The Inside Out of the Ageing Self: Identity, Trust, and Friendship of Australian Seniors in an Online Community of Older People.

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Dedicated to the "Oldies".

Table of Contents

Table of Contents iii
List of Images vii
Abstract viii
Thesis Statement ..... **x**
Acknowledgements ..... **xi**
A Note to Readers xiii
Prologue xiv

1

Introduction: Ageing and Technology **1**
The anthropology of ageing 3
The anthropology of online sociability 5
The silver surfers of successful ageing 7
Reflections and reflexivity 12
Creativity and identity: What's in a name? 13
A secret pool of wisdom: ageing on The Roost 17

2

Identity, Community and Social Participation: **20**
Arriving in the Field **20**
Doing ethnography: the rites of passage 21
The bare bones of identity 23
Who will be my friend? 26
Bringing myself to life online. 29
Consciousness of self: photo or image? 32
And then the Welcome Wagon arrived 36
Messages that welcome: how names matter 40
Messages that come 'alive' 42
Messages that invite 43

Conclusion 47

3

Vitality of Presence: Glitz, Pics, and Animations 50

Profile image: visible accessibility 57

Homepage: personally and with personality 63

Home away from home 66

Seasonal creativity 67

Guestbook sociality 69

Private messages 73

Bulletin news 77

Glitz and Bitz: formatting the experience 82

Personalising text 84

Contrasting presence: In Memoriam 91

Conclusion 95

4

Friendship: Meaningful Social Interactions 98

Anthropology and friendship 100

Social capital and friendship 103

Reflexivity: friends and friendship in the field 104

Friendship and ageing 109

Socialising with peers 112

The 'belonging friendship' 114

Choosing friends 118

The ABCs of friendship 120

Etiquette: manners and community friendship 127

Etiquette: font size matters 130

Etiquette: the gift of time 132

Reciprocity 135

The experience of online friends 137

Conclusion 138

5

Trusting the Online Presence 140

Life experience, gossip, and intimacy 143

Trust: contemporary debates 147

Trusting the online evidence 148

Trusting invitations 151

Trust as a moral value 152

Rapport and intimacy in the field 154

Trusting online relationships: researcher or friend? 158

The role of gossip 159

Gossip and cultural competence 163

Written text as gossip 164

Conclusion 171

6

Trusting the Site: Disruption and Distrust 173

Trusting the site 175

Distrust: breaches in site security 180

Disruption and distrust 188

Private Profiles 190

Private groups 196

Enculturation, co-operation and compromise 198

Conclusion 201

7

The Inside Out Self: A Case Study 203

Experiencing the self with others 205

Anonymity 207

Bridging online with offline 209

Everyday lives, Everyday selves 212

Encounters, narration, and experience 217

Online narrations of the self 221

Convergences: digital meets real 225

Meaningful social inclusion 231

Reflections of the self: "who I think I am" 235
The internal youthful self 238
Communicating the youthful self 242
Conclusion 244
8
Conclusions 246
Bibliography 253

List of Images

Image 1 Arriving in the field 25
Image 2 Online fieldwork tool - animated graphic 32
Image 3 My profile photos 33
Image 4 Bringing myself to life online, February 2010 35
Image 5 Welcome message graphic without animation 36
Image 6 Welcome message: animated 42
Image 7 Welcome message: graphic and text 44
Image 8 Animated graphic of embodied ageing 54
Image 9 Example of merging images to create a graphic 56
Image 10 Guestbook entry visit: animated online presence 70
Image 11 Animated guestbook entry: friendship visit 71
Image 12 Sample of a private message smilecon 73
Image 13 Weekly bulletin message 78
Image 14 Bulletin message: online presence 80
Image 15 Graphic with animated embedded message 81
Image 16 Sample of an animated signature graphic 83
Image 17 In Memoriam Group image 91
Image 18 "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog".© Peter Steiner, 1993 173
Image 19 Home interview with NTLady, 2010 203
Image 20 Graphic announcing the impending birth of a granddaughter 214
Image 21 Home visit with Essie, Perth. Photo taken August 2010. 217
Image 22 Profile image offsite, TruckdriverSA 219
Image 23 Simile of AussieWoman's profile image 2009-2016 221
Image 24 Narrated themes: place, garden, nature in a remote location. 226
Image 25 Home stay visit: The Bower 229
Image 26 From graphics online to fairies in the garden. 230
Image 27 AussieWoman with Friend. Photo taken May 2010. 235
Image 28 Home visit with Carrie. Photo taken November, 2010. 242

Abstract

This thesis explores how older people are successfully connecting online and how they integrate those experiences into their everyday lives. While there is an emerging body of research contributing to the anthropology of ageing that is concerned with online sociality of older people, the interactions between online and offline sociability of older Australians has not been anthropologically examined. This thesis contributes a unique and in-depth long term ethnographic study to broader perspectives of ageing by adding the voices of older Australians to contemporary understandings of social connectedness in a world that relies more and more on using technology to maintain relationships with each other.

The research is based on fourteen months of fieldwork, October 2009 to January 2010, conducted in an online community of approximately 12,000 members who identified themselves as sixty years of age or older. The ethnographic study design involved the creation of a profile, the development of online relationships, extensive exploration of the social networking site, and the creation of an online focus-group. In addition, home stays and face-to-face interviews were conducted in Australia to understand the relationship between placing self-aware content online in a trusting manner, and its convergence with understandings of the self within the social context of everyday lives.

Examination of the experiences of older people ethnographically within the characteristics of their own social settings, online and offline, provides a rich understanding of social context that challenges predominant assumptions linked to ageing discourses. These include public health policies associated with loss and decline, popular cultural discourses and representations of ageing, and grievances related to the socio-economic burden that the ageing population is perceived to have on western states.

Social isolation has been shown to be problematic for older people as friends diminish over the life span. This thesis argues that the Internet provides new pathways to source and establish new friends that are meaningful to participants based on their own likes and dislikes, and moral values. Older people bring to the online context well defined understandings of trust which they rely on to make friends with strangers. This thesis contributes to contemporary anthropological debates concerning trust, and the ability to establish trust online.

Utilizing an acute awareness of the self, older people provided visual and textual cues as narrations of the self on homepages to describe who they think they are in terms that they perceived were accurate representation of identity. Graphics and text enhancement were used as symbols of meaning to create a culture of social inclusion that celebrated ageing amongst peers in a trusting environment. Technology affords older people with an opportunity to express the self in a variety of contexts without the distractions of the ageing physical self, and this allowed the youthful, unencumbered internal self to emerge and be shared with others. The ability to be able to maintain a continuity of the self with strangers was the reason why communicating online for older people was considered to be so rewarding and meaningful.

Thesis Statement

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint award of this degree.

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Signed ..... Date .....

Diane Shaw

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This thesis is the result of many experiences, and would not have been possible without the generosity and inquisitiveness of the hundreds of people I met online; all of whom have names but cannot be named. Not everyone could be mentioned in this body of work, but each of you contributed to the research endeavour. I especially want to acknowledge and thank those of you who opened your hearts and your homes to me. It was a privilege and great honour to be able to share time with you and your families; these are memories that will stay with me forever. I agree with you all, you are who you think you are, and I thank each and every one of you for allowing me to get to know you. When I am with you all, I feel young too!

I sincerely thank my supervisors, Dr Susan Hemer and Professor Mike Wilmore. Neither of you lost faith in me or my project. Susan, when the chips were down, you persistently brought me back into the fold and encouraged me to finish. I will miss our coffee times together. Mike, you selflessly provided me with the tool to keep me on track; our weekly Friday 5pm emails. There were more than a few Fridays where all I could say was "I have nothing to report", but you always replied with encouraging words that lifted me up and kept me going. I will miss our "wine time for me, coffee for you" Friday 5pms. You are both amazing teachers, and I am grateful to you both.

I would also like to thank the Australian public for the Australian Postgraduate Award that sustained my life while I researched other people's lives. I hope this research contributes towards changing the way we think about older people in our communities, and the ways in which we socially connect with them.

I am not the same person I was when I stepped out as a research novice into the social worlds of the people I studied. There have been many ups and downs along this road of discovery; my mum passed away, my dad became elderly, and I became a Nana.

Significant milestones in my own life. Love and the enduring support of my family and friends allowed me the space and time to think, write, and finish with a feeling of pride and satisfaction. My love and gratitude to you all for taking the backseat for such a long time!

A Note to Readers

At the time of writing, and subsequent readings, careful consideration was given to allocating pseudonyms to the people mentioned throughout this thesis. Any pseudonyms that may match a member in the future will be a coincidence of time. Names of places and other identifying factors have also been replaced with pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of all participants.

All quotations from participants were obtained from non-public spaces within the online community or via direct personal communication with the participants. I have not altered spelling errors or typographical nuances expressed in their words, because they demonstrate the diversity of skills, character, and personalities within the group. For ease of reading, I have added punctuation and removed unnecessary spaces and excessive use of dotted lines. Any significant changes to quotations have been footnoted in the text.

I chose not to quote blogs written by my participants because it is difficult to protect privacy in research of Internet-mediated social contexts (Markham 2012). Instead, I sensitively paraphrased one of my participant's blogs in order not to lose the meaning of the content or the context in which it had been written and shared. By doing this, the blog is rendered unsearchable on the Internet, but retains its usefulness in a research context.

Prologue

It was the last day of fourteen months I had spent in the field. Carrie, Nickie and I sat at the bus shelter patiently waiting for the bus that would take us home. The mid afternoon sun was warming and there was no hurry. The day had started off slowly; a quiet morning coffee in the spotlessly clean kitchen of my hosts followed by a gentle walk to the bus stop that would take us, according to Carrie, via the tourist route into town. A change of bus was required in the city in order for us to reach our shopping destination— not that we had any shopping to do; this trip was more to do with showing off a beautiful city to a visiting friend than it had to do with shopping.

It occurred to me that the slowness of the day had only been noticeable to me. All day I had consciously made the effort to slow my walking pace to accommodate the cautious and measured steps of my hosts; Carrie's steps being aided by his "trusty" walking stick. Sitting on the bench waiting for the bus we chatted about old age. They candidly discussed with me how noticing, acknowledging, and accepting the physical changes of ageing was an inevitable part of the end stage of their lives. For Carrie and Nickie, both in their mid 80s, being slow was part of their everyday lives and something they had grown into over a lifetime of living. I felt privileged and grateful to be in their company.

As the sun warmed us, I remembered how only a few days earlier, I had sat with Carrie and watched him laboriously work his way through his computer routine with one good eye; the other, clouded over by cataracts, had for some time been rendered blind and useless. He painstakingly moved the mouse around the screen, clicking and sometimes re-clicking, the icons that would open the programmes to connect him with his family and friends, and a social world full of meaning and significance. From time to time he

would mutter to himself "not that one", "where did I put it", "ah, there it is", "you fool", "fix that later", "must remember to do that", "I was sure I put it there", or lean forward to squint with his good eye at the desktop screen that, to me, looked very much like the chaotic shed he had allowed me to peer into on the first day of my visit.

Satisfied that all the necessary programmes were opened, he settled back into his chair and commenced his daily routine of reading and writing emails, pouring through a variety of news websites, forwarding anything he thought might be of interest to others, saving files considered to be important enough to keep for "posterity" or for when "time and a sharper mind" permitted a more leisurely and thoughtful read. Quite often he would laugh out loud at some mischief in an email that had tickled his sensibilities. Other times, he would sit back in his chair; hands aged by time folded on his lap, and appear pensive before continuing his routine. Methodically he responded to those emails that needed a response or, if the "humour was upon him", invite me to read something of interest that he wanted to share. Dates of importance were jotted into a note-taking programme that had been given a permanent position on the screen desktop; a list, if you like, of things to do: birthdays, passwords, blog topics, doctor appointments, important things to "*remember"*. Once the "serious business" of the morning activities were dealt with, he logged into the social network site "for oldies" to "see what everyone is up to".

The social networking site, which I had affectionately nicknamed *The Roost*, was the pivotal point of his day where meaningful social connections were sustained and managed daily, even hourly, until sleep beckoned towards midnight on most nights. Carrie's face lit up with pleasure as the webpage opened, an eager shuffle in his chair, and a slight forward thrust of the chin were indicators of his readiness to participate with his online friends. Here, too, there was routine. The homepage displayed the current activities of its members where seemingly no-one sleeps. Birthday announcements were noted to be dealt with later; forum notices of interest were opened, read, commented upon, and closed. Private messages that required thoughtful replies

were dealt with in order of them being received, and, finally, the leisurely activity of clicking on friends' profile pages to check for activity, and to leave a friendly message on their guestbook as mementos of a visit from a friend. Tasks that required a measured and thoughtful response were set aside to be dealt with after his regular afternoon "siesta" when his mind would be "fresh and invigorated" and better equipped to "think clearly".

Many of the interactions required the creation of a personalised graphic. Managing and creating graphics was a time-consuming activity often accompanied with the frustrations of errors and the irritation of consequent re-makes. Once delivered, these thoughtfully edited graphics painstakingly created with the intent to surprise and delight the recipient, appeared as effortless gifts in emails, messages, and on friends' guestbook pages. These meaningful interactions sustained Carrie's sense of social connectedness and contributed to his feelings of having an "active, healthy mind" as well as being a valued and contributing member of society. His position as the "elder" amongst the "oldies" was taken seriously by him and his genius for producing "ditties" that reflected a commentary on the social issues within the community constantly entertained and delighted us all and served to illuminate his quick wit and thoughtful intelligence.

For Carrie, time in front of the computer was mediated by the routine of a long and happy marriage. Mealtimes and shopping were a shared activity with Nickie, his wife of nearly 50 years. The pragmatics of the "division of labour" had long ago been successfully negotiated between them. Leisure time for Nickie was spent "firmly in control of the remote" watching television or reading a book, while for Carrie, all leisure time was firmly committed to time spent with "his computer" and nearly all of that time was spent online.

Sitting at the bus stop, in a moment of silence, I reflected on my time socially interacting with Carrie and others, when it suddenly occurred to me that during our social interactions online there had been no evidence of the physical signs of ageing that

constrain and shape our everyday lives as we age. On the contrary, there was an extremely high level of energy and vitality for life and living that demonstrated a fierce determination for independence and social inclusion.

During my fieldwork, I marvelled at the levels of energy my participants and other members of the community displayed online. The volume of daily interactions was huge and often involved multiple interactions with each other over a 24-hour period. Members frequently surprised me with their feisty, playful, and sometimes demanding social interactions with each other, me, and the broader community. Many times, I was humbled by the compassion and understanding shown for a member with a problem or dealing with the emotional trauma of the death of a loved one. Offers of support would arrive within minutes of a problem being posted. I found myself constantly scrambling to keep up with these energetic "seniors".

All of us will eventually succumb to the most natural human condition of ageing. Every day of my fieldwork was met with the excitement that a new day brings; when, rather than being curled up in an armchair waiting for death to claim them, my participants were embracing and experiencing each day with youthful energy that defied their ages. They embraced my quest for knowledge and understanding of the experience of ageing in a technologically connected world by generously opening their lives and their homes to me and answering my questions by reflexively sharing their experiences with me and with each other.

I had spent the previous fourteen months hanging out with a group of "oldies" on a social networking site created for older people; a secret pool of wisdom. As I reflected on my time with this amazing collection of intelligent, energetic, and fun people, I realised that I too had reached the age of being considered an "oldie". Like my participants, I too am considered to be a member of the ageing population; the unfolding burden on younger generations.

Yet online, this marginalized group of people were actively socialising with each other on a daily basis. Socialising for this group was concerned with offering support for each other in an environment free of the constraints of family duty or government policies on ageing, and more importantly, free of the constrains of the physical impositions that the ageing process inevitably imposes on our bodies. It was Nickie who quietly put this into perspective while we were sitting at the bus stop, when she spoke out proclaiming, "We are not lemons, you know". Indeed, in fourteen months of fieldwork, I never encountered a single "lemon".

I met Carrie on the social networking site that I had chosen to do fieldwork for my PhD research. Like so many of the members of that site, he was a willing and enthusiastic participant in the research endeavour. Over fourteen months we shared daily contact via the Internet, yet sitting at the bus stop I realised that Carrie was, in fact, quite old. As he playfully said, "my body is ageing faster than my grey-matter", it occurred to me that socially interacting online frees the internalised embodied self—the grey matter—of the constraints of an aged and crumbling external shell to reveal the youthful, unencumbered self expressed in communication online with others.

Curious as always, Carrie asked what I would be writing about in my thesis. I knew from my online experience of our interactions that this simple question was important to him, and full of unspoken intelligent enquiries. I responded with honesty, which was the basis on which our friendship had been forged, and told him that I would do my best to critically reflect on the experiences of a group of older Australians socially connected in a technological world.

1

Introduction: Ageing and Technology

> *Social change does not automatically reduce quality of life of the elderly…under certain conditions, massive societal change can have a positive impact on the lives of the aged. (Sokolovsky 1997:xxv)*

In a world that is rapidly depending on all forms of computer mediated communication for social interaction and social contact, it is increasingly important that we understand how older people are successfully connecting online, and how they integrate those experiences into their everyday lives. My research project ethnographically investigated the relationship between online social practices and offline sociality amongst older Australian men and women and their friends on an international social networking site that was specifically created for people over the age of fifty. Social interaction online for this group significantly merged offline social practices with online sociability, and this contributed to meaningful experiences of self-worth as members of society.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2012) defines "older persons" as anyone who is "over the age of 60 years". This statistically determined number conjures ageist assumptions that tell us nothing about the experience of being "older" from the perspective of someone who has reached this age or beyond (Prendergast and Garattini

2015).[1] In this model, chronological age determines the boundary for loss of youth as a construct for population discourses associated with loss and decline (Crampton 2013). Within scholastic literature related to studies of "older" and "elderly" groups, the age of participants can vary enormously between these two descriptive characteristics; stated age ranges vary between 40 years of age at the lower end of the spectrum to 100 years plus are cited (see for example Biniok and Menke 2015; Haubold and Guanguin 2017; Kanayama 2003; Nef et al. 2013). It is difficult to imagine how someone who is 40 years old can be labelled as "elderly".

Within a western cultural context, the terms "older" and "elderly" invoke an everyday set of meanings and understandings that are linked to the declining years or end of life course (Dickinson and Hill 2007; Featherstone 1995; Prendergast et al. 2009; Sokolovsky 2009). Featherstone (1995:227) referred to popular cultural representations of old age as "the repertoire of the pornography of old age" whereby the gazing lens of western cultural representations is divided into two categories; that of the youthful person ageing healthily, full of vigour and zest for life, and those individuals disabled by illness and bodily decline that imprisons the inner self (also see Clarke 2001; Featherstone and Wernick 1995). This thesis challenges the popular cultural assumptions highlighted by Featherstone to present an alternative perspective on ageing from a group of savvy and socially connected seniors who are nestled comfortably between these two cultural extremes.

I was fortunate that in one online community, advertised as suitable for the "older crowd", I had access to over 12,000 "older" people from around the world who were socially connected using the Internet, and even more fortunate to be able to spend time with some of them face to face in their own homes. Although I use terms such as "older", "old", and "oldies", these descriptive terms are not meant to be judgemental, disrespectful or to stereotype my participants (see Dickinson and Hill 2007; Williams

[1] In Australia, the Government provides to senior residents, defined as 60 years and over, access to a Senior Cards Scheme. This scheme provides free transport concessions and participating business discounts on a variety of goods and services (Australian Government 2016b).

and Nussbaum 2012). While my participants claimed to prefer being called "seniors" offline, on the site they more often referred to themselves as "an oldie" or collectively as "oldies" and, where appropriate, I endeavour to maintain their world view.

I was curious to learn from this group of seniors what it meant to them to be "older", and, in particular, being older in a society that has become more and more dependent on computer technology to communicate. How much communicating did they do online and who did they communicate with? How important to them was this kind of communication? Was it easy or difficult to learn? I was also interested in how long they had been using computers, but more importantly I wanted to understand their experience of being socially connected online and the impact this had on their everyday lives.

