virtual community. Parallel to that, as previously stated in sub-section 3.3.1., the aim was to identify, from responses in the questionnaires, the candidates which are most suitable for one-on-one interviews. These were students who proved through their answers, to be actively involved in OSN.

The second round of data collection was based on the qualitative in-depth interviews. The purpose for conducting one-on-one interviews is to produce in-depth data which are obtained from the participants' personal experiences with SNS. According to Steiner Kvale (2007: 1), the conversation is a fundamental basic mode of interaction amongst humans. We talk with each other, interact, ask and answer questions. It is through these conversations that people get to know each other, learn about others' experiences, feelings, hopes and other internal conditions and about their lifeworlds (Kvale, 2007: 1). Therefore, an interview serves as a formal strategy of deriving such information from the participants through conversing. However, David Silverman (2014: 172) argues that interviews do not actually tell us about people's experiences. Rather, they offer indirect representations of those experiences. Interviews merely produce particular accounts or representations of the individuals' views or opinions — a researcher does not “*get into someone's head*” (Byrne, 2004 cited in

Silverman, 2014: 172). Nevertheless, interviews in qualitative research are still one of the effective means of examining what people actually do in their lifeworlds; it has the ability to access directly what happens in the world of individuals (Silverman, 2014: 169). In this study, one-on-one interviews enabled me to examine how the lifeworlds of my interviewees look like, as they revolve around OSN.

Before I could embark on a formal interview process, I first had to conduct a pilot interview. The pilot study served to pave the road towards the formal interview process from which the data are to be interpreted, analysed and integrated. This pilot interview was conducted on a young adult female from the university campus who admitted that she is actively involved in OSN. Although I was successful in conducting this pilot interview, the challenge that I faced was that the interviewee's accounts did not produce satisfactory narrative material in a sense that her responses were mostly brief. While on that, I comprehend that individuals vary in terms of how they express themselves verbally. Having noticed this challenge, I felt obliged to revisit the structure of questions asked from my interview schedule. This helped me to figure out new and effective strategies that assisted to elicit valuable information that could meet the narrative standards of recounting experiences during the formal interviews. Conducting a pilot interview was of great help since I was able to identify the flaws in my interview schedule, and the shortcomings related to the manner in which I executed my interviewing skills.

During the interviews, I made use of open-ended questions to allow probing and the feelings of the participants to be expressed while I, as the researcher, maintain active listening. Active listening as part and parcel of data collection in qualitative research is a skill that can assist a researcher to produce rich data (Silverman, 2014: 169). In that way, an interviewee is provided with enough freedom for talking and meaning ascription. During the interviews, I made use of a probing strategy as a way of eliciting information from the interviewees. I also engaged in active listening while my participants were expressing themselves, more especially by paying attention carefully to the type of language spoken and its meaning. Just as a reminder, the interviewees were young adult students, and some of them spoke in semi-formal English. The fact that I, as a researcher am also a young adult, by mutual reciprocation in terms of language understanding and exchange, I was able to develop an important rapport with my participants.

The last round of data collection was a combined follow-up interview in the form of a focus group discussion. A focus group in qualitative research *"implies the presence of a moderator*

*who uses the group as device for eliciting information*” (Stewart et al., 2007: 37) in a non-directive and open discussion (Neuman, 2012: 318). In this type of interview, the researcher normally gathers 6-12 people in a room; a gathering that usually lasts for a maximum of 90 minutes (Neuman, 2012: 318). However, in this study, I conducted a focus group discussion which only consists of four participants. The manner in which I carried out this focus group was peculiar or unconventional in a sense that it took place through an online platform — WhatsApp. Online focus groups can be distinguished between ‘*synchronous*’ and ‘*asynchronous*’ groups (Flick, 2009: 269). In order for the former to take place, all participants should be online at the same time in a ‘*chatroom*’ or they should use specific conferencing software. The latter requires all participants to have this software on their devices (computers, cellphones, tablets, etc.) and does not require all participants to be online at the same time (Flick, 2009: 269). The type of online focus group this study opted for is synchronous. Thus, participants were all online at the same time in the WhatsApp chatroom/group.

Although new methods of data collection that come with modern technology such as the internet have to be embraced, conducting a focus group online was not my initial plan or option. The reason for resorting to the utilisation of an online platform to collect data was due to a series of student protest incidents that were taking place on campus during the period of data collection. These events did not only take place at the UFS, but across most South African universities, and were politically driven. These protests erupted in the middle of September 2016 and ceased in November 2016. Due to the disruption in academic activities, the campus had to be shut down and students who stay in campus residences were ordered to vacate their rooms and go home. This came across as a setback to my study since my participants were all of a sudden out of reach. For this reason, I had to communicate the idea of conducting this focus group session online to my supervisor and my participants — both of whom approved this adjustment in data collecting.

I subsequently created a ‘*WhatsApp group*’ which consists of me and the four participants. The advantage of this mode of data collection is that it overcomes the constraint of a geographical barrier — participants were able to communicate from their respective locations. In addition, given the fact that anonymity should always be maintained in social research as part of the ethical protocol, the physical absence of the participants strengthened this aspect of the ethical code. However, few disadvantages did come into play. Firstly, due to the fact that the style of asking and responding to questions was performed through written

texts, the time spent on this focus group discussion was prolonged (it took 4 hours); some of the participants became tired. Secondly, texting as mode of communication limited the participants' level of self-expression in the sense that some participants were inclined to type shorter responses. I believe this was due to the fact that typing can be tiring at times and is slower in comparison to spoken communication. Lastly, the physical absence of the participants meant that I, as researcher, could not witness their body language and reactions. The body language can be important as it carries meanings that could otherwise not be observed.

### **3.3.3. Data analysis**

This part of the methodological account provides an account of how the narratives and survey responses gathered during this research study are analysed and organised in order to gain an understanding of the phenomenon under study. In social sciences, there are two main ways of analysing narrative data: firstly, we reduce people's perceptions, experiences, emotions, feelings and so on, to numbers. Secondly, we reduce the aforementioned variables into sounds, words or pictures as recordable units (Bernard and Ryan, 2010: 5). The former way of analysing data produces mostly quantitative results while the latter yields mostly qualitative data.

As already mentioned earlier on in the introduction to this chapter, this research project adopts a mixed methods approach to social research, thus, a combination of quantitative and qualitative aspects. A researcher that deals with quantitative analysis or '*social statistics*' seeks to make sense of the data collected by managing, manipulating and analysing the numerical data obtained during the course of the research process (David and Sutton, 2011: 470). The aim of quantitative analysis is to collect and summarise data which are commonly known as '*descriptive statistics*', and to consider the results in relation to a wider context using '*inferential statistics*' — statistics which allow the research to make inferences on the likelihood of the sample results being replicated in the population (David and Sutton, 2011: 619). Normally, the first step towards quantitative data analysis is to describe and summarise a single variable, also known as '*univariate statistics*' (Nardi, 2003: 116). The importance of this phase is to allow the researcher to get to know his/her data so as to be able to look for trends in the data and to think critically about how the results can be interpreted and interrogated further at a later stage (David and Sutton, 2011: 472). The univariate data can be presented in a number of ways. These include frequency distributions, graphs or charts and statistical measures (Nardi, 2003: 116). When using frequency tables or distributions, the

researcher normally begins by selecting variables that enables him/her to describe the sample (David and Sutton, 2011: 473). Such variables can be gender, year of study, race, and so on, and are categorical, nominal, interval, or ordinal in nature. One can also use graphs and charts to present the univariate data. These representations are useful when the researcher wants to give a visual description of the variables. As identified as one of the ways of understanding more about the distribution of the variables in a sample, statistical measures such as the '*measure of central tendency*' are used to provide a summary of where the responses are clustered (Nardi, 2003: 121).

Upon evaluating univariate data analysis, the researcher can now begin to investigate the '*bivariate*' relationships between variables. Bivariate data representation is a technique that enables the researcher to describe and explore the relationship between two variables (David and Sutton, 2011: 508). Should the researcher wish to study three variables or more, this will require a '*multivariate*' analysis of data (Nardi, 2003: 140). Whereas the frequency tables are used to represent univariate data, bivariate data are usually described by means of what is called '*cross-tabulations*' (*crosstabs*, for short ) or '*contingency tables*' (David and Sutton, 2011: 510). Crosstabs illustrate the number and percentage of occurrences in the sample of each value of a particular variable at the same time with each value of another variable (Nardi, 2003: 141). At this stage the aim is to show whether an independent variable is exerting a significant influence on the dependent variable (David and Sutton, 2011: 510). From this, the goal is to make inferences about the population from which the sample was drawn.

In analysing the quantitative data of this research, frequency tables and graphs are used. The contents of the presented data can be seen in chapter 4 of this dissertation. To provide a description of my sample, I use univariate analysis in the form of frequency tables and graphs as visual illustrations of the data. In this study, the data used to describe the sample includes gender, age category in years, race, and year of study. Some of these variables, such as gender and the amount of time spent on SNS during a normal day, are cross-tabulated. Finding out which gender spends how much time online, for instance, is used to see if that corroborates the narratives of the participants who were interviewed on that aspect. To analyse the quantitative data obtained from the survey, I make use of the web based software called the *EvaSys (Education Survey Automation Suite)*. *EvaSys* is used by universities, colleges and training providers to carry out all necessary steps of a survey which include questionnaire construction and data evaluation. One can reach a target population in various

ways including a paper-based, online or hybrid survey (which is both online and paper-based). In this study I created and distributed paper-based questionnaires using this software.

According to David and Sutton (2011: 320), the social investigators involved in qualitative research or those who pursue the mixed methods approach, are inevitably engaged in some kind of qualitative data analysis (QDA). Since this research adopted a mixed methods approach, it is therefore bound to engage in QDA. In the process of analysing the data, a researcher who deals with qualitative research needs to prepare and organise the data by reducing the data into themes through a process of coding. Upon that, these codes are condensed and eventually, the data can be presented in figures, tables, or discussions (Creswell, 2007: 148). There are five broad forms of data that can be considered as qualitative: physical objects, still images, sounds, moving images and written words (Bernard and Ryan, 2010: 10). In this study I convert sounds (audio recordings) into words in the form of transcripts, from which the codes that developed into themes emerge. During my engagement with the analytic process, I make use of *'thematic analysis'* in order to make sense of the data.

Thematic analysis involves the process of identifying themes in the data which carry meaning that is relevant to the research question (Willig, 2014: 147). In this sense, thematic analysis assists the researcher to identify patterns in the data. In conjunction with the thematic analysis, I also adopt the phenomenological approach in analysing qualitative data. When involved with the phenomenological approach, one should be committed in staying very close to the text that is being analysed in order to ensure that it is the participant's narratives that drive the interpretation of the data (Willig, 2014: 147). This is to say, the researcher attempts to set aside his/her own personal experiences (Creswell, 2007: 159) and theoretical knowledge in order to direct the focus on the participant's narratives. Clandinin and Connelly (2000 in Jonny Saldaña, 2013: 134) argue that qualitative researchers should adhere to *'fluid inquiry'*, which is "a way of thinking in which inquiry is not clearly governed by theories, methodological tactics and strategies". Although it is not entirely possible for me to let my personal experiences influence how I analyse the participants' narratives, I rely more on an *a priori* approach in dealing with the data. In achieving this, I first begin with the *'selective approach'* (detailed scrutiny of every sentence or sentence cluster) to the *'holistic approach'* (van Manen, 1990: 106). This allows me to unpack, word by word, the meanings of participants' narratives with the aim of making sense of their (participants) meanings. However, words alone do not suffice to uncover the meanings of participants' experiences.

For this reason, I take into account the body language expressed by the participants. At times, the unspoken language can reveal meanings that can otherwise not be expressed verbally.

Even though the phenomenological approach to data analysis requires me to rely on participants' narratives, I realise the importance of employing an inductive approach — which includes an understanding derived from theoretical views as well as the comprehension of the literature reviewed. This helped me to generate main themes which are included in the presentation of the findings. Carla Willig (2014: 143) asserts that it is impossible for a researcher to enter a text without adopting a theoretical perspective on it, not posing some initial questions about it or even without making assumptions about possible meanings about it. The theoretical perspectives adopted by this study are therefore important in helping to find a way into the data.

As I already alluded earlier on in this section, the narratives of the participants were recorded during the interviews and were later transcribed. These transcriptions are verbatim — the exact same words as were used originally. Therefore, the transcripts reflect the life experiences as recounted by the participants. As Polkinghorne puts it (1995: 8 in Saldaña, 2013: 131): *“stories express a kind of knowledge that uniquely describes human experience in which actions and happenings contribute positively and negatively to attaining goals and fulfilling purposes”*.

#### **3.3.4. Quality and rigour of data: validity and reliability**

During or after the research process, the social investigator should constantly reflect on the quality or rigour of the data produced. That is to say, the researcher has to check if the accounts made are accurate or not, or whether what was being looked for is gotten right or wrong (Creswell, 2007: 201). According to Roberta Heale and Alison Twycross (2015: 66), rigour *“refers to the extent to which the researchers worked to enhance the quality of the studies”*. In social sciences, the concepts of validity and reliability are commonly used to measure the rigour and quality of the research. These measurements are mostly associated with quantitative research. However, there are qualitative equivalents that parallel those in quantitative approaches (Creswell, 2007: 202). The following two sub-sections focus on these concepts and the manner in which they are applied in both quantitative and qualitative aspects of this study.

### 3.3.4.1. Validity

In quantitative research, validity refers to the extent to which the data collection instrument accurately measures the phenomenon of the study (Mertova and Webster, 2007: 23-90; Heale and Twycross, 2015: 66). In this study, a quantitative survey was conducted using closed-ended questionnaires to measure variables such as the time spent on SNS, the number of SNS used and other like variables. The aforementioned variables measured in this study are easily identifiable in the questionnaire, thus, '*face validity*' (the degree to which an assessment subjectively appears to measure the variable that it is supposed to measure) is evident. Validity is further distinguished between two types: '*internal validity*' and '*external validity*'. The former is concerned with the question of whether a study is not affected by other hypotheses that may explain the result of the study (Yin, 2009: 42). The latter refers to the extent to which the results of the study can be generalised to the entire population from which the sample is drawn (Yin, 2009: 42). It was not the intention of this study to test any hypotheses associated with the phenomenon in question, hence internal validity is not relevant in this regard. However, external validity is applicable since the sample drawn can be said to be representative of the entire student population of the UFS, Bloemfontein, thereby making it possible to generalise the obtained results.

When coming to the qualitative dimension of the study, the concept of '*trustworthiness*' is used as the parallel to validity in quantitative research (Creswell, 2007: 202). According to Creswell (2007: 206), there are 13 strategies that can be used as the validation criteria in qualitative research. However, my focus is only on a few strategies that are relevant to this study and I will therefore not discuss all 13 validation criteria. The first strategy that can be used to enhance quality is '*triangulation*'. Triangulation is the process in which multiple methods (data sources, theories, investigators) are used to study one phenomenon (Creswell, 2007: 208; Flick, 2009: 12). In this study I make use of '*theory triangulation*' and '*methodological triangulation*' strategies (Denzin, 1989: 17). Several theoretical frameworks are employed in this research in order to shed light on the subject of study from multiple viewpoints (cf. chapter 1, section 1.2.). With regards to triangulation of methods, as stated in section 3.2.2. of this chapter, in this study, the in-depth interviews, a focus group discussion and a survey are employed. This approach is useful in exploring different facets of the issue under study (online social networking). Another strategy that is used by qualitative researchers is the use of '*thick description*' (Creswell, 2007: 209). In Norman Denzin's (1989: 13) words, thick descriptions involve "*deep, dense, detailed accounts of problematic*

*experiences... It presents detail, context, emotion and the webs of social relationships that join one person to another*". The purpose of thick descriptions is to go beyond the superficiality of data by unwrapping the meanings associated with the feelings and actions of the participants. A rich description of data is the cornerstone of this research as it relies mostly on the narratives of the participants' lived experiences. This description is supplemented by the theoretical and analytic descriptions, not only the factual data obtained from the participants (Denzin, 1989: 13). Thus, the data analysis chapter entails the aspects related to this process (thick descriptions). The usefulness of this strategy is that it endows readers with decisions regarding the '*transferability*' of information to other similar contexts (Creswell, 2007: 209; Mertova and Webster, 2007: 101). In this research, these contexts or settings can be other tertiary institutions in South Africa.

#### **3.3.4.2. Reliability**

The term '*reliability*' is used to refer to the consistency and stability of a measure in quantitative research (Mertova and Webster, 2007: 23; Heale and Twycross, 2015: 66). This means that a respondent who completes a questionnaire should have approximately the same responses each time that instrument is completed (Heale and Twycross, 2015: 66). In this research, the questionnaires were only administered once. Thus, reliability cannot be accounted for, in the sense of replicability. However, the approach that was used to assess the reliability in this study was to ask the same questions (some) that are used in the questionnaires, during the interviews (both in in-depth and focus group formats). This was done to check whether respondents were honest in the responses they provided.

In qualitative research, the equivalent term to reliability is '*dependability*' (Mertova and Webster, 2007: 23-91). Dependability means that findings should be reproducible. If the next researcher follows the same procedures as described by an earlier investigator who studied the same phenomenon, findings and conclusions reached should be similar (Flick, 2009: 45). One of the ways in which reliability can be addressed in qualitative research is through documentation of data by using a good quality digital recorder — the recording later gets transcribed (Creswell, 2007: 209). During the interviewing process, I used a digital recorder to capture the narratives of the participants and later produced detailed documents of the transcripts. Another way which can be used to enhance dependability of data is to provide interviewing training to the interviewer(s) and to check the interview schedules after test interviews or after the first interview (Flick, 2009: 386). The research programme of The Narrative Study of Lives (NSoL) in the Department of Sociology, in conjunction with the

Postgraduate School (PGS) at the UFS, were useful in this regard. The NSoL held seminars which were aimed at equipping us with the knowledge and skills of how to conduct qualitative interviews. The PGS also offered a workshop for the same purpose. In addition, prior to conducting the official in-depth interviews, I used a pilot study as form of practical training as well as to assess the validity of my interview guide.

### **3.3.5. Ethical considerations**

In the process of planning and designing a qualitative study, researchers are obliged to consider what ethical issues can show up during the study, and to plan how these have to be dealt with (Creswell, 2013: 56). The methods employed in qualitative research, such as probing for instance, are used to dig deeper into the participants narratives in order to obtain rich data by exploring their inner personal conditions such as feelings, emotions and meanings. For that reason, the kind of data produced in this research is considered personal in nature. Although this study does not seem to pose any potential harm, to ensure that it is performed with the outmost integrity, all necessary measures in terms of ethical considerations were taken.

During the process of data collection, all students who took part in the survey were made aware of the aims of the study and what it is all about. Although all applicable ethical considerations were followed, total anonymity was compromised at this stage of data collection. The respondents had to provide personal information such as their names and contact details on the questionnaires. The purpose behind this action was to assist me as researcher to get hold (through e-mails and telephonically) of those who I selected to participate in the one-on-one interviews. However, the respondents were guaranteed that such personal information will be strictly protected and kept confidential.

Regarding the interviews (both the in-depth and focus group interviews), similar to the survey, I explained to the interviewees, the aims of the study and the subject matter that is to be covered. I also made the interviewees aware that the interview will be recorded with an audio device. After explaining the contents of my study to my interviewees, I then asked them to sign the informed consent letter which entails that they agree to take part in the study. Unlike during the survey where students were asked to provide their personal details on the questionnaires (details such as their names and contacts information), during the interviews (both one-on-one interviews and the focus group) anonymity of the participants was

maintained by means of assigning pseudonyms to them. Detailed ethical principles that were applicable to this study are outlined in the informed consent document (see appendix B).

It should be noted that the entire ethical procedure is a process upheld within a formal context. In this study, ethical clearance was applied for and granted by the Ethics Clearance Board of the Humanities Faculty, UFS. The clearance number for this study is **UFS-HSD2016/0324** (see appendix A). The application of the ethical clearance serves to ensure that all ethical procedures applicable to the research study are followed and the manner in which they will be applied is feasible. In this study, amongst other requirements that had to be fulfilled as expected by the Ethics Committee was to request formal permission from the university's authorities to conduct the research on students of the UFS, Bloemfontein.

### **3.4. Conclusion**

The aim of this chapter is to provide an account of the methodological framework employed in this study. The mixed methods approach (though dominated by the qualitative dimension in this study) is identified as the most suitable to this research project. Both quantitative and qualitative research designs are discussed and explained as to how they are executed by means of the employed research methods. The narrative inquiry as one of the methods of data collection in qualitative research is recognised as the backbone of this study. This approach is useful in defining the kind of data (rich descriptions) that have to be obtained from the research participants. Such data are obtained through in-depth interviews and a focus group discussion guided by interview schedules.

Also important is the discussion based on the techniques and strategies employed to draw a sample from the target population. In that discussion, it is pointed out how a convenient sampling is used as a method to guide the recruitment of the respondents during the survey. Quota sampling was employed through which the candidates for one-on-one interviews were selected. Equally important is the account on the analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data and the manner in which the quality of data is enhanced. In quantitative data analysis, univariate and bivariate statistics are used as the representations of the numerical data, while thematic analysis and a phenomenological approach are regarded as pertinent for this study in as far as analysing the qualitative data. In improving the quality of data, different strategies are used depending on the type (qualitative or quantitative) of the data being dealt with. The concepts of validity and reliability capture the main ideas in this regard. The last aspect

discussed concerns the steps taken to ensure this study maintain the highest ethical principles applicable during the course of this research.

## **Chapter 4: Presentation of quantitative data: Profile of the student survey**

### **4.1. Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to present the statistical data collected by means of the quantitative survey. The survey was based on convenient (non-probability) sampling method in order to select 100 students from the University of the Free State (UFS) (cf. chapter 3, section 3.3.1.). From this sample, the data were captured and analysed from 97 questionnaires, using the EvaSys application. Three of the questionnaires were incomplete, therefore, not considered as part of the data.

The analysed results reflect the important aspects concerned with the relations and interactions that take place amongst members of the cyber community in the context of online social networking (OSN) — in this case, a group of UFS students. The primary aim of this study in exploring the dynamics of such relations and interactions is to understand how the participants, from their own subjective points of view, understand, experience, feel and respond to these relations and interactions. In supplementing this understanding, the quantitative data, which refer to what Pierre Bourdieu describes as '*social physics*' (cf. chapter 1, section 1.2.3.1.), serve to describe the objective and external constraints that have an influence on these interactions. Social network sites (SNS) as part of the media are forms of social structures that exert force on the users, and thereby mould their experiences.

This chapter provides a profile of the sample. The focus is firstly on the socio-demographic characteristics (i.e. gender, age, race and year of study) of the students. Secondly, the patterns of OSN activity as shown by the sample are dealt with. Lastly, the focus will be on the perceptions of respondents regarding the social benefits derived online. The statistical data are then corroborated, along with an analysis of the conducted literature, and with the narratives of 4 participants who took part in a focus group discussion that was conducted as part of this study.

### **4.2. Socio-demographic variables**

The presentation of the socio-demographic variables below is in the form of descriptive data, and univariate analysis is used in this regard. Univariate analysis involves the description of a single variable (cf. chapter 3, section 3.2.4.).

Figure 4.1: Gender of the respondents

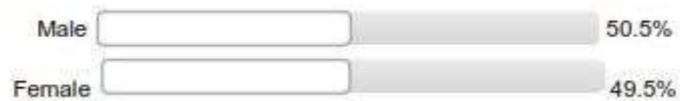


Figure 4.1. above shows that 50.5% of the respondents are males while females constitute 49.5% of the sample. Initially, a predetermined percentage (50%) for each gender category was set to ensure an equal number of respondents regarding both genders. A predetermined equalised number for each gender category is informed by quota sampling employed in this study. The slight discrepancy regarding gender is due to rejected questionnaires which were incomplete.

Figure 4.2: Age categories (in years) of the respondents



The age structure depicted in Figure 4.2. shows that a significant majority (88.4%) of respondents fall in the age category of 18-22 years, followed by a minority (11.6%) which comprise the age category of 23-27.

Figure 4.3: Race of the respondents

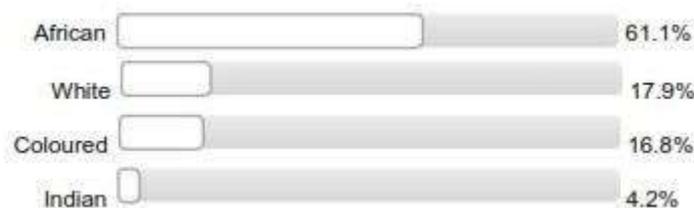
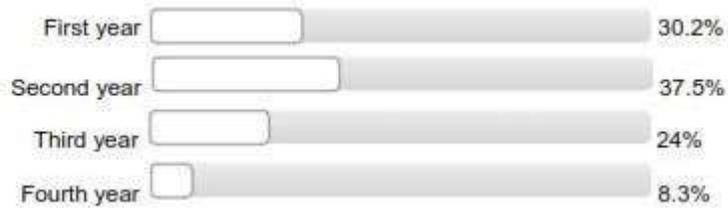


Figure 4.3. above represents the race categories of the respondents. This Figure reveals that almost two thirds (61.1%) of the respondents are African, who constitute the majority of the sample. This proportion is followed by White respondents consisting of 17.9% and Coloureds with 16.8% of the respondents. The Indian population is represented by 4.5% of the respondents. The proportion of the African students compared to the other racial groups in the sample roughly confirms the demographic composition of the students of the UFS.

Figure 4.4: Year of study of the respondents



From Figure 4.4. it appears that slightly more than a third (37.5%) of the respondents were in their second year of study (in 2016 — the year during which the data were collected) followed by first years that make up 30.2% of the sample. Those who indicated to be in their third year of study constitute almost a quarter (24%) of the respondents while those who were doing their fourth year constitute 8.3% of the sample.

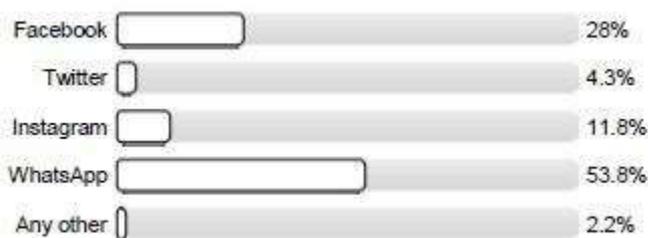
### **4.3. Patterns of online social networking (OSN) activity of the respondents**

While the previous section deals with the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, the current one focuses on the unfolding patterns of OSN activity as shown by the respondents. The first part of the section deals with the univariate analysis while the second one focuses on the bivariate analysis of the data. Whereas the univariate analysis is used to provide a description of one variable, bivariate analysis is useful in describing the relationship between two variables (cf. chapter 3, section 3.2.4.).

#### **4.3.1. Univariate analysis**

This sub-section deals with the description of the patterns of OSN activity based on the SNS that provide most satisfaction to the respondents. This is followed by the time spent online and the primary use of these sites as indicated by the sample.

Figure 4.5: Social network sites which provide most satisfaction



When asked which social network site provides the most satisfaction, Figure 4.5. reveals that slightly more than half (53.8%) of the respondents obtain most satisfaction from WhatsApp. This Figure is followed by Facebook with a significantly lower proportion of 28%. Coming after Facebook is Instagram with 11.8% and Twitter with 4.3% of respondents. 'Any other'

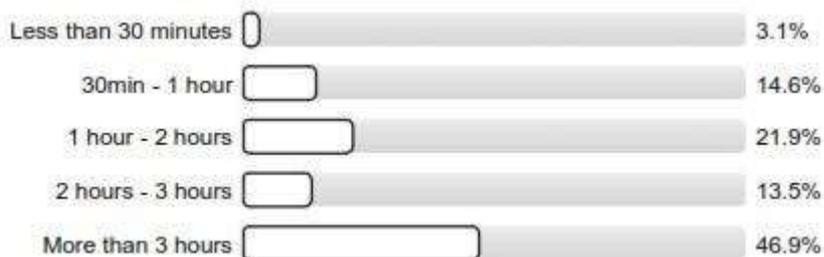
SNS from which satisfaction is derived constitute an aggregate of 2.2% of the respondents. These SNS are, as indicated by respondents: Pinterest, Snapchat, Skype, Tumblr, Badoo, LinkedIn, BBM and Mxit.

In line with South African Social Media Landscape 2016: Executive Summary Report, WhatsApp is regarded as the most used social network site in Android, Apple and Windows online application stores with Facebook as the runner up — thereby validating the obtained results (Fuseware 2016: 2). See chapter 2, section 2.2. In the focus group discussion conducted as part of this study, the participants also confirm that these two SNS provide most satisfaction to them. Below are some of the accounts of the focus group participants after being asked which SNS provide them with the most satisfaction:

*Wonder: WhatsApp, because it's fast to plan something with friends and if you are running late, you can quickly WhatsApp that person and just say you're running late.*

*Millions: WhatsApp, for communication. Nothing more. Facebook: just to know what's what... In my circle, for me Twitter it's for trends and following celebs (celebrities). I don't like that... It doesn't excite me to be following people who don't even know you.*

**Figure 4.6: Time spent on social network sites by respondents on a normal day**



When determining the amount of time respondents spend on SNS, Figure 4.6. above reveals that almost half (46.9%) of the respondents indicate that they spend more than 3 hours engaging in online social networking activity on a normal day. Those who indicate to be spending 2 to 3 hours are significantly less than those who spend more than 3 hours on these sites as they make up a proportion of 13.5% of the respondents. The high percentage of 46.9% of the respondents, that indicate that they spend more than 3 hours per day on SNS, validates the findings of several studies which report that individuals who own a modern internet device(s) spend a large proportion of time on SNS (Tang et al., 2015: 102; Tazghini and Siedlecki, 2013: 827). See also the discussion in chapter 2, section 2.2.

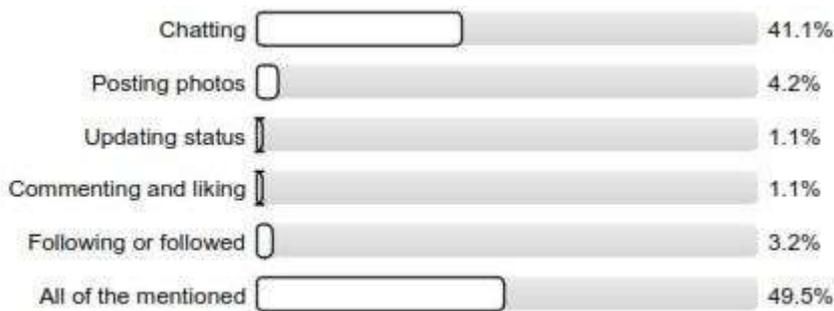
The following statements from the participants in the focus group confirm that SNS are indeed part of student participants' daily lives and that they spend a considerable proportion of their time on online social networking activities:

Millions: *I can't stay away very long... So it [online social networking] has become part of my daily routine... I stay on Facebook more than the hours I sleep!*

Pretty: *I use social network sites in every part: from my day to day activities to my events I want to participate in.*

Katlego: *I include [online] social networking in almost everything I do; it has become part of my daily life to the point of almost posting every move.*

Figure 4.7: Primary uses of social network sites as indicated by respondents



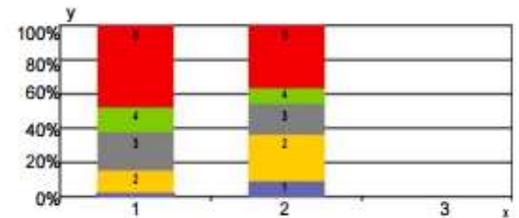
It was also important to inquire what respondents do while on SNS. Figure 4.7. above shows the result to this inquiry. Approximately half (49.5%) of the respondents indicate that while finding themselves online, they do 'all of the mentioned' (chatting, posting photos, updating status, commenting and liking and following or being followed) activities. SNS which allow all of those functions are Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, with WhatsApp being an exception in some respects; it only allows the functions of chatting, posting photos and status updates (cf. chapter 2, section 2.2.). An activity which respondents indicate to be engaging the most in other than doing 'all of the mentioned' is chatting (41.1%). WhatsApp is the most compatible messaging application for chatting as it allows 'instant messaging' to take place between, or among users (Hedlund, 2013: 1).

### 4.3.2. Bivariate analysis

In dealing with the bivariate relationships between variables in this sub-section, crosstabs (David and Sutton, 2011: 510) and stacked bar charts are used for data representation. These charts enable the researcher to break down and compare parts [aspects of the variable(s)] of the whole.

Time spent on social network sites (on a normal day) and age (Table 4.1. and Figure 4.8.)

y	1	2	3	4	5	
x						
1	2.4%	13.1%	22.6%	14.3%	47.6%	100%
2	9.1%	27.3%	18.2%	9.1%	36.4%	100%
3	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
	3.2%	14.7%	22.1%	13.7%	46.3%	100%



x: Age category (in years)  
 1: 18 - 22  
 2: 23 - 27  
 3: 28 and above

y: Time spent on social network sites  
 1: Less than 30 minutes  
 2: 30min - 1 hour  
 3: 1 hour - 2 hours  
 4: 2 hours - 3 hours  
 5: More than 3 hours

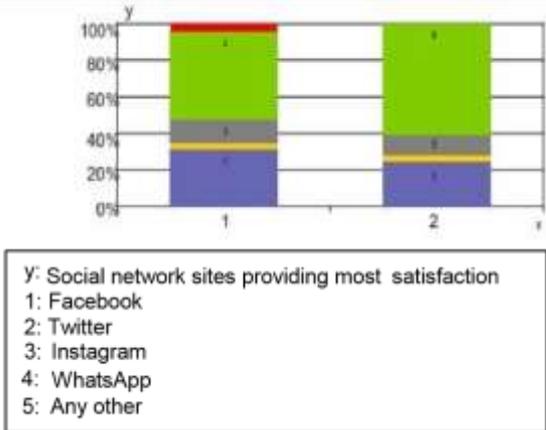
N.B: *The 0% representing the independent variable '28 and above' in Table 4.1. and Figure 4.8. is regarded as statistically insignificant. However, due to the technical setup of the application used to generate the data, this figure could not be removed.*

Both the Table and Figure above (Table 4.1. and Figure 4.8.) illustrate the relationship between age categories of the respondents and time spent on SNS during a normal day. The results show that the respondents that are between ages of 18 and 22 and spend more than 3 hours on SNS are slightly less than half (47.6%) of the sample whereas those who are between the ages of 23-27 (and spend the same amount of time on SNS) constitute slightly more than a third (36.4%) of the sample. The general overview of these results suggests that the time spent on SNS during a normal day is indirectly proportional to the age group of respondents — the younger the age, the more time is spent on SNS; the older the age, the less time is spent on SNS.

Satisfaction from social network sites and gender (Table 4.2. and Figure 4.9.)

x	y	1	2	3	4	5	
1		31.3%	4.2%	12.5%	47.9%	4.2%	100%
2		24.4%	4.4%	11.1%	60%	0%	100%
		28%	4.3%	11.8%	53.8%	2.2%	100%

x: Gender  
1: Male  
2: Female

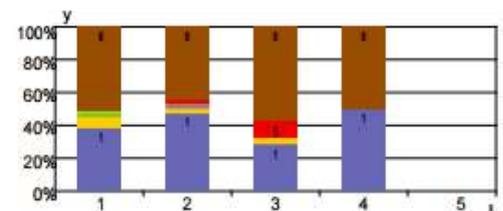


The above depicted data (Table 4.2. and Figure 4.9.) describe the relationship between the gender of the respondents and the amount of satisfaction derived from each of the SNS. The data show that more females (60%) than males (47.9%) indicate that they derive more satisfaction from WhatsApp — where WhatsApp is indicated as the most satisfying SNS by both genders when taking into account other SNS. With Facebook coming second, slightly less than a third of males (31.3%), compared to almost a quarter (24.4%) of their female counterparts, indicate that they derive more satisfaction from Facebook.

Primary uses of social network sites and year of study (Table 4.3. and Figure 4.10.)

x	y	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
1		37.9%	6.9%	0%	3.4%	0%	51.7%	0%	100%
2		47.2%	2.8%	2.8%	0%	2.8%	44.4%	0%	100%
3		28.6%	4.8%	0%	0%	9.5%	57.1%	0%	100%
4		50%	0%	0%	0%	0%	50%	0%	100%
5		0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
		40.4%	4.3%	1.1%	1.1%	3.2%	50%	0%	100%

x: Year of study  
1: First year  
2: Second year  
3: Third year  
4: Fourth year  
5: Fifth year and above



y: Primary uses of social network sites  
1: Chatting  
2: Posting photos  
3: Updating status  
4: Commenting and liking  
5: Following or followed  
6: All of the mentioned  
7: Not applicable

N.B: The 0% representing the independent variable ‘fifth year and above’ in Table 4.3. and Figure 4.10. is regarded as statistically insignificant. However, due to the technical setup of the application used to generate the data, this figure could not be removed.

It is evident from Figure 4.10. above that the most prominent use of SNS by respondents according to their years of study are *'chatting'* and *'all of the mentioned'* activities. The results reveal that respondents who are in their third year of study indicate to be engaging in chatting more than other groups. The proportion of these respondents (third years) is more than half (57.1%), followed by first years with 51.7%. Another proportion (50%) of the respondents which indicate to be using SNS primarily for chatting is constituted by those who are in their fourth year of study followed by a cohort (44%) of second year respondents. The option *'all of the mentioned'* is represented by half (50%) of the respondents which are students who are in their fourth year of study followed by slightly less than half (47.2%) of those who are doing their second year. After these two groups come more than a third (37.9%) of first year respondents and slightly less than a third (28.6%) of those doing a third year — all of which indicate to be chatting, posting photos, commenting and liking and following or followed.

#### **4.4. Perceptions on online social benefits**

SNS can be viewed as the platforms through which social benefits can be derived. Some of the social benefits which can be said to be prevalent online include social support and freedom of expression. Such benefits can assist people to manage and improve their well-being through intersubjective interactions (Sponcil and Gitimu, 2013: 6; Hunt et al., 2014: 238) if these interactions are successful. The focus of this section will therefore be on the presentation of the social benefits derived online by the respondents. The first presentation is based on online social support (see also the discussion in chapter 2, section 2.4.) followed by sharing of one's sentiments and opinions online.

##### **4.4.1. Online social support**

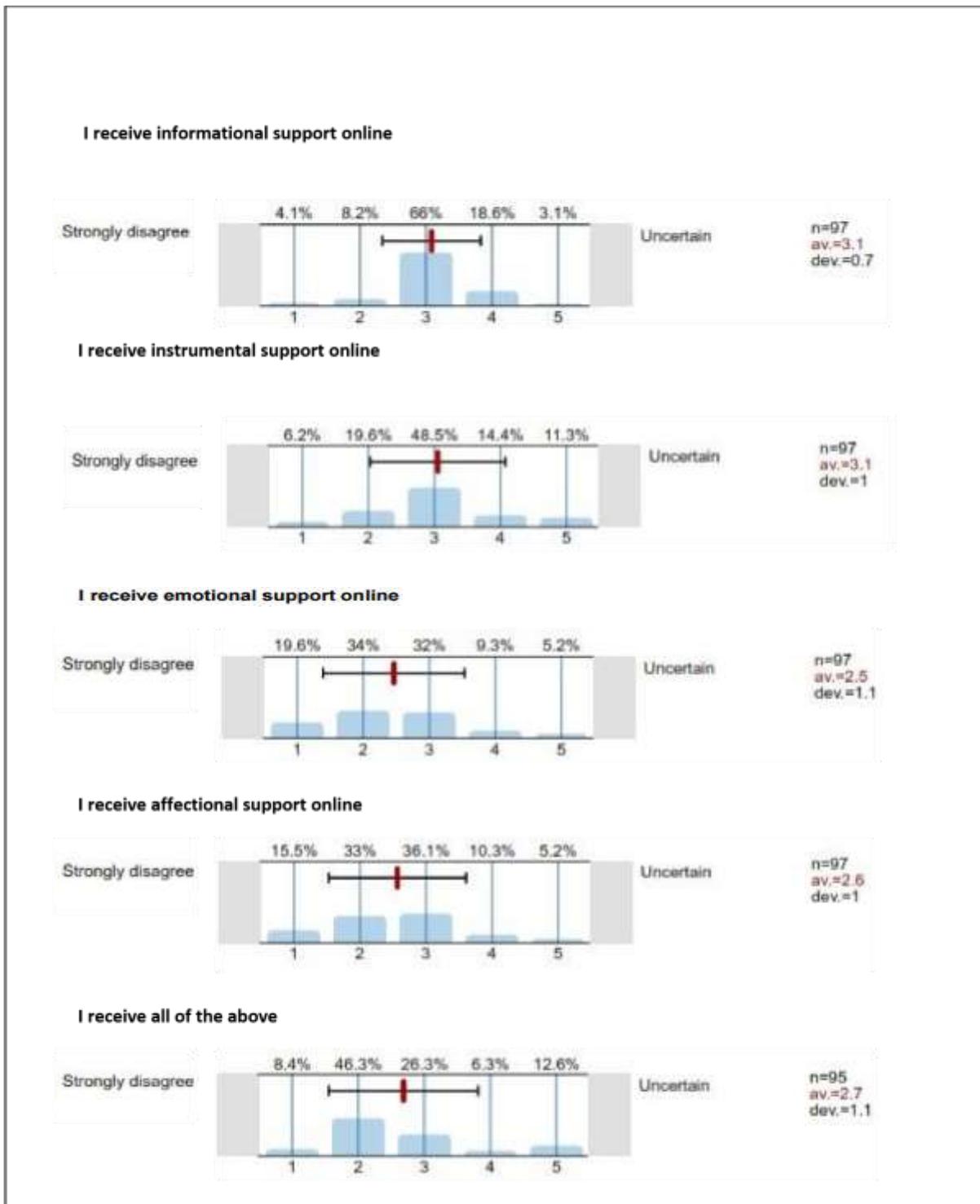
A cluster of the graphs on the next page represent the perceptions of respondents regarding the degree to which they receive different types of online social support. These types of support are: informational, instrumental, emotional and affectional online social support. The responses to the statements concerning these types of support are presented in a 5 point Likert scale in the following way: 1 – strongly disagree; 2 – disagree; 3 – agree; 4 – strongly agree; 5 – uncertain<sup>1</sup>. On the right hand side of each graph, three important measures which explain the pattern of results are displayed. The first measure (n = 97) shows the total number of

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<sup>1</sup> An unconventional format of the Likert scale in this chapter was employed by the researcher as a tactic used to enhance the validity of students' responses.

respondents, the second (av.) one indicates the average of the respondents' responses while the last measure (dev.) indicates the standard deviation from the average or mean.