The anthropology of ageing

Early anthropological approaches to ageing were concerned with the structural features in societies; for example, documenting formal age systems and the social conditions that affect the status of elderly persons (Keith 1980; Keith et al. 1994:xiii). This early focus was concerned with the ritual transition, via age sets, through the life cycles (progression from one age stage to another as defined by age) to understand the social functioning of non-western cultural groups. Keith (1980:339) refers to these senior members of society as "guides" who gave curious ethnographers "tours" into traditional cultures, while seldom enquiring into these guides' own lives. The importance of the elements of social stratification of the elderly and transitioning from one life stage to another in relation to knowledge, resources, social position, and so on, were noted within the broader context of the community under ethnographic study, rather than detailing the experience of ageing.

In contemporary anthropological studies of ageing, the focus has shifted from the elements of social stratification to combine experiential elements that serve to embrace

the diversity of ageing within a cultural context (Clark 1967; Cohen 1994b; Danely 2015, 2016; Jerrome 1992; Kaufman 1986; Myerhoff 1979; Perkinson and Solimeo 2014; Sokolovsky 1997, 2009). Combining the social context with individual experience produces an interwoven and holistic (Ingold 2012) perspective on ageing that sheds light on the meaning of ageing *during* the ageing process.

Barbara Myerhoff's (1979) early groundbreaking ethnography of elderly residents at a Jewish community centre in California documented the life histories of her participants. She found that the elderly relied on stories as their bodies began to fail them. In my own research, elderly participants also engaged in similar story-telling in their blogs and elsewhere as memoirs of their lives. Sarah Lamb (2001) takes a different approach to explore the life stories given by women of a village in West Bengal. For Lamb, exploring life stories creates a sense of "telling of a life", whereas history often implies a "verifiable recounting" of information from the past (2001:16). My participants engaged in both story-telling and verifiable recounting (war and depression years).

Kaufman's ethnographic research in 1986 broadened and deepened our knowledge of the ageing process. She used the voices of elderly Americans to note that older people have a sense of self that is ageless and stress the continuity of their identity within a framework of a continuous and coherent self. Continuity of self is an adaptive process in later life that is personal, where the individual is the interpreter of experience. She argued that "the old Americans [she] studied do not perceive meaning in aging itself; rather, they perceive meaning in being themselves in old age" (Kaufman 1986:6). By connecting the experience of people's daily lives within the characteristics of their social settings, it is possible to tease out the meaningfulness of older people's lives to provide a rich social context away from public health policies, popular cultural representations, and grievances related to the burden that the ageing population is perceived to have in western societies (Australian Government 2009; Clark 1967; Coleman, Ivani-Chalian, and Robinson 2015; Crampton 2013; Uren 2013; Wenger

1998). The participants in my research demonstrated not only a continuity of self, but were comfortable being themselves in old age.

The anthropology of online sociability

There are several anthropological monographs of online sociability. Daniel Miller and Don Slater (2000) ethnographically examined the use of the Internet by Trinidadians in Trinidad. Miller and Slater's work is significant in that it examined both the online and offline social worlds of those under study. Tom Boellstorff's (2008:4) ethnography of the online game *Second Life* is important because it was the first to "depart from previous studies of Internet culture by conducting fieldwork entirely *inside* Second Life" (his emphasis). Although Boellstorff's study focused solely on the online worlds, his research legitimised the anthropological study of virtual spaces as places where meaningful sociability and stable identity formation is achieved.

There are other works that are important including Elizabeth Bird's (2003) multi-methodological study of the media audience and Lori Kendall's (2002) study of Bluesky (and other online platforms) to examine how men and women negotiated gender roles online. Her research included face to face meetings with her participants to reveal that participants stick surprisingly close to the facts of their actual lives and personalities. Denise Carter's (2004) study of Cybertown in which she met some of her informants offline (2004) found that "rather than transforming methods of sociability such as friendship", computer-mediated communication "has enhanced or added to those mechanisms that were already in place in everyday lives" (2004:110).

Annette Markham (1998) went online to interview users of cyberspace in a variety of online platforms prior to the advent of social networking sites. Markham was interested in examining the "real experience" of the people she met online to present their voices at a time when theorizing about online technologies was devoid of those voices; she

found multiple and diverse experiences amongst people and argued that computer-mediated communication was experienced along a continuum to suggest that:

> The Internet is simply a useful communication medium, a *tool*; for others, cyberspace is a *place* to go to be with others. For still others, online communication is integral to *being* and is inseparable from the performance of self, both online and offline (her emphasis, 1980:20).

All of these anthropological studies and their authors have made significant contributions to our understandings of the impact the Internet has had on our everyday lives over the past twenty years, but none has specifically focused on older people. In this thesis, I address this gap in anthropological knowledge to bring the voices of older people and their experiences online into focus.

To date, there have been no anthropological studies of older Australians online. There are, however, a handful of studies of older Australians' use of technology by disciplines such as health sciences (Aguilar, Boerema, and Harrison 2010; Ballantyne, Zubrinich, and Corlis 2010; Russell, Campbell, and Hughes 2008), computer sciences (Gietzelt 2001), sociology (Malta 2007), public policy (Latukefu 2006), psychology (Sum, Mathews, and Hughes 2009), communications, IT and media (Burmeister et al. 2012; Burmeister, Weckert, and Williamson 2011; Goode 2011), and gerontology (Dickinson and Hill 2007). Due to the lack of anthropological research that targets older Australians online, I will be drawing on a variety of scholastic studies to investigate older people's use of social media to highlight consistencies and gaps in our knowledge pertaining to the experiences of older Australians socially interacting online.

Many scholars have pointed out, and continue to point out, that the majority of older people worldwide are not embracing technology. In the literature this is referred to as the "digital divide" and more often referred to as the "grey divide" when discussing older people (Abbey and Hyde 2009; Fietkiwicz 2017; Millward 2003; Selwyn et al.

2003).[2] Nevertheless, in recent years the Australian Bureau of Statistics has noted that older Australians are increasingly connecting online for a variety of reasons, including banking, seeking health information and staying in contact with families and friends (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012; Ballantyne, Zubrinich, and Corlis 2010; Zickuhr and Madden 2012). As the Australian population ages, the "grey divide" and ways to encourage older people to use computers is increasingly of interest to policy makers and professionals in the health and ageing sectors (Power et al. 2007; Russell, Campbell, and Hughes 2008). Researchers have also begun to focus on the ways in which technology can assist in improving the health status of older people where "healthy" and, therefore, "successful ageing" are desired outcomes (Ashida and Heaney 2008; Hart, Chaparro, and Halcomb 2008; Mellor, Firth, and Moore 2008).

The silver surfers of successful ageing

The current emphasis in research on ageing is concerned with "successful ageing"[3], "social engagement"[4], "well-being"[5], and "positive ageing".[6] There is also concern for finding and developing methods to close the "grey divide" to ensure that all older people have access to, and use of, the Internet.[7] Other studies are focused on optimising

[2] The term "digital divide" also refers to people who do not have access to the Internet for socio-economic reasons, lack of infrastructure or due to disabilities. In Australia, Latukefu (2014:43) refers to this as the "urban-rural technological divide", which privileges metropolitan regions and leaves rural communities with limited access. Warschaeur (2003) argues for social inclusion rather than the concept of a digital divide where computers and Internet connections are provided with funding but without education and support for their use.

[3] Adams, Leibbrandt, and Moon (2011), Fisher and Specht (1999), McKenna, Broome and Liddle (2007), Nimrod (2009, 2010) and (Torres 2006). Also see Latukefu (2006).

[4] Ashida and Heaney (2008)

[5] Adams, Leibbrandt, and Moon (2011), Aguilar, Boerema, and Harrison (2010), Costa (1980), Mellor, Firth, and Moore (2008), and Sum, Mathews, and Hughes (2009).

[6] Gergen and Gergen (2003), Gubrium and Holstein (2003), and Warburton and Mclaughlin (2007).

[7] Abbey and Hyde (2009), Brabazon (2005), Ito et al. (2001), Loges and Jung (2001), Millward (2003), and Selwyn et al. (2003).

web design for older people[8], and the ways in which technology can assist the elderly in their homes.[9]

The World Health Organisation, in their policy framework for "active ageing", defines "successful ageing" as "the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation, and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age" (World Health Organisation 2002).[10] It also recognises that factors other than health influence how populations and individuals age over the life course.

Within a gerontological framework, Rowe and Kahn (1997) produced a universal model of successful ageing that still remains largely intact in discourses on ageing. Their model defines "successful ageing" to include the three main components listed below:

> Low probability of disease and disease-related disability, high cognitive and physical functional capacity, and active engagement with life ... successful aging is more than absence of disease, important though that is, and more than the maintenance of functional capacities, important as it is. Both are important components of successful aging, but it is their combination with active engagement with life that presents the concept of successful aging most fully ... While active engagement with life may take many forms, we are most concerned with two, interpersonal relations and productive activity. Interpersonal relations involve contacts and transactions with others, exchange of information, emotional support, and direct assistance. An activity is productive if it creates societal value, whether or not it is reimbursed (1997:433).

Willcox et al. (2007) argue that this model excludes the vast majority of older people who do not fit neatly into this paradigm. If all the elements for successful ageing within

[8] Gibson et al. (2010a), and Hart, Chaparro, and Halcomb (2008).
[9] Davey et al. (2004), and Ihde (2008).
[10] Ageing or Aging? Throughout this thesis I use the Oxford English Dictionary spelling for ageing. In quotes I retain the author's spelling.

this model are not present, the alternative is to fail. I agree with the importance of interpersonal relations but do not support the concept that an activity must be productive to create societal value. Rowe and Kahn (1997) suggest that societal value is formed when there is a third party benefit, for example a relationship related to caring for a family member or working as a volunteer are productive activities that create societal value and are defined as "all activities, paid or unpaid, that create goods or services of economic value" (1997:438). Predictors for productive activity include educational level, functional capacity, and self-efficacy in sustained activity in old age, and when combined are indicators for "successful aging" (1997:438). They go on to argue that a robust view of successful ageing encompasses three distinct domains; "avoidance of disease and disabilities, maintenance of high physical and cognitive function, and sustained engagement in social and productive activities" (1997:438). We need to ask, who decides these values - health professionals or those who are ageing? For example, is sitting in front of a computer socialising with friends online a productive activity? Does it have "societal value"? Is societal value necessary or even an important component to the life experience of someone who is ageing? Research now suggests that "successful ageing" is a multidimensional concept linked with ideas associated with activity, health, independence and productivity (Adams, Leibbrandt, and Moon 2011; Fisher and Specht 1999; McKenna, Broome, and Liddle 2007; Nimrod 2009, 2010; Willcox et al. 2007).

Different disciplines examine well-being in very specific ways. For example, economists use statistical measures such as income per capita and life expectancy to draw their conclusions, while psychologists use surveys to ask participants to rate life satisfaction, or perceptions of happiness and well-being, on a numeric scale to understand the nuances expressed by these indicators to generalise a population. In a longitudinal psychological study of older people living in Southampton, England, Coleman, et.al. (2015) used the method of individual case analysis. This method, according to the authors, "employs reasoning on a case-by-case basis to propose explanations at the level of the individual case before drawing any conclusions about a

sample or group of people as a whole" (2015:4). With this method consideration is given to an individual's own understandings of their situation which is included in the analysis. The interviews over a twenty-year period examined individual self-understanding (referred to as identity) to conclude that "the importance of a sense of contribution is perhaps one of the more under-rated aspects of individual identity in later life, and we should explore new ways of enabling older people to continue to feel involved" (2015:235). This thesis will show that social connections online offer older people an opportunity to be involved from the comfort of their own homes.

Anthropologists provide an ethnographically-portrayed conception of well-being conceived from different social and cultural contexts. In a collection of ethnographies that examine well-being and happiness from a variety of different cultures around the world, Mathews and Izquierdo (2009:5) offer the following broad definition of well-being:

> Well-being is an optimal state for an individual, community, society, and the world as a whole. It is conceived of, expressed, and experienced in different ways by different individuals and within the cultural contexts of different societies: different societies may have distinctly different culturally shaped visions of well-being. Nonetheless, well-being bears a degree of commonality due to our common humanity and interrelatedness over space and time. Well-being is experienced by individuals—its essential locus lies within individual subjectivity—but it may be considered and compared interpersonally and interculturally, since all individuals live within particular worlds of others, and all societies live in a common world at large.

An anthropological perspective of the subjective experiences of older people socially connected online and the meanings they attach to their interactions is important. How can we know what these interactions mean, if we do not ask and are not prepared to

listen? This thesis is throughout an investigation of the subjective experiences and the voices of older people that includes their own perceptions of happiness, well-being and life satisfaction.

At the present time, the Australian Government is focused on providing services that encourage ageing in place (at home rather than in aged care facilities) for as long as possible. An Australian survey of older Australians found that, amongst other things, older people *prefer* to age in place (Karimi and Neustaedter 2011). Pilot studies, predominantly in aged care facilities and senior organisations, designed to assist and encourage older people to embrace technology are on the increase in Australia and elsewhere with mixed results for those who participate (Ballantyne, Zubrinich, and Corlis 2010; Dourish and Bell 2011; Gietzelt 2001; Hart, Chaparro, and Halcomb 2008; Ito et al. 2001; Kim and Pan 2014; Millward 2003). Significantly, these research projects show that when researcher assistance is provided, outcomes are positive for older users; however, once assistance is withdrawn, participant interest wanes (Furlong 1989; Hart, Chaparro, and Halcomb 2008; Ito et al. 2001; Warschauer 2003).

While these studies are encouraging, we can learn so much more from older people who are *already* successfully connected using the Internet. For example, my participants were all self-taught computer users, and very successful at troubleshooting problems or seeking support and help from their online community of friends and fellow members. This circle of help and support from peers was re-shared with new members and was a crucial influence in sustaining interest to remain connected socially online. Should it be required, help and assistance is accessible twenty-four hours seven days a week from peers and friends online.

According to Russell et al (2008), there are benefits to be gained from being a "silver surfer". "Silver Surfers" are older people who are now embracing technology in a variety of ways to connect socially, do banking, purchase goods, or surf for information (especially in relation to health matters). These benefits are now being recognised as

new research emerges (Ashida and Heaney 2008; Pfeil and Zaphiris 2009; Pfeil, Zaphiris, and Wilson 2009; Wright 2000) and are currently linked to the theory of social capital, whereby the social capital is experienced as social support via the development of social ties (Aguilar and Sen 2009; Blit-Cohen and Litwin 2004; Bourdieu 1985; Gray 2009; Hanifan 1916; Putnam 1995; Russell, Campbell, and Hughes 2008). Recent research supports that older people are, in fact, enjoying the experience of social connectedness from being online, and my research certainly supports these emerging reports (Aguilar, Boerema, and Harrison 2010; Burmeister et al. 2012).

The notion that older people, seniors, and the elderly are successfully connecting online seems at odds with popular conceptions and research that continues to posit that older people lack the desire, or the interest, to use computers, yet as early as 1996, Joyce Post outlined senior activity online (Post 1996). At that time, she found links to seniors actively involved in a variety of activities including web design, creative writing, education forums, computer training, engagement in virtual communities for the elderly, and much more. While I do not deny that some older people do not have the motivation, desire or interest in using computers, many do, and as early as 1990 several of my own participants were quietly connecting online with others, and/or using the Internet to source information on topics that were of interest to them. Like so many older people online, these astute seniors had quietly slipped under the radar of many scholars and researchers. For a good number of years, being online was considered to be an activity exclusively for the young, and for the most part, much research continues to be focused on younger people.

Reflections and reflexivity

In Malinowski's (1926) traditional meaning of immersing oneself into a culture to understand the "other", I had a true sense of immersion, but no sense of "otherness". Working at home, from home, meant that I was working within my own cultural

environment.[11] I shared similar cultural backgrounds with other members of the online community; I was a similar age, we all communicated in English; the majority of the membership was from western cultures; due to our ages we shared similar life experiences; and we all had a basic level of competency using computers (discussed further in chapter 3). Sharing the same cultural background as my participants would, in time, allow me to form insightful reflections (Palriwala 2005).

Over the course of the research period, I certainly immersed myself in the field and the lives of my participants. The research field was defined by engagement in social connectivity and social connections (Boellstorff 2008; Carter 2004; Gatto and Tak Sunghee 2008; Van Dijck 2013). I was not distracted by learning and understanding the meanings of language (other than HTML language) or grappling to understand cultural differences, and this freed up my research time to concentrate on my participants' online activities and the experiences of their social worlds.

Throughout this thesis I employ a reflexive approach to highlight the situatedness of knowledge (Harraway 1988; Moore 1996). This knowledge, gained from participant observation in both the online and offline setting, offers one interpretation of the social lives of a group of senior Australians and their social worlds. The fieldwork was multi-sited. Firstly, connections were established with men and women on the social networking site, and secondly, after many months of online interaction, friendships were formed and enough trust was gained to meet participants in their homes, cafés, as well as in my own home.

Creativity and identity: What's in a name?

Names, and the willingness of my participants to share names, presented ethical problems and difficulty maintaining confidentiality. All of my participants preferred to

[11] For a review on "anthropology at home" see Peirano (1998). Also see Palriwala (2005) for a discussion related to studying one's own society.

be named. This was understandable because their motivation for being on the site was to make genuine friends from around the world (see chapter 4). Members offered glimpses into their daily lives by posting family photographs or updated photographs of themselves; rarely masking themselves or their offline social lives while interacting with each other or with me. I found no evidence for the desire of anonymity or purposeful deceit amongst members of this group. On the contrary, nearly everyone with whom I came into contact displayed a generosity of spirit, openness, and goodwill (notable exceptions are discussed in chapters 2 and 7).

Perceptions of online anonymity and confidentiality continue to be the subject of academic debate (Ess 2010; Eynon, Fry, and Schroeder 2008; Hine 2005, 2008; Markham 2012; Markham and Buchanan 2012; Voida and Mynatt 2005). Confidentiality and privacy are of particular concern where participants' expectations of online privacy vary from that which is actually searchable and available using search engines (see for example, Carter 2005; Kendall 2002; Sveningsson-Elm 2009). I was already aware of these problems so very early in the research process I gave the social networking site a nickname and called it *The Roost*; the site reminded me of a gathering place where people sit down to share conversation and sociability occurs. It was a private and affectionate nickname that I did not share with my participants, but it did allow me the freedom to safely speak about the site to my colleagues and friends without identifying the online community I was researching. To preserve anonymity for the site and its members I have retained this personal nickname as a pseudonym throughout this thesis when referring to the website (c.f.Boellstorff 2008).

On *The Roost* members and participants believed that their interactions online were private and only observable by each other even though sections of *The Roost* are not secure, and anyone with the details of a username could retrieve information using a search engine. Keying a participant's username into a search engine has the potential to produce a link that takes the viewer directly to the homepage of my participants. Denise Carter (2014:153) experienced a similar dilemma when keying her participants'

usernames into a search engine only to find that each one was easily identifiable by the material retrieved. My participants, and the broader community, believed that all their data was private and contained within a secure site; however, this was not and still is not the case (see discussion in chapter 6).

Many scholars have researched the ways in which identity is formed online and how this is linked to authenticity online (Arfaa and Wang 2014; Boellstorff 2008; Castilla et al. 2016; Gatson 2011; Hine 2008; Kendall 2002; Miller and Slater 2000; Rheingold 1993; Spittle 2008). Gatson (2011:224) has successfully argued that an online name is chosen by the user and, therefore, reflects "at least partially, of the true self". Amongst other things, authenticity for my participants was linked to their choice of username.