Figures 4.11: Online social support



- **Informational support**

The first graph under the sub-heading *'I receive informational support online'* reveals that, two thirds (66%) of respondents agree that they receive informational support online while a significantly lower proportion of these respondents strongly disagree (4.1%) with this statement.

- **Instrumental support**

With regards to receiving instrumental support online, which is represented in the second graph, slightly less than half (48.5%) of the respondents agree to be receiving this type of social support on SNS. Slightly less than a fifth (19.6%) of the sample disagree that they receive instrumental support online.

- **Emotional support**

The third graph indicates that there is a slight difference in the values representing the proportion of those who agree (32%) and disagree (34%) to be receiving emotional support online. However, the results show that a distribution of average response (av. = 2.5) is clustered to the left, which suggests that more respondents disagree and also strongly disagree (19.6%), than agreeing and strongly agreeing (9.3%).

- **Affectional support**

Affectional support somewhat carries a similar meaning as the emotional support (see also the discussion in chapter 2, section 2.4.). The overlapping of meanings of these two concepts can be regarded as attributable to the almost similar pattern of the graphs that represent the results based on emotional support and the results based on affectional support. The results show that 36.1% of the respondents agree that they receive affectional support on SNS while a third (33%) disagrees with the statement.

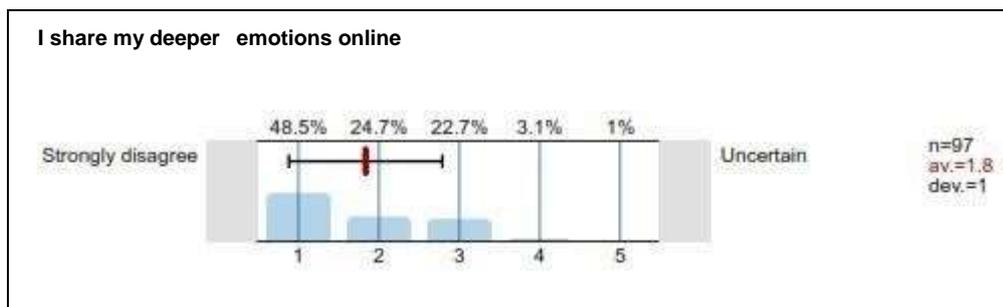
- **All of the above**

The respondents were also required to indicate if they receive *'all of the above'* types of social support online. The data presented in the last graph show that, more respondents (46.3%) disagree than agree (26.3%) to be receiving all the types of social support during their interactions on SNS.

#### 4.4.2. Sharing: opinions and sentiments on everyday life issues online

While the previous sub-section focuses more on the social benefits received by members of the online community under study, this sub-section deals with the perceptions of the respondents regarding the extent to which SNS allow them to share their emotional expressions with others. In the process of sharing their sentiments with each other, the online interactants get to fulfil their own emotional needs. Below are the results.

Figure 4.12: Sharing of deeper emotions online



As can be seen from Figure 4.12. above, the general attitude of the respondents regarding the issue of whether OSN allows them to share deeper emotions online is largely negative. The results reveal that slightly less than half (48.5%) of the respondents strongly disagree that they share their deeper emotions online while a quarter (24.7%) disagree. Those who agree to be sharing their deeper emotions online comprise slightly more than a fifth (22.7%) of the sample.

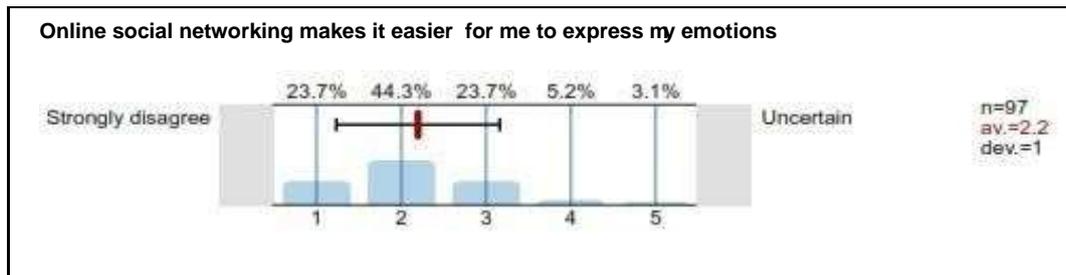
Millions is one of those who do not believe (strongly disagree or disagree) in sharing his deeper emotions online:

Millions: *I don't know if it's me, but I don't like listening to other people's problems as much as I don't like telling people about my pain.*

Pretty is part of those who agree that they share emotions online though not in a deep way:

Pretty: *Sometimes when I'm sad; mostly because of all the support I get afterwards. But I imply it kind of indirect. I don't say directly what's wrong for why I'm sad.*

Figure 4.13: Emotional expression online



When revealing to what extent do they express their emotions online, less than half (44.3%) of the sample disagree that OSN makes it easier for them to express their emotions. Slightly more than a fifth (23.7%) strongly disagree with the notion that OSN makes it easier for them to express their emotions. Although the percentage of those who agree that they find it easier to express their emotions online is equal (23.7%) to those who strongly disagree, it is only a significantly low (5.2%) proportion which strongly agrees.

Even though the statistics reveal that most of the respondents disagree to be sharing their emotions online, some of the participants who were part of the focus group state that they do share their emotions online; however, the purpose of sharing their emotions with others is to create a platform for engagement:

*Katlego: Yes, simply because I wanna [want to] empower and/or spark a conversation that will allow me to share knowledge about certain things.*

*Millions: Most emotions I post about are just to spark up conversations and reactions from people.*

#### 4.5. Conclusion

Indicating the respondents' socio-demographic characteristics as a point of departure for the analysis of the research participants' narratives is an important first step for the researcher to get to understand the data. Univariate analysis is useful in describing elements of the socio-demographic data. Along with the univariate analysis, bivariate analysis is employed to describe OSN activities of students on SNS. To corroborate the statistical description of data, I incorporated aspects of the narratives of four students who took part in the focus group conducted for this study. The data reveal that WhatsApp and Facebook are indicated as the most preferred and beneficial applications as far as SNS are concerned. Regarding the amount of time spent on these sites, the results, along with the reviewed literature and the

participants' own narratives, confirm that a considerable amount of time is spent on SNS. The obtained results also suggest that there is a possible association between the time spent on SNS and the age of the respondents; the younger (18-22) the respondents, the larger the amount of time spent online.

It is important for this study to measure the perceptions of the sample used in the survey regarding the benefits derived online. This aspect will be dealt with extensively in chapter 5 which contains a qualitative analysis of students' experiences. In as far as the benefits that students derive online, two aspects were measured: online social support and sharing of opinions and sentiments on everyday life issues. Regarding online social support, the key findings reveal that informational and instrumental online social support are the ones which are indicated as the most important by respondents. As for emotional and affectional online social support, the responses indicate surprisingly low levels. Very few of the respondents indicate that they share their deeper emotions online. A similar trend is revealed regarding whether OSN makes it easier for respondents to express their emotions. The next chapter (chapter 5) deals with the qualitative findings produced from the narratives of the selected participants. From these narratives, a more detailed picture regarding the use of SNS can be drawn.

## Chapter 5: Presentation of qualitative data

### 5.1. Introduction

While the focus of the previous chapter (chapter 4) is mainly based on the social statistics collected during the survey part of the research to make sense of the empirical reality of the research participants, the current chapter (chapter 5) deals largely with the presentation of qualitative data obtained during the in-depth interviews. In the questionnaires distributed amongst the target population as one of the steps involved when carrying out the quantitative survey, exploratory research questions are included and were later discussed during the qualitative interviewing processes (in-depth interviews and the focus group discussion). In the interviews, research questions are used to guide the interviewer as well as to obtain more specific and in-depth information relevant to the research topic. The questions in the interview schedules (in-depth interviews and the focus group) are constructed from the ideas which emerged from the reviewed literature and theoretical framework. The main themes are therefore deduced from both the relevant social theory and from the literature review.

Given the predominantly interpretive nature of this study, it is important to note that the qualitative data presented in the subsequent sections are also a reflection of my personal interpretations and applications of the relevant sections of sociological theory, the literature and the statistical data. However, as required by the phenomenological approach to data analysis, the researcher is required to suspend the suppositions and preconceived ideas that may “*blur the sociological gaze*” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 39). When keeping this in mind, it crucial to stay neutral as the interpretation unfolds. Moreover, in dealing with the participants’ narratives, the use of ‘*thick descriptions*’ is important in describing their everyday social reality of online social networking (OSN). As explained in chapter 3 (specifically in section 3.2.5. of this dissertation), thick descriptions involve an interpretation of participants’ narratives that goes beyond a shallow depiction of their experiences regarding the phenomenon. The aim is to unwrap the meanings related to the feelings, actions and experiences of the participants. To achieve such description, I make use of detailed verbatim quotes extracted from the transcripts of the interviews in order to provide the readers with the participants’ own subjective experiences about OSN; thereby making it possible for them (the readers) to construct their own interpretations.

## 5.2. Social construction of reality on social network sites

This section of the chapter focuses on the participants' construction of reality in the context of online social networks. As part of the cyber community, the participants engage in the ongoing interactions and relations which seem real to them. According to phenomenological thinking, individuals often do “*create large-scale social forces*” (social practices such as norms and values) that are products of their own interactions, which in turn seem to become beyond their control (Inglis, 2012: 94). In this sense, humans create social reality. Online social networks are products of human beings who use these sites to pursue their interactions. As people begin to incorporate these interactions into their social lifeworld, they start to experience them as real and objective.

### 5.2.1. Making sense of online social networking

OSN has become part of the social reality in which members of a virtual community base their everyday lives. These online platforms become the social spaces that allow users to negotiate their daily lives and to construe shared meanings created during the processes of relation formations and interactions. It is therefore important to first explore the reasons why the participants are involved in OSN as well as to explore the meanings OSN has for them. In stating the reasons for her involvement in OSN, Pretty, a 21 year old third year student has the following to say:

*Pretty<sup>2</sup>: Uhm, I would say I'm involved for, for... to get information. To get information. Because as I said, that's where we get information. And it's accessible everywhere you go. So that's the reason why I'm... and for social purposes. Like if you have nothing to do, you know you keep yourself busy with something else. And it's good for your brain because you keep on reading; reading stuff on social network sites. So it keeps your brain active.*

Obtaining information and socialising with others when boredom strikes, are the main reasons why Pretty uses social network sites (SNS). For the 19 year old Katlego, the curiosity to experience these online platforms was the first reason why he started using SNS:

*Katlego: Why am I involved? Uhm... I'd say firstly, you know the hype created around it, you know. Before you start using these sites you hear people talking about them, you know. You wanna (want to) hear... you wanna know what this thing actually is. So I think the first thing: the hype that was created around it, neh. But once you actually get onto the platform you realise that it's convenient — it's very convenient. Yah, I'd say that's why.*

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<sup>2</sup> Pseudonym.

Interviewer: *So the reason why you are involved in online social networking is because of that hype?*

Katlego: *Yah. It's sort of the hype created around it, yeah. Because a lot of people started talking about it and then you wanna know what actually this is, yah.*

The 21 year old Rasala, who is in his third year, believes that peer influence played a role in getting him and others into OSN:

Rasala: *I think the reason why I'm involved is because of... mostly for all of us it was because of a peer pressure at school. Your friend told you about this: "Okay let's do this. Let's start a group chat. Let's join this". It's more of a group thing that every teenager practices so as to be active, online.*

Sharing the same sentiments as Rasala is the 23 year old male student who goes by the name of Millions. He too, is convinced that peer influence that comes along with a certain degree of social pressure, is the reason why he joined SNS in the first place:

Millions: *It's... it's the... I won't say peer pressure. But it had an influence because of friends. You know when your friends have something. Like I was saying, they post things and you see them; even if it's not the life they lead. Uhm, today let's say I'm going out with my family. It's the end of the month (parents got paid) and it happens only once. But when you post about it everyone seems to have that perception: "Oh, this guy is living the life"! So that's what I... So I saw a couple of my friends going to a swimming pool. They went once. They posted about it. I'm like: "What?" And then they went again and then they posted, with girls of course. So I was like: "This is for me, I need to be there". I got uhm... I had a phone, so that's when I just had Facebook. They went to the swimming pool, I came with. So you see, what they did was to hook me onto something. So that's what it means to have social network sites. So it... it pulls people in, but it was because I liked what they were doing. So I had to follow, yah.*

Although it was somehow difficult for Wonder (22) to state the reasons responsible for her involvement in OSN, communicating and tracing distant relatives which she subsequently managed to reconnect with, served as motives in this regard:

Wonder: *Why? Uhm... uh... I don't know. It's the... it's the uhm... I can communicate with my people and communicate with anybody I wish to. And it's... I don't know... it's a very complicated thing to explain.*

Interviewer: *Okay. But in the first place when you made use of social network sites, can you remember the real reason that made you use social network sites — at the very beginning?*

Wonder: *At the very beginning? It's the... uhm... the first time I used Mxit, for example, was... I don't really know my niece that lives in Aliwal. And... I saw her on Mxit and I wanted to talk and see if I can communicate with her so that we can maybe get together sometime. And that actually happened because the first time I met her, like really met her was at my grandfather's... how can I say it... departure from this world. And that's the*

*first time and the only time I saw her. And then I got Mxit and started communicating with her and I started to know more about her life and what she's doing and what grade she's in. And then there came a time and place where I really wanted to meet her — like I really wanted to know her face-to-face. So I invited her to stay with us for a week and everything was uhm... was... how can I say it? [Pause] Uhm... was organised through Mxit. It was organised through it and it was everything.*

In exploring the meanings that participants attach to OSN, what stood out in their narratives is the importance of SNS in facilitating the communication between themselves and their people. The idea of sharing information with other SNS users is also one of the meaningful functions of SNS. But more importantly, the efficiency, accessibility and convenience of these online platforms seem to be the qualities that participants value the most. For Pretty, this is what OSN means to her:

*Pretty: Uhm, I would say it means everything because lately, like now, that's where we get our information, you know. Not all of us read newspapers because we're lazy to read newspapers. So online social networking is the closest [source of information]. And technology has improved as you know. So it's better 'cause (because) you go online and see stuff and then it's much easier than reading a newspaper. And everywhere you go, social networking on your phone... you know, it's everywhere — it's accessible; in simple terms.*

While the notions of receiving and sharing information are the crucial meanings attached to OSN by most of these participants, for Rasala, Katlego and Wonder, the emphasis is more on faster communication which is cost effective as compared to traditional (and slower) communication channels:

*Katlego: Uhm, to me it means uhm... faster communication. And as a student I think it also means saving money, you know. It's a platform for us to communicate at lower rates, you know. It doesn't really cost too much... And faster communication, you know. I mean we are always on our phones. So whenever you wanna (want to) reach someone you just send a text and it gets through. I think it means faster communication to me.*

*Rasala: To me it means getting information to the next person much faster. Or being able to communicate with a lot of people at the same time 'cause (because) in terms of Facebook, if you post something, like all 500 people can read it in order to get information from it — from those ads (advertisements) and everything.*

Wonder, who recently got engaged, states the following:

*Wonder: Well, personally it's a [communication] channel through which I can communicate with my fiancé. And I can also communicate with my parents. Like when I'm done with my tests I let them know. Or if... anything, anything I need information about, I communicate with this specific person who has that information. And the other thing is I'm also a very sociable person and I need that confirmation that: "This is alright, that is not right" — that's one thing. And if I'm sad, I go on Facebook and post something and everybody... you can see how many people actually care about you.*

Interviewer: *Now, you've mentioned the fact that you also use social network sites to connect with the closest ones. Why can't you use other means of communication instead of social networks sites?*

Wonder: *Uhm... like what? A letter? That takes too long. Calling is very expensive. WhatsApp is the most cheapest way actually; that's the main reason.*

Like other participants, Lesego, the 19 year old first year student also attaches the meaning of OSN to the importance of information produced and shared via SNS. However, for her SNS serve as the tools of self-expression, thereby facilitating sociability:

Lesego: *What does it mean to me? It means, uhm... a chance to learn, a chance to engage with other people, a chance to uhm... to express what you feel. Like you know that sometimes it's sort of difficult to engage with people that you have in real life — that you're surrounded by and then, uhm ... yah, for me I've always took it as something ... sort of uhm, a learning curve for me.*

Interviewer: *Mhm. Okay. What kind of things do you learn from social network sites?*

Lesego: *Okay, like I said before ... uhm, you know what... this thing of finding out about what happens also — from other worlds, from other countries, you know. Crime, depreciations and ... just basic things, just things.*

As for Millions, OSN simply means “*everything*”. The manner in which he describes the meaning that OSN carries for him indicates that he bases almost everything he does on SNS:

Millions: *Online social networking is everything 'cause (because) most of the things we... everything. Like when I'm bored, it's online social networks. When I'm having fun I have to go on social network sites to update my friends so that they too can do what I'm doing or get hooked on what I'm doing. So it's like... it's... everything that's 'trending' (popular activities or topics on SNS)... Whatever you do, it's trending. So, [online] social networks, yoh! (overwhelmed) I can't live without them.*

### **5.2.2. Online social networking as paramount reality**

This sub-theme is concerned with the views of the participants with regards to the impact that OSN has on their lives. It should be noted that all of the research participants belong to Generation Z<sup>3</sup>. Hence most of them were born into social media. As a researcher, I too fall into this generation cohort and am active on SNS. Nonetheless, I never got to experience internet at an early age like most of these participants. I grew up during the times when cellphones were merely devices used to call one another and to send messages. By the time OSN took over the world, I was already a mature individual. The first cellphone I owned was not compatible with the internet. In contrast, most of my research participants were

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<sup>3</sup> Generation Z: the generation cohort which was born in the mid-1990s and early 2000s (Tulgan, 2013:1).

introduced to cellphones and a whole array of other devices such as tablets and laptops from which the internet can be accessed, at an early age. In this sense, it is safe to say that the online environments are part of the world they know best. Although they often realise that the online world is unnatural, they experience it as natural. To them SNS is a *'paramount reality'* — *"the lifeworld seems like a completely unavoidable sphere in which one lives"* (Inglis, 2012: 96). In delving into how significant OSN is in these participants' lives, I asked them to describe to me how their lives would change if they were to stop using SNS. All of them are of the opinion that their lives would somehow reach the *'abnormal state'*. The following interview extract depicts Katlego's perspective on this subject:

**Interviewer:** *If you were to stop using social network sites, how do think your life would change?*

**Katlego:** [Pause] *...Drastically, I think. Honestly, us as students or as sort of teenagers or young adults, you know social media... like we grew up with social media, basically. From adolescence to early adulthood, we grew up with that. That is all we know honestly. Life would change drastically I think, yah. It would almost be... I know it's weird to say this but it would almost be impossible to live without social media.*

In giving an account on the same issue, Wonder is also under the impression that life without SNS would be unimaginable. She views OSN as a phenomenon which is hard to escape. She goes on to make an analogy of stopping to engage on SNS with the side effects that drug users experience when they discontinue using these substances:

**Wonder:** *How would my life change? I think I will be... there was a time a few years ago where my phone got broken — and I couldn't use WhatsApp, I couldn't use Facebook — nothing. I was like in a... you know that feeling when you get trapped? That's a feeling I got when I think I can't use them anymore. That feeling of: "I want to communicate with these people but I can't". And if online social networking can just stop for everybody, I think everybody will feel that something is missing. I can't explain it; it's just a... you feel trapped. I feel trapped if I'm not using online social network sites and I feel like everybody is just 'out there' but I can't get to them.*

**Interviewer:** *Mhm, okay. It must have been a terrible experience.*

**Wonder:** *It was, like uhm... you know that feeling when... the people that got addicted to drugs and stuff and then they need to get over it? That feeling of needing to attack the addiction but at the same you need to fulfil it. That's the feeling you get when you stop using social network sites.*

For participants Lesego, Pretty and Rasala, should OSN be discontinued, they believe that they have a lot to lose with regards to personal development nurtured by the information that SNS feed them. In this regard, there is a perceived disruption on their daily functioning:

Lesego: [Pause] *Yho! Would you even get to that point? [Laughing] You'd like to get to that point?*

Interviewer: *Yes, explain to me.*

Lesego: *Okay. Uhm, I guess my life would change drastically because I've always looked at social networking sites as sort of a learning curve for me — something that get me to learn like in real life. Not necessarily real, but in like daily basis. I get to learn a lot from social network sites. So if that happens, that part of my life is going to shut-down, change or something. I feel like, uhm... a part of me, a learning part of me will shut-down as well. So ... Ay' (No) it's not gonna (going to be) be 'ayoba' (good/cool). It's not.*

Interviewer: *Now, if I may ask. Uhm, if you were to stop using social network sites, how would your life change?*

Pretty: [Laughing] *I would fall behind. I would fall behind 'cause (because) as I said, I don't read newspapers. So I would not know what is going on. Even if they say the world is coming to an end tomorrow, I'm not gonna (going) know anything because a newspaper, you have to go to Food Zone (campus store) maybe, or some shop to buy a newspaper — I don't have that money. It means I can't get access to newspapers. So I think I would fall behind, I would not know anything.*

Rasala: *I'll be connected to less people if I stop using those social media platforms and I think I won't get the same information that I get now.*

Interviewer: *So, how will that actually change your life?*

Rasala: *I think my growth will be slow — my intellectual growth will be slow.*

In analysing Millions's account on how his life would change if he were to stop using SNS, I learned that due to his anti-social tendencies in real life, his social life would take a downside as he would be disconnected from his online 'friends':

Millions: *Currently my life would get boring. Uhm... I do less 'chilling' (hanging out) with friends; like face-to-face because, uhm... I don't know... I get bored too quickly when I'm around people and when I'm out, when I'm out... even when I'm out I'm on my WhatsApp telling people: "Hey, I'm there and there and there". You see — keeping things updated. And then when I get bored I just wanna be alone with my phone. So if I don't wanna (want to) speak to people on my phone sometimes, I just 'shush' (keep quiet). So if I can stop using social network sites and I find myself having to be together with others, if I don't wanna talk, it seems to be rude. So the feeling of boredom wouldn't stop.*

It is quite clear that SNS have a lot to offer. According to the survey results (chapter 4, section 4.3.), half (49.5%) of the respondents indicate that the following (labelled as 'all of the

mentioned') uses of SNS are all, though not equally, important to them: chatting, posting photos, updating status, commenting and liking, following or followed. However, chatting (41.1%), compared to other uses, is identified as the most pertinent function of SNS by the respondents.

### 5.3. Online social interactions and relations

While the focus of the previous theme is on how the research participants make sense of the OSN activities and the meanings these activities have for them, this section is concerned with the actual processes of interactions and online social relations. Like offline environments, SNS serve to facilitate the interpersonal relations amongst members of the online community. Through OSN, individuals get to develop and maintain social capital as one of the important resources that assist their social relations (Lu, 2011: 52). The social capital acquired by the SNS users refers to two different types of people — people who they meet online and those who are already in their lives. When one compares the social capital displayed in offline and online settings, there is a realisation that the ubiquitous nature of the internet is responsible for more extended online relations and interactions, which is rarely the case in the physical environments (Julien, 2015: 365). One of the important aspects that this theme explores is the extent to which these interactions and relations feel real and intimate. The concept of *'tie strength'*<sup>4</sup> captures this process.

The first question that was posed to all the participants is to tell who do they interact with on the online platforms and upon replying, to explain why they engage with these particular individuals. The aim is to learn what type of people do these participants interact with and how do these interactions mould their relations. Although I discovered that these participants interact with almost every type of person, the emphasis is more on the online interactions with families and close friends. Below is Katlego's account on this question:

**Interviewer:** *With regards to online social relations and interactions, I want to know that who do you interact with? Family, friends, lover or lovers, classmates, strangers — who do you interact with?*

**Katlego:** *I'd say all of the above that you just mentioned because you know nowadays even family members are on the online social networks. On WhatsApp for example, I have family... I have my parents on WhatsApp. I have my friends on WhatsApp; I have lovers, classmates and even strangers on Facebook. Yah, I'd say I interact with everybody on these social media.*

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<sup>4</sup> Tie-strength: The amount of connection a user has with his or her online friends.

Interviewer: *Mhm. Why do you interact with those people, specifically?*

Katlego: *Uhm, because... uhm... because they're people who are close to me. They're people that I interact with the most; especially family and friends, you know — because they're people who are close to me. So like I said, with the convenience of these online platforms it is easy for me to talk to them, yah.*

Even though Katlego interacts with a broader online community, he is more dedicated to interacting with his consociates (family and friends). He finds it worthwhile to interact mostly with these people because they are close to him. This denotes that these are people he invests most of his social capital in. Rasala also interacts mostly with people who he regards as close to him. Besides these people, he interacts with other individuals who are part of a group he is in. He believes that he derives a sense of belonging from his interactants through an ongoing interaction with them. However, he does not mention family members in this regard:

Rasala: *Okay, online I interact with... mostly my friends — the ones I went to high school with and those from around varsity and my girlfriend. And others are just group-chats where I'm involved in some stuff like church stuff, the choir. And then that's the people I communicate with, on my online platform.*

Interviewer: *Okay. Why those people?*

Rasala: *Because I feel like they are closer to me and the breakdown in communication with them will just draw us apart if we don't keep communicating; we just gonna (going to) go apart. And then with them, they also have a sense of belonging. We can relate when we communicate to each other. We can relate. We could have something to talk about.*

For the following research participants, like others, interaction with their consociates still takes priority. However, unlike other participants, they show a strong disapproval when coming to developing relations and interactions with strangers via these online platforms:

Interviewer: *With regards to social interactions and relations, who do you interact with online — family, friends, lover or lovers, class-mates, strangers?*

Wonder: *Uhm... my family, my friends and my fiancé. Those are people I interact the most with. I don't trust strangers; I don't interact with them. Uhm... those are people who are closest to me. Like I said, I'm a social butterfly, at times. I want people who are closest to me to be in my life and online social networking provides that.*

Pretty: *Everyone. But on my side, I don't like talking to strangers. So most of the time I talk to my friends and family. Strangers, I just ignore.*

Lesego: *I interact with family members, friends, lovers and ... besides them ... okay, classmates, ex-classmates neh, and uhm ... that's it. I don't interact with strangers. You're a stranger, I don't know you. I just... I don't entertain strangers because you never know what the intentions of that particular person are. So I rather... If that person wants to talk to me he/she would make some sort of efforts — sort of coming to me like face-to-face rather than on social media. So strangers, I don't talk to them.*

When Pretty, Lesego and Wonder are asked the reasons why they do not interact with strangers but only with people who are known to them, this is how they narrate their experiences:

Interviewer: *Why do you specifically prefer to interact with this type of people and not much with the strangers?*

Pretty: *'Cause (because) I feel like I know those people and I'm avoiding trouble. Talking to a stranger, you don't know the risks. Okay, we can say it's 50/50 (equal) because you don't know if this person means good or this person means bad. But I try to avoid that all the time because I'm a sweet person: I would think this person means good 'kanti' (whereas) this person means bad, you know. So I just don't want to talk to strangers 'cause I don't wanna find myself in trouble.*

When coming to the issue of interacting with strangers, Pretty believes that this can either be a good thing or a way of inviting trouble into one's life. Nonetheless, to stay safe, she avoids interacting with strangers at all costs.

From the previous quotes, Lesego asserts that if someone whom she considers a stranger wants to talk to her, that particular individual should make attempts to organise a face-to-face meeting. Upon this account, her view was challenged with posing the question that follows:

Interviewer: *Okay. Now, what if it's someone who can't easily reach you? Maybe someone who is like 800 km or 400 km away, and really wants to interact with you?*

This is how she responds:

Lesego: *The question is: do I know them? Do I know him? Do I know her? 'Wa bona' (you see). It's just ... it's sort of ... it depends. Like if you come with 'that attitude' (unpleasant attitude) ... 'cause (because) some people will be like: "Hey bitch", 'wa bona' (you see). I... I... I... [Stuttering] don't even know him, but then already look at what's happening 'wa bona' (you see). Would you entertain that kind of a person? No, you wouldn't. Another one would be like: "Hi, I just want to tell you this and this and that". Some of them don't waste time — they just get to the point. It is then where I'm like: "Okay this particular person is cool, I can do this. But then, okay, where does he or she live? Have I ever met him or her before? Do I sort of know the kind of person he or she is?", 'wa bona' (you see). From there, yah... But then just me talking to strangers, it's a no-no.*

Below is her account on why she prefers interacting with people she interacts with as opposed to strangers:

Lesego: *They're people that I live with on a daily basis: the people who are close to me, whom I love, the people who sort of have a meaning... The people who sort of have a meaning to my life and which I think we have a meaning together.*

In looking into Lesego's sentiments regarding interacting with strangers, besides lack of trust towards them, I learnt that what she condemns most is an outrageous attitude or approach that some strangers she might have probably encountered before on SNS, manifest. She reveals how some people can use derogatory and disparaging language in the process of interaction. As for people with whom she prefers interacting, she highlights the importance of meaning sharing between her and them in the everyday life. Thus, there is a demonstration of intersubjectivity<sup>5</sup> between people who share the same lifeworld.

Following is Wonder's experience with strangers she came across on SNS:

Interviewer: *Uhm... if I may ask: you said you interact mostly with your family, friends and fiancé. Now, don't you have people you can consider as strangers, maybe on Facebook?*

Wonder: *Ah... okay that's... I don't want to interact with strangers because you can't trust them because you can't... Because if you trust them... let's just say I had a bad experience with them. Like this online chatting; that green one. Not WhatsApp, the other one.*

Interviewer: *Facebook?*

Wonder: *No, the online... I don't know. That's WeChat — that's the thing. WeChat, neh (used to confirm if the listener is following)? In WeChat you can communicate with people around you, neh? And that's crazy because WeChat you don't control it. ToGo too. ToGo is also a social network site — you can communicate with strangers around you. And if this stranger, let's say he's 50 years old, neh? I'm 22... Let's say he's a psychopath and everything — that is scary [Shivering voice]. And I don't say all guys are like that. But most guys, in my experience, neh? They only want one thing on WeChat, on ToGo and everything; they want this... sexual vixen. I'm not interested, I have a fiancé. I don't want that [firm tone].*

Although Wonder does not narrate her experience in the first person, the preceding statement she made confirms that she talks about herself and what she went through. She indicates how some SNS such as WeChat are anarchical and how such state of affairs is bound to certain repercussions — one being sexual advances made towards others.

Millions too, interacts with everyone on SNS. However, he makes a special reference to his girlfriend as someone he constantly interacts with. He goes on to describe some conflicts he gets into with his girlfriend which are related to OSN:

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<sup>5</sup> Intersubjectivity is discussed in chapter 1, section 2.4.

Interviewer: *Who do you interact with, online?*

Millions: *I'd say it's my girlfriend 'cause (because) she was supposed to go to varsity and it just became worse after finishing school, you see. We used to chat, but we had a time frame. So, after school, yes, we used to chat. She had to do her homeworks and I had to do my things and give her space. She's not like me though; she used to chat with a time frame. So now she's not at school — she finished school and she couldn't go to varsity. So all we do is chatting. Whenever she texts me, she expects me to like, respond. If I don't respond it's like I'm doing something else. So what happens is that I chat with my girlfriend more than anyone — 8 hours a day, or more sometimes; on weekends of course. During the day I have classes. And even in class I still use my phone to chat with her if the lecture is boring. But most of the time it's my girlfriend.*

Interviewer: *What do you mean when you say while you're chatting with your girlfriend and when you don't respond she thinks that you might be doing something else? What do you mean by 'something else'?*

Millions: *Uh... by something else I mean... since well, we as people have our own insecurities. Sometimes we... I'd say insecurities because I can't say jealous. But we give people the impression that: "Okay, this is what I'm doing..." You know people... like you have your own mind-set and I have my own mind-set if you're not talking to me on social network sites or phone. Let's say you don't answer my calls... if she doesn't answer my calls I'll be like: "Oh, who is she with right now?" You see? So that's maybe what she thinks. Maybe she thinks I'm doing something — I'm busy with something; someone in fact... someone, that's why I'm not responding this and that. So that's the reason. So... I don't know how to put it in other words so that I can make it more clear. But maybe she thinks I'm cheating when I'm not responding to her texts.*

Like Millions, Pretty also experiences a conflict between herself and her boyfriend which, according to her, is caused by SNS. She raised this issue after mentioning that amongst the people she interacts with on SNS, her boyfriend is an exception:

Pretty: *Social media makes us fight because he's gonna (going to) post one thing and I get angry, I'm gonna post one thing, he gets angry. So we decided that, you know what no soc... (was about to say no social media). We don't even have each other on social media. So we're just: "If you need me, call me"; "Send an SMS". No social media.*

Thompson and Hickey (2005: 129-130) who are cited in Chapter 2, section 2.4.1. of this dissertation distinguish between five patterns of social interaction where 'conflict' is one. They describe this form of social interaction as the one in which individuals or social groups get involved in disagreements and clashes. This clearly seems to be the case in both the situations of Millions and Pretty. Although the nature of their problems is different, one thing in common is that both their conflicts are stirred by OSN. In line with Thompson and Hickey (2005: 129-130), Pretty realises a detrimental role which this conflict between herself and her

boyfriend takes, and as a resolution, she decides to refrain from communicating with her partner via SNS; she resorts to another mode of communication.

According to Bosanciamu et al. (2013: 52), interactions that take place on SNS have the possibility to extend to face-to-face social relations as individuals continue to engage with each other. In exploring the dynamics of social relations and interactions online, it is important to inquire, from the research participants, whether these interactions do translate into offline contexts or not. This inquiry was proceeded by asking the interviewees if they have ever met someone online with whom they now have physical social relations. The majority of the research participants affirm that they have established face-to-face relations with those they met online:

*Interviewer: Now, have you ever met someone online with whom you now have physical social relations and interactions?*

*Rasala: Yes.*

*Interviewer: Okay. Uhm, how did that happen?*

*Rasala: Uhm, I just... I got a friend request from... I didn't know the person then. I accepted [a friend request on Facebook], then we started chatting and then I got to meet the person, and then he told me that he went through my time-line<sup>6</sup> and he thought we could be close or something. But then now we are close friends. That's how it happened.*

Although Rasala is not the one who initiated an online friendship between him and the person he is now a close friend with, his cooperation towards their ongoing interaction has helped this relationship become a face-to-face one. Thompson and Hickey (2005: 129-130) argue that cooperation is a form of interaction whereby individuals and groups work collectively with the aim of reaching a common goal (see chapter 2, section 2.4.1.).

In responding to the same question, Katlego unfolds the manner in which he established the physical social relations that originally emerged from SNS:

*Katlego: Yeah, a lot. I think a lot of people. You meet people online, and online is not enough you know. So you... I actually have friends now, good friends that I met over social media. And we actually have physical social relations now because of these platforms.*

After being asked to elaborate on how the progression of online relations to offline context happened (based on his own personal experiences), this is how he explains the process:

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<sup>6</sup> Time-line refers to a linear representation of status messages, pictures and events that SNS users post on Facebook.

*Katlego: Okay, there's this one person that I've inboxed on Facebook, once again. And I thought I knew the person, you know. It was... it was... I was asking a question over Facebook via inbox whereby I asked this person something. And that led to a conversation and once we had that conversation over Facebook we realised that we sort of click. Yah, there were similarities there. And like I said, because Facebook is not convenient in terms of communication — it is not fast enough. So we decided to exchange numbers. Once we exchanged numbers, I added the person on WhatsApp and we started talking. And it actually led to a point whereby we felt like we trust each other enough to meet up. So yah, that led to us actually meeting up in around Bloem (Bloemfontein). And me and the person, we are now friends actually.*

In his own words, Katlego believes that online interactions and relations are not enough; one has to meet the people in person. Even though he claims that he met a lot of people online with whom he established face-to-face relations, he makes specific reference to an individual with which he developed such relationship. Through an ongoing online interaction with his friend, Katlego built a rapport with this individual up to a point where they decided to meet in person. From what he says, establishing face-to-face relations with this individual became successful due to mutual attractions they had towards each other. Ivcevic and Ambady (2013: 298) affirm that online interactants tend to interact more with people with whom they have similarities, regarding interests and characteristics — and this seems to be corroborative with Katlego's case.

Below is Lesego revealing how she established face-to-face relations with someone she met online:

*Lesego: Uhm... Mhm... yes, yes I have. There's this guy that I met through social media — Mxit days. Uhm... we sort of started knowing each other from Mxit. And from there we started talking everyday keeping each other's company. And then from there we started meeting up and then the relationship grew from like zero level to... yho, another. And even now we're still talking. And then he sort of ... he ended becoming something, uhm... important. Or should I say he ended up becoming one of my boy-friends. So, it was cool. It was cool.*

Below is Millions's account on the same topic:

*Millions: Yes, it's my girlfriend. Uh... it's my girlfriend. The way we met, we met on Facebook. From Facebook we went to WhatsApp. From WhatsApp we got to meet, and the rest is history.*

*Interviewer: Mhm. Can you tell me how did that happen?*

*Millions: Well first, when it started, uhm... You know, we guys, I don't know if it's only me or... What I do when I want someone, I go through their profile on Facebook and 'like', 'like', 'like', 'like,' like, 'like' just to get attention. And she returned the likes; she liked my things (posts). And then I commented on some of her*

*pictures and then that's how the conversation started. So I asked her to 'chat'<sup>7</sup>with: "Can we use inboxes?" and then we started using inboxes. From the inboxes I asked for her numbers and then we went to WhatsApp and that's where I asked her to meet me. And then after we met we talked and talked maybe for two to three days and then... At first it was not love, but you know how it goes. And eventually she... she was cool. For someone I met on social media, she was cool.*

What is common to Lesego and Millions's narratives regarding the subject in question is that both of them met their current partners through SNS. Lesego states that a constant interaction with this guy she met online eventually developed into an intimate relationship which still exists. As for Millions, establishing a physical relationship with his partner from SNS was a matter of determination as opposed to something which happened spontaneously. He explains in detail, how, with the aid of SNS, he systematically imported online interaction into an offline relationship.

Two out of the six research participants claim that they never met someone online with whom they now have physical social relations:

*Interviewer: Have you ever met someone online whom you now have physical social relations and interactions with?*

*Pretty: No.*

*Interviewer: Absolutely not?*

*Pretty: NO.*

As a follow up question, Pretty was asked to tell why she does not establish physical relations with people she met online. And this is what she tells:

*Pretty: As in like someone that I have on... as my friend on Facebook? I know them already. So... yah. The thing is we know each other. It means a lot. We don't need to have some kind of a social or physical relation. We know each other. It's fine 'mos' (anyway), everyday.*

Pretty maintains that it is not necessary for her to initiate face-to-face interactions with her online friends because these are people she already knows in real life. As Lu (2011: 54) and Ivcevic and Ambady (2013: 298) state, individuals who are involved in OSN tend to convey their physical relations and interactions to online platforms in order to broaden them (see chapter 2, section 2.4.3.).

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<sup>7</sup> Chat: conversing through SNS.

Wonder also claims that she never established physical social relations with someone she met online. However, this is not entirely true because in her narrative, she talks about a bad experience she had after meeting physically with someone she met on SNS:

*Wonder: Uhm... No. I don't trust strangers. I'm not... There was someone, neh (used to confirm if the listener is following)? It was a few years ago, neh? I met him on WeChat, neh? We interacted, and we... we uhm... how can I say it? We became more than friends and everything. That was before I got engaged and everything and before I clicked again with my fiancé back to my life. That was a very hard period in my life. But there was someone. But he just turned out to be... he just wanted... you know... that thing that everybody wants (sexual favours) on WeChat. He turned out to be like that. So, uhm... we broke-up and I never talked to him again. That's the only person I met on social media that become more that a person I talk with only on online social network sites.*

*Interviewer: Mhm, okay. So, if I may ask: since you met this person on WeChat, did you meet that particular person physically — in person?*

*Wonder: Yah, I got to meet him physically. I went to a date with him — everything. It was a real relationship. It was a real relationship that was extended from WeChat because in that period of my life I was really sad, neh? I was not interacting with my fiancé at the time because I was like mad at him because he hurt me. And that was... it was like I was in a big hole after that. And I did everything humanly possible to get over him and it didn't work. And one of the things I did was going on WeChat, meet guys online, meet them in person and strike a relationship with them. That didn't work.*

Like Lesego and Millions, Wonder met someone online who later became more than a friend. However, for her this turned out to be a nightmare in a sense that the guy she met online had no good intentions about this relationship. She goes on to explain that her motive for establishing the face-to-face relations with people she meet online was to initiate romantic relationships which she hoped will make her forget about her boyfriend who is now her fiancé. She used SNS as an escape mechanism from the hardships she was enduring. Because of the experiences she went through, she is of the opinion that online strangers are not to be trusted; hence she no longer interacts with them.

While on the journey of exploring the online social interactions and relations of the research participants, as much as these online platforms occupy a significant place in their lives, I am curious in knowing their views and perspectives regarding the authenticity of SNS interactions and relations. That is, are the online social interactions and relations real? In providing their views on this issue, some participants are not clear whereas others believe that these interactions are not real. After being asked whether he thinks online social relationships are real, this is how Rasala replies:

Rasala: *No.*

Interviewer: *Can you tell me why you think that way?*

Rasala: *I'd like to think of it as me going out to a restaurant and post a photo of the food I'm eating and then tomorrow I'm at home eating pap (South African staple meal made out of maize meal) and chicken and I don't post that food. Online relationships are more of a propaganda kind of a thing where we only post the good, and we don't post the bad. Then if you want to educate me, tell me: "Okay, I'm happy with my boyfriend today". Tomorrow I also need to know: "You know we are going through some challenges and this is how I overcame them". It's all about good life if it's like that.*

Interviewer: *Mmh, okay. So what you imply is that they are not that authentic?*

Rasala: *Yes.*

It is clear that Rasala believes that online interactions and relations are not real. He is convinced that the materials (pictures or status messages) through which some people express themselves online are a reflection of a simulated life. He argues that some members of online communities tend to act in the socially desirable ways in a sense that they only post the materials which represent decent areas of their lives as opposed to unpleasant ones. He also raises the point that, the function that members of SNS should serve should be of mutual learning, and it is only through transparency if this is to happen. Like Rasala, Millions also thinks that SNS relationships are not genuine. However, his experiences differ to those of Rasala in this regard:

Interviewer: *From your own perspective, do you think online relationships are real?*

Millions: *Not really, because, uhm... I've experienced situations like: I know I saw you on Facebook, but when we meet we just pass each other, you see. You don't greet me, I don't greet you. We just know each other from Facebook, you see. So that... there is something I have developed. If I don't... on Facebook we're just acquaintances, you see. You're there. If I take you from Facebook to my WhatsApp... even if you can give me your numbers and I don't want them — I don't want you in my circle. I leave your numbers there. So if I take you from there and bring you to my WhatsApp, which means 'yes'. Now you're becoming a friend — you're coming close. From there it's meeting (meeting physically). From the meeting I decide: "Okay, she can stay in my circle. She can't stay".*

What concerns Millions about the reality of online social relationships is that the interactions take on a different tone when online friends cross paths in physical environments. According to him, there seems to be low levels, or no interaction beyond SNS. For these reasons, he develops an idea of classifying and categorising his online friends based on his desire to bring

them close or keep them distant from his social networks. The verdict about whether one is to be a close or a distant friend is contingent on his impression of such a person after meeting face-to-face. While Rasala and Millions are under the impression that online interactions and relations are not sincere, Wonder and Lesego express uncertainties on this matter:

*Wonder: Uhm... let's just say people that are strangers, neh? The stranger people, neh... I don't know. I can't say yes, I can't say no about it. If I say yes, then the guy that only wants one thing [wins] and I can't say no because I know there are people out there that are married because they met their husbands or wives online. It depends. It depends on the person, and it depends on the other person as well. If one person only thinks about: "I'm buying networking; I'm just thinking of a little ass". Then I don't believe that relationship is real. But if that person and the other person really care about each other and they really commit on... Let's say to talk everyday on Facebook or to get to meet face-to-face... Let's just say it's real if they get to meet face-to-face. If they don't get to meet face-to-face and the other person just wants the fun stuff and not the relationship based stuff, then they aren't real. I think it is... I think if you meet this guy or this girl on social network sites and... Or he or she doesn't want to meet you in person, then why? Why are you talking to the person? That's my thinking.*

*Interviewer: Okay. So what you mean is that if the relationship is real then you have to meet someone physically in person?*

*Wonder: Yeah. You can't have... you can't have... You can't marry this (grabs her cellphone). You can't marry your computer. You can't marry your tablet — you need to marry a person.*

At first, Wonder is indecisive as to whether online relationships are real or not. Nonetheless, her verdict is that if relationships and interactions are to be considered as real, they have to also exist beyond online platforms. Those that remain online cannot be considered as real. Her emphasis is more on intimate relationships. She depicts how both male and female counterparts should conduct themselves in order to confirm their online relations. Lesego also seems to have difficulty in expressing her views regarding this issue. However, she eventually puts forward her insight about when relations are real and when are they not:

*Lesego: [Pause] Uhm... this is a difficult one. It's a difficult one because what's 'real'? Because... because I'd say that today I happen to speak with some person that I know from the streets. He or she will be saying: "I'm this kind of person, I do this and that". Okay fine, you get to know each other. At the end of the day you realise that this person from the streets was not honest to me. He or she was not real because what he (she) said he (she) has, it is not really there. You see, this person is able to do this because... let's say he or she is in Cape Town and you here in Bloemfontein. So let me say, I don't think they're real. I don't think they're real. I don't. SOME of them are, some are not.*

*Interview: Uhm, so in your view, some of them are real and some of them are not real? [Pause] is that what you're saying?*

Lesego: *Yes, that's what I'm saying.*

Lesego was then asked to describe how online relations and interactions are supposed to be, in order to be considered as genuine.

Lesego: *Okay, those that I consider as real it's uhm... Let me say you meet a person on social media, okay, you know this particular person stays in D2 (area) or whatever. And then this person tells you: "I do this, I do that". And I'd be like: "Oh yah, you do that? Okay". And then eventually it just happens that you try to add 2+2 together: "Oh this person told me this the other day and today he or she still says that". So this means that the relationship is real. Like this person is honest about his or her life and I'm honest about my life. And if it comes to a point where you are able to meet up, and know each other, you see that what this person has been saying about himself or herself is indeed true. So you realise that the relationship is real. The one that I say it's not real I would say if I get to interact with someone from Jozi (Johannesburg) or even close, and then this person lies about his or her life because there's something that this person wants from you or whatever, I don't know — it's not real. Because I think everything... You get to see a lot of stuff... You get to learn about a lot of stuff through time you see. 'Cause (because) there you talk to someone. He or she will tell you this and that — you don't know this particular person. Obviously, as human beings you know that we form our impressions during the first [encounters]. So you only get to know this person once you talk every now and then. Through time, you'll be able to see that: nah, this person is like this and that. Or he is not like this and that, you see. So I think it lies on time. Time-time-time.*

From Lesego's perspective, online social interactions and relations should be characterised by honesty and virtuous self-presentation among online interactants if they are to be considered as real. In the process of interaction, individuals have to be honest about who they are, and deceptions should be discouraged. Lies, deception and dishonesty about oneself, according to Lesego, are deemed to contaminate the realness of these relations. The notion of online interactants meeting face-to-face seems to play a crucial role in determining the authenticity thereof. Lesego, in her statement, alludes that meeting an individual in person is an imperative act through which one can be able to make sense regarding whether a relationship is real or not. Moreover, as the interactions take place in the online domains, time plays a significant role since the individuals get enough opportunity to form impressions of one another.

#### **5.4. Online social support**

There are two main reasons behind the exploration of '*online social support*' as one of the major themes under analysis. Firstly, as an individual who has been involved in OSN for a while, I realise how frequent people resort to SNS for social support. Secondly, several sources that form part of the reviewed literature identify online social support as one of the

reasons why people are attached to SNS (Leung, 2011: 382; Sponcil and Gitimu, 2013: 6; Hunt et al., 2014: 238; Trepte et al., 2015: 75; Tang et al., 2016: 103). Also see chapter 2, section 2.4. Due to these reasons, I want to investigate the research participants on this subject to see if online social support is also one of the factors that influence their online interactions. In the literature review, five components (Emotional social support, Instrumental social support, Informational social support, Affectionate social support and Social companionship) of social support are outlined. However, only two of these are predominant in the participants' narratives, namely 'informational' and 'emotional' social support. The others are only partly accounted for (see chapter 2, section 2.4.). The quantitative results on social support in chapter 4, section 4.4. show that informational social support online is indicated by the respondents [66% (agree) + 18.6% (strongly agree)] to be the most frequent form of social support. Although emotional social support also prevails as an important type of social support online as shown by the interviewees, the survey statistics reveal that it is not well received by the majority (see chapter 4, figures 4.11.).

In delving into participants' experiences regarding social support in online platforms, I first was curious to know if the participants have ever received any type of social support online. It appears that all of them have received and offered at least one or more type(s) of social support online. This is an excerpt from the in-depth interview with Pretty explaining which types of social support she has received on SNS:

*Pretty: I would say all of them. Uhm... information... I'm now updated on what's going on. If I didn't have uhm... let me say social media, I wouldn't know what's happening on campus, for example. But now I know. And instrumental, uhm... my fridge at res (residence), I bought it online. So if.. things are expensive. So I went on Facebook: "Hi I'm looking for a fridge, I have this much". And then someone came up: "Oh okay, it's okay, can we meet and negotiate?" You know. Uhm... emotional: last year my dad died, I posted on Facebook, I'm like: "My dad died". Everyone was there for me, you know. Everyone was there. Through social media, my friends called 'cause (because) I couldn't call each and every friend of mine and tell them: "Oh, my dad died". I posted one post, and then everyone called. So I would say... okay on social companionship, uh... I organised an event at res (residence) and I had to advertise it. So people... black people don't like posters. They don't read posters. So on social media I created uhm... I don't know what to call it. It's an event what, what. Uhm... let me say I created eh... eh... something like a group and then that's where... Maybe when you see it, you check all the details, if you're going then you'll tick 'going'. If you think you're going you'll tick 'maybe'. If you're not going you'll tick: 'not going'. And that's where I updated people: "Okay this is what's happening" — on that group of social media. So people came at large amounts 'cause they were updated. So I do get social support on social media.*

It is clear that Pretty receives all types of social support. She highlights the importance of the informational support in keeping her in the loop regarding issues related to campus. She also points out how Facebook helped her spread the word about her father's death and the emotional support she received thereafter. For her Facebook is the appropriate platform to transmit information to others since she mentions that people, blacks, to be specific, do not like reading posters pasted around the campus. She does not only receive social support from others. From her side too, social support is transmitted:

*Interviewer: Now, on your side, have you ever given any type of social support online?*

*Pretty: Yes. Uhm ... information. Let's say uhm... for example, I'm selling something. I'm gonna (going to) write: "Okay guys, I'm selling this and this and this; who is interested? For this much. Who is interested?" And then... maybe, there is something that happens on campus, let's say a strike, maybe. I'll write on social media for those who don't stay on campus so that they don't waste money for taxis. I'll write on social media: "Hey guys, there's a strike on campus blah... blah... it's not safe". But if you wanna (want to) come see it, then you can come. At least I provided information. So if they come... they come at their own risk. And emotionally, yes I have. Let's say my friend posts something sad. I'm gonna ask what is going on and then I would try to reach out to her. From there she'll talk to me and tell me what's going on. So I have... I don't just read the status and be like: "Okay". And then I move on. I follow up and see what exactly is going on, what happened and stuff, yah.*

There are two main forms of social support which Pretty offers her online friends: informational and emotional support. She mentions that the informational support she normally receives has to do with what is happening around the campus. Such information is also the information she disseminates among her online community. She makes reference of a series of events related to the student protests that have been taking place at the UFS during 2016 and demonstrates how she supported others informationally. With regards to emotional support, she asserts that whenever one of her friends posts content which refers to sadness, she supports such an individual by being there for her/him. This is an act of reciprocation as it (online social support) flows both directions.

Unlike Pretty who receives all sorts of online social support, Millions only refers to informational and emotional social support as the ones he receives. However, more emphasis is on informational support than on emotional social support:

*Interviewer: Regarding social support, Have you received any type of social support online?*

*Millions: Yes. A lot, a lot. I remember this one time when... it was back in 2013. There were trials, Free-State Stars (South African soccer team) trials back at my hometown. So they were gonna (going to) hold trials. So*

*they posted on their page on Facebook. So I found out about it. So I went. I didn't make it, okay. So basically I get social support on such things on Facebook and WhatsApp. Sometimes... uhm... there's these chain messages. I don't know if you know them — 'read and share'. So there were bursaries... there were bursaries. Even though I didn't succeed in getting a bursary... They said NSFAS (National Student Financial Aid Scheme): "If you wanna (want to) apply for NSFAS click on the link". And then I did and I applied; I didn't get it. So you get these on... even if you have problems. Like I said, there is somewhere in the interview when we started, I told you uhm... me and my friends we share... Let's say something happens from campus then... I share with them my emotions: "Ey, I'm not feeling good today". Friends: "Why?" Then I elaborate and tell them: "Because this and this happened". That's about it. So I do receive social support online.*

From the narrative of Millions, it is clear that informational support that was provided through SNS played an important role in two areas of his life: career and academic life. On the former, with the information he received from Facebook, he learnt about soccer trials that were held in his hometown. Had he succeeded in such an endeavour, because of SNS, he could have earned a life that might be a dream of his. On the latter issue, although he cannot report success, he learnt about the availability of certain forms of financial aid for studying through SNS. He did not only learn about the financial aid opportunities, but he was also able to apply through the very same platform (Facebook). SNS provided him with more than just social support. Because of this kind of online social support Millions received, he was able to save time and resources in making sure that he submits a bursary application. From my experience, I know that it is not simple to receive information about financial aid (for studies) since that kind of information is not widely known. The process of applying for financial aid can also be hectic and time consuming, if done physically as opposed to being processed online.

The importance of receiving information regarding happenings on campus seems to prevail in the narratives of some of the participants. Wonder is one those participants:

*Wonder: Informational support? [Thinking] Uhm... the strike that was on campus and everything. You can see when people... uh... My fiancé stays on campus. And the last strike [when the white students were being attacked by black students following the incident where protesters (cleaning staff) and some black students were attacked by, mostly, white rugby players and fans] in February or whenever, neh. It was somewhere there, neh. I was really, really scared for him. And you can really see on Facebook the devastation and stuff. The people like my fiancé, my friends — everybody was saying: "Go get him, go get him, go get him". So I literally wanted to go and get him (he's in a wheelchair). It was on Monday right; Monday evening. We couldn't get him because there were tough guards. But Tuesday morning like 6:00 to 07:00, we were here and we got him. I don't know... it's the information about what's happening on campus. And for me and my niece to live on campus was scary. The other information I got was... it's basically friends related. When my friends get done with something and...*

*stuff. But that's actually the fact that chaos was on campus and I wanted to come and get them because of the information that was given to me through Facebook, WhatsApp and everything.*

Wonder recounts on one of the protest events that took place on the UFS, Bloemfontein campus in early February 2016 and on the role that SNS such as Facebook and WhatsApp played in keeping her updated about the state of affairs. She depicts the incident on that day as one in which she, and those close to her, were in danger. She was in a dangerous situation when she should not have been — she had to go and fetch her fiancé who is in a wheelchair to ensure that he is safe. In spite of the harm she could have been exposed to, where the only safe way was to remain static in the space she was confined to, she knew about what was happening at that point in time. This was due to the transmission and dissemination of information through SNS — largely Facebook.

While Wonder and Pretty acknowledge the informational support they receive regarding critical events on campus, such as protests, Katlego is more inclined to appreciate the informational support which has to do with his academic work and the general daily news:

*Interviewer: Have you ever received any type of social support online — be that informational, instrumental, emotional or social companionship?*

*Katlego: Uhm... I'd say yes, because uhm... for example, information: there is a lot of information posted over Facebook: information that I can actually relate to, you know. For example, information regarding, uhm... campus or anything related to my school-work. For example, cancellation of the tests, uhm... assignments, an assignment due date; anything like that. That information which is useful to me... Oh, articles, like news... the news, the actual news. The news that are posted on social media. That is the kind of information that I received.*

Having been asked the same question of whether he receives any kind on social support online, Rasala too, refers to informational support as the main type he receives and shares with others. Twitter is a resourceful social network site in this regard:

*Rasala: Informational, yes. As I said in the beginning, there is a lot of informational stuff that I receive. As I said Twitter is very informative, I get to learn a lot.*

As mentioned in the previous statement, Rasala also returns a favour to others by posting information that can be deemed useful to a broader online community. This is his account when asked what type of information he has shared before:

*Rasala: Shared before... It has to be economical, whereby an economist online was predicting the future of the economy of South Africa and how the youth can be involved as the hands of the economy are in the...the... the... [Stuttering] economy's survival is in the hands of the youth. How can they use the opportunity to make it count?*

When looking at emotional social support online, some participants report that they do receive some and reciprocate to it, whereas others claim that they do not open up to receive such support. This type of social support involves talking and communicating feelings that show love, care and sympathy. A question was posed to participants, requiring them to tell if they share their emotional thoughts with their friends online. In responding to this question, some of the participants began to reflect critically on the meaning of the term *'friends'*. What became salient in these participants' narratives on this issue is that they began to categorise the *'friends'* they interact with online according to their social importance:

Rasala: *Friends online goes to a definition of FRIENDS, FRIENDS, FRIENDS. My actual friends that I have in person, and I can communicate online with. Because (since) I don't get to see them, yes, I share my emotions and thoughts with them.*

Although Rasala is not explicit, he makes the point that the kind of friends he shares emotions with online are those that he knows personally. In this sense, those friends that are only known on online level are disregarded. Again, being selective on who he shares his emotions with, tells us that he communicates these (emotions) in private chats through platforms such as WhatsApp as opposed to open platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. In that way, the interactions are only restricted to those who are involved in them — thus preventing those (online friends not known in person) who are not intended to be part of the interaction from being involved. In open SNS such as those mentioned (Facebook and Twitter), one has little control on who views the content or who takes part in the interaction.

Other participants who are selective and who categorise online friends according to what they mean for them are Katlego and Lesego:

Katlego: *Uhm... I'd say it depends where and who it is. I normally wouldn't share my emotions... especially emotions on Facebook. Because like I said, it is a platform where everyone can see.*

The idea of sharing emotions with a broader virtual community on a platform such as Facebook is questioned by Katlego. For this reason, should he feel like sharing his emotions with others, it should be with specific individuals — supposedly in private chats such as on WhatsApp.

Lesego confirms the sentiment of sharing her emotions with certain people:

Lesego: *It depends on what kind of friends. 'Cause (because) you know, when you're online, right, there are those friends of which uhm... you share certain stuff with and some you just can't. It's a no go area, you see. So 'mina' (me) personally, yah, there are things that I share with those friends that I know understand me — the*

*close ones. If I can do this and that, I can confide in them. I know when I go to this particular person I'm gonna (going to) get help, I know that I'm gonna feel better. So I do share, I do.*

The allusion of sharing emotions privately seems to be something valuable also to Lesego. Firstly, like Rasala and Katlego, she is selective when it comes to who she shares her emotions with. Secondly, when a person confides in someone, that information has to remain confidential between these people. And this cannot work on open platforms such as Facebook. Moreover, Lesego talks about the time when she received emotional support online from one of her closest friends on a private chat:

*Lesego: Mm... [agreeing]. Emotional. Okay. I remember the time when I lost my grandmother back in 2010 and that one person I once told you about, the one I met through social media when I was still using Mxit gave me that social support. Because I couldn't handle the pain, engaging with people who I was surrounded with was sort of difficult because I'm the kind of person who finds it hard to talk about stuff, you know — like face-to-face. So, sometimes social networking is sort of basically good for me. Like okay, I can be able to express myself like 'this'. And I have my phone. I have my laptop. I could write this. I could tell this particular person because I know they would sort of give me that support, you know, yah.*

Lesego raises the point that face-to-face interactions can, at times, curb her self-expression. For this reason, SNS are the platforms through which she can freely express and communicate her feelings to others, especially those feelings related to her emotions. She receives this kind of social support from others and she also reciprocates to the very same people (or a specific person).