On *The Roost* it was important to members that they "be themselves" and, because of this, they used either their own name (several using their full name) or variations of their names, including family nicknames or other identifying information, such as place of residence, to create their online name. For example, my name is Diane and I live in Australia. A username choice that I might make would be to combine my shortened name of Di together with being an Aussie to create the username AussieDi. This is more than a partial reflection of my true self; it is, in fact, a very accurate detail of who I am and where I live in the world. I chose my own username from a playful colloquial name for older women in Australia. While this name confused non-Australians, it was immediately identifiable to Australians on the site that I was an older Australian woman. For the most part, members chose names that they believed would identify them with a reasonable amount of accuracy.

It was common practice on *The Roost* to use offline first names to address each other, however, during my visits with participants, the use of offline names and online names were interchangeable. This switching between names quite often made it difficult to know who was being discussed, and I would often need clarification for an online name or an offline name of someone that I did not know well. Miller and Slater (2000:70)

noted a similar integration of the use of online and offline names during their research in Trinidad, as did Kendall (2002) and Carter (2005). This interchanging of names points to Gatson's (2011) concept of retaining parts of the "true self" where members actively choose not to hide or mask their offline lives, especially once friendships have been established.

The willingness to share personal information confirmed a lack of deceit or masking of who a person is online. A catchy username would become an offline nickname, especially in face-to-face situations, and was an indicator that the username had enveloped the person's online identity, but was also in harmony with their offline self. Without doubt, the motivation to make friends on the site removed the desire to hide or mask one's self, but this willingness to be named does present problems for Internet researchers (Carter 2005; Gatson 2011; Miller and Slater 2000).

While I have grappled with the generosity of being urged by my participants to use identifying names and consent has been given to use images, I have genuine concerns in providing the possibility of identifying participants and other members of the community. This is especially problematic now that dissertations are available digitally. To ensure confidentiality, all participants have been given pseudonyms and all identifying information has been removed (Boellstorff 2008; Kendall 2002). As with my participants, using my own online name would produce links to the website, therefore, throughout this thesis I refer to myself as Di or Diane.

There is more to a name than a name. Names, styles of language, and the use of individually created graphics were all associated with the identity of the user, which provided linkages to a member’s authenticity and credibility, not only online but offline as well. Indeed, my own identity and authenticity were essential factors to consider as I prepared to go online to meet people. Berreman (1972) noted the importance of this role of the ethnographer:

> Attempts to convey a desired impression of one's self and to interpret accurately the behaviour and attitude of others are an inherent part of any social interaction, and they are crucial to ethnographic research. (1972:xix)

Without authenticity or credibility, it would not have been possible to meet and make new friends on *The Roost* or to meet each other face to face. Authenticity and credibility were crucial to the outcomes of this research project.

This thesis is not concerned with 'virtuality', 'imaginary selves', 'fake misrepresentations' or the cyber-dash of early Internet research where the imagined lives of people were "played" out online (Turkle 1984, 1995, 1996). Researchers have moved on from these early interpretations of the self online (Boellstorff 2016; Miller 2013; Nardi 2015). This thesis is an examination of older people from many different corners of the Western world socially interacting with each other as part of their everyday lives.

A secret pool of wisdom: ageing on The Roost

The following chapters investigate the ways in which senior Australians socially connected online to mediate their social lives, as practised in their everyday lives. Seniors connect daily from the comfort of their own homes and in their own time to build and sustain friendships with others around the world; quietly contributing to society, yet, for the most part, this activity remains invisible.

In Chapter 2, I begin by examining, through the lens of my own experience, arriving in the field to highlight the ways in which social participation and interaction on the site are initiated. Forming friendships is the foundation of the social interactions on the site, and to achieve this, it is necessary to create a profile. I call this process "bringing oneself to life" and describe how this was achieved. I investigate the role of the

welcome wagon as a rite of passage and how welcoming shapes the culture of *The Roost*.

There are various modes for communication on the site. In Chapter 3 I detail the character of the interactions used in these interactive components to argue for vitality of presence online. Building friendships online was the primary reason for people having a profile on the site, and these rich and diverse pathways to friendship-forming ensures continuous online presence. Images were used extensively throughout the site and it is possible to tease out the significance of gifting graphics as a form of communication that encourages friendship-forming. Social interaction is also enriched by the use of graphics. I examine the In Memoriam pages of the site to contextualise the difference between vitality of presence and online presence. Vitality of presence is notably absent from the In Memoriam homepages of the deceased.

Being online and socially interacting with others was a significant activity in the everyday lives of my participants and for other members of the community. Through the lens of my participants' experiences, Chapter 4 ethnographically describes how online friendship-forming, as well as sharing and support from the broader community, contributes to the everyday lives of seniors in meaningful ways.

Chapter 5 is concerned with the ways in which older people form trusting relationships online. Contemporary scholastic debates related to trust are examined to contextualise how older people bring their offline values and morals to the online context, in order to form trusting relationships with strangers that are meaningful to the members, but also form the backbone of the culture of friendship on the site.

Trust between members of *The Roost* is not possible without trust of the website and the site administrators. In chapter 6, I examine the role of the administrators in providing a secure and safe environment for older people to socially interact with each other, and follow this with a discussion related to how members' perceptions of trust unravelled

when a large influx of new members brought new ideas and ways of interacting with members that disrupted established social practices on the site.

Communicating with similar-aged people was the crucial attraction for being on *The Roost*. Although age is clearly listed on each person's profile, the physical distractions of ageing; for example slowness and social isolation, were largely absent. Certain aspects of ageing were evident such as grandchildren, health issues, and memories. Chapter 7 is concerned with the multiple notions of the self in social theories applied to online as well as offline identity formation. In this chapter I explore the convergence of online self representations with perceptions of the everyday self to argue for the emergence of the liberated inner self via online communications.

I conclude by arguing that social engagement online enriches the lives of older Australians (as well as their international friends), which contributes to their experience of meaningful social participation and inclusion as they age. On *The Roost* ageing is an inevitable and accepted aspect of life that is celebrated. Being online and socially interacting at their own pace facilitates the emergence of the internal youthful self to be shared with strangers, and this contributes to feelings of social inclusion as valued members of society.

2

Identity, Community and Social Participation: Arriving in the Field

> *I feel like I've landed in a foreign place. I feel lost. The site is not intuitive. I thought it would be easier than this. I am feeling shy about what to put in my profile. Must bring myself to life. And, then, the welcome wagon arrived. (Field notes, October 2009)*

In October 2009, I sat in the comfort of my home and stared at the profile page displayed on my computer screen with its empty white boxes neatly placed into two columns and highlighted with blue borders. The empty boxes, blank but functional, served to remind the user that content needed to be added there. The empty profile page was mine and the gateway to my fieldwork site; the "front door", as it were, to my research for the next fourteen months. Even though I had been socially connecting online since 1990, registering on a social networking site and creating a profile for the purpose of socially interacting with others was very foreign to me. The profile page that I was staring at was generically provided by the website administrators to all new members upon joining. It was here that I would spend an enormous amount of time immersing myself into the culture of the online community that I had affectionately renamed *The Roost*. It was important to me that I place information in the boxes that was accurate. What if I got it wrong? What if no one wanted to talk to me?

In this chapter I reflexively discuss arriving in the field. My aim is to examine, via my own experience, the processes of initiation and subsequent participation in the community. I begin with a discussion of the role of 'rites of passage' to this process and follow this with a discussion of my self-aware identity as an ethnographer. I then investigate the arrival of the welcome wagon and its role as a rite of passage and how welcome messages shape a culture of caretaking and inclusion on *The Roost*.

Doing ethnography: the rites of passage

Gaining access to conduct research on the site would be the first of transformative ritual practices that I would experience as an ethnographer (Johnson 1984). In 1908, Arnold Van Gennep (1960:3) characterised ceremonies and rituals as "rites of passage" in a theoretical framework to explain the "succession of stages" in one's life that are marked by "ceremonies whose essential purpose is to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another".[12] Rites of passage he argued were subdivided into "rites of separation, transition rites, and rites of incorporation" (1960:11). He was careful to note that not all the categories were used in every ceremonial pattern, "thus, although a complete scheme of rites of passage theoretically included preliminal rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition) and postliminal rites (rites of incorporation), in specific instances these three types are not always equally important or equally elaborated" (1960:11). The point he made is that all ceremonies and rituals have their individual purposes, and may accompany any change or entry from one stage to another. Victor Turner (1967) has suggested that a transitioning "liminal personae" is characterised by being "no longer classified and not yet classified" which can be understood as "neither here nor there", and was "at the very least 'betwixt and between' all the recognized points in space-time of structural classification" (1967:96-97).

[12] *Les Rites de Passage* was written in French in 1909 and translated into English by Monika Vizedom and Gabrielle Caffee in 1960.

Gaining access to the site, filling in my profile, being acknowledged by members, and acceptance by the community were rites of passage I would experience.

As gatekeepers to the site, it was the administrators who I approached for permission to conduct research amongst their members. It is not uncommon for gatekeepers to restrict access to anthropologists' enquiries in the field. Gender, colour, generation, and race have been documented as problematic (or not) for ethnographers (Johnson 1984; Robben 2007). As the site's webpage stated the minimum age was "strictly enforced", my email to the administrators requesting permission included my age (53), because it was highly probable that had I been under the age limit, access would have been denied. My first rite of passage was gaining permission to do research on the site transitioning me from student to apprentice anthropologist (Palriwala 2005), although this did not guarantee me access to the members.

The Roost was established in 2008 by two software engineers. Both were in their late 40s and living in different states of America. In an email interview, they informed me that they initiated the site to meet the social needs of the older customers they were assisting with computer technical support (Admin, October 2010). According to the administrators, "many older people were unhappy with the content on other social networking sites, which basically catered for the younger crowd, we wanted to provide them with a place of their own on the net" (email, June 2009). In a media release in 2008, the administrators supplied the following account of the site:

> *The Roost* is a new web community and social-networking site designed for older people. Unlike Facebook and MySpace, which cater to a younger audience, *The Roost* provides a unique environment where mature adults can share photos, music interests, videos, and write blogs. Members can also create their own unique Web page, start their own interest groups, participate in community chats and forums, and interact with other members from all around the world. (email, June 2009)

Aside from the administrative tasks of running a busy social networking site, Admin1 and Admin2 were also active members of *The Roost* each with their own profiles. Between them they produced the daily birthday list, the daily list of new members, the monthly list of featured members, and from time to time they settled disagreements or removed and blocked entrance to troublemakers from the site (discussed further in chapter 6). Other than seeking and gaining permission to do research on their site, direct communication between myself and the administrators was limited to one interview during my fieldwork; for the remainder of my time on the site they left me to experience the site in my own time and without guidance or interference.

Membership numbers varied over the course of my fieldwork. In October 2009, there were 12,219 members of which 699 were Australians and this steadily increased to 12,617 until April 2010. In 2010, a drop in *The Roost* membership of 612 members occurred. Although this reduction in membership did not affect the Australian membership, it did significantly impact on the whole community (discussed further in chapter 6). The age range of members was between 50 and 99 years, and more than 90 percent of the membership identified as being 60 years of age or older. Members represented 32 countries from around the world with USA and Canada forming the majority of the membership. All of these members had, of course, already created a profile on their homepage, and most were active on the site and had established friendships.

The bare bones of identity

The profile page, also known as the member's homepage, was located in the space assigned on the Internet by the site's domain name, and was the place in which the members of the enclosed or bounded online community socially interacted with each other on a daily basis. By enclosed, I mean that entrance to this community could only be gained by registering as a member; registration required a unique username, email address, and password. Parallels can be drawn here with virtual worlds. Boellstorff

(2016:39) noted that the most distinctive feature of virtual worlds is that they are places which underscore how not all online phenomena are media. Virtual worlds in his opinion do not mediate between places; they are places in their own right that persist as individuals log in and out of them. He also noted that within these worlds and the social relationships are a place in which to interact. For many months, all the interactions I would experience would be contained on the site, and for most members all their interactions with each other remained there (discussed further in chapter 4). It was on this profile page, my homepage, that I would share aspects of my identity, personality, interests, and research information.

Although the page was bereft of any content detailing who I was or why I was there, the basic information needed to open a profile (the bare bones of my identity) had been generated automatically during the joining process and appeared on my profile page when I logged in for the first time (see Image 1, below). My online username chosen months earlier and indicating that I was Australian was situated to the left of the tabs labelled 'profile', 'gallery', 'blogs', 'guestbook', 'friends', 'favourites' and 'videos'; tabs that, in time, would become familiar to me as the hub for online activity. A small bar below my username indicated that I was a standard member and that I was "ONLINE".

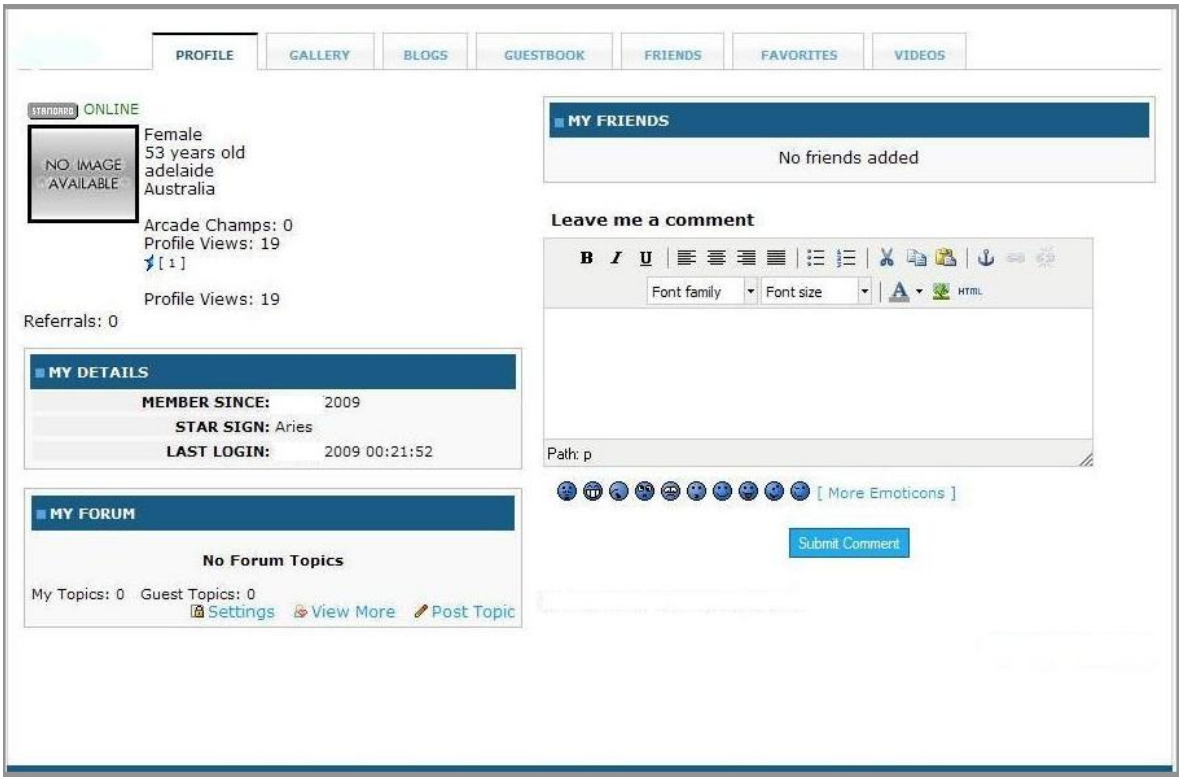

Image 1 Arriving in the field

Beneath my username, and framed with a thin black border, was a grey box with the words printed in bold, uppercase, "NO IMAGE AVAILABLE", indicated that it was possible, perhaps even desirable, to place an image in the allocated space. Nestled closely below this space my computer generated joining information was displayed; female, 53 years old, Adelaide, Australia. Below this, another box with blue borders, and labelled "MY DETAILS", contained practical information about me; the date I joined, my zodiac sign, and the last time I had logged in. In due course, I would learn that the date I joined would be assigned status within the community, although on the day I joined this was not obvious to me. The small star, half coloured in blue underneath my details, would grow into more stars over time and would, as I contributed enough activity to the site, change to orange stars - rewards for participation and acknowledgement of community experience that could be leaned upon in times of community support or in times of conflict. This acknowledgement of status within the

community was very similar to what Bird (2003:62) found on a fan community listserv where experience, based on length of time as a community member together with community contribution, held social status within the listserv community. During my fieldwork on *The Roost*, the only time social status between members became apparent was during times of conflict (discussed in chapter 6).

The last box displayed in the left-hand column of the page, and headed "MY FORUMS", contained links to "settings", "viewing" and "posting topics", which was of course empty, yet the empty space aroused in me a curiosity for the kinds of topics I might find in the forums, and the variety of interactions those topics might generate amongst interested members. I anticipated that the method of interactions in these forums would be similar to those documented by Bird (2003), Kendall (2002), Boellstorff (2008) and others, where one member posts a topic for other members to comment on by adding their views/opinions to the topic. Similar to Boellstorff (2008), later in the research process I created my own research focus-group with participants where a significant amount of the data used throughout this thesis came from. While I had anticipated that the method would be the same, and it was, the content in *The Roost* forums surprised me. Topics were eclectic and viewed from the perspective of older people's wealth of knowledge through life experiences. However, unlike other online forums, on *The Roost* nearly all forum comments were enhanced by the use of graphics. Graphics and emoticons played a major role throughout the site and are discussed further in chapter 3.

Who will be my friend?

Situated at the top of the content section of the page was a box labelled "MY FRIENDS" that contained the words "No friends added", suggesting that it was possible to add friends and display who those friends were. Boyd and Ellison (2007:211) have shown that the salient features of a social networking site are that it is a web based service that allows individuals to "construct a public or semi-public profile within a

bounded system", whereby individuals "articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection" with the ability to "view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system". They posit that social networking sites are unique in that they enable users to communicate and make visible their social networks, which are primarily comprised of relationships shared with offline connections and that these connections support pre-existing social relations (2007:221). In other words, according to Boyd and Ellison, the "friends list" on a social networking site, is an extension of our off-line social connections (friends, family, colleagues, friends of friends, and so on) and are not primarily sourced from within the system. This was not the case with members of *The Roost* where friendships were sourced from strangers; however, on *The Roost* it was possible to view friendship connections in the manner that Boyd and Ellison have described using the MyFriend list.

Unlike other social networking sites such as Facebook where offline social connections are the foundation of online friendship circles, connecting and making friends on *The Roost* was achieved by drawing from the pool of members from within the system. Invites to family members and friends offline to join *The Roost* were unusual and rare. Offline relationships brought to the site were primarily limited to those of married couples, each with their own profile, or siblings sharing the experience of being online together. Members of *The Roost* restricted their sociality and friendship-forming to members from within the online community and rarely met face to face (discussed in chapter 4).

Friendship forming is a powerful human trait that forges strong community bonds. Dunbar (1992) theorized that there are limits to the number of people with whom we can share a stable inter-personal relationship. He argued that humans, due to evolutionary limitations on the brain, can only sustain a meaningful social group size of approximately 150 people. Yet, On *The Roost* it was not unusual for members to have hundreds of friends with one member having over 3,000 (managing friends is discussed in chapter 4). Boyd (2006:4) refers to people who amass large numbers of friends on

social networking sites as "collectors". She found that collectors amass large numbers of friends to significantly increase the size of their network via "gateway friends" who are not connected to them personally in order to open up a larger network of contacts rapidly. For myself, beginning a profile, aside from the administrators, I knew no one on the site. The empty friendship box invoked a sense of trepidation in me. Would anyone want to be my friend? What kinds of friendships would a researcher develop on a social networking site? How does one even begin to make friends, and what would these online friendships be like? Nevertheless, Dunbar's theory of limitations aside, the empty "MY FRIENDS" box invoked in me an overwhelming desire to make a friend!