*Interviewer: Okay. On your side, have you ever given any type of social support online, to someone?*

*Lesego: Yes, the very same person.*

*Lesego: Yah. Uhm, this particular person [laughing] had uhm... what is it? Sexuality problems. Sexuality problems — sort of like, determining whether uhm... he is straight, bisexual. That kind of thing. So he had a problem with that because he couldn't talk to his mother; father: Obviously, NO, because he grew up in a strict family and they're also church going people. So if you talk to them about the fact that gays and lesbians exist they'll tell you that it is Satanism and stuff. So this person couldn't deal with this issue because he was staying in an environment or community which despise that kind of people (homosexuals) and stuff. So he felt as if he is not living the life that he wants, you see. So since he trusted me and felt comfortable when he talks to me, I think I managed to give him that emotional support, you see. Because sometimes he was able to tell me that: "You know today I woke up with a broken heart because my mom did this and that yesterday and I don't know what to do with my life". You see. So like I'll be there for him giving him advices and try to console him, you see. After that his stress decreased and he also forgets about that drama, you see. So I feel like I have... I have...*

The emotional support that Lesego offers is normally given by professionals such as psychologists, counsellors or any other persons skilled in handling issues related to identity

problems. Although this trend of sharing personal troubles on SNS does not impact significantly on the professions established to deal with such matters, it does, to some extent, undermine the work of these professions if ordinary, lay people start to take on the role of the psychological counsellor, for example. Pretty's statement that replies to the question of whether she shares her emotions online confirms this viewpoint:

*Interviewer: Okay. If I may ask, what sort of emotions and thoughts do you share most of the time?*

*Pretty: Ah, it depends. If I'm hurt... especially... the... the [stuttering] one thing that I like to pos... to do is post... [stuttering] especially when I'm hurt... I'm an extrovert but I don't like talking about my emotions. I hate talking about my emotions. So at least Facebook 'nyana' (some) I post: "Okay I'm so sad today. I feel so depressed 'blah... blah'". I know they'll ... Someone is gonna (going to) come and reach out, you know: "Oh, okay call me". You know; comfort me and I become fine. I have a problem with psychologists. I prefer writing on social media than going to a psychologist and talk to a psychologist.*

*Interviewer: Now, I become curious. Why do you dislike psychologists? Because, I mean they are professionals.*

*Pretty: They... uh... they dig up what you don't wanna (want to) talk about. So hence I'm saying on Facebook I post: "Okay guys my dad died because one two three one two three". Good. Everyone comes: "Oh, I'm so sorry for your loss 'blah... blah... blah'". I go to a psychologist: "Okay my dad died... blah blah". She is gonna (going to) know all the information from the beginning and that's not why I'm there. I don't wanna talk about it. Hence I say I don't like psychologists. I have a huge problem with psychologists. Even after my dad died I went there for two sessions. After that I was like: "Nah thanks! This is not for me". But with Facebook I would post: "Today I miss my dad". And then I know that someone is gonna call: "I saw your status. You gonna be fine, man. Can we meet?" You know, yah.*

From what Pretty says, in dealing with her trials and tribulations, like when her father passed away, she rather externalise her emotions to the public (Facebook) than dealing one-on-one with a professional. For her, the sympathy, empathy and compassion that come from ordinary people she shares a lifeworld<sup>8</sup> with, are sufficient. In this sense, SNS can be viewed as serving therapeutic functions.

Another participant who shares and receives emotional support on an open platform such as Facebook, is Wonder:

*Wonder: I do get social companionship and emotional support from Facebook, because it's the... like I said, it's the... You can actually see how many people care about you because when I... How can I say this? Uh... I'm not... I dropped a relationship with my best friend of maybe nine years, neh, because I felt like she's just using me, neh. And I posted something on Facebook and literally, I was sad when I post it. And literally, everybody*

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<sup>8</sup> Lifeworld: "mundane, everyday world in which people operate" (Inglis, 2012: 90).

*online supported me through that. It's just the... You can really, really see who actually cares about you. And when it's my birthday, I have a lot more fun because through online social networking, neh, because... When it's my birthday, neh, I don't care about gifts or anything, neh. Just call me, then I'm on top of the world. If you don't call me, post it on Facebook [laughing] because at the end of... I make it like... I don't go to my Facebook on my birthday throughout that day when it's my birthday because I'm really looking forward to tonight. So everybody just leaves and everybody is... [laughs] you know. And you go on Facebook and you're like: 'WOOOW' (overwhelmed to see the messages). I love my birthdays on social network sites because when the celebration is over, the celebration still continues on Facebook.*

Wonder highlights two important, but distinct experiences she receives emotional support for. She first talks about the time when she ended a long friendship with a person she believes was using her — which is normally a painful experience. Secondly, she narrates about a wonderful and heartfelt emotion that she experiences when it is her birthday. In the study of affect in everyday life, existentialist sociologists (Kotarba, 2009: 144) make us aware that emotions which carry potential harm and deception are capable of destructing us, while actions which bring about positive emotions foster social cohesion. These remarks are in line with Wonder's experiences (cf. Chapter 1, section 1.2.2.). Regarding emotional support she received when she was sad, it was then when she got to identify who really cares about her and who does not. By posting her sad feelings on Facebook, she knows that this is where she will receive emotional support. Emotional support also entails the acts of loving and caring for others, and a courtesy such as wishing someone a happy birthday represents that for her. Traditionally, people offer gifts to those who celebrate their birthdays as an act of kindness. However, in the way SNS are used, there is a discernable shift from physical and material representation to intangible, online demonstration of kindness which is not taken for granted by people such as Wonder.

Moreover, reciprocity seems to play a role in circulating social support online. Wonder is an example of that:

*Wonder: Yes, I do give social support. I do... If someone is unhappy I do give them social support. If my fiancé is sad or anything, I'm the one who calms him down. I don't know... I'm the... I'm the... I give social support back to them if anything happens. I give it when someone posts something on Facebook that really means something to them; then I give it to them.*

*Interviewer: Okay, something like what? If you can give an example?*

*Wonder: If I can give an example? Uhm... my aunt... my aunt is twelve years younger than my mom. So she's more like a friend, really. And she went through a devastating relationship and she posted something about it on*

Facebook. And we all were like: “Oh, it’s okay, you’ll get a new one; a better one that God intends for you to have everything with him”.

The idea of finding it difficult to share emotions on the open SNS as expressed by most of the participants seems to reflect the responses of the survey sample. Figure 4.12. in chapter 4 reveals that 73.25% [48.5% (strongly disagree) + 24.7% (disagree)] does not share deeper emotions online.

## **5.5. Identity and self presentation**

This section deals with identity construction and self-presentation of participants in online platforms. According to Leung (2011: 382), as supported by Sponcil and Gitimu (2013: 5-6), OSN affords young people who are part of the online community more of an opportunity to explore their identities than in offline contexts since they get ample time to determine how they want to express themselves. Thus, OSN offer them more ownership and autonomy over their identity formations. Also important is the manner in which one wants to be perceived online. In this sense, one’s online interactants are like a mirror which reflects an image the person seeks to view. A sociological concept which captures this process of self-presentation is that of ‘*looking-glass self*’, which can be associated with the sociologist Charles Cooley (cf. chapter 2, section 2.5.). In this line of thought, self-presentation as performed by SNS users can be seen as directly linked, and influential to identity construction. It is therefore important to explore the ways in which the participants construct their identities online, and most importantly, to see if these identities are different from the offline ones. Moreover, investigating the role of self-presentation online and how that inform online identities is one the objectives of this study.

In exploring the concept of identity and how it is construed by participants, they were asked to provide a subjective understanding of the meaning of the concept identity. Following that, the questions which seek participants to describe and compare both their offline and online identities are posed. The conceptions about identity from three of the participants are more inclined to suggest an idea of self-understanding<sup>9</sup> (or a personal identity) and self-concept. These three are Pretty, Lesego and Katlego.

Pretty: *Identity... identity is... uhm. I don’t know how to explain it. But it’s you. Like ... individual, yourself, your morals.*

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<sup>9</sup> Self-understanding as defined by James Fearon (1999: 20) refers to the way in which a person defines who he/she is.

Lesego understands the construct of identity in the following way:

*Lesego: Uhm, identity is, uhm... It's sort of like an entitlement to your own life. Your privacy, uhm... Knowing who you are, what you stand for and what you stand against. Your values — what is important and what's not important to you. So, I feel like identity covers a lot of stuff and carries the most important things about you. That's identity. That's the word.*

Although Katlego's definition of identity lacks specificity and clarity, understanding identity as “*something that you are, that someone doesn't have*” means that he also believes it (identity) to be a self-concept:

*Katlego: Uhm... I think identity is.... something that... something that can't be taken away from a person. I think identity is something that you are, that someone doesn't have.*

The conceptions of these participants about identity and of those who will later be discussed, can be regarded as the expressions of ‘*category of practice*’. This expression, according to Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper (2000: 4), is used by lay people, in everyday settings to make sense of themselves, their activities, what they share with, and how they differ from others. In Pretty's understanding, one's morals form part of identity. And for Lesego, values are a crucial constituent of one's identity. In thinking sociologically, how they understand identity is influenced by their non-material culture which can be attributed to the socialisation instilled into them by the society; since both the concepts of values and morals are components of culture.

Although not said in so many words, Rasala's understanding of identity carries the notion of the concept as a ‘*collective*’ phenomenon (Brubaker and Cooper, 200: 7). Collective identity, as described by Brubaker and Cooper (2000: 7), refers to a subjective, experienced, felt and perceived commonality amongst members of the group. The concept of “*sense of belonging*” in Rasala's account captures this idea:

*Rasala: I think identity is uhm...having belonging — where you belong. Who you are. That's what I think identity is: who you are.*

For Millions, identity is not just what one thinks he/she is:

*Millions: Identity? Identity is oneself. Like the way you perceive yourself... In fact, not you... but how people perceive you. Because my identity, I just know myself in the mirror, you know. But identity is not only what appears on the outside. What you see is not really my identity. But... nah-nah, what I see: like what I see, I see myself as Millions. But you, when you look at me you can tell: “This guy is like this, he's like that...” You see. So I would see myself through your eyes because when you tell me that: “Dude, you're cool. You're this and*

*that". And for me to tell that you're lying: NO. It's what you see. So I just know that I'm Millions, and I look like this... I know my character and... That's basically how I understand my identity. I know through other people when they tell me: "Ey, dude, you're doing good". Millions reply: "Okay am I the good person or... when I do this?" Okay, that's my identity.*

Even though Millions's account contains uncertainties, it is salient that he understands identity in two ways. Firstly, he describes identity as one's self-concept and self-understanding. Secondly, he portrays this construct as something which is a product of others' perception of oneself. And it is from these views that one's identity is realised. It is true that one's identity is not solely based on subjective understanding of oneself but also influenced by thoughts and perceptions of those around us about us (Kidd and Teagle, 2012: 7). Having defined what identity is in their own understanding, participants were subsequently asked to describe their everyday 'real' (offline) identities and to account whether these are consistent with the identities they portray online. Four out six research participants believe that their offline identities are different to their online ones. The first account is Rasala's:

*Interviewer: How would you describe your everyday offline identity — meaning: your identity when you are not on social network sites?*

*Rasala: When I'm not on social network sites I think I'm more quiet...Yah, I think I'm more quiet. I'm always alone. I don't talk that much [laughing] like I do when I'm on social network sites. I won't be standing on the podium preaching or something. No.*

He further explains why he thinks his offline and online identities are different:

*Rasala: Because offline I'm more with myself. I talk to myself a lot. I feel like that's when I think a lot and that's when I get to go online and share all the stuff. But then now on a... off... when I'm offline, I don't really get to engage with people. I think I'm a bit emotional when I engage with people and people don't wanna (want to) accept your view and they want to force their viewpoint on you. That's why I just keep everything to myself and rather share it [online].*

Rasala describes himself as an introvert when he's offline as opposed to an expressive and extrovertly self when he is online. Even though he possesses two different identities, they complement each other: online platforms afford him an opportunity to externalise his thoughts and perceptions that he feels constrained to communicate in the offline environment. Several sources (Leung, 2011: 382; Sponcil and Gitimu, 2013: 5-6) affirm that SNS users give themselves enough time to figure out how they want to articulate their sentiments, views, thoughts and perceptions online (cf. chapter 2, section 2.5). And this is how Rasala

operates, since he reveals that: “... *offline I’m more with myself. I talk to myself a lot. I feel like that’s when I think a lot and that’s when I get to go online and share all the stuff*”.

Lesego is another participant whose offline identity differs from her online identity and this is how she describes her offline identity:

*Lesego: Like, it’s simple. For example, I prefer a simple life. I don’t want a complicated life, you know. Waking up everyday, doing what you do, doing what you know you’re best at, you know. It’s [as] simple as possible... You know you stick to your values — you know what’s wrong. I know at this particular time I have to be at res (residence). At this particular time I need to study. I need to be doing this and that. It’s just fine, it’s normal; just the way I want it to be.*

In the following statement Lesego explains how her online identity is different to her offline one:

*Lesego: Definitely. Definitely, it is... it is different. I think like I mentioned a few reasons. It’s (identity) vague online. [Overlapping utterance — Interviewer: Mhm...] Offline you get to, uhm... to know the real Lesego — who I am. Because online I don’t really say a lot. I don’t post anything that can make you think: “Oh so, Lesego is this kind of a person. Oh so, she does this”. No, I don’t post anything that has to do with that. So when you know me in real life you’ll know that: “Okay, this person does not live her life this way. She stands for this. She values this the most”. So I feel like I’m way too different in these two contexts. You understand?*

The idea of values being the centre of one’s identity seems to prevail as Lesego constantly refers to this concept (values) in several quotes. To her, aligning oneself with values leads to the life that is uncomplicated, simple and routinised; which is exemplifying her identity. Such way of describing one’s identity validates Berger and Luckmann’s (Inglis, 2012: 94) thought that, frequent and repeated actions which eventually are cast into a pattern, otherwise known as the ‘*habitualisation*’ process, are an essential aspect of human life (cf. chapter 1, section 2.6). Moreover, Lesego reveals that her online identity is not consistent with her offline one in a sense that regarding the former, she is more reserved and limits her self-disclosure. This reflects back to her idea of opting for a simple, non-complex life which is her true identity.

The remaining two who claim that their offline and online identities are not the same are Wonder and Millions. I begin with Wonder’s narrative where she illustrates using an example of one of her experiences: how her offline identity differs from the online one:

*Wonder: On social network sites? Okay. Uhm... I don’t know. I think I’m really... I’m really constricted. Because, if I talk to a person face-to-face they know exactly what I’m thinking, they know exactly what I’m feeling. Online platforms are really constricting me into being... [pause] more like a proper lady, I can say. I’m more proper on social network sites than I am in my real life.*

Wonder alludes to the fact that the disembodied nature of SNS makes it hard for her to be who she really is in real life. She states that she is more of a “*proper*” lady online than she is in offline settings. While others consciously decide how their online identities should be, Wonder’s online identity is shaped by limitations inherent to SNS. When shifting the focus to Millions’s identities (offline and online), he describes himself as an extrovert in real life, and has a sense of humour:

*Millions: I’m a chilled person. I chill, sit in my room and watch sports. And I’m a loud person. I’m a loud person and I like making jokes when I’m with friends. But when I’m alone I sometimes make jokes and laugh alone. It’s like remembering something I did or think of something. Maybe something happened, and I’m like: “Why didn’t I do this?” And suddenly I start laughing. I’m just a... I’m a chilled, person man. I talk. When given a chance I talk.*

In describing his online identity, this is what he has to say:

*Millions: Oh, online? I’m all fake. Nah-nah, not all fake — a bit fake. Because some things, I fake them, you see. Sometimes I fake... [pause]. So I lie a bit — twisting things around just to make myself look cool. Because I can’t come second best all the time. It’s just that sometimes you need to win, you know — stay winning. That’s it. So my personality is different from my actual self. I’m loud on Facebook, but all you see is ‘typing’ (texting) and... There’s a line! Even if you can read it and you find it hilarious. But if I say it to you in person, it’s gonna (going to) be funnier. So there’s this thing that sets Facebook and my real personality apart.*

Millions makes it clear that he portrays a “*fake*” identity online since he is not always honest about his true character. This dishonesty is driven by the need to be socially acceptable. Connection to his false identity is a desire to be competitive on the online platforms. In the process of interaction, people find themselves in situations where they have to compete with one another. And this is the case with Millions (cf. chapter 2, section 2.4.). Furthermore, there seems to be a similarity of experiences between Millions and Wonder — they are both constrained by SNS when expressing themselves. The following phrase from Millions’s quote captures this point: “*I’m loud on Facebook, but all you see is ‘typing’ (texting) and... There’s a line! Even if you can read it and you find it hilarious. But if I say it to you in person, it’s gonna (going to) be funnier*”.

In contrast to the previously discussed narratives of participants Rasala, Lesego, Wonder and Millions who assert that their offline identities are not consistent with their online ones, two other participants, who will be dealt with shortly, claim that the identity they possess in real life is the same as on online platforms:

Pretty: *It's (offline identity) the same as the one I have when I'm on social media. What they see on social media... What I post on social media represents me; whether I like it or not. So, hence I'm saying: I don't post naughty things 'cause (because) I'm not naughty. So, what they see on social media is what they see when I'm not on social media, yah.*

In defining what identity is in earlier discussions, Pretty mentions morals as the fundamental aspect of one's identity. In relation to the notion of morality, she argues that she does not “*post naughty things*” on social media because she is not that kind of a person in real life. In this sense, her morals play an important role in her personal identity. When coming to Katlego, the question was posed to him in order to find out about his identity:

Interviewer: *Now, if you have to answer the question: 'Who are you?' What would your reply be?*

Katlego: [Laughs] *Can I relate it to sort of my own online profile or...? [Overlapping utterance — Interviewer: Uhm, in anyway you can describe it] ...Because I... you know, online. For example, Facebook: they ask the same sort of question: Who are you? And based on who I am on Facebook and who I am in life in general I... I actually wrote that I am the African dream.*

Interviewer: *Oh well, that sounds like a very deep way of describing oneself. If you could please break it down, what do you mean when you say you are an 'African dream'? What...*

Katlego: [Overlapping utterance] *I shed light on a lot of problems that we have as Africans. Be it our past, be it our present. I share sort of solutions which I think could sort of uhm... emancipate our people. 'Cause (because) I believe that we are still in a state of slavery; which is mental slavery, you know. So I said to myself: that is African dream. 'Cause I believe that our people can still be freed from these ideologies; from these thoughts that they have in their minds, you know. Yah, in that sense.*

In Brubaker and Cooper's (2000: 10) analysis of identity, it is viewed as a term (identity) which implies a high level of groupness. It refers to the sameness among members of a social group who are clearly distinct from non-members. This kind of identity is collective and characterised by universalism. Katlego describes himself as an “*African dream*”. The noun by itself suggests collective identity of ethnicity and/or race. He, again, uses the “*we*” pronoun to polarise his identity or group membership from that of non-members. Having learnt that about his identity, one comes to infer that, both online and offline, Katlego identifies himself with those who are the same, who are homogenous and who share a common social reality with him.

In exploring how participants present themselves online, this question is asked: “*Do you care how people perceive, think and feel about you online?*” The replies of four of the research

participants indicate that they do not really care how others perceive them regarding the way they present themselves online:

Rasala: *No, I don't.*

Rasala goes on to state why others' perceptions about him do not matter:

Rasala: *Uhm, because I believe that you can do 99 things right and someone will always point out the one that you didn't do right. So, whether they agree with me or not, it's their own views. It's their own take. I'm happy I was able to express myself.*

Katlego: [Laughs] *I'd say: No. Not even a lil' (little) bit because ah... We're all entitled to our opinions and if you feel that something doesn't uhm... it is not for you, you can just ignore it. So it is everyday life. So I really don't care about what people say about what I have to say.*

Lesego: *No, on the online platforms I don't.*

Interviewer: *Mhm-mhm...*

Lesego: *'Cause (because) as people we have our own perceptions about how we would like other people to be: "I'd love her to be pretty. I'd love her to be a fashionista. I'd love her to be this and that". And somehow these things will affect you if you dwell much on them. So I just don't care. I live my life the way I want to live it. So, yah.*

Wonder: *I don't know how people perceive me online. In fact I don't think I even care what people think about me online or offline [laughing]. I'm not the type of person that... if you don't like me online then don't be friends with me. I don't think... How people perceive me, that's their problem or advantages. I don't care. That's what they think; I can't change it.*

Interviewer: *Oh, okay. Why do their opinions not matter to you?*

Wonder: *Why? Uhm... I was like, bullied for most of my youth; from the first time I went to primary school and everything. I was bullied from grade 1 up until grade 5. I was bullied and I was called ugly and everything and I was bullied physically. But I don't want to be... and then I got into this mind-set of: "I don't care anymore". I really don't care what people think about me [with a firm voice]! And that's how everything works now. And that's how I feel I need to be because I can't change what people think of me. I wish to be different but I can't change it. So why do I need to be unhappy about it and be not happy with me? [Pause] That's how I feel.*

These statements by the above mentioned participants suggest that they believe in freedom of expression because they accept that each individual (online) has the right to speak his/her mind. Phrases such as "*their own views*" (Rasala), "*entitled to our own opinions*" (Katlego) and "*own perceptions*" (Lesego) from participants' narratives reflect the notion of liberty. Rasala is of the impression that human beings are creatures that focus more on what one does

wrong as opposed to what is being done right. And for that reason, he chooses to be nonchalant about what others have to say about how he expresses himself. In Lesego's opinion, should one lack immunity against other's perceptions, thoughts and views about how he/she should be, this is likely to cause a distressful ambience in one's life. As for Wonder, a driving force behind her blasé attitude regarding other's thoughts about her is the results of incidents of having been bullied as a young girl. Having experienced both emotional and physical bullying, she came to the conviction that if one is to be happy about herself, other people's perceptions (negative), thoughts and sentiments should be rejected. This kind of attitude expressed by these participants reveals the extent to which they can assert their identities on online platforms — thus somehow negates the 'looking-glass self' principle. That is, they do not imagine their identities through others' perceptions. Instead, they assert ownership over their identities.

As mentioned earlier, not all of these participants claim to be not caring about other people's views on them on SNS. The following two report that they care:

*Pretty: Yeah, it does matter. It does matter what people think about you.*

*Interviewer: Okay, why do you care that much about their views?*

*Pretty: Uhm... can I make an example again? Let's say... I have my friends and family on Facebook — we're very close. They all know that on social media, I don't like these things of sugar-daddies and whatsoever. And then I go on social media: here I am talking about how I want sugar-daddies. They're gonna be shocked and they gonna post: "Okay this is not you! What's going on?" They know me. So their opinions matter 'cause (because)... I... I ... they don't know who I am anymore, you know. So their opinions matter because they can see the difference. They can see the difference. Even when... we all have... we all have friends and we all have those friends that will make you do bad things. Those very same people that are close are the ones who gonna call you to order: "Listen, this is not how you do things! Come back!"*

*Millions: Sometimes. Sometimes, uhm... I remember this one incident last year: I made a friend, you see. This chick... this other chick, she's fat. She's not fat, she's chubby. She said I should stop saying that. Uhm... we met and became friends. She's a stoner<sup>10</sup>. I do not smoke weed, but she smokes. And she smokes with guys near my house. So they sit there and smoke. So sometimes I just go there and chill with them. So we interacted and interacted, and we became friends on Facebook. So she left and went to Sasol (Sasolburg). So this other morning I woke up, I had this idea: "Let me post something about fat people", you know. Uhm... it was winter. Uhm... that winter the chubby... chubby chicks are 'trending': #MindNoWeather, you see. And like she inboxed me: "Owh, kanti o so chomi — your post! Like le wena you have a thing against chubby women? (Owh, friend — your post! so you too also have this thing of being against chubby women?)". You see. So I kind of felt bad. I*

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<sup>10</sup> Stoner: someone who smokes marijuana.

*have a friend who's like that; who's still 'dissing' <sup>11</sup>people like that. I said: "Sorry". Okay, I went to the post and removed it. And then I went back to explain. I said it. It was supposed to be a diss. So I was like: "Neh, what I want is, you... you're chubby right? Like it's winter now. So, like guys (men) want you guys (chubby women), you see. So I'm just opening your ears and stuff so that you watch-out. It was not to diss-you, diss-you (it was not a diss per se). But I removed it, I'm sorry". She was like: "It's chilled (It's cool). I understand", you see. So I care sometimes what people say.*

As stated by Lu (2011: 53-54), what SNS users post on their walls (specifically Facebook) influence the way others perceive them regarding their social attractiveness (cf. chapter 2, section 2.5). This corroborates with Pretty's statement. She explains that since she has close friends and family on Facebook, she cannot post the content that can be viewed with disdain and will consequently show her in a bad light. She is aware of the fact that the manner in which she presents herself online will definitely have an impact on her self-image. Although existentialist thinking (Kotarba, 2009: 147) emphasises the importance of agency, we always find ourselves in a *'self-to-society relationship'* where the self is confronting the society — and this is where Pretty is positioned (cf. chapter one, section 1.2.2.).

When looking at Millions's account on the same issue, I came to the realisation that the reason why, in this context, he cares about others' perceptions is related to his experiences. He recounts the situation in which he posted an offensive content on Facebook where he referred to big women as *"fat"* — which is regarded as derogatory, in most cases. When realising that such action offended someone who relates to it or is affected by it, he became aware that the manner in which he presented himself at that time did not reflect positively on his character. In trying to fix the issue, he apologised and removed the post.

## **5.6. The dark side of social network sites**

This theme refers to participants' unique experiences regarding the disruptive occurrences that come with OSN. Two sub-themes are explored in this regard: Online addiction and online victimisation and defamation.

### **5.6.1. Online addiction**

Online addiction comprises the behaviours demonstrated by members of virtual communities which include such a prolonged engagement and attachment to SNS that it disrupts their focus on real life roles and responsibilities. These responsibilities include educational and professional obligations as well as real life relationships (Griffiths, 2013: 1; Abdulahi et al.,

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<sup>11</sup> 'Dissing': to talk disrespectfully about someone.

2014: 136). Before making an assessment as to whether the participants consider themselves as online addicts, I first try to understand how they conceptualise the term ‘*online addiction*’:

*Katlego: I'd say an online social addict... I think is someone that is involved in every, almost every social network platform that is out there. We're talking from the likes of Twitter to Instagram. To, uhm... What's this? Uhm... BBM — all these platforms. Someone that is... when I say they're active I mean they regularly post. They're on these apps 'cause (because) they pretty much provide the same services. I mean I would say an online addict is someone that is always online, you know. Always using these different online social network sites.*

*Interviewer: Mhm. So when you say an online social addict is a person who's always online, uhm... do you mean that they're always online doing whatever they do without doing other things or...*

*Katlego: Yah, in a sense... Uhm, in everything they do, it involves... They somehow balance the two with online, you know. Like for example: you're in class, and then you're on Facebook at the same time. Like in everyday things. Like they're online constantly interacting uhm... over social media. Yah, I would say that's online addiction.*

*Rasala: An online social addict to me would be someone who can't live without it. They just can't live without it. They are always glued to their phone or computer. If you take their phone away for an hour it's an issue.*

*Interviewer: Mmh.*

*Rasala: Jah, basically it's someone who's always on their phone. If we are in the meeting, as soon as they leave the meeting, the first thing it's the phone. So that's what I consider an online social network addict to be.*

*Wonder: Social network sites addict? Uhm... those are people who are 24/7 (around the clock); let's say on Facebook... 24/7. Uhm... Facebook 24/7 and they tell uhm... let's say, uhm...: "I'm at the supermarket; I'm buying this and this", or "I'm eating this". And then you post a picture on Facebook for everybody to see. It's like... there are stalkers in the world, right. And I know there are. And they don't have to do anything to follow other people to be stalked because they are stalking you through Facebook, basically. That is Facebook addiction...*

*Lesego: [Laughs] Uhm, I think an online addict would be someone who is forever on social media. Like somebody who sort of shut-down their real social life; and they're more into social network sites. They sort of do not pay attention towards what is surrounding them — they're always posting this and that: they are always online, YHO! [Pause] I don't know how to explain it but they're just like... They don't have that social life. 'Kore' (actually), their lives are merely social media per se — they don't have that active social life. Do you understand? [Pause] Do you understand?*

According to the explanations by these participants, an online social addict is firstly, someone who is active in multiple SNS, thereby spending a considerable amount of time on these sites. Secondly, this person engages in OSN while doing or performing everyday tasks that require one's attention. Lastly, should someone/something attempt to obstruct them from accessing their internet devices, they become irritated. Some of these perspectives validate the symptoms of online addiction as identified by Griffins (2013: 1). Spending a lot of time and being online while concurrently doing other activities that require one's attention, are examples of 'salience'. Salience refers to a behavioural, cognitive and emotional obsession with SNS usage. The other issue identified by participants (getting irritated when stopped using SNS) reflects 'conflict' — interpersonal and intrapsychic problems that have to do with OSN (cf. chapter 2, section 2.6.). After stating their understandings of what an online addict is, the focus shifts to finding out if participants consider themselves as online addicts. The following excerpts represent their narratives on this subject:

Interviewer: *Do you consider yourself as an online addict?*

Pretty: *YHO! I think I'm one [laughing], I think I'm one 'cause (because) I can't go a day without going to social media. If I don't have data, I find means to get data so that I can go to social media. So I think that itself shows a lot that I cannot survive without social media. And it's starts like that and then at the end I'm gonna (going to) be there 24/7 (the whole day), not focusing. You see?*

Interviewer: *What do you mean "not focusing"?*

Pretty: *Sometimes, let's say I have an assignment. And is due next week. Instead I'm gonna be on social media and forget about that assignment and then maybe two days before [submission], then I'll panic and do the assignment. So let's say... let's say if social media was not there, maybe it would be on our brighter side 'cause (because) we would know our priorities. Now we don't know our priorities 'cause social media has taken all over in our country. So, yah.*

Wonder: *I consider myself as a social network sites addict because if I don't have data... if I don't have it, I want it. So if I have it, I use it up. Like, let's say in a week or two. So that's why 500mb that is on my phone is not enough. I have... let's say I have 500mb on my phone, 500mb on my tablet and I still end up using 2gb more.*

Interviewer: *Wow! That's a lot of data.*

Wonder: *If I have it, I use it. If I use it, it gets finished and I want more. So I literally spend R300 just for data.*

Millions: *Heeh (Yawning), to be honest, uhm... Just like me. But there are people who are worse than me. But just like me, uhm... The only time when I say I'm not on my phone — when I'm not pressing my phone is when I'm playing soccer because I can't take it to the field with me. And then when it's half time I need my*

*phone. I want my phone. I wanna (want to) see who texted and then WhatsApp (reply and send WhatsApp messages). So I think I'm an addict. If I wasn't doing anything besides doing something that... if I could do something without carrying my phone... Whatever I'm doing, my phone is with me. So I am an addict — I consider myself as an addict.*

**Lesego:** [Laughing] and [pause] *Hmm... Can I say maybe [laughing]? Or must I reply with yes or no?*

**Interviewer:** *No, well you can...*

**Lesego:** [Overlapping utterance] *Maybe... maybe because... I would honestly say that a day won't pass without me being on WhatsApp. It won't, definitely. So I don't know if you would say I'm addicted to WhatsApp, you see. A day won't... yah we [are] still talking about WhatsApp. A day won't pass without me being on WhatsApp. Like even me, myself, I emotionally, I sort of... my heart breaks, you know. Sometimes I don't have airtime and then I don't get to check on my people: family and friends... whatever. So, I'd say maybe, maybe, maybe.*

Pretty admits that she is an online social addict and feels that it is difficult to carry on if she has no means to connect to the internet. However, she also comes to the realisation that she invests too much time on SNS — to such an extent that she even neglects her academic obligations. Wonder states that she uses more than one internet device to access SNS and charges each with an equal amount of data bundles, which can be said to cost much. Because of her fetish behaviour in terms of these sites, she ends up utilising even more data than she initially intends. Moreover, Millions and Lesego both state that they are addicted to WhatsApp. Since WhatsApp is an instant messaging application where the interactants can reach each other anytime, these participants reveal the unrest they experience if they are away from their internet devices or disconnected from the internet. Lesego mentions that, should a day pass without accessing her WhatsApp, she becomes emotionally affected. As Griffins (2013: 1) indicates, '*withdrawal symptom*' is one of the signs of SNS addiction. This sign involves unpleasant physical and emotional symptoms when OSN activity is interrupted (cf. chapter 2, section 2.6.). For Millions, trying to justify why he is attached to his smartphone, he believes that such behaviour is due to the fact that he does not occupy himself enough with manual tasks that can prevent him from having his cellphone in his hands. The only way he is separated from it is when he plays soccer. Even though the majority of these participants regard themselves as the SNS addicts, two of them do not believe that they are:

**Katlego:** *Nah. No. Actually I wouldn't say I am because I choose certain social networks sites to use. For me I use Facebook and WhatsApp. That is... I might have an Instagram account but I'm hardly on it. Like I said I... You know, when the hype is created around a certain thing, you always want to get it and experience it. So the only reason I have those accounts that I have is because of the hype that was created by people. I prefer using Facebook and WhatsApp. So that is where I'm at, at the moment.*

Rasala: *No, I don't. 'Cause (because) I think I can manage my time. If I say I wanna (want to) study, uhm... I can stop. If I feel that this is time to de-activate my account and go away for a while, I can do that. It doesn't really affect me — I can leave it. Only, I can stay with WhatsApp just to get information because there are group-chats where I get the information of what's gonna (going to) be happening when and where. But then other stuff, just doing that and that... nah.*

For Katlego, the amount of time and the degree to which one engages on SNS defines online addiction. He does not consider himself as an online addict due to the fact that he only uses two SNS and as far as the third one is concerned (Instagram), he is not active on it. Also considered a sign of addiction on SNS is a lack of time-management as alluded by Rasala. For him, since he can manage his time and is courageous enough to de-activate his SNS accounts if needs be, is the reason why he believes he is not an online addict. The only social network site he rather remain active on is WhatsApp as he regards it as instrumental for facilitating his daily activities.

### **5.6.2. Online victimisation and defamation**

This theme is related to experiences of the participants with regards to incidents of harassment, cyber-bullying, defamation of character, getting hacked and so on. These issues take place during the process of interaction on SNS (McCuddy et al., 173: 2016). Most of the participants claim to have experienced, escaped or knew someone close to them who was affected by form(s) of victimisation or defamation on SNS platforms.

Among the participants who experienced some form of online victimisation, is Pretty. She reports to have been a victim of identity theft from her Twitter account where the perpetrator was a female. She believes that this perpetrator was stalking her since she came to realise that this person steals her pictures whenever she uploads them with the intent of impersonating Pretty:

Pretty: *Uhm... there's this other girl. She created Twitter but ... she used other names but used my pictures.*

Interviewer: [Pause] *WOW!*

Pretty: *Yes. She used other names, but her pictures were my pictures. And people would tweet on her wall and tell her: "Oh you look beautiful". So this person, whenever I upload... That's why I say Twitter is open. Whenever I post... Let's say today I feel: 'I'm on point' (looking good in terms of physical appearance). I take a picture and post it on Twitter. She would take my picture and upload it on her account. And then people will obviously give her compliments: "Oh you look beautiful. You look beautiful!", yeah.*

Another person who experienced identity theft along with defamation of character on Twitter, though vicariously (experienced indirectly, through another person) is Katlego:

Interviewer: *Oh, okay. So what happened is that someone...*

Katlego: [Overlapping utterance] *...Hacked my friend and then I... they basically started an account with my friend's name, using my friend's pictures and send ridiculous stuff about my friend. So I just lost it and went to Twitter and swore.*

A form of victimisation that seems prevalent in participants' experiences and knowledge is account hackings, mostly on Facebook:

Rasala: *Well, I got an e-mail — it's connected to my e-mail. I got an e-mail that my Facebook has been logged into at this time and it sent all the details and they asked me to confirm if it was me. And I was not the one. I wasn't on Facebook at that time.*

Wonder has never been hacked, however, her sister was:

Wonder: *No, not with me. But I know that my sister went through it. They hacked her account — they hacked her Facebook account. They portrayed her as a... how can I say it?... as a prostitute, on Facebook.*

Interviewer: *Oh, that was bad.*

Wonder: *That was real bad. They portrayed her really... My sister is a nice person — really soft spoken. She's not like me; I'm all over the place. My sister is the proper one. She got hacked and they really made her look like a sexual vixen of Facebook. She went as far as to delete her account on Facebook.*

Millions also has a second-hand experience of getting hacked on Facebook, obtained from other users:

Millions: *My account has never been hacked. It has never been hacked. Let me say I never experienced those things. But uhm... like on Facebook, you see people... Sometimes other people hack others' accounts and post porn and stuff like that. And then later they're like: "Ah, that was not me. Someone hacked into my account... this and this and this". I think those things are caused by... There are these things that people send on Facebook, you click on the link and then it does something. There was this thing before... You remember the thingy (thing) in France? The terrorist attack?*

Interviewer: *Yah-yah, I remember that.*

Millions: *When that happened, there was this link. You click on it. When you click, it makes your profile picture... your profile picture appears at the background and the France flag appears in front. So you're (your profile picture) still visible, you see. That was that. It went through and became viral. Some people after that were like: "Ah, someone hacked into my account". And you could see on the wall: porn and stuff, you know; a lot of things. I was like: "Okay, maybe these things, this 'changing' thing is the cause of that". Why people*

*would hack into your account? It's because of the link we... Like when you're on Facebook, you'll be like... You're trying everything that everyone is doing. So 'wena' (you) sometimes you become unlucky and click on something that is not 'ayoba' (good). So it wounds. That's how people's accounts get hacked. So for me I wouldn't do those things.*

It is not surprising to discover from the participants that the incidents of hacking mostly transpire on Facebook compared to other SNS. As reported by the Indian Central Branch (Das and Sahoo, 2015: 225; McCuddy et al., 174: 2016), cyber-crimes such as defamation of character, account hacking and identity theft are frequently found on Facebook. I am of the conviction that such occurrences are due to the limited privacy and its nature which allows an open interaction to take place amongst the online community at large. In examining the narratives of Wonder and Millions, both of them know of people who fell victim to hacking. Wonder is adamant that her sister is undeserving (as she is a nice person) of not only having being hacked but, on top of that, being portrayed as a prostitute on Facebook by the hackers. Also related to sexual images is what some Facebook users find themselves connected with, by being hacked: in this case, pornographic content. One of the situations where Millions believes a lot of people became victims of being linked to sexually explicit content which appeared as if it was posted by the owners (preys) of those Facebook accounts, was during the time following the terrorist attacks in January 2015 in France. During those events, Facebook enabled the users to attach the flag of France to their profiles to pay tribute to the lives lost at that massacre. However, in that process, this was later turned into something else. According to Millions, people found themselves linked to an issue with a sexual content without being aware of it.

## **5.7. Conclusion**

It is clear from the collected narratives that OSN has become part and parcel of the everyday mundane activities of most of the research participants in this study — thus, they indicate to be spending a considerable amount of time online. The following reasons, as provided by the participants, can be attributed to this propensity of spending a large amount of time online: obtaining crucial information such as news, going online for communication purposes as well as for tracking down distant relatives. Peer influence, boredom, as well as the popularity of SNS are also some of the reasons that drove participants into these online spaces.

The literature review reveals that online interactions are mostly utilised as the extensions of already existing offline relations. The relatives, families and close friends are identified (by the participants) as people which participants interact with frequently. However most of the

participants claim to have met friends online with whom the relations and interactions were migrated to offline settings. When looking on the issue of establishing relationships with strangers, participants, especially females, have shared their experiences regarding the ramifications inherent in interacting with people they do not know. As such, they show strong disapproval and condemnation of building relationships and interactions with strangers.

Amongst forms of social support dealt with in this study, informational and emotional support appear to be the most exchanged types of social support online — between the participants and their online friends. As the youngsters, they view SNS as their main sources of information when taking into account the traditional media sources such as newspapers and television, for instance. Although emotional support online appears to be crucial in the everyday lives of the participants, most of them emphasise that they prefer to share their emotional issues on SNS that allow for private chats — such as WhatsApp, as opposed to open online platforms such as Facebook.