Below the friendship box was an area labelled "leave me a comment" with an empty text-messaging box similar to the ones I was familiar with in emailing programmes on some website designs. There were no instructions to indicate where this comment, should I wish to leave one, would go. It seemed odd, and strange, to be able to leave myself a comment. What purpose could leaving myself a comment possibly serve? Leaving common sense behind, I tested the box by sending myself a message, only to be informed by a generic system message that I could not send a message to myself! The silliness of my actions made me laugh out loud and I wondered how many others had attempted the same thing. The mystery of the comments box would be resolved quickly in the form of welcome messages left as comments on my profile under the label of "guestbook", discussed below.

Re-assembling aspects of my offline self for an online audience was fraught with insecurities as well as excitement (Bird 2003; Boellstorff 2008; Johnson 1984; Markham 1998). In an offline fieldwork context, Berreman (1972) who conducted fieldwork based in the lower Himalayas of North India made the following point:

> "Every ethnographer, when he reaches the field, is faced immediately with accounting for himself before he proposes to learn to know. Only when this has been accomplished can he proceed to

> his avowed task of seeking to understand and interpret the way of life of those people (1972:xviii).

The space in which to account for myself in the online context of my fieldwork was the function of the profile page. My profile page, bereft of anything personal to guide visitors or potential friends and participants to assess my personality, my likes and dislikes, beckoned me to share enough information about myself in order to reveal, in pictures and words, a sense of who I was with other members of the community. I felt the desire (and need) to bring myself to life within the spaces of the empty boxes. My field note jottings are littered with prompts such as "must add something *interesting* about myself", "urgent, find a place to talk about the research", "photo or image?", and so forth.

Ellison, et al, (2006:415) suggest impression management and the desire to present an authentic sense of self through tactics such as creating a profile reflects [an] "ideal self" as an attempt "to establish the veracity" of identity claims. Although Ellison, et al, were discussing online dating sites, a desire to be authentic helped explain profile information placed on *The Roost,* including my own (discussed further in chapter 7). The process would be based on my own perceptions of myself and what I felt others might like to know about me in order to instigate enough interest to make contact with me and hopefully enough information to elicit curiosity to participate in my research.

Bringing myself to life online.

During the process of initiating myself into *The Roost* community, I was very conscious of the experience of exposing myself to a wider audience, and the possible implications this would have for me and for my research participants. Before I could begin to participate in the community, I also felt that it was essential that I find a place on my profile to announce that I was a researcher who had come to explore their social world. I was aware of scholastic debates related to ethical research online. Some scholars have

argued that the Internet as a public sphere renders data placed there freely available to researchers, whilst others argue that use of data requires consent (see Ess 2002; Fielding, Lee, and Blank 2008; Hine 2005; Lee, Fielding, and Blank 2008; Markham and Buchanan 2012; Wilkinson and Thelwall 2011). Statistical information stripped of the social experience in which data is placed on a social networking site tells us little about the human experience. As an anthropologist interested in people as well as their data, my ethical position assumed that behind every social interaction online resided a person and, as such, they should be given an opportunity to choose whether or not they wanted to interact with me based on the information I provided. My introduction to the community as a researcher was achieved by placing a notice on my profile in the "ABOUT ME" box.

The "about me" box was initially not visible to a new member; it was hidden until activated with text or images. Although the content of my profile changed frequently as I became enculturated into the community, the notice, reproduced below, remained on my profile throughout the research period.

> Hi! Thanks for visiting!
>
> It is important for me to find a place to let you know that I am an anthropologist doing my PhD research on online/offline social interactions amongst older Australians (and their overseas friends).
>
> Anthropologists spend a significant amount of time participating and observing the communities they are researching to gain a meaningful understanding of the people and their culture. I am very interested in learning about you and your experiences on (and off) *The Roost*.
>
> I am an ethical researcher. This means that if you do not want to participate in my research, I will respect your wishes. Please let me know so that I won't disturb you with visits or messages. It also

> means that if you are a researcher working on this site, you need my permission to use any of my content on this site.
>
> If you would like more information, I would be very pleased to provide you with answers to any questions that you may have. I would love to hear from you!
>
> I am happy to be here fumbling my way around, and look forward to meeting some of you. ☺ (Field notes, October 2009)

The purpose of the notice was twofold. First, I wanted to represent my intentions on the site as openly and honestly as possible (accounting for myself). If I had to disguise or mask what I was doing, I would have found that situation to be untenable. Placing a notice on my profile meant that any member could, at a glance, make a decision regarding the project without the necessity, or embarrassment, of declining. Being clear about my reasons for being there would, I hoped, be one of the building blocks towards developing trust with members of the community, especially with those whom I hoped would join my research project's offline component.

Secondly, I was aware of the difficulties encountered by Kendall (2002) who had disguised her researcher status online in her research of an online pub. When she wanted to meet her participants in a face to face situation, she experienced problems after explaining to her online participants that she was, in fact, a researcher. She had to overcome suspicion to deal with the emotional conflict of loss of trust developed between herself and the online community that she was studying. I did not want to experience problems meeting willing participants face to face, and this first step towards building trust online allowed me to interact honestly with many members of the community and was, I believe, the underlying reason I was invited to visit more participants than I had funding for. Developing and maintaining trust online is discussed in chapter 5.

Later, and with the help of a participant, I would add an animated graphic of a notepad and pen as a signature (Image 2, below) in an effort to create further awareness within the community that I was taking notes.

Image 2 Online fieldwork tool - animated graphic

The signature was added automatically by the system to all comments that I left on the site; it playfully served as an indicator of my researcher status and that I was taking notes. I likened this to carrying a notebook, camera, or voice recorder in a physical fieldwork environment (see Sanjek 1990). For home stays in the second half of the project I did utilize the conventional note-taking paraphernalia of the anthropologist in the field, and, interestingly, all the participants I visited expected me to do so!

Consciousness of self: photo or image?

The empty space assigned to the profile image caused me a lot of anxiety. The decision whether to place a photograph of myself on the Internet was difficult. In over 20 years of being online, for security reasons, I had never placed an image of myself online, yet I was presented with an empty profile on a website where posting photos of one's self appeared to be the community norm. In the interest of building trust, I decided to join in with the majority of members and uploaded a profile photo that clearly showed my face. Overcoming my reluctance, I used four photos at varying intervals over the fieldwork term (see Image 3, below). Anthony Cohen (1994a) would call this a "consciousness of self" (1994:27) in which the individual recognises their "distinctive identities" (1994:66) as self-aware authors of their own social conduct and the social arrangements in which they participate. Profile photos were one-click links used

throughout the site as a significant pathway to visiting other members' profiles. Although it was also possible to click on a username to achieve the same result, the favoured method of navigating to another member's profile was by using their profile image. On *The Roost's* homepage, smiling faces attracted members to view profiles; smiling faces attracted me to view profiles too!

Image 3 My profile photos

I have never regretted making the decision to verify my identity online with a face photo instead of using an image as a representation of myself. With the exception of one participant who used a photo of a toy animal and another who used an image from nature, all of my participants shared photos of themselves on the site. Generally, the majority of members on the site chose photos of themselves rather than images (see discussion in chapter 3).

All members' induction to *The Roost* shared the same route; all were presented with an empty homepage to place details of themselves for the purpose of sharing something of themselves with other members of the community. The majority of members participated in the activity of bringing themselves to life online. Sundén (2003:3) has suggested that a profile page is where one "types oneself into being". On *The Roost*, I argue that the process of filling in the generic profile was more akin to 'bringing oneself to life' online. This became obvious in the difference between a profile page with the bare bones of information on it that is generated when first joining and one that has been brought to life with ample descriptive content about likes and dislikes and embedded with graphics, animations, music, activity stars, personal family photographs,

and so forth. This process is more akin with transferring the self—being me—into a format that is understandable online (discussed further in chapter 7).

The slow process of working my way through the various options on the site took a number of weeks of trial and error to produce a profile that displayed something of my personality, my education, my likes and dislikes, my humour, my research, my family, my home, and the myriad of little things that create the identity that we understand to be ourselves offline (see Image 4, below). Throughout my time in the field, I changed the content and images frequently in line with the customs and rituals of the community (see chapter 3).

Encapsulated in the process was also the business of sharing, in words and pictures, those aspects of my identity that I hoped would bring myself to life for anyone who choose to read my profile. It was a very subjective as well as selective process motivated by my desire to make friends; without friends my project would fail. I understood this motivation the moment I felt the pang of wanting to make a friend when I saw the empty "MY FRIENDS" box. I eagerly looked forward to socially interacting with members of this vibrant community of older people.

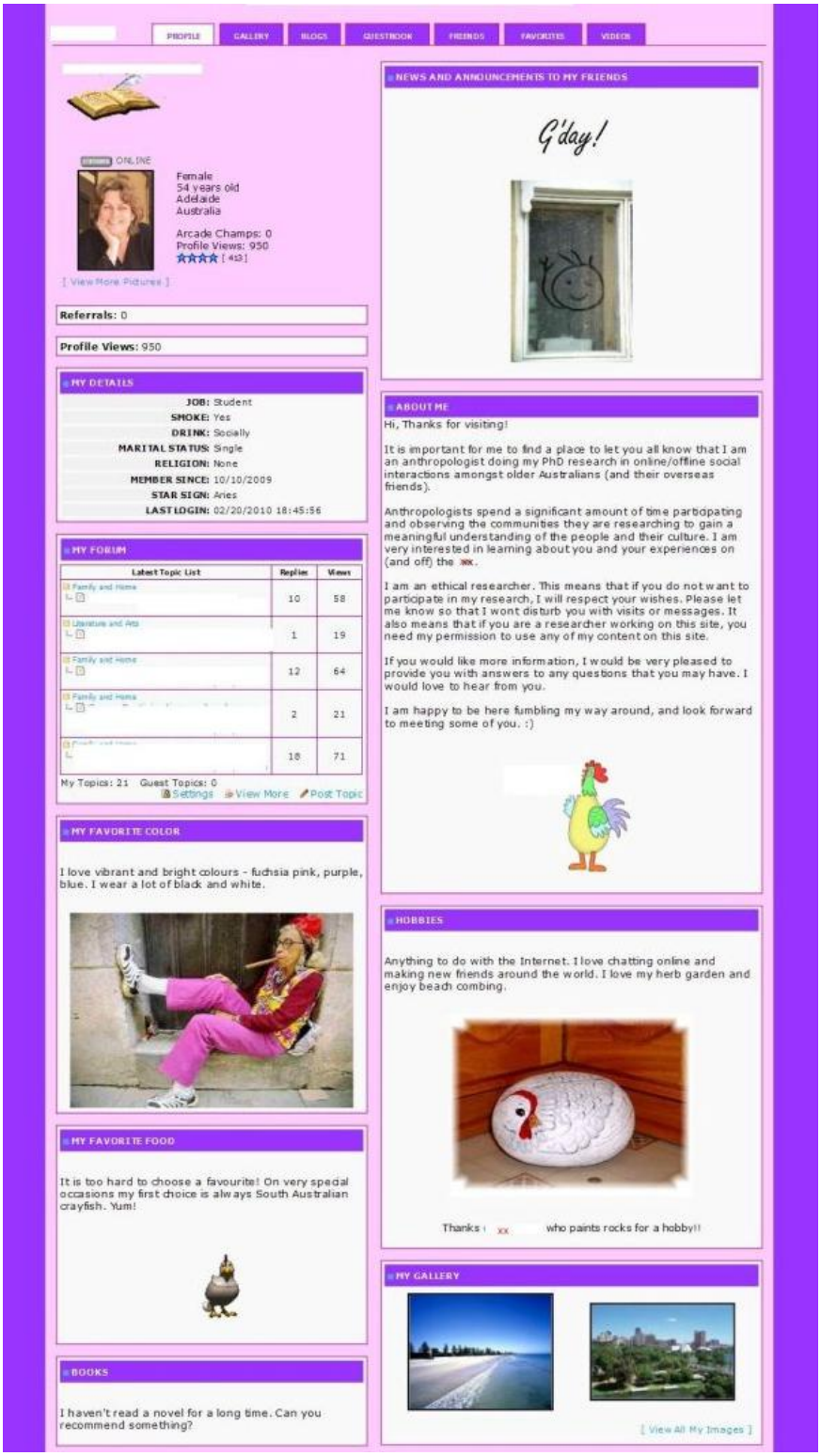

Image 4 Bringing myself to life online, February 2010

And then the Welcome Wagon arrived

According to boyd (2011), profiles are where a large proportion of communication on social networking sites takes place between friends. While it would take time to bring myself to life within the empty boxes in the hope of attracting people to my project, I need not have worried. Very soon after opening my profile for the first time, the 'welcome wagon' arrived leaving many welcoming messages on my homepage. Even though my profile only showed the basic information about me, a photo, and details about my research, I received twenty-eight welcome messages from members of the community over a twenty-four-hour period. [13] The "comments box" that had given me so much amusement earlier was the place where visitors left guestbook entries. These messages were transformative as another rite of passage where my status changed from new member to being acknowledged by the community.

Image 5 Welcome message graphic without animation[14]

[13] It was fortuitous that I added my research information and profile photo as a priority because the rest of my profile information would be added as time (and experience) permitted over a few weeks.
[14] This graphic is freely available for use from commentsyard.com.

The welcome messages I received were genuinely welcoming and expressed a willingness to form friendships with me; they also provided practical information regarding this "fun" community.[15] Amongst the messages were four from members who bore the title of "Welcome Wagon Staff". Aside from the administrators, "staff" on *The Roost* were all volunteers who had proven themselves to be competent in a variety of areas related to activities on the site or as experts in helping with computer issues. I would later learn that it was the duty of assigned volunteers bearing this title to welcome new people, and the routine practice for other interested members acting as self-appointed ambassadors of the site to welcome all new members. This is very similar to the findings of Burmeister et al. (2012:10) on GreyPath, where appointed volunteer members acted as mentors to new people. In the course of my fieldwork, I too would participate in the activity of welcoming new members, especially new Australians. This important cultural practice encouraged participation and social interaction amongst the membership.

There is surprisingly little academic analysis of the concept of a 'welcome wagon', although thousands of articles reference this volunteer model utilising the taken-for-granted understanding of the appointment of a person from within a group who is assigned to welcome newcomers. The Welcome Wagon Company was founded in America in 1928 by Thomas Briggs (Briggs Foundation 2012). In a statement on the Briggs Foundation website a summary was given of the ideology of the Company at that time, it stated:

> Welcome Wagon became a household word throughout the world and its 8,000 Hostesses were a familiar symbol of community service and friendship. The Welcome Wagon Hostesses made more than one million home visits per year welcoming new families to their communities and visiting others during special occasions. These visits were sponsored by 100,000 businesses and included

[15] Nearly all the messages I received referred to the site as a 'fun' place to be. Fun is discussed in chapter 3.

> gifts and messages from the sponsors along with helpful information about the community, its services and organizations. (Briggs, 2012)

In America, Welcome Wagon International Incorporated is now considered to be a marketing company that uses a website to offer local information and downloadable special offers but no longer engages in home visits. In Canada, Welcome Wagon Limited (2016) was established in 1930 as a separate company that continues doing home visits. On their website, it is possible to request a "friendly visit" and a paid representative will attend to this. Included in the visit is a "free gift package" provided by "local civic minded businesses" and "valuable information". While the company's ideology has evolved over time, the underlying concept as a symbol of community service and friendship remains entrenched in everyday understandings of the welcome wagon.

Elisabeth Jones (1989:1), ethnographically examined the role of the Welcome Wagon Organization in reciprocal relationships. Jones found that the gifts created a system of obligation to the sponsors of gifts that perpetuated the organisation's purpose. She also found that, "the welcome wagon is responsible for the new resident to go through a rite of passage or transition from the outsider status of a new resident to socially accepted and civic-minded member of the community". On *The Roost*, although there were no gifts from merchants and no obligation to participate in the community, transitioning from being new and an outsider to being welcomed as a community member via the welcome messages, did take place. In an ethnographic study of SeniorNet, Ito, et al (2001:18) have described volunteer hosts who seek out and identify newcomers who may be confused by the online environment or hesitant to interact. These hosts "send off a friendly welcome [email] letter with hints about how to get the most out of SeniorNet". The hosts provide a caretaking role that is not dissimilar to the welcome messages I received from *The Roost*'s welcome wagon staff, and self-appointed welcoming ambassadors.

The welcome greetings I received on *The Roost* align with Brigg's concept of the Welcome Wagon and Jones' (1989) finding of social acceptance. A visit to a member's profile plus the gift of leaving a welcome message with offers of friendship and information perpetuated the purpose of the community, which on *The Roost* was to initiate interaction with other members from around the world. The welcome ambassadors also performed a caretaking role but more importantly they provided a pathway to friendship forming. This is very different to social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace.

Facebook is a friendship network comprised predominantly of known people, although this model has recently changed from one of connected to one of connectivity. Van Dijck (2013) has shown that in the early years of social networking sites, the infrastructure through which social network sites operated facilitated connectedness between people. Since 2008, he argues, the focus has shifted from community orientated platforms of connectedness to one of monetizing connectivity by maximising lucrative data traffic between people, things, and ideas as a business model. In other words, on Facebook connections are not limited to people one knows. On MySpace, every newly generated profile comes with one default friend. This friend, whose name is Tom, was Tom Anderson, one of the founders of MySpace and his friendship is linked to providing newsletters to members. Thereafter, it is up to the individual to add existing friends or seek out new friends from within the MySpace membership (see boyd and Ellison 2007).

On *The Roost* the ritual of welcoming is caretaking; it is also a rite of passage whereby the newcomer transitions from being a stranger (outsider) to being incorporated into the culture. The messages were also an acknowledgement of my arrival in the field online. There was no obligation, or expectation, that a response to a welcome message was required by the recipient of the message, although in my enthusiasm to participate, I responded to all the messages I received, and thereafter continued to do so throughout my time in the field.

The welcome wagon concept on *The Roost*, as signifier of community service and friendship, contributed in shaping a culture of caring in the community. As well as offering an introduction into the culture of *The Roost*, the messages galvanised me into reciprocal action and, as such, I immediately shifted from being an outsider to a participating community member. The activity of welcoming new members was the backbone to *The Roost* being a successful social networking site for older people.

Messages that welcome: how names matter

My first contact with the 'natives' was the welcome messages; they were in an important bridge to connecting with the community. The variety of the greetings clearly demonstrated to me something of the personality of the sender; many used graphics with embedded messages, or a combination of a graphic with an attached message, while others wrote text notes offing help and assistance. All the messages were colourful and many were animated; the colour and animation expressed a vitality of presence that expressed sincerity and playfulness.

To my surprise, a noteworthy number of the messages had been signed with the messengers' offline first name—Lill, Alan, Rose, Lucy, Lea, Alf, Otis, Buzz, Reynold, Pat, and so forth—while others used either an abbreviation of their username, or their username initials, such as DD, riz, moo, and Blue. Unlike online names that are purposefully chosen as a "screen name" to provide anonymity online (Boellstorff 2008:12; Ess 2010; Turkle 1995) or providing real names on Facebook for the purpose of linking existing social connections (Van der Nagel and Frith 2015), on *The Roost* usernames were predominantly pseudonyms that specifically offered information about the member's offline life, at least partially, to be purposefully shared, yet also retaining some anonymity. Sarah Gatson (2011:232) explains that "online selfing" is related to the individual's identity that offers an opportunity for a strong and authentic connection between the online and offline self.