Moreover, SNS can be perceived as the platforms through which identity formation takes place. As such, most of the participants claim to have constructed identities online which are different from their real life ones. The recurring narrative is that their online identities bestow on them, the ability to exercise more autonomy and self-expression than in real life. However, other research participants state that the disembodied nature of SNS is one issue that determines how their online identities should be like. They say this because they feel like OSN restricts them from expressing their real selves. Furthermore, as much as OSN seems to be convenient and compatible with the lives of the participants, there are ramifications involved in the process of interactions. These ramifications are online addiction and online victimisation. Online addiction is reported to be prevalent amongst some of these participants while online victimisation and defamation are mostly experienced vicariously through a friend, sibling or relative. The participants proved to be knowledgeable about these repercussions caused by SNS, and have learned the ways of minimising these risks.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Online social networking (OSN) as a contemporary social phenomenon has sparked a lot of interest in many researchers around the globe. Nonetheless, many studies focusing on social media and students are quantitative in nature. The data gathering instruments used in quantitative research — such as closed-ended and structured questionnaires — are not sufficient if the researcher is interested in measuring an individual's internal conditions such as feelings, sentiments and opinions. Closed-ended questionnaires merely accommodate aspects of the study which the researcher feels are important and excludes those issues the researcher considers unimportant. In this manner, crucial information might be missed. This study's interest is on the interactions and relations amongst a group of students at the University of the Free State (UFS), Bloemfontein. The aim of the research is to attempt to understand how the students perceive, feel, experience, respond to, and make sense of the interactions and social relations via online OSN in their everyday lives. The pursuit to understand human subjectivities contains a substantial amount of qualitative information that can be generated from individuals' narratives. Hence this study relies largely on the qualitative approach and modestly on the quantitative approach. OSN can be seen as a complex phenomenon which cannot simply be reduced to merely subjective or objective levels of social reality. A strict focus on only one of the approaches while ignoring the other raises a possibility of misinterpreting social reality. Thus, some part of this study is informed by Bourdieu's social praxeology — an approach that weaves together the objectivist and constructivist approaches (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 11). Social praxeology and relational methodology relate to what is commonly known as a mixed methods approach which is applied in this study. Implementation of this approach aims at enabling the researcher to develop a holistic account of the issue under study.

Social network sites (SNS) can be perceived as the social spaces where students are involved in an ongoing social construction of reality. Thus, SNS serve as the platforms through which the users construct shared meanings created during the processes of relation formations and interactions. Although online interactions are intersubjective, the meaning construction around SNS begins on the subjective level of each and every individual user. When individuals create meanings out of something, they try to make sense out of it. In this research, reflecting on their motives which explain why the participants are involved in OSN describes how they construct meanings out of their online interactions. The literature review reveals that individuals are often driven by common reasons and motives which motivate

them to engage in OSN. These reasons are related to maintaining and establishing social and professional networks. From the narratives of the participants, receiving crucial information such as news, communicating with others at the lower costs as well as reconnecting with distant relatives are some of the reasons why the participants are primarily involved in OSN. Additional reasons include peer influence, boredom, as well as the popularity of SNS which led to the curiosity to experience these sites. Each of these motives and reasons contributes uniquely as social forces which made SNS the social reality of the participants. Based on these motives and reasons, one can infer that SNS form the basis of the participants' everyday mundane activities provided that the participants belong to Generation Z (the generation cohort which was born in the mid-1990s and early 2000s) — thus, they are born into social media.

The fact that the participants grew up during an era where social media dominated the medium of communication suggest that their lives have always been intertwined with SNS. In this sense, their experiences of SNS feel natural to them. This point explains why most of the participants feel like their lives would be abnormal and disorganised in the absence of SNS. SNS confront them as a '*paramount reality*' — a completely unavoidable sphere in which one lives. The literature review reveals that tertiary students spend a considerable amount of time online and this finding is confirmed by the survey results which show that almost half (46.9%) of the respondents in this research project spend more than 3 hours engaging in OSN activities, on a normal day.

Since SNS appear to be so appealing and inviting to student participants, one may ask: with whom do students interact and form relations? The findings show that the participants maintain and develop their social capital in two different ways — by interacting with people they meet online and those who are already in their lives. For most of the participants, maintaining interpersonal relations with their close ones (consociates) such as families, relatives, significant others and friends is what fulfils the purpose of their online interactions. These are people whom the participants regard as valuable in their lives. Although the participants prefer to interact with their consociates, they also interact with people that they come across online. Hence the majority of them claim to have met people online with whom they later established face-to-face relations. The common sentiment is that online interactions are not enough — thus, people have to meet physically. '*Open*' online platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are a type of SNS which make it possible for users to interact with anyone including strangers. Even though the idea of meeting new people online

might seem exciting, establishing relations and interactions with strangers is highly condemned by some of the participants (especially females). This attitude towards online strangers is induced by undesirable experiences and ramifications faced by these participants. They associate online strangers with traits such as dishonesty, discourtesy and opportunism. They allude that, inviting a stranger in one's life, is to invite trouble in one's life. Moreover, in reflecting on the authenticity of online relations and interactions, the participants construe the way in which one should evaluate realness on SNS interactions. According to the narratives of the participants, online relations and interactions should be considered real online if they are translated into physical relations; if these relations remain purely virtual, they should not be regarded as authentic.

SNS users tend to bring some of their real life social practices into online settings; and one of these social practices is social support. Social support can be seen as the mechanism through which people can manage and improve their well-being (Sponcil and Gitimu, 2013: 6; Hunt et al., 2014: 238) and can thus be regarded as one of the social benefits derived online. This study deals with five types of social support, namely: Emotional social support, Instrumental social support, Informational social support, Affectionate social support and Social companionship. However, the narratives of the participants show that the most exchanged forms of social support online are informational and emotional support. The quantitative results reveal that 66% of the respondents agree to be receiving informational support online. Even though emotional support is also predominant as can be identified in the narratives of the participants, the statistical data reveals that this form of social support is not well received by many [19.6% (strongly disagree) + 34% (disagree)] compared to those respondents [32% (agree) + 9.3% (strongly agree)] who indicate to be receiving it. One of the interesting findings regarding informational support is the role that SNS played in circulating the crucial information related to a series of protest incidents which occurred at the UFS in 2016; SNS served as the main medium of communication used to keep the student community in the loop. In taking a gaze at the emotional social support online, the issue of sharing emotions online is handled with a high level of sensitivity by some of the participants. They assert that they prefer to share their deeper emotions with those whom they trust through the online platforms which allow private chats — such as WhatsApp. They are against the idea of sharing their emotional issues on the open SNS such as Facebook. These are participants who value their online privacy. Nonetheless, some of the participants state that they do share their emotions with the broader online community. They believe that emotional support received

from a large number of people online is therapeutic, especially when one is going through the trials and tribulations of life.

Identity formation and self presentation are some of the social processes which SNS users undergo as the interactions unfold. According to existential sociology, individuals construct their ‘*self*’ within the complexities of social and cultural contexts and are active in exercising their will and agency (Kotarba, 2009: 142–143). SNS can be seen as the social spaces that allow members of the online community to explore their identities more than in real life contexts since they have ownership and control over their SNS accounts. The exercising of agency is evident in the narratives of the participants since most of them claim to have constructed new identities online which are different from their real life ones. They are of a view that OSN allows them to have the ability to be autonomous and self-expressive than in real life contexts. That is, when they are online, they have the capacity to become who they cannot easily be in offline settings. The ways in which some of the participants present their identities online are motivated by their need to become socially acceptable while others choose to limit their self-disclosure online. Nonetheless, for some of the participants, it is not entirely their choice to be different people when they are online. They allude that the disembodied nature of SNS is one of the factors that dictate how their online identities should be like. They feel that OSN restricts them from expressing their real selves. Some of these participants argue that they are funnier or ‘*crazier*’ in real life but cannot fully realise such traits on SNS. Moreover, the majority of the participants appear to believe dearly in freedom of expression. They believe that each and every individual has the right to say what he/she wants, whenever he/she likes, online. Therefore, they present themselves the way they like with regards to the material they post online and do not really care what other interactants perceive or think about them. However, not all of them feel that way. Other participants believe that they have to maintain and present good images online since they do not want to diminish their social attractiveness — they are therefore wary about the content they post online. In line with Goffman’s theory of ‘*dramaturgy*’, a person is like an actor on the stage and use ‘*impression management*’ to present himself/herself to others in the ways he/she wants to be viewed depending on who is the ‘*audience*’. Hence this theory expounds why some of the participants care about how they present themselves online.

Finally, although OSN form an important part of the participants’ lifeworld, they sometimes face the problems and challenges inherent in SNS. The challenges which the participants experience with OSN include online addiction and online victimisation and defamation.

Online addiction manifests itself through behaviours that include a prolonged engagement with SNS such that it interferes with people's real life roles and responsibilities. The responsibilities that might suffer (or neglected) due to online addiction can be professional and educational obligations and real life relationships. Drawing on the narratives of the participants, the majority of them do consider themselves as online addicts. Some of the participants state that they spend too much time online — to such an extent that they sometimes neglect their academic obligations. The common symptoms shown by the participants are withdrawal symptoms — unpleasant physical and emotional symptoms when OSN activities are disrupted. They report that whenever they run out of means to connect to the internet they become emotionally affected. As far as incidents related to online victimisation and defamation are concerned, the participants claim to have experienced, dodged or know someone close to them who was affected by these incidents. These incidents range from identity theft to account hacking. Some of these ramifications were experienced by participants through a friend, a sibling or a relative. SNS in which these incidents usually take place are Facebook and Twitter — as identified by the participants — since they are open and public. All in all, the findings of this research project give insights which indicate that OSN, taken for granted as it is, have become part of the participants' as well as the respondents' lifeworld. It is thus an everyday lived experience perpetuated through intersubjective interactions.

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## APPENDIX A: ETHICAL CLEARANCE APPROVAL LETTER



Faculty of the Humanities

26-Jul-2016

Dear Mr Sele

Ethics Clearance: **Online social networking: reflections on social relations amongst a group of students, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein.**

Principal Investigator: **Mr Sello Sele**

Department: **Sociology (Bloemfontein Campus)**

### APPLICATION APPROVED

With reference to your application for ethical clearance with the Faculty of the Humanities, I am pleased to inform you on behalf of the Research Ethics Committee of the faculty that you have been granted ethical clearance for your research.

Your ethical clearance number, to be used in all correspondence is: **UFS-HSD2016/0324**

**This ethical clearance number is valid for research conducted for one year from issuance.** Should you require more time to complete this research, please apply for an extension.

We request that any changes that may take place during the course of your research project be submitted to the ethics office to ensure we are kept up to date with your progress and any ethical implications that may arise.

Thank you for submitting this proposal for ethical clearance and we wish you every success with your research.

Yours Sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'R.P.', is located below the 'Yours Sincerely' text.

Prof. Robert Peacock  
Chair: Research Ethics Committee  
Faculty of the Humanities

## APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT

I..... (Full Name),  
do hereby declare that:

I am 18 years or older. I agree to participate in a Sociology Master's in the Narrative Study of Lives research project entitled "Online social networking: reflections on social relations amongst a group of students, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein" and that data will be collected from me in a one-on-one interview/ focus group discussion with a student researcher, Sele Sello Jan. Sele Sello Jan has recruited me for the research. He has informed me that the research explores the reflections on social relations in online social networking amongst students the University of the Free State, Bloemfontein.

### **I understand that:**

I do not have to divulge information of a personal nature.

The research topic can be potentially provocative and I may be exposed to insights, information or viewpoints that could make me feel uncomfortable. Should I need support from a professional counsellor, I will be referred to one at Kovsie Service, the University of the Free State, Bloemfontein. Dr Barnaschone, the counselling psychologist from Kovsie student counselling and development kindly undertook to facilitate an appointment for me, should the need arise for counselling.

My participation is voluntary and I am free to withdraw personally, or to withdraw my data, from the research at any time.

The student researcher pledges to protect my privacy to as great a degree as possible and to conduct the research sensitively, responsibly and ethically.

I am free to approach the student researcher, or the project supervisor Professor J.K. Coetzee with any questions or issues related to this research and to have these addressed to my satisfaction.

### **I am satisfied that adequate steps will be taken to protect my privacy:**

- The interview/ focus group will be audio-recorded, but I will choose a pseudonym before data are recorded so that my real name will not be on the recording, nor will it appear on transcriptions.

- This consent form will be kept in a safe place by the student researchers until they are handed over to the project supervisor Professor J.K. Coetzee. This will also apply to audio-recordings once data have been transcribed, student researchers will be instructed to erase any copies of audio recordings.
- After the research is completed, data may be used for presentations or journal articles. However, information or data will not be traceable to me personally.

Signed

(Participant).....

Date.....Place.....

...

Signed

(Researcher).....

**For any further inquiries regarding the research, please feel free to contact:**

The Researcher, Sele Sello Jan: 078 231 9260

The Research Supervisor, Professor, J.K. Coetzee: 051 401 2881

**Counselling professional contact details (Kovsie student counselling and development):**

Dr Melissa Barnaschone (Counselling Psychologist)

Tel: 051 401 2853

Email: BarnaschoneM@ufs.ac.za

# APPENDIX C: SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

DRAFT

EvaSys	<b>Online social networking: reflections on relations among a group of students,</b>	Electric Paper
The Narrative Study of Lives		Sociology

Mark as shown:     Please use a ball-point pen or a thin felt tip. This form will be processed automatically.  
 Correction:     Please follow the examples shown on the left hand side to help optimize the reading results.

**Dear Respondent**

You have been selected to participate in a survey designed to collect information on the above topic. Our aim is to examine how students of the University of the Free State experience, feel, make sense of and respond to relations and interactions that take place through social network sites. This research is conducted by a Master's student in the Narrative Study of Lives, Department of Sociology, UFS.

The information collected will be handled with the greatest confidentiality. Thus, your questionnaire will be accessed only by the researcher.

Should you have any further queries concerning any aspect of the survey, you are welcome to contact the supervisor of the researcher – Prof. Jan K. Coetzee - at 051 401 2881.

**(Ethics Clearance Number: UFS-HSD2016/0324)**

**SECTION A – Please fill in your details with a pen and mark with an X where applicable**

Name and Surname

Cellphone number

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

E- mail address

Gender

Male                       Female

Age category (in years)

18-22                       23-27                       28 and above

Race

African                       White                       Coloured  
 Indian                       Other

Year of study

First year                       Second year                       Third year  
 Fourth year                       Fifth year and above

**SECTION B – Please mark the most appropriate answer**

How often do you use each of the following social network sites?

	Very frequently	Frequently	Occasionally	Seldom	Not at all
Facebook	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Twitter	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Instagram	<input type="checkbox"/>				

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DRAFT

SECTION B – Please mark the most appropriate answer [Continue]

WhatsApp

Any other (specify).....

Which social network site provides you with the most satisfaction? (Please mark only one)

Facebook  Twitter  Instagram

WhatsApp  Any other

How much time do you spend on social network sites on a normal day?

Less than 30 minutes  30min - 1 hour  1 hour - 2 hours

2 hours - 3 hours  More than 3 hours

I use social network sites primarily for... (Please mark only one)

Chatting  Posting photos  Updating status

Commenting and liking  Following or followed  All of the mentioned

Not applicable

I receive informational support online

I receive instrumental support online

I receive emotional support online

I receive affectional support online

All of the above

Strongly agree

Disagree

Agree

Strongly agree

Uncertain

I share my opinions/sentiments on everyday life issues online

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Agree

Strongly agree

Uncertain

I share my deeper emotions online

Online social networking makes it easier for me to express my emotions

Online social networking and sense of belonging

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Agree

Strongly agree

Uncertain

Social network sites help me to connect with people I like to interact with

I interact with anyone including strangers via social network sites

I value my online friends to the same extent as my friends/people in real life

Social network sites play a major role in my everyday life

It will be easy to live a life without online social networking

SECTION B – Please mark the most appropriate answer [Continue]

I feel a sense of belonging whenever I interact with my online friends/people

How does online social networking affect your life in general?

Very positively  
 Positively  
 Negatively  
 Very negatively  
 Uncertain

Thanks for your cooperation!

## APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

<u>Research participant's basic information:</u>	
Name and surname	
Pseudonym	
Age	
Gender	
Race	
Year of study	

### 1. Making sense of online social networking

1.1 Can you try to remember the first time using a social networking site and describe that experience?

1.2 What does online social networking mean to you? (Explain in detail).

1.3 Why are you involved in online social networking?

1.4 Which social network site(s) (SNS) do you prefer the most?

1.4.1 And why?

1.5 If you were to stop using that/those social network site(s), how would your life change?

1.6 What role does online social networking play in your daily life? (Think about your daily use of SNS).

1.7 What do you consider an online social addict to be?

1.8 Do you see yourself as an online social network addict? Motivate your answer.

### 2. Social interactions and relations

2.1 Who do you interact with online (family, friends, lover (s), class-mates, strangers etc.)? And why them/him/her

2.2 Have you ever met someone online with whom you now have physical social relations and interactions?

2.2.1 If yes, who and how did it happen?

- 2.2.2. If no, why have you not established the physical social relations?
- 2.3 How is the relationship strength (weak/strong) between you and your online “friends”/ chat-mates in different SNS (specifically on Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram)?
- 2.3.1. What makes you think it is strong/weak?
- 2.4 Who do you primarily post about on your social networking sites? Family relatives, friends, lover(s)? And what kind of a content?
- 2.4.1 What else do you post about?
- 2.4.1.1 And why?
- 2.5 Do you publicize your intimate relationship(s) (if involved in any) on SNS through status updates, photo-sharing or anything like that? If yes/no, why?
- 2.6 How do feel when people whom you have relations with update statuses, share photos of you, and tag you?
- 2.6.1 And why do you feel that way?
- 2.7 Do you think online relationships are real? Motivate your answer.
- 

### **3. Online social support**

- 3.1 Have you received any type of social support (informational, instrumental, emotional, and social companionship) online?
- 3.1.1 If yes, which type (s)?
- 3.1.1 If no, what do you think is/are the reason (s) why you are not getting any support?
- 3.2 Have you ever given any type of social support (informational, instrumental, emotional, and/or social companionship) online?
- 3.2.1 If yes, which type (s)?
- 3.2.2 If no, why are you not giving any support?
- 3.3 Do you share your emotions and thoughts with your “friends” online?
- 3.3.1 If yes, what sort of emotions and/or thoughts do you share?
- 3.3.2 If no, why can’t you?
- 3.3 Who offers you the most support online? And how is it helpful, if you get any?
- 3.3.1 If you don’t get any, would you like to be supported more by your online friends? Why?
- 3.4 Who do you support the most?

3.4.1 If you do, how (type of support)

3.4.1.2 And why them/him/her?

3.5 Do you think online social support is the same as offline support? (Motivate your answer).

---

#### **4. Sense of belonging**

4.1 To what extent do you feel that online social networking has become part of your life?

4.1.2 What about your online friends, do you consider them as part of your life (or not)? (Explain your answer).

4.1.3 Why do you think your online friends accept (or do not accept) you in the SNS?

4.1.3.1 Can you describe the feeling of being accepted (or not)?

4.2 Do you think/feel you belong to online social networks? (Motivate your answer).

4.3 Do you think online social networking is your “thing”? (Motivate your answer).

#### **5. Identity and self-presentation**

##### **5.1 Identity**

5.1.1 How do you understand identity?

5.1.2 How would you describe your everyday offline identity?

5.1.2.1 How would you describe your personal image and identity on SNS?

5.1.2.2 Is it different from your offline personal image?

5.1.2.2.1 If so, how?

5.1.2.2.2 If not, what makes you think it is not different?

5.1.2.3 Are you happy with how you present yourself online? Motivate your answer.

5.1.2.4 Do you think this online identity is who you really are? Motivate your answer.

##### **5.2 Self-presentation**

5.2. 1 Do you care how people perceive, think and feel about you online?

5.2.1.1 If yes, whose views on you do you care about most?

5.2.1.2 If no, why do their opinions not matter?

5.2.2 What kind of personal information do you disclose on your profile?

5.2.2.1 Why that kind of information?

5.2.3 How do you present yourself online in terms of the behaviour you portray through your status updates, photos you share and things like that?

5.2.4 Have you or do you manipulate (e.g. make photo edits) or enhance your image (e.g. wear or appear sexy) in order to appear more appealing on SNS?

5.2.4.1 If yes why?

5.2.4.2 If no, why?

5.2.4.2.1 Why do you think it is/not worth it?

## **6. Online victimization and defamation**

6.1 Have you ever been harassed or victimized (dumped, cursed, sexual advances etc.) via SNS?

6.1.1 If so, how did it happen?

6.2.2 How did it make you feel?

6.2.3 How did you stop this harassment?

6.2 Have you ever experienced manipulation (account hacking, account theft, false information) via SNS?

6.2.1 If so, how was your trust on SNS affected?

6.3 Have you ever been in trouble because of SNS?

6.3.1 If so, how were your general feelings towards this?

6.3.2 If not, how do you make sure you avoid it?

• What are your general feelings about online social networking?

Thank you for your time, is there anything more you would like to add?

After I transcribe your interview and have more questions, would it be okay to contact you again?

**Thank you!**