As I outlined in the introduction, all of my participants chose a username that would connect with their offline self. Hobbies or offline interests were also reflected in usernames; a belief in "fairies" and "my magic garden" combined to form one participant's username to reflect aspects of her offline social world as well as her spiritual beliefs (see chapter 3 and 7), and some had used their full offline names unintentionally due to lack of experience with online registration:

> With regard to my name, I ended up with my username unintentionally due to ignorance/stupidity/senility or something to that effect. I had tried to join up about ten days earlier, but due to my lack of experience at doing passwords etc., rather made a mess of things, so it was not until about my third try that, after a lot of dithering, finally got it sorted out, only to find out later, too late, that I could have, should have, used something weird that would aptly describe me. (Carrie 2010)

Or with regret:

> I'm not happy with the choice of my online name. At the time of joining, I had no idea what I was doing so just put in my real name. Pretty stupid as I don't think many others have done the same. I'd never had anything to do with these type of sites and didn't know about putting in a "made up" name. I would like to change it but it would be so time consuming that I won't bother. (Essie, 2010)

It is important to keep in mind that prior to joining the website a new member initially signs up with a username, email address, and password. The decision to choose a name to sign up with that will attach to one's identity reasonably accurately prior to joining the site is significant in that the usernames were not intended to create a mask for deceit but rather as point of reference to that person's offline social world. This self-aware decision is made prior to registering the chosen name on the site or for that matter, any

other sites online. The friendliness of people signing their messages using real names added warmth and sincerity to the greetings I received creating an immediate sense of belonging (discussed in chapter 4). Even though the signatures used surprised me, the personal touch added authenticity to the messages that had the effect of making the welcome messages seem genuine and caring.

Messages that come 'alive'

At first glance, the appearance of the welcome message graphics seemed 'nannerish' and some even seemed child-like to me. My immediate response to the animated graphics was that I found them to be somewhat distracting and annoying yet intriguingly playful and welcoming. My homepage instantly came "alive" with these shimmering and blinking graphics that were well beyond my own capabilities of production.

Image 6 Welcome message: animated

The themes of the images included teddy bears, nesting birds, flowers, cats, giggling girls, pumpkins, children's faces, hearts, and butterflies. The images were reminiscent of greeting cards that one might seek in a stationary shop to give to a grandmother or mother on her 80th birthday. Both men and women used similar graphics. The cultural practice of making and sharing graphics is discussed in the following chapter. For now,

I wish to document that my homepage transformed from something that appeared to be static to an enlivened and busy page of hopping, popping, and shimmering images of friendliness.

Messages that invite

Amongst the welcome messages were invitations to visit the sender's homepage invitingly informing me that their "door is always open". This was a common theme that I would frequently encounter during the course of my fieldwork. It was up to individuals whether or not to take advantage of the "door" always being open and accept invitations to "visit". Initially, I would routinely visit profiles out of a sense of duty to my research although over time and similar to my participants, I embraced the cultural activity of visiting and would keenly follow-up on invitations from friends on the site before visiting other community members. I did find, as Dunbar (1992) suggested, that there was a limit to how many people I could meaningfully interact with. This is reflected by my field notes; the friendships I formed list detailed and copious interactions are noted whereas notes of members that I casually interacted with are less frequent, and those with whom I had little or no personal interaction only detail their profile content. Time restraints for fostering new friendships while nurturing established friendship strained my energy and to some extent my enthusiasm to continually expand my friendship circle. Certainly, at least for me, I can confirm Hill and Dunbar's (2003) expanded theory on the limitations of human capacity to sustain large numbers of socially networked friends in meaningful ways (there is more on friendship in chapter 4).

Activities associated with invitations to participate in the community were varied and interesting. One greeter, Ladyjac, who also listed a number of activities to participate in, requested in 2009 that I visit her page and sign her guestbook with "450 signatures from 24 countries and counting", (see Image 7, below). Specially designed widgets

(software) taken from elsewhere on the web and loaded onto homepages collected the statistics of visitors and reassembled them into country of origin of the visitor to be observed at a glance where members lived in the world.[16] In the course of my fieldwork, I signed many members' homepage visitor widgets. The place of origin widget was novel, interesting and fun; it also served as reminder that the membership was international.

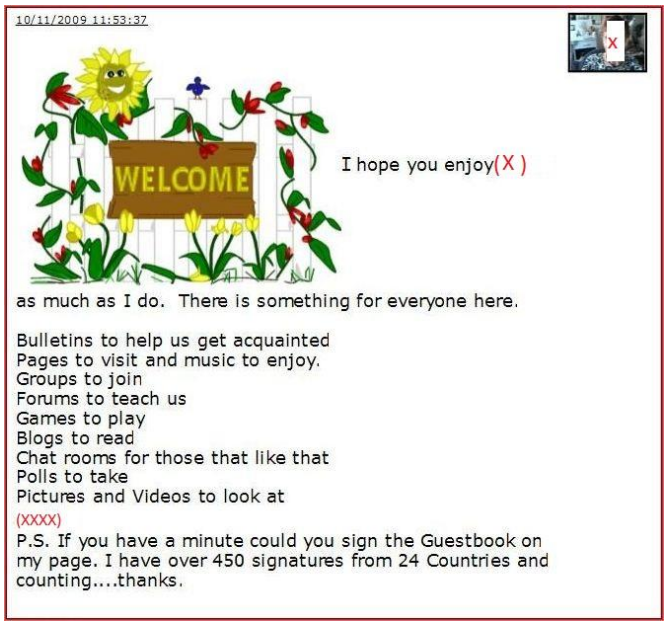

Image 7 Welcome message: graphic and text

Listing activities that were available to new members was also a common theme in the welcome messages. New members were assured that there was "something for everyone here". Another member, who later became a key participant in my research, offered tips on the best places on the site to post information about my project and advised me to "just ask, because we don't know what you want until you tell us" (LillianGrace 2009). While another, Malcolm, generously offered me advice on how to do my research! There was no shortage of activities to engage with on the site; games, chat, blogs, forums, groups, bulletin messaging, private messaging, leaving guestbook

[16] At the time of welcoming me to the site, Ladyjac had visitors from 24 of the 34 countries represented by members on the site.

entries, watching videos, listening to uploaded music, taking member's polls, sending birthday wishes, welcoming new members, congratulating featured members, designing and updating profile pages, writing blogs, and so forth, were all activities that were utilized by members on a daily basis. Over time I learned to participate in most of these activities. I also developed a mild addiction for playing a game on the site called "Bubble Shooter"![17]

Phrases brought from offline social worlds to the online environment, such as "grab your favorite drink, kick off your shoes, get comfortable and have lots of fun" (LittleGran 2009), and "from my place to yours we are thrilled you joined us here" (UKgirl 2009) brought to mind what we might expect in an offline social setting. These were offline practices that I could relate to when socialising at home; it felt welcoming and hospitable to be approached by strangers in such a familiar way.

By engaging with offline social rituals in an online context that was familiar, reassuring and non-threatening, the welcome messages effectively created a sense of knowing what to expect and at the same time a feeling of being socially included in the community; the "family". There were many references to "the group" as being a "fun" place where new "friends" could be found, and where the opportunity to explore a "new adventure" awaited, as well as the site being a place where "new knowledge" could be obtained. As a new member, these messages made me feel welcomed and interested to learn more.

Bird (2003:57) explains that just being subscribed to an online listserv (or forum) does not result in the forming of a community and that community in her research group required "nurturing and rules" that were enforced through place-bound practices. On *The Roost*, familiar practices brought from offline, as evidenced in the welcome

[17] Although bubble shooter is a solitary game, scores were listed against member's name on the site. Friendly competition and bantering between contestants added fun to playing. I remained at the bottom of the ladder to the amusement of members, my excuse being that I spent less time playing than the others. When I left the field, I found a web-based replacement game but without the friendly interactions with others, I quickly lost interest in playing (see www.shooter-bubble.com).

messages, were methods from offline place-bound practices that became embedded into the online social practices of *The Roost* via the Welcome Wagon philosophy of sharing. Sharing is also teaching the shared practices of the community by way of example (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992; Gee 2005; Wenger 1998). A new member is taught what to expect from the online community and by example learns to socially interact within that community in a friendly, caring, and non-threatening way. The messages also served to reinforce a culture of community participation and inclusion. Engagement is transferred from one to another as an activity that is accepted, encouraged and shared effectively connecting members with each other to build relationships such as friendships.

The messages also demonstrated the kind of culture, in this case nurturing and inclusive, that I could expect to find as a new member of the community (also see Burmeister et al. 2012; Ito et al. 2001). The graphics and content of the messages initiated a process of enculturation. Enculturation is the process of becoming incorporated into the culture of the community, which arises out of social interaction.[18]

Graphics and animations were used throughout the website as guestbook entries, in private messages, for decorating profiles, as enhancements to bulletin announcements, in forums and in blogs to emphasize content in blog entries, and in signatures. My participants described them as "pretty" and "glittering" personalization of messages. An enormous amount of time and energy—emotional and artistic expression—is employed to create and make these graphics, which are invested with, not only the personality, likes and dislikes of the creator, but also invested with consideration for the project in which they are intended. The significance of the graphics reaches far beyond "pretty" and "glittering" personalization of messages. My research shows that they are complex

[18] Enculturation and socialisation are theoretically closely related however Margret Mead (1963:185) argued that they should be studied separately. In her definition, enculturation is "the process of leaning a culture" and socialisation is "the set of species-wide requirements and exactions made on human beings by human societies". Acculturation and assimilation describes the processes of accommodation and change that results between differing cultural groups when they come into first contact (Herskovits, Redfield, and Linton 1936; Teske and Nelson 1974).

gifts that signify online presence (see next chapter). Even if I had not been a researcher, these messages would have been impossible to ignore. An alternative reaction to the greetings is discussion in chapter 7.

The invitations in the welcome messages generated activity, and activity fostered opportunities for community participation and social inclusion and social interaction amongst members. Boyd (2006:2) has argued that "friendship helps people write community into being in social network sites". The welcome wagon messages certainly initiated opportunities for friendship forming by offering a contextual forum in which to participate with others even though this was not obligatory.

My initiation into the community commenced by reciprocating the messages and visiting each profile individually to leave a thank you text message (it would take some time before I was able to learn how to make and use graphics). The welcome messages heralded the beginnings of thousands of social-interaction exchanges I would have online. Like a game of ping pong, messages started flowing back and forth and I began to form friendships, and some of these friendships would be extended beyond the confines of the website to include email, chat programmes, Skype, telephone calls, face-to-face interviews, and home stays.

Conclusion

In the first instance people were drawn to this social networking site because they wanted to interact with people of a similar age to themselves. Many participants (and other members) confirmed that they were attracted to *The Roost* because it was a site designed for people their own age. As one participant offered as an explanation for choosing to join *The Roost*:

> I saw something about a new group, especially for us folks who are out of our teens & 20s but still not over the hill. I thought it was a great idea! I joined & have never looked back since. (Quirita 2009)

Joining the online community of *The Roost* was embedded with the activity of bringing one's self to life within the frames of the empty profile boxes using words, graphics and/or animations, and community begins with the interactions that the members of the group initiate and maintain with each other as caring and nurturing older people.

In many ways doing fieldwork online was not too dissimilar from doing fieldwork offline. It presented many of the same kinds of challenges associated with traditional ethnographic work in a foreign culture. I knew no one, and I had no understanding of the HTML language. I was not familiar with this particular online culture and it was not too dissimilar from endeavouring to find my way around in a new environment without a map. I did not know what was or was not acceptable behaviour within this online community nor did I know anything about the customs of this group. My introduction to the community was an initiation process via bringing myself to life that all new members negotiate upon joining.

The activity of bringing myself to life on my profile was similar to the traditional concept of "arriving in the field"; the physical setting down of a suitcase, unpacking it, and acclimatizing to the new environment constitutes arriving in a physical place. The difference between arriving in the field offline and arriving in the field online were the welcome messages. Without some form of acknowledgement online, there would have been no "arrival" and without the acknowledgement of my profile, my profile would have just been another page, on a website, on the Internet. The welcome messages sent by caring and nurturing community members offered support, information, and invitations to participate with other members. This activity was the backbone of the friendship culture of *The Roost*.

I too became enculturated into the community through a process of accounting for myself, consciousness of self, and transitioning rites of passage. For me, my every waking moment was consumed with the everyday lives of this group of older people, most of whom I would never meet, but came to care about on a daily basis. In the next chapter I investigate the characteristics of the various modes of communication used on the site to argue for a vitality of presence that attracts and nurtures friendship forming.

3

Vitality of Presence: Glitz, Pics, and Animations

Profile Attractions, Interactions

For yours truly the things we favour,
a sense of humour we do savour,
a tinge of naughtiness to add to flavour.
Graphic art, done personally, with personality,
layouts showing imaginative artistry.
To challenge my lack of sophistication,
a sense of humour to add to my elation.
Insights into different cultural locations.

The desire to understand and tolerate,
other opinions, on the latest ''Gate''
of this planet that we all share,
other's thoughts and how they care.

A sense of humour is for what we look,
and pictures of tasty temptations from a cook.
There being many cooks with the amazing gift
of culinary expertise to tease my midriff.

But we cannot complain as we look again,
our humour's sense put under strain.
So there be lots to see out on *The Roost*,
variety is the spice of life, a boost.
Though we take time out now and then,
like the prodigal son, we return again, and again.

~ Carrie 2009 ~

My most startling observation regarding *The Roost* was the extensive utilization of graphics by the members. Graphics and a range of other images including text formatting were used as a method of communication that resulted in some form of social interaction between members. The use of imagery was endemic and filtered though all aspects of the site's activities, including guestbook entries, bulletin notices, private messages, forums, groups, and blogs, as well as being extensively used to individualise and decorate homepages.

Image use and the character of the social interactions that accompanied them changed depending on the mode for communicating on the site. In this chapter I describe the character of these communicative tools, designed for social interaction, to argue for vitality of presence online. I also consider the difference between presence and being present online with an analysis of *The Roost* memorial pages. Due to space limitations, the discussion is limited to a selection of modes of communication that generated significant proportions of the activity on the site to encourage social interaction amongst members. These were the "fun" areas of the site that my participants repeatedly told me kept them "busy", "interested" and socially engaged on a daily basis. I examine profile images, homepages, guestbook entries, the private and public messaging system, text formatting, and the under-researched online fun factor for older people (De Schutter and Vanden Abeele 2015; Kanayama 2003). I use the term 'images' to include photos, graphics, smileys, emoticons, and animations that have been used as content for the site by members.[19] I discuss text formatting as a separate category although text formatting on the site was used as a form of image that could be viewed and understood as a decorative communicative tool.

Images were applied throughout the site in a variety of differing ways and for various reasons, and without exception all of my participants used images in one form or another to add meaning to their communications online. All of the members I

[19] Emoji (two-dimensional pictographs) were not available on the site but are similar to emoticons (see Kelly and Ryan 2015).

communicated with off the site also used graphics and/or altered their own photographs for use in emails. Graphic use extended beyond online use too. Carrie, an 85-year-old, surprised me by attaching glittering stickers to the envelopes of handwritten correspondence between us. To anyone not familiar with the ways in which graphics were embedded into the everyday activities of *The Roost*, the attached stickers might have seemed childlike, perhaps even silly, but for me they were an extension of the online interactions that we had been sharing for a number of months; these simple gestures were touching and a delight to receive. When I asked him about their use, he told me that the motivation for using stickers on "snail mail" was for "the fun of it and to personalise mail according to who the recipient be". On *The Roost* his use of images was designed "to add interest, feeling, amusement and perhaps to emphasize unspoken comment". Carrie's experience of using images, both on and offline, was common amongst members and participants; they were fun and added intent to communication with each other.

In the previous chapter I described the welcome messages that overwhelmed and surprised me with friendly greetings and inclusive graphics that acknowledged my arrival into the community. Papacharissi (2002a, 2002b) has shown that the technology of a social media site and the design tools it supplies, together with the expertise of the user, influences the look of a personal homepage; the home page becomes a media product and the author its producer. Yet, the homepage is more than a media product. Boyd (2011:43) has pointed out that "profiles are where conversations occur" and this is certainly the case on this site. On *The Roost*, homepages were the cornerstone for viewing details about members as well as the place where social interaction amongst members was initiated via guestbook entries as well as access to the private messaging system.

De Schutter and Vanden Abeele (2015) have noted that scholarship connected to fun and play for older people online is concerned with skills improvement related to physical age-related constraints that prevents older people from playing online games

for fun. They consider this to be a form of ageism in games. This reductionist perspective on ageing reinforces ageing as a process of decline and debilitation. Instead, they suggest, digital games are for all ages, including older adults, and should not be marketed solely for the purpose of mitigating age related decline; rather the focus should be on enjoying the game (playfulness over usefulness). While interactions on *The Roost* are not related to gaming but rather to social interaction, graphics and the use of images were used considerably throughout the site for fun and play especially in respect to the ageing body.

In a longitudinal study of older people in the UK, interviewee responses were spiced with humour similar to those expressed on *The Roost*. Coleman et al (2015) found that a sense of humour contributed towards a positive outlook on life, especially in the advanced years, and was used to "defuse negative feelings in the face of growing disability and threat to well-being" (2015:226). Humour, expressed with images related to ageing and the ageing body, played a significant role in the social interactions amongst members of *The Roost*.

Baym (2010:62) has suggested that the performance of humour and playfulness online can lead to a "sense that there is a real person behind otherwise anonymous text". She goes on to say:

> Our expressions of emotions and immediacy show others that we are real, available, and that we like them, as does our willingness to entertain them. Our playful conventions and in-jokes may create insider symbols that help groups cohere. These phenomena are only enhanced by the additional cues found in shared video, photography, sound, and other multimedia means of online interaction.

Humour is a core group value on *The Roost* that informs the ageing identity of the group. On *The Roost*, humour and playfulness are enhanced by the use of images, including animations, although sound was not available other than in music players.

There is a large body of research on the use of smileys related to instant messaging and other chat formats (see for example, Bays 2010; Danet 2001; Jacobson 2007; Randall 2002; Yahoo! 2007) and, although graphics are not used in instant messaging, it is possible to draw some similarities with their use on *The Roost*. Bays (2010:48) suggests that the use of 'smileys' on instant messaging acts as "perceptual cues for understanding interaction", and that animations on instant messaging are "interactive rather than content conveying devices" (2010:59). On *The Roost*, while various forms of imagery (including animations, graphics, and smileys) do act as perceptual cues they also provided members with an interactive element as well as conveying content in messages.

Silvio (2010) points out that animation as a performance trope brings visible attention to the many ways in which people currently experience the self as a connection between social, technological, and psychological. Many of the animations shared on *The Roost* were associated with humour related to the ageing body for example, an animated old man with a walking stick or animated old woman in a rocking chair were commonly used. An older person might write, "I am tired today", but if an animated rocking chair is added to the message the ageing body is brought into the conversation. The images below are animations that demonstrate the experience of the ageing self brought to the online context in animated format.

Image 8 Animated graphic of embodied ageing

Raine, Brenner and Purcel (2012) from the Pew Research Center refer to Internet users on social media who post *original* photos or videos to share as 'creators', and those who *find* photos or videos to repost and share as 'curators' (my emphasis). Members of *The Roost* were both creators and curators; they were also engaged in creatively *altering* their own photos as well as downloaded images.[20] These images were often embedded with personal messages that were shared on an individual basis with friends (personalised) or generally with the broader community (for example, season's greetings). In this mode, they became not only creators and curators but also designers of content that specifically targeted recipients with appropriately intended meanings.

Frequently images were merged into composites effectively remaking an image to personalise the content. The playful image reprinted below, is an example taken from my welcome, induction and introduction to members of a group that I joined on the site. My profile photo and information were taken (without permission in order to surprise me) from my homepage to be superimposed with images from elsewhere in a humorous and fun way.

[20] Images on the site were predominantly taken from free-content websites, although not always.

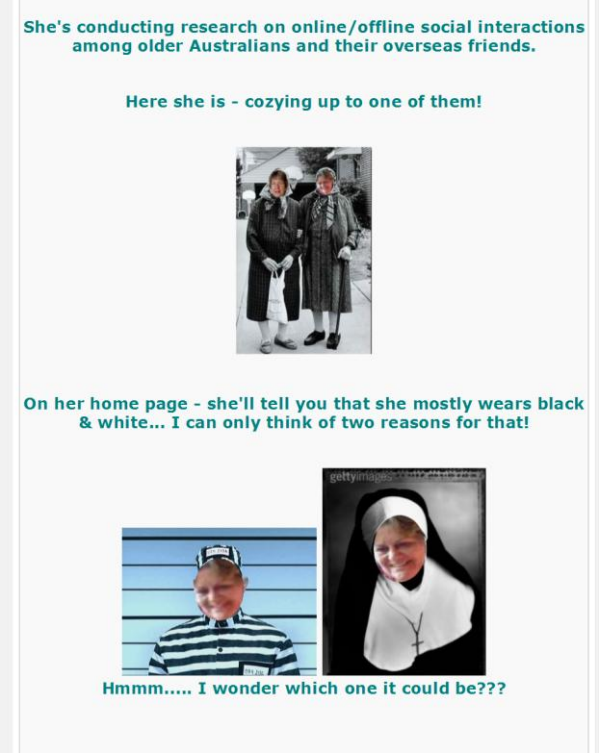

Image 9 Example of merging images to create a graphic

Nearly all image altering was conducted on *PhotoBucket* (photobucket.com), which is an online video and photo hosting website/server that offers live links to where the image is posted. Alternatively, images were designed and created by using software such as *Gimp* or *Photoshop* installed on home computers. Because *PhotoBucket* was supported by the site with live links, it was the preferred method for uploading images as edited content.[21] It was common practice to save images (used and not yet used) to private computers or external hard drives as "backup" for profiles or as a source for potential "future" use on homepages and elsewhere. Images were valued objects created, designed, and archived for use as communicative tools to enhance social interaction between members.[22]

[21] Problems associated with broken live links is discussed in the In Memoriam section of this chapter.
[22] For a discussion on virtual objects see Brey (2014).

In the next section, I begin by examining profile images to contextualise these images on the site and the meanings attached to them by members. The profile image is a feature of the homepage and is the most visibly consistent image across every aspect of *The Roost*. I follow this with a discussion of the homepage as a mode of communication where guestbook sociality occurs.

Profile image: visible accessibility

Every profile had the option for uploading an image and the choice of image was decided by the individual. Boyd and Ellison (2007:211) have suggested that, while social networking sites provide a wide variety of technical features, the "backbone of these sites is the visibility of user's profiles". They refer to this as a mechanism for "public display" which has the purpose or intent to make connections with other members of the site visible (2007:213). On *The Roost*, an essential component of this "visibility" was via the use of the profile image with the express purpose to make friends. The profile image was used throughout the site as a clickable link that immediately opened that individual's homepage for viewing. It was possible to click a username, but the preferred method was to use the profile image.[23] Another feature of the profile image was that it provided evidence of a member viewing your profile by leaving a footprint of the profile image of the viewer, which was also clickable. This easy and simple pathway to other member's profiles provided not only visibility but also accessibility to other members.

Within scholarly discourse, avatars are commonly referenced and discussed in relation to virtual worlds, especially games. Silvio (2010) explains that the term avatar was taken from the Hindu/Buddhist religious vocabulary—avatar, the embodied form of a deity, during the development of online software. On *The Roost*, participants frequently

[23] Often only the profile image was visible until the mouse was hovered over the image to reveal the member's name.

referred to profile images that were not personal photographs as 'avatars', although the site was not understood to be a virtual world. Contrary to Tom Boellstorff's (2008:119) study of the virtual world of Second Life where "residents" could have many accounts with a variety of different "personas" represented by avatars (created images to match the personas), members of *The Roost* had one profile and one profile image (although this could be changed). For members on *The Roost*, avatars were considered an expression of the self in the same way an image or a photo would be. Generally, the term avatar was used to describe an image chosen as a representation of the self rather than a photo of the self. The overwhelming preference and customary practice on *The Roost* was for the placement of a face photo. Nevertheless, for some on *The Roost*, an alternative to a face photo, was a source of creativity. As BluePenguin pointed out:

> I find a symbol of myself to be more of a creative statement than a photo of myself. I enjoy seeing the avatars that people chose to represent themselves. I would rather be judged for my words than for myself. (BluePenguin 2010)

BluePenguin's creative image was a photo of a penguin sitting on a keyboard wearing blue flippers.[24] She gave no further explanation for her choice but I did learn, via email, that she is a creative writer, which explains her preference to be "judged" by her words. Words expressed online are very much part of the self (see chapter 7).

For AussieWoman, "a <u>need</u> for caution and privacy" (AussieWoman's emphasis) were essential online and for that reason she would not post a photo of herself "anywhere online", but would, if asked, "send a photo to an online friend". AussieWoman's profile image is of a butterfly, which she told me fitted in with her "spiritual beliefs". It also represented "a symbol of transformation". In a focus-group discussion she shared the reasons for her choice of using the image of a butterfly:

[24] This description has been altered for anonymity.

> This is a little story about my avatar, the butterfly. I usually go for a twenty minute walk on dusk and the first 250 meters are on a main road. As I was nearing my first corner I happened to glance down and there on the road lying on her side was a dying butterfly with crumpled wings.
>
> I thought that she had had an unfortunate meeting with a car, so I picked her up thinking that I would put her in the scrub so as to avoid any further mishaps and allowing her to die in peace. I gently tried to put her down on the ground with a little shake and her feet gripped my hand very tightly and would not let go. I tried to brush her off, however, she just gripped tighter so I gently cupped my hand round her and took her on my walk on the brush track round a big paddock. I could feel her little feet holding on and soft little movements. I kept peeking at her thinking that she was dying.
>
> When I got home, I opened my hand and she still did not seem to want to leave, so I put her in a lavender bush and watched to see what would happen. Over the next hour she started to move more vigorously and her wings began to straighten. I was very excited and took photos. In a couple of hours she had gone about her butterfly business. I regard the event as a miracle for one little butterfly and she is a special memory for me. (AussieWoman 2010)

AussieWoman's narration of her experience with the butterfly accounts for the personal experience of her choice of image. It is not a random image lifted off the Internet, it has significant personal meanings attached to how she understands her 'self'. When I met and stayed with AussieWoman in her home, it was a pleasure to discover that her enormous garden was busy with all kinds of different butterflies going about their business (see chapter 7). In AussieWoman's case, the choice of a butterfly image, and the accompanied story, offer a glimpse into her everyday life that a photo of herself would not have provided.

BluePenguin and AussieWoman were exceptions; very few members chose an image in place of a face photograph. Nevertheless, other images were acceptable as they presented insights to the person behind the profile in a similar way to that of AussieWoman's butterfly. The image a member chose was perceived to offer, like clues to a puzzle, additional information about the person, and others were able to recognize this.

> I don't mind when 'friends' use avatars. When I choose one, I use a 'sparkly cat'--I love cats & I love anything that's sparkly, lol. I think sometimes an avatar shows more about yourself than an actual photo, whether or not you realize it. (JulieAnn 2010)

Throughout the course of my fieldwork JulieAnn often switched between a variety of images including "sparkly" cats that she created and different photos of herself. Her homepage was also consistently decorated with cat images. She also had many photographs in her album of her home and family, including the family cat.

The majority of members on *The Roost* used photos. Participants and members expressed that, while they preferred to see a photo of the people they were interacting with, it was not necessary for contact or interaction.

> People seem to respond more often when an actual picture is used. I like to be able to see the person I'm talking with if possible. (KatCan 2010)

> I like to see photos of people but also like to look at the variety of other images some use to portray themselves. I use a photo, although it is a few years old and I have altered quite a lot since it was taken. This is the only forum where I put my photo on display as I feel safe and with friends here. I am attracted to those profiles that have

> photos, but it isn't a determining factor as to whether I want to communicate with them. (NTLady 2010)

The sharing of offline lives for many included sharing a photo of themself online. The choice of image was as unique as it was reflective of the individual.

Privacy (although not anonymity) was a concern for Blitz, who was initially "reluctant to put a picture on her page", so she used a "cartoon image" instead. But as she "began to collect friends", she found it easier to "recognize faces rather than images" and "after a short time put up a picture" of herself. As QLDman pointed out:

> A photo is a nice personal touch. Which then draws me to see what their interests and outlook on life is all about. (QLDman 2009)

During the course of the discussion on profile images, Seniorita initially felt that because she did not have a "current photo" to share, rather than have "no picture available", she preferred to "use other things" that she had "learned to download" while on the site. Seniorita's lack of experience and an inability to produce a suitable photo using "crop and resize" facilities forced her to use alterative images, but she maintained that by using other images she had "nothing to hide". Her choice of profile image was one of a human-like angel, which she said reflected her "religious leanings". Seniorita's statement that she had "nothing to hide", brings to mind Goffman's (1990:26) theory of the technique that a person employs for "impression management" of the self for others. Yet for Seniorita, the process was linked to her lack of technical expertise.

Assistance with resizing images to use in profiles was a common query from members in the help forums. It was customary on the site that whenever someone experienced a problem with working with photos or graphics, a member with more knowledge would offer support. As a consequence of the discussion concerning profile images, another member of the focus-group came to Seniorita's rescue and offered information on how

to resize a photo suitable for use as a profile image. A couple of months later, she posted the following comment to the focus-group discussion:

> I found a disk of pictures of about 2 yrs ago, so using the info I've learned here on [*The Roost*]. I used Paint to crop out my picture, saved it to my computer, and walla! Now you have a picture to put with my name. (Seniorita 2009)

Seniorita's close up photo of her smiling face was received very positively by other members of the group. Mia's unrestrained comment of "Way to go Seniorita girl! So glad to "see" ya!" expressed the importance placed by members on "seeing" who they are "talking" to, and it also acknowledged her perseverance to learn how to do something new. This kind of support and feedback was an essential community practice that encouraged members to stay connected and to continue learning challenging aspects of technology. For the remainder of my time on the site, Seniorita kept the photo of her smiling face as her profile image.

The profile image was the face, the personal presence, of all the interactions on the site; it also represented the presence left behind as a footprint on homepages after a visit, and it was the leader for all comments placed elsewhere on the site. The profile image was both visible and accessible to all members. As Carrie's aptly titled poem reminds us, regardless of the image used, it was the profile image that attracted members' curiosity toward another member, and this encouraged them to click on the profile image for the direct link to that person's homepage where social interaction on a personal level occurred.

The Roost is predominantly an anonymous social networking site, yet member preference was to provide genuine and honest information about themselves including profile photos and other information on their homepages. The motivation for older people to self-represent honestly and with some accuracy is linked to a desire to form genuine and sustained friendships with strangers from around the world.

Homepage: personally and with personality

The homepage and profile page were understood to mean a single location on the website that was dedicated to an individual or a location on the site. Viewing profile information on homepages was the predominant pathway to initializing contact with other members. Aside from providing textual information regarding likes and dislikes, interests, and so forth, decorating one's homepage with images was a common activity in which the majority of members participated. Even if a member chose not to decorate their homepage, in the time I was on the site, it was rare for members not to have some sort of profile image. A profile that did not display an image was usually in the "bringing to life" phase of a new member or in the process of replacing one image with another.

It is important to note that the homepage or the profile page are terms that are interchangeable dependent upon the viewing process but are in fact the same page. Profile details or information about the member (username, profile image, age, date of birth and interests) are all managed via the homepage and referenced as profile information. Interactions from members were posted on a member's homepage via the guestbook, and viewing one's own information was understood to be viewing or working on one's homepage. It was not uncommon for members to make interchangeable statements such as, "I left you a message on your homepage" or "Where I live is on my profile".

The website's homepage with its recognisable logo was the source of daily notices for birthday announcements, featured member listings, the location for the community Shoutbox (similar to twitter), membership counter, daily tips and tricks from the administrators, and from time to time other community announcements from the administrators. The site's homepage also listed members who were currently online, as well as a daily listing of new members; it was the hub for information that fostered social interaction.

A member's homepage was the first point of reference to investigating whether it would be possible to form a friendship based on the information provided about their likes and dislikes, and other information about who they were (discussed in chapter 4). Boyd (2011:43) has shown that "profiles represent the individual and serve as the locus of interaction" that have been "actively crafted to be seen by others". As with any other social networking site, members of *The Roost* decided how they wished to present themselves to others with the tools available to them. Nearly all my participants invested time and effort into creating a homepage packed with personal information, photos, and/or graphics. Across the site, every imaginable image format was used in one form or another on homepages.

The homepage was the personal space on the site where members could be as creative or as imaginative as they wished. Boyd and Ellison (2007:217) have pointed out that MySpace was the first of the social networking sites to provide users with added features that allowed the personalisation of user pages. On MySpace, a "copy/paste code culture emerged on the web to support users in generating unique MySpace backgrounds and layouts" (2007:217). One of the basic functions on *The Roost* was to offer the ability to alter profile borders, colours, fonts, background layouts, and foreground overlays similar to that of MySpace. For the more adventurous, it was possible to upload images, music players, widgets, and personally designed overlays to decorate the generic homepage. Papacharissi (2002b:656) has linked the use of these sorts of creative accessories as projects of "technological competence". It was not unusual for new members of *The Roost* to be lacking in technological competence. Nevertheless, a willingness to learn and share knowledge with each other meant that members gained competence with technology over time.

> My latest background is a [Roost] one. How easy to do! Virtually make your choice, copy the pages of code and then paste them into the right place and it's done! (VicGirl 2010)

Individually created background layouts and overlays were frequently shared in *The Roost* help forums. Changing homepages was a popular activity amongst the membership.

Weather and geographical widgets as well as music players made the page interactive on a more personal level. Allowing visitors to sign a geographical widget announced the location in the world of a visitor, while audio stimulation from music players offered insight into the music taste of the member while simultaneously reading the content of their page. As one would expect from such a large community of people from around the world with varying decades of age groups represented, the music tastes across the site were eclectic. Some homepages when opened played music automatically, which added to the pleasure and fun of visiting members' pages. As Blitz explains:

> It's fun when a song comes on that I know. I start singing along. I always leave a comment when I do! (Blitz 2009)

For others such as AussieWoman, slow Internet speeds were a problem that inhibited some member's ability to enjoy these interactions.

> I don't visit the pages overloaded with animations and music. My Internet is too slow". (AussieWoman 2009)

Papacharissi (2002b:656) links excessive "bells and whistles" on homepages to "uncontrolled enthusiasm" that asserts individual creativity. Certainly, on *The Roost* there was enthusiasm for individual creativity resulting in homepages that were slow to load. Comments such as AussieWoman's were frequently posted in open forums in part as a complaint about homepages that had been excessively styled with movement and sound, and in part to let people know that not everyone had fast Internet speeds.

Home away from home

Homepages were decorated based on the amount of time and energy available to update profiles and the level of experience the user had with technology to be able to produce graphical layouts. For those who did enjoy updating their homepage, it was as much about the pleasure it gave to others as it was about being creative. For my participants, the experience of an online homepage was compared to their homes:

> Our profile page is like the front door to our home...I think some of us like to make it as pleasant & attractive & welcoming as we can. Those of us who have the time and the ability to change everything from the graphics to the colours & more...can have great fun doing it!! (Quirita 2009)

> I feel my page is like a welcome mat to people, be them friends or just visitors browsing. It is always nice when they take the time to write a comment and compliment you on your effort. (Blitz 2009)

> In an on-line community such as this, our page is our home. Offline, we decorate our home to suit not only our tastes and style, but we also decorate for different Holidays and Seasons. So it seems to me that decorating our on-line home to reflect something about us, or a Holiday, or season is no different. (Saser 2009)

Not everyone had time to invest in creating decorative profiles. As NTlady commented, "between reading on forums and playing with my dogs, I don't get to do a lot of things I'd like to". Participating in the forums and blogs was more important to her than time spent "fiddling" with her homepage. However, she did acknowledge that she tried to "put special greetings" on her page, "like for Christmas, New Year etc". During my time on *The Roost*, themed decorating of homepages was an activity that nearly all members who maintained a presence online participated in.

Seasonal creativity

Personalising the homepage for calendar events reflected offline national identities, but also served a method by which members could celebrate the diversity of the membership. This activity involved either creating or searching for images to upload that were related to the major calendar events of the year. Homepages were decorated for religious holidays such as Christmas and Easter, commencement of the four seasons of the year with northern and southern hemisphere differences, Mother's Day, St Patrick's Day, Father's Day, Valentine's Day and, depending on which country a member was from, national holidays were observed by themed homepage changes too. The creative involvement was individual and varied between participants. LillianGrace, in her early 80s, offers the following insights to her creativity on the site:

> I like to decorate my page so I do it for New Year, St Patrick's, Easter and Christmas, I think that's all. When I do them, well usually a long time before the event, I get some ideas and can't resist implementing them.
>
> Everyone likes to have their page looking good for visitors, rather after the fashion of making sure your house is clean and tidy when visitors are expected.
>
> I like to be unique and don't have the skills to do that, so I have to use material from the same sites that everyone else gets theirs from. When I'm not doing a theme page, I can use my own photos and be different. (LillianGrace 2010)

For some, changing the homepage was an activity in itself. JulieAnn, in her late 60s and living in the USA, was a fervent homepage designer and each change she made was an elaborate production of graphics that glittered and moved. For JulieAnn changing her homepage was related to developing new skills, and calendar events were an opportunity to display her creativeness.

> You know me, any excuse for a 'change', lol to use neat new graphics! At the moment my page is 'purple themed'. My plan was to change the background to lilacs using photos from previous years. However I was bored yesterday and decided to try some new ideas. Right now that one is SciFi with Capt Janeway photo as the background and different SciFi photos from other TV shows. So right now it's a tossup whether I use that for my next 'theme' or stick with my original idea, or do something else!
>
> I only do a holiday theme page for the ones that I like, which for me means ones that just 'beg' for neat graphics like Halloween, Christmas, St Pat's Day, etc. At home I only celebrate Christmas. (JulieAnn 2010)

The above testimonials emphasise a common theme amongst my participants in that nearly everyone in the community embraced the major world calendar events regardless of whether they celebrated these at home or not. Changing homepages is not only a personal activity but a community inspired activity as well. The diversity and multicultural dynamics (religion, ethnicity) of the interactions between members was celebrated publically by using themed graphics for world calendar events not just local ones.

Blitz from Queensland, Australia, who was in her 70s, took pride in her homepage changes and made changes in part to please herself and have fun, but also she hoped that visitors would enjoy the changes too. In her testimony below, Blitz makes the point that showing off her Australian lifestyle to visitors was important to her.

> I feel my page is like a welcome mat to people, be them friends or just visitors browsing. It is a lot of fun to do.
>
> I probably don’t change as regularly as some. I did go all out with an Australia day page and probably kept it on longer than usual for a

> one day event. I am a proud Aussie and there are not a lot of Aussies on [*The Roost*] and I wanted to show something of our lifestyle and country.
>
> Valentine, Halloween and Thanksgiving they are not traditional celebrations 'downunder' either, but I do add a few appropriate pictures at the time with my wishes etc. When Easter is finished I will change my page and then probably again three or four times before Christmas. (Blitz 2010)

Blitz's comments demonstrate the importance national identity plays on an international social networking website (Miller and Slater 2000). Posted greetings from friends and visitors celebrating the day being commemorated confirms respect and acknowledgement of another country's cultural practices within *The Roost* community. It was not unusual, for example, for an Australian to leave a graphic of a pumpkin during Thanksgiving or for a Canadian to wish an Australian a "happy Australia day" and so forth. Calendar events were an opportunity for social interaction amongst the members in which nationalistic rituals were acknowledged as an online activity generated from offline cultural practices brought to the online context. Celebrating these events together created community cohesiveness that demonstrated tolerance for diversity amongst members. More importantly, it created an atmosphere for the social inclusion of all members.

Guestbook sociality

The ability to leave guestbook entries on a member's homepage was another significant mode of communication on the site where images played a major role. Boyd (2011:43) has pointed out that "profiles are where conversation happens" on social networking sites, and this was certainly the case on *The Roost*. The guestbook was located on each individuals' homepage with the facility to "leave a comment" via a text box. By default, the guestbook was open to all members whose profile had not been set to "friends only"

in which case only friends could interact with that person (see chapter 6). It was not compulsory to leave a message when visiting a profile because the system recorded all visits with a clickable profile image. Even so, it was the routine practice of members to leave a comment to indicate that they had "dropped in" for a "visit" or as the playful image suggests below, were "sliding by to say hi".

Image 10 Guestbook entry visit: animated online presence[25]

These interactions were evidence of online presence that documented the numerous daily, and sometimes hourly, feelings and emotions related to the sender's everyday life events and practices. Messages left as entries on a member's guestbook varied enormously from the deeply personal, such as condolences, to light bantering about the weather. If we think about our offline social interactions and the variety of greetings we express to friends, family, acquaintances, colleagues, and even strangers during the course of a day, these were expressed in the online context with graphics as text or text enhanced with a graphic. A single created graphic could also be shared multiple times with friends rather than typing out individual notes.

[25] Graphic available for free from http://www.glitter-graphics.com/graphics/837010

On social media sites, Manning and Gershon (2013:108) have shown that online and offline practices are seen as "inextricably entwined", and this was evident on *The Roost* via guestbook entries. Greetings and messages included acknowledging the day or even the hour of the week, calendar events, get well wishes, birthday greetings, condolences, and congratulatory messages including the birth of grandchildren, wedding anniversaries and being selected as a featured member, to mention a few. However, the majority of the messages were concerned with notifying the receiver that a friend was online and thinking of them (see image below).

Image 11 Animated guestbook entry: friendship visit[26]

Frequently, several exchanges could be viewed between two people (or more) when the reply function was being used. In this way, multiple exchanges could be read as a public conversation between the parties concerned. The ability to view a conversation in this way highlighted the friendship between the members as they bantered or shared information publicly between each other.[27]

One memorable example of these exchanges occurred between myself and a participant in America. It was summer and daytime for her, and she was in the process of filling

[26] Blingee.com is a free web service for creating animated graphics that was popular with members.
[27] Conversations were also the subject of deletion by the receiver as well as during routine maintenance by the Administrators.

her wading pool while gleefully sending me photos of this event as it unfolded in her back garden. Geographic and time zone differences meant that for me it was winter and evening, so the images I was sending back were of warm fires, chocolates, and red wine. The graphics and photos that we were sharing linked offline events with online sociality and offered visual documentation of genuine intent to share each other's lives in the present moment. Even though the conflicting seasons of living in the northern or southern hemisphere highlighted different living conditions, these differences were negated in the amicable and playful exchanges between us. This playful interaction by two women in very different parts of the world was not uncommon on the site, and I observed many instances of this kind of interaction between members. For us, sharing a moment in synchronous time was fun, informative, and served to increase the bond of our developing friendship.

Although bantering in this way was common, the majority of comments were single entries from friends and other members of the community. Typically, guestbook entries were concerned with everyday social practices, such as exchanging greetings, well wishes, birthday messages, seasonal comments, and so forth, and in nearly all instances were reciprocated. These interactions were signifiers of online presence because each entry received alerted the recipient that someone had visited. There were occasions when guestbook entries noticed the absence of a friend. Questions such as, "I haven't seen you for ages. Are you okay?" or "Where are you?" and, often, "you are missed" indicated lack of online presence. For members on *The Roost,* lack of online presence was a worrying concern. Serious illness, such as a sudden heart attack or cancer treatments were reasons noted for absence of members upon their return. These exchanges highlighted the lack of online presence for those who noticed and cared (see chapter 6).

Private messages

The site offered a private messaging system similar to email in that these messages were private and only shared between the two individuals concerned. Predominantly, large graphics were absent from private messages, but smileycons, emoticons, and animated signature graphics were frequently used. Randall (2002:2) states:

> To simulate spoken communication, Internet users turn to a set of non-linguistic signs called emoticons, as well as linguistic play in the form of acronyms and abbreviations. Emoticons simulate speech—and in fact some of the bodily communications that accompanies speech—by providing physical expressions (mostly facial) that would be apparent in a spoken conversation.

Small graphics, emoticons, and smileycons were frequently used on *The Roost* in social exchanges between members not only as facial expressions but also to contextualise thoughts and ideas, physicality, and emotions.

Image 12 Sample of a private message smilecon

Private messages with a serious undertone were often "softened" with an image as the message exchanges below demonstrate. The context of these interactions was related to the timing of setting up the research focus-group. I was reluctant to start the group without as many participants as possible, and as a novice in setting up a group-forum on the site, I had made mistakes during this process, effectively prohibiting people that I had invited to join the group from actually joining. I had also failed to let my new friends know that my mother was seriously ill and that my daughter had flown out from

London to spend time with her grandmother. My absence had been observed by my lack of action in activating the focus-group. It was at this point that I began to understand the meaningfulness of socially interacting with members and the importance of communicating with friends or an absence would be noticed.

LillianGrace and Quirita were the first two participants to join the focus-group and were anxious to "get started". We had shared many fun and entertaining interactions via our guestbook pages and several emails involving consent forms to participate in the research endeavour had been completed. My first impressions of LillianGrace were of a no-nonsense personality; an opinionated and direct woman in her 80s with a sharp mind who had an aversion to "time wasters", "religion", and "busybodies". LillianGrace was also an experienced group host having initiated and maintained her own group for several years. She had also offered practical help for the "novice", me, in setting up the group for anthropology. Her message, reproduced below, acknowledged the help she gave me with the invitation process for joining groups on the site as well as receipt of her invitation from me to join. She was also alerting me to the fact that she may not stay in the group if it did not suit her. The message was blunt, to the point and lacked graphics.

> (no greeting)
> I'm so pleased you have found out how to invite people to a group, and thank you for your kind invitation.
> However, anthropology doesn't interest me at all. I will join if you like, but I can't see me remaining a member...but we don't know until we try!
> See you in a bit,
> Lilly. (19 November 2009)

Unaware of my family troubles and as she had not heard from me, I received a second message from Lilly, below. In the second message, she used a clever graphic to show her frustration by adding humour to temper the seriousness of the message content.

Hello Di,

I joined your Anthropology group and I'm still waiting to find out what you want me to do, or what questions you want me to answer. Let me know how I can be a contributing member, as I'm not into joining things and then doing nothing LOL.

Hugs, Lilly. (December 2009)

In the personally created graphic Lilly is grumbling about the lack of interaction from me in the research focus-group, she is dressed and ready! The graphic is notable because the previous correspondence with her was unusually devoid of any graphics. The text message is prompting me to act, which I chastised myself over as I read it, yet the graphic made me laugh. The message was conveyed and interpreted as it was intended; serious in content, but tempered with humour graphically .

I experienced a similar message exchange with Quirita. My perceptions of Quirita, who was in her late 60s, was of a friendly, educated, and family orientated person. All previous interactions with her on our guestbook pages had included graphics and emoticons. It was noticeable to me that Quirita's message, on the same topic, lacked any graphical enhancement.

> Hi there!
>
> Well ...I've been waiting & waiting for my first question but I have yet to hear from you. Have you been expelled from school?
>
> [Lilly] & I seem to be the only 2 volunteers to your study!! Now that's no good! I've a few other Aussie friends on my list & I can contact them & request that they get in touch with you if you want.
>
> [Seeya], Quirita. (December 2009)

Even though the words were clear, it was the lack of graphics on these messages that sent a clear signal to me that there was a problem that I needed to address. My response to Quirita was personal:

> Hi Quirita!
>
> I think some messages must have got lost! Mum has been critically ill. My daughter flew out from London to spend some time with her Nana (and me) so I haven't actually been around much.
>
> For reasons unknown to me I have been inviting people but they are unable to accept joining the group - very frustrating. I think I will just open the group up from private to public. Maybe that will solve the problem!
>
> Getting back into it! Hope all is well with you. *hugs* (December 2009)

These serious interactions prompted me to send out a bulletin notice to MyFriend list regarding the reason for the delay in getting started. At the time, my personal troubles and my lack of experience with using the site (technical incompetence) caused unintended problems for my participants. Once these difficulties were resolved and

everyone who wanted to participate had successfully joined, many hours of interactions within the group produced much of the data used in this thesis, and contrary to LillianGrace's reservations, she became a key participant in the research project.

Bulletin news

The bulletin messaging system was designed to stay in touch with those members who were listed as personal MyFriends. Once crafted, a single bulletin could be mass delivered into each friend's inbox and appear as an individual message. Bulletin notices were labelled by the system as a "bulletin". Labelling messages as bulletins effectively separated mass communication from personal messages at a glance.

Boyd (2006) has noted that bulletins were used on Friendster and MySpace to announce a wide variety of practices between friends, for example announcing changes to profiles, spreading gossip, informing friends of upcoming events, asking questions of friends, and even to rally people to act politically. Her participants "liked seeing others' bulletins" and this was reason enough to add someone as a friend (2006:13). Generally, members of *The Roost* had many more friends than they could keep up with on an individual basis, and it was the bulletin system that facilitated a simple method of staying in touch with all of them. The system was primarily utilized to circulate information en masse to these friends, for example alerting friends to being away, announcing a return, or giving updates on recovery after surgery.[28] As JulieAnn explains:

> Many of us use Bulletins to say hi & let people know what we're doing, or if we're not feeling well, or going to be away, etc. I read them every morning unless I have something I have to do first. I

[28] In two cases during my time in the field, bulletins were used to alert members of the broader community, via circulating the same information between friends of friends of the death of a member's loved one (see chapter 5).

> respond when friends say they are sick, or 'down', or have other problems, to let them know I'm here if they need me, etc. I also respond if they say something that 'clicks' with me. (JulieAnn 2010)

Not all bulletins were used in exactly the same way, but images nearly always accompanied bulletin messages.

Hello, Friends all over the world.
I send you some flowers again, to brighten your weekend. I hope it will be a good one for you.

Image 13 Weekly bulletin message

At the time of doing my research, SmockMill, age 69, had over 2,500 friends and held the status on the site for having the most friends.[29] On social networking sites, boyd (2006, 2011) refers to people who amass large numbers of friends as collectors in order to open up larger networks of friends to include strangers. On *The Roost*, everyone is a stranger to begin with. Carefully placed on SmockMill's home page is an invitation to all members to be his friend; no one is refused: "ask me, I accept everyone!" SmockMill's once a week bulletin always contained a photo of a flower or flowers taken

[29] This increased to 3,160 in December 2012 but has since dropped to 2,880 friends in March 2017 after his death in December 2012.

in his garden. The message was always the same and themed to wish the receiver an enjoyable weekend.

In an email interview SmockMill confirmed that all the flower photos were taken by him and explained, "It's my great hobby to take flower photos. I have hundreds of them" (SmockMill). In some of the photos he shared glimpses of his home and garden landscape. SmockMill's profile photo was of himself standing in the distance and looking out across a beautiful panoramic view of mountains near where he lived. On his homepage was a graphic with a quote from Socrates, "Get not your friends by bare compliments, but by giving them sensible tokens of your love". On a site that uses an enormous amount of imagery, the sensible token of photos of flowers to use as one wishes demonstrates the warmth of SmockMill towards his friends on *The Roost*. With very few words, SmockMill's images shared something of his offline world with his thousands of online friends who represented a significant (25 percent) proportion of the membership.

Similar to AussieWoman, his garden must be stunning and the photographs provided insight into his offline social world of tending his garden. SmockMill was an accomplished photographer who took superb weekly photographs in very high definition to share with his friends; "you can use the gallery photos for anything you like" was clearly stated on his profile. Aside from receiving consent from SmockMill to participate in the research, and his response to a question about where the photos he used came from, all interaction from him came via his weekly bulletin. The only other communication I had with him was via a single guestbook entry. This entry was in response to the many guestbook entries I left thanking him for his well wishes or to compliment him on his photography.

Another participant that I had very little contact with consistently sent out two bulletins every day throughout my time in the field. Every morning BrightStars, aged 70, would post a graphic embedded with the words "good morning" with no other message accompanying the graphic, and every evening she would send out a bulletin saying

"good night". Frequently, the graphics chosen were animated. From time to time, she would recycle a favourite graphic, but most days new graphics were sourced and used. No other message ever accompanied these graphics. If it were not for receiving these daily bulletins, I would not have been aware that she was online.

Image 14 Bulletin message: online presence

The good morning graphics were symbols for her online presence—I am here—that served to announce that she was actively participating on *The Roost*, and the good night graphic served to announce that she had left the site—I am gone—and would no longer be available to socially interact. SmockMill and BrightStar's messages were important signifiers of online presence, because they alerted friends and members of their presence or lack thereof on the site. This was especially relevant to anyone who had more friends than they could stay individually in touch with on a daily basis.

My participants were ambivalent towards the bulletin system. As MooMoo describes, below, it was something that the system provided that was tolerated or used for convenience.

> I don't respond to the bulletins, I think of them as general information, unless they are a prayer request, then I reply. Most of the time, it's just Happy Monday or Good Night, which is general info that I don't feel I have to reply to. And sometimes I read bulletins and some days I don't. (MooMoo 2010)

As I mentioned previously, messages were nearly always in the form of a graphic and many of these had attached text messages. If the graphic included words that conveyed the sender's meaning, no message was necessary or needed because the graphic was used to illustrate unspoken words.

Image 15 Graphic with animated embedded message

The above example is typical of an embedded message in a graphic that required no further explanation. When received on a Wednesday, the message is clear and, anyway, everyone likes jellybeans!

Aside from disseminating information to large groups of MyFriends, the bulletins also served as a tool for announcing online presence to all the people in a member's MyFriend list, even the ones who were not considered to be "close" friends or where social interaction occurred at a minimum. It was also the mechanism used to bring the

community together; for example, in the case of serious illness, such as a heart attack, or as an information alerting system (see chapter 5).

Glitz and Bitz: formatting the experience

Significantly to members, *The Roost* offered the ability to format text. As members are substantially older than on other social networking sites, this function was appreciated by all members. Unfortunately, web designers are not conforming to established disability guidelines when designing web sites for older users resulting in difficulty for older people with vision loss to read small default font sizes (Arfaa and Wang 2014; Bernard, Liao, and Mills 2001; Castilla et al. 2016; Gatto and Tak Sunghee 2008; Hart, Chaparro, and Halcomb 2008). The default font size for the site was 8 points, which was dauntingly small to read for most people on the site, including me. This necessitated innovative editing of all text to a comfortable size thereby successfully circumventing poor web design. In this section I discuss font style and sizing as a graphic that personalises text with style and colour. Chapter 4 discusses fonts in terms of cultural etiquette on the site.

Although text size was often increased, many members including all of my participants enhanced text messages by using a variety of font styles, sizes, and colours as a way of expressing personality and creativeness, adding emphasis to words, as well as considering the practicalities of text being easier to read. Baym (2010:151) discussing the use of technology in text-only interaction suggests:

> Rather than be stymied by lack of social cues inherent in text-only interaction, people innovated, making use of punctuation, capitalization, verbalization, and other tools to convey the social attitudes and feelings they wanted to impart.

Text size enhancement was a tool appreciated by this older group as was choice of font colour and style. Signature graphics (images used to sign messages) changed often and were used to enhance the message as well as to add playfulness. In her study of font use online, Danet (2001:332) established that the use of different styles of fonts and colours was a means to "add play" to our communications online.

Image 16 Sample of an animated signature graphic

The response from members to my enquiries about font use and size was that if one writes to someone in, say, font size 18, there was an expectation that the reply would be in a similar sized font (LillianGrace, Carrie, JulieAnn, Blitz, and others). While the size of the font was important in communications, colours and font style choice were also considered to be creative personal decisions. There was an explicit understanding within the community that font size and colour mattered and should be respected and reciprocated. Consequently, even simple alterations to text formation that altered the default setting acted as another form of graphic enhancement that not only assisted with vision impairment but also added personality and character to text.

My participants had clear ideas about the way in which they used graphics and the purpose that they served. All of the participants in the group used some form of image or text enhancement and this was evidenced elsewhere on the site in other forums and groups. The following excerpts are taken from a focus-group discussion related to graphic use. Although the responses were all different, they were similar in that making and using graphics was a hobby that gave them pleasure, and graphics were designed to either enhance text or replace text. In the following section, for the purpose of demonstration, I have not reformatted the messages.

Personalising text

The kind of graphics that LillianGrace preferred to use were ones that she made herself, and her homepage was filled with her own creations by mostly using personal photographs. Lilly told me that graphics, "add attraction to a message and convey to the recipient that I care enough about them to bother". She was also creative with her choice of font and colour, and takes into consideration the recipient when making these choices as part of the themed message.

> If I know somebody likes purple, I will make sure that occasionally I send that person a graphic with purple in it, but not all the time. I try to vary what I send.
>
> Making graphics is as much for my own pleasure as anyone else's, I do it as a ... hobby....The reason I make them at all, is my passion for being unique.
>
> 
> Lilly

LillianGrace was using Comic Sans MS, size 14 with a blue font. LillianGrace changed the colour of her font to blend with the graphics she makes and sends; in this case blue (sky) to match the animated windmill. She uses black, Ariel size 18 in emails.

As I have mentioned elsewhere, JulieAnn's homepage was one of the more creative pages on *The Roost* and heavily laden with animated graphics, photographs, and other imagery. She also changed her homepage frequently. Aside from using cat imagery, she also enjoyed the process of creating "shimmering" water scenes such as rain, puddles, and ponds. The fact that she uses graphics elsewhere was further incentive for her to find and make beautiful graphics.

> Mainly, I suppose I use them because I like showing my creativity. Even if I'm the only one who sees it, I enjoy making my page 'special'. When I make comments, I usually try to find a graphic to fit the occasion...or find one that fits my Friend's interests. I also use graphics in emails, so I'm not limited to using them only here on [*The Roost*]. I guess that's why I feel inclined to spend more time on finding/making them. I even use them in 'snail mail' letters. It's a hobby to me. I've always heard that you need to keep your brain active as you grow older--well, I certainly do that.
>
>  **Juls**

JulieAnn rarely formatted her comments with colour, but she did reciprocate font size when replying to other members throughout the site. In the above message she was using Times New Roman in black, size 12. She also changed her signature graphic often. In the above post, she used an animated cat with twinkling eyes to sign her message with her real name.

Carrie being the oldest member of the group, was the most surprising with his creations. Being less active offline, he had more "time on his hands" for "creative endeavour". He

was very involved in restoring his "personal stash" of Second World War photographs for an upcoming reunion of war veterans in New Zealand. Carrie lived in Tasmania, Australia, and technology assisted him in disseminating his creations "efficiently and effectively". After restoration, the images were emailed to the organisers to be shared with "surviving mates". Many of his posts were accompanied with animations of old people.

> Making my own is part of my hobbies in playing with graphics, and using animations to create a theme, which i not only use on the "*The Roost*" but in e-mails and in some printed pictures. My hobby also involves restoring and repairing old photos and colouring in black and white ones that may suit. So all in all they provide me with an artistic challenge in composition and creation.

Carrie

In a discussion of the use of avatars used in virtual worlds, Manning and Gershon (2013:120) have argued that participants embody themselves via a character or persona.[30] Avatar embodiment allows the participant to become present in the virtual world. On *The Roost*, the characteristics of animated graphics depicting ageing are performing that which cannot be seen, the ageing body with which members of *The Roost* are able to identify. These graphics become the performance of ageing online. All the animations were sourced online. Each one chosen was pertinent to the content and acted to enhance the comment.

[30] Also see Boellstorff (2008).

Carrie always centred his text and his preference was for blue coloured fonts. From time to time he would alter the font style especially when he wrote poetry ("ditties") as comments. Even so, he generally kept to Times New Roman for "ease of reading". He told me that he always prepared anything he wrote for the site in an offsite editor because he had cataracts that made reading (and writing) difficult for him. In this way, he was able to use a much larger font size (size 20) that enabled him to read and edit before "shrinking" to an appropriate size for the site. On more than one occasion he accidently posted the full font size into the focus-group discussions. Distressed by the error, he would email me and ask me to delete his mistake so that he could repost his response in an "appropriate font size". Sometimes the font would be posted in a size that was too small to read comfortably on the screen. As a group, we became accustomed to these mistakes and would playfully tease him about it.

Quirita's homepage shared family photos, fun graphics, a world clock, flag widget (most visitors from her own country), and a number of banners supporting a variety of causes including breast cancer, autism, epilepsy, ovarian cancer, leukaemia to name a few. She changed her theme often to reflect calendar events from around the world and seasonal changes. Quirita explained her use of colour and movement in messages thus:

> The added graphics give colour & movement (if they're animated) to an otherwise plain message. For example, seeing a LOL laughing mouse or dog at the end of a joke makes that joke even funnier (for me!) Some graphics are just meant to be seasonal decor... falling leaves in an autumn message or snowflakes in the winter. Other graphics add softness to a note... like a flower unfurling added at the end of the message. My favourite graphics these days are the signature graphics that we can make. I LOVE those!

Your friend..... Viv [flying flag]

Quirita, 68, designed and created a signature graphic for me after I had noticed a few participants using them. I thought they were a unique, fun and playful way to signoff a comment or message, but I lacked the technical skill to make one for myself. As was common on the site, Quirita's offer was generous and required nothing from me in return. In our email correspondence, she told me that the pleasure for her was "in the making and the giving of the graphic". She emailed it to me "with clear instructions for the one without technical ability" on how to activate it on *The Roost*. I placed the graphic on my homepage (where it still remains) and used it whimsically, as other members used theirs, to add a touch of playfulness to my posts throughout the site.

Similar to JulieAnn, Eve preferred not to format text other than by increasing the size when reciprocating; however, she often used smileys and text enhancement, such as typing in uppercase, to emphasise words. She uses Times New Roman in black, size 12. Quirita used an animated graphic signature in nearly all her messages on the site.

Although AussieWoman claims to lack computer skills, she is actually very competent with computers (see chapter 7). AussieWoman did not change her homepage at all during my time on *The Roost*, but all her comments were accompanied by small graphics, increased font size, and coloured text.

> I do so admire you all for your artistic talents of which I am sadly lacking. It's a bit like sewing to me, completely double Dutch. I think reading all your replies that it takes a lot of dedicated time and I guess that I have gone in other online directions. It doesn't mean that I do

not appreciate them as I do and I love pretty things too. I always try to put a little smileycon in my notes and forum posts as it adds a bit of expression same as little smiling faces now and again :) I will try to find an appropriate smileycon where possible to fit the subject and if I can't I just use something pretty. :)

 AussieWoman

AussieWoman used Book Antiqua Font in a shade of orchid, size 14. She never changed her font style, colour, or size during my time in the field. She did change her attached smileycons in all her messages across the site depending on the content of the message she was conveying, or alternatively to add "something pretty". It is interesting to note that in all the communication we shared or I witnessed she never used an image that depicted anger.

Blitz, from Brisbane, Australia, was one of the younger members (age 67) of the focus-group who changed her homepage frequently. She was also one of the many who preferred to use a larger font. Although she used graphics extensively on her homepage, she restricted the use of graphics for special occasions but used a variety of graphics for signing off on messages.

I like to make graphics for special people and special occasions. I guess it is something like when you stand for ages selecting a particular birthday card etc for a special person or occasion. We could just send a nice piece of note paper with happy birthday on it but you like it to have a nice verse and an appropriate picture etc. I think we hope that they will convey our message and make that person feel special.

blitz

For Blitz, making graphics to give to others was a thoughtful process that considered the recipient, but she restricted their use to special friends. Although making graphics was restricted to special friends, she did change her font style and colour frequently as well as her signature graphic. In the above message, she used Comic Sans MS in black, size 14.

As the above testimonies indicate, for this older group, the ability to increase font size for readability was a crucial component of the website design that did not require technological competence (Papacharissi 2002a, 2002b), but was an essential communicative tool (Baym 2010). Formatting text creatively (colour, font size and style) also added personality into the text. Text messages, often creatively colour-coded

with graphics were aesthetic enhancements that were fun and a pleasure to create for this older group. Altering text colour and adding graphics added a touch of the personal, or as Carrie offered in his poem, were "done personally, with personality". While creating and designing graphics required computer skills that not everyone was capable of, increasing font size, style and colour of text was an easy to use editing tool provided by the site that everyone could use.

Graphics were perceived as fun to make, use, and share (Danet 2001). They were understood as something that was a pleasure to give and receive, which displayed the author's creativity, demonstrated individuality, and added unspoken expression and personality; notably graphics signified vitality of presence (good morning, good night, sliding by to say hi) of the sender. Nevertheless, lack of vitality of presence was also observed and noticed by members. In the next section, I discuss the difference between vitality of presence and presence online as evidenced in the memorial pages of the site.

Contrasting presence: In Memoriam

Image 17 In Memoriam Group image

After death and only upon the request of family, a member's homepage could be listed in the In Memoriam group by the administrators. Not all deceased members' pages were

listed.[31] During my time in the field there were seven homepages of deceased members listed, none of whom I knew.[32] All of the homepages listed were of deceased women. Although these members were deceased, they were remembered by their friends from *The Roost* community. This remembrance was not via guestbook messages left on homepages. Rather, remembering was invoked during conversations related to participation by those no longer present in historical *Roost* events. For example, remembering their ability to make graphics, their generosity to help others, or their dedication in welcoming new people to the site; their interactions—their past vitality of presence—was remembered. It was in these remembering conversations about members who "had passed" that alerted me to existence of the In Memoriam group.

Web memorials have been a part of digital life and death since the early 1990s (Geser 1998; Roberts 2006). These memorial pages are created after death by loved ones to express bereavement and to demonstrate continuing bonds (Roberts and de Vries 2004). In 2004, Facebook allowed the memorialisation of a deceased person's Facebook page by keeping them intact and allowing friends of the deceased person access to the page rather than deleting it (Bouc, Han, and Pennington 2016; Church 2013; Kasket 2011). Digital memorials on Facebook are similar to *The Roost*, they "display vivid visual and discursive representations of once-living creators" (Church 2013:184). On *The Roost*, keeping profiles intact after death and allowing access to the homepages of the deceased by friends as well as community members started with the first death of a

[31] Sadly, Carrie passed away in May 2015. My friendship with him is discussed in chapter 4. In 2016 Carrie's homepage was not listed. Carrie had expressed to me and the focus-group his concerns about his digital footprint on the Internet, which he wanted to remain intact. His family were unable to locate his password for his *Roost* profile, and it therefore remains within the broader membership as a living member's profile. From my own personal perspective, I find it comforting to be able to view his profile as he left it. Dealing with our digital footprint after death, our digital legacy, and how to manage this are very recent concerns that scholars are beginning to take an interest in. What are our rights? Can we leave a digital estate? What happens when web sites disappear? Is archiving safe? (see Kasket 2011; Wright 2014). SmockMill's homepage is also not listed in the In Memoriam group. Initially, his homepage was maintained by his son; however, in 2016 the last login by his son was in February 2015. SmockMill still had 2,880 MyFriends in 2016 but this is slowly decreasing.

[32] Fortunately, no members died while I was in the field. The members listed in the In Memoriam Group either died before I arrived in the field or after I left.

member in 2008 shortly after the site was created. My interest in this section is the difference between vitality of presence and presence online.[33]

The first time I visited the homepages of the deceased was in June 2010. Each page appeared to be very much like all the other homepages I had visited; they were colourful, embedded with images many of which were animated, displayed family photos, and were filled with detailed personal information similar to those previously outlined in this thesis. The self of each of these individuals had been brought to life online by a living person. At first glance I was startled by pages that appeared to have the same vitality of presence as the living, yet the people who created these homepages were deceased. Above the profile image in very small print was the word 'Memory' (white print on a black background), which had been placed alongside the online status of OFFLINE (capped in red). This small signpost for death was easy to miss and the only indicator that the person who had created the homepage was deceased and that their page had been memorialised by the administrators. Church (2013:188) refers to memorialised pages created by the living on Facebook as "an aesthetic identity gravescape whereupon future members of the community may come to observe traces of that presence". The homepage of the deceased on *The Roost* held an undeniable presence; they captured the moment in time when the vitality of presence of the person who created the homepage changed to an online presence archived in perpetuity.

Unlike dedicated memorial websites (see Bouc, Han, and Pennington 2016; Heathcote 2015; Roberts 2006; Roberts and de Vries 2004), where memorials are created by the living for the dead, messages of bereavement, grief, and mourning were absent from the memorialised homepages. Only two pages had been altered to include an announcement from family that a loved one had "passed away" and each of these announcements included animated graphics of a religious nature. From last login dates and dates of death, it was possible to note that the announcements were made between one and three months after death. This does not mean that there were no condolence messages from

[33] Chapter 5 deals with the death and community engagement.

the community at the time of death, on the contrary, there is a high probability that there were (see chapter 5). What it does mean, however, is that condolences messages had been removed either by a family member or by the administrators during periodical system maintenance. At first glance the lack of condolence messages was disconcerting; visually it gave the appearance that the homepage belonged to a living person. The character of the content, embedded photographs and animations on the homepage, gave the appearance of vitality of presence.

In 2016, I revisited the homepages of the deceased to record any changes to those homepages. Once again, I was startled; the energy of these pages had altered, and there was evidence that the homepages were now in a state of neglect and disrepair. All had broken links either to images stored on expired *PhotoBucket* accounts, external music players and/or photo slide viewers were no longer hosted, and internal links to forum and group posts were missing, including blogs that had been deleted. Furthermore, photo albums had been removed and other images loaded on the homepage before death were now gone.[34] There were other signs of absence. The last recorded login to these pages varied between 2008 and 2010, a further reminder that the homepage had not been cared for.

MyFriend lists remained reasonably intact. For example, one deceased member had 20 MyFriends in 2008 with 16 MyFriends remaining in 2016. Another had 121 MyFriends in 2010 with 106 still listed in 2016. Nevertheless, there had been some removal of friends, although it is not clear if those friends had left the site or had actively delisted a deceased MyFriend. Certainly, the footprints of profile images were continuing to be recorded from visitors even though no messages were being left.[35] My records show that viewing counters were reset upon memorialisation of the homepage, and in 2016 all of the memorialised pages showed that these pages were still being viewed many years after death (up to 8 years). How to account for these viewings? There are a few possible

[34] I was recently advised by one of my participants that the site administrators removed all blogs prior to 2014 as part of system maintenance. Understandably, this upset many of the bloggers.
[35] At the time of viewing in 2016, I was unable to match footprint profiles with MyFriends lists.

explanations. Perhaps in the same way that I draw comfort from visiting Carrie's homepage, remaining MyFriends view and remember their friends by visiting their homepages. Or perhaps curious new members visiting the pages in the same way I visited, or alternatively there may be a structural problem with the system of memorialisation on the site.

Never to be seen and not replied to were guestbook entries remembering the deceased person's birthday. In 2016, these birthdays would have been reliably announced to all members by the system and recorded on the site's homepage, but the greetings stood out as inappropriately placed messages. "Wishing you a healthy happy year my friend" with a graphic of a birthday cake animated with sparkling candles seemed at odds with death and remembrance. And another, "wishing you all the great things in life, hope this day will bring you an extra share of all that makes you the happiest" had been carefully crafted with an animated graphic of colourful dancing balloons with a twinkling happy birthday sign. These were not birthday remembrance messages for a missed friend or lost loved one; the messages were irreconcilable with death, and disrespectful to the memory of the deceased persons (Roberts and de Vries 2004). The messages were the result of a system that has not yet found an appropriate way to deal with memorialisation of deceased members (Hoskins 2009; Kasket 2011; Wright 2014). Each year the process of ageing continues to be recorded on birthday anniversaries; the stated age on the homepage increases as birthday well wishes go unanswered. There was no social interaction and there appeared to be no maintenance of the homepage; "the home away from home" seems abandoned and neglected; the front door left ajar for visitors. All that remains are presences online; digital traces to be viewed by members and perhaps friends on the Internet.

Conclusion

Markham (2003:8) argued that "the Internet as a place does not only require a sense of architecture, but also requires a sense of presence from others". In this chapter I have

argued that vitality of presence is essential for an online community to thrive and be beneficial to its members. The culture of *The Roost* is one of using and sharing images that are embedded with everyday social practices that is initialised on homepages by choice of profile image as visible accessibility.

Humorous graphics are used to bring the ageing body into conversations to represent the unseen physical ageing self. This activity creates an energy—vitality of presence—between members as well as for the community, as a fun place to socially interact. Images were used as communication tools that were employed as message content, to enhance content, or to replace unspoken words. Images were used in a variety of different ways but it was the graphics, animations, smileycons, emoticons, altered photos, and formatted text that reinforced vitality of presence and continuance of life.

Graphics and text enhancements, subjectively made and received, were symbols of meaning, often linked to ageing, for this older group that represented and shaped the culture on *The Roost*. Like a game of ping pong, the graphics circulate back and forth across all modes of communication. They were received and viewed at home giving pleasure to the recipient and pleasure to the sender who curates, creates and designs them. Reciprocation of all these messages is not required (for example bulletin messages), yet participation and social interaction occurs as a result of their use. Vitality of presence reassures members that their messages are being noticed, read or replied to, which instigates a "checking-in" culture of sociality that is "fun", "feels good" and is "rewarding".

In this chapter I have argued for vitality of presence online that for this community of older people has meanings associated with fun, creative pleasure, and social interaction. Visible and accessible profile images initiate curiosity to view homepages with the possibility of forming friendships and, once friendships have been established, friendships are enriched and sustained online using offline social practices. In the next

chapter, I explore online friendship-forming through the lens of my participants' experiences.

4

Friendship: Meaningful Social Interactions

I think that the way one tends to socialise offline is not all that much different online.

For us oldies, we cannot equate childhood long-time friends with the "net" insofar as it is for most of us a fairly recent innovation, therefore, the nature of making friends has some differences from offline but the basic principles are much the same in that we look upon meeting others online with much the same criterion that we may use these days offline.

Bearing in mind that the interests we had many moons ago, and made friends with, those same interests will have changed. So, perhaps with new friends we have made recently, and may make now, will encompass changes that ageing does influence.

As is generally the case where one becomes involved in joining a new social group/club/etc, one will, after initially being accepted and then left to absorb the atmosphere, one will tend to naturally gravitate towards a small "clique" where ones "instinctive" unspoken search for the company of apparent compatible acceptance may be felt and invited to join.

In time perhaps one or two will become very close, a few others close and for a lot more they will be acquaintances and the remainder "club members" of varying degrees of friendliness. (Carrie 2010)

In previous chapters I examined the ways in which modes of communication on the site facilitate social processes that encourage social participation and interaction amongst members. Friendship is the focus of the site's ideology and the purpose for bringing older people together in one place on the net. With the exception of a few members who have invited friends or family members to join *The Roost*, friendships were initiated and developed from within an online community of strangers. On the surface, friendship forming appeared to be an ad hoc process; however, underlying the publicly visible MyFriends section of the site, members attached private and meaningful identifiers to these friends. From a pool of strangers, how do members decide who will be their friend and how do they maintain these friendships online?

During my time on *The Roost*, I came to understand the importance of friends and friendship to the members as well as its relationship to the very fabric of this online community for older people. My expectations were that, as an older group, forming friendships would be an activity steeped in personal preferences based on life experiences, and that forming close relationships online, such as friends, would be guarded by trust-building exercises concerned with issues related to privacy and security. Many scholars have shown that privacy and security online are serious concerns for older people, yet for my participants these were less of a concern when forming friendships online (Burmeister et al. 2012; Burmeister, Weckert, and Williamson 2011; Choi et al. 2014; Hope, Schwaba, and Piper 2014; Nef et al. 2013).

Relationships formed online were considered not to be too dissimilar to those formed offline and in some cases, were believed to be more valuable than offline friendships. On friendship, Pahl (2000:1) noted that "friendship may be seen as an increasingly important form of social glue in contemporary society". On *The Roost* friendship *is* the social glue that defines this community. This chapter is concerned with friendship forming and what friendship means to members of *The Roost*.

Anthropology and friendship

All of my participants were born long before social media played a role in the development and maintenance of personal relationships. For this reason, I draw from a variety of resources, both historical and emerging, to contextualise my participants' experiences and understandings of friends and friendship. I see no benefit in an analysis of older people online that compares them to younger people. Comparing older people with the experiences of younger people marginalises the experience of ageing especially in relation to a technologically connected world where research has predominantly been focused on 13-30 year olds.

For older people, comparisons can be made with ethnographic material collected prior to the advent of the Internet to help understand the experience of friendship formation online. The influences of living in a world prior to using social media and social networking sites allows us to explore whether any change from pre-existing social norms has occurred when older people access social media to make new friends.

Perspectives on friendship and older people remain under researched anthropologically, although material is beginning to emerge on relationships formed online (Allan 2010; Danely 2015; De Schutter and Vanden Abeele 2015; Kanayama 2003; Malta 2007; Sum, Mathews, and Hughes 2009; Xie, Huang, and Watkins 2012). Historically, anthropologists have documented friend relationships within a theoretical framework of kinship studies in non-western cultures (see Allan 2010; Bell and Coleman 1999; Desai and Killick 2010; Sokolovsky 2009). Recently, Desai and Killick (2010) have opposed the annexing of contemporary transformations of friendship within the frame of kinship to argue for flexibility in exploring changing sociality. Friendship forming with strangers in an online context is outside the parameters of traditional kinship relationship studies.

One of the challenges for anthropologists has been elucidating the meaning of friends and friendship (Beer and Gardner 2015; Bell and Coleman 1999; Boissevain 1974; Carter 2005; Desai and Killick 2010; Jerrome 1992; Kaplan 2014; Pahl 2000; Paine 1969). This challenge is partly due to an early focus on kinship and cross-cultural studies, and in part to the special relationships that anthropologists develop with their participants in the field. Bell and Coleman (1999) aptly refer to these positions as enduring themes related to friendship in anthropological scholarship. While kinship studies are a valuable method for understanding friendship in non-western countries, they are not helpful in understanding friendship formation on *The Roost* with strangers. Nonetheless, there is agreement amongst anthropologists that friendship involves mutuality that is private, voluntary, and individualistic (for a review see Beer and Gardner 2015).

Allan (2010) has argued that patterns of friendship in later life are shaped by the same sets of values gained in friendship participation in earlier phases of life. Friendships over the life course are influenced by personal environment levels, network levels, community levels, and societal levels and these affect the character and patterns of friendship development and sustainability (2010:241). He points out two key issues for consideration of friendship in later life. First, in later life, "friendship needs to be developed" and "people need to be met and known before friendship emerges", and this requires opportunity. Secondly, "friendship needs servicing", which requires continuing involvement and participation (2010:242). Later in this chapter, I will show that opportunity and participation significantly contribute towards meaningful friendship formation for members of *The Roost*.

Stepping outside the structural constraints of institutional kinship studies (which I also aim to do), Paine (1969) broke from anthropological tradition of understanding friendship through kinship relationships. He argued that western friendship is "structurally unencumbered" (1969:507), and is a relationship between "persons paired in the same role" (friend/friend) (1969:507) that is "autonomous" (1969:513) thus

becoming "a kind of institutionalised non-institution" outside of kinship relations (1969:514). Friendship in a western context is governed by personal choice, equality, and mutually supportive behaviour based on trust (trust is discussed in the next chapter). Under these circumstances an autonomous friendship becomes free of the institutional and economic responsibilities imposed by kinship relationships. Paine (1969:513) also noted that "privacy in a personal relationship means that the relationship may be established and maintained independent of reference to the various group-derived statuses of the individuals" and refers to personal/private friendships as "communicational closure" from the group whereby the "conduct of the friendship may not be carried into social interaction with other persons" (1969:513). Paine's theoretical position provides a useful western model of friendship that is anthropologically outside the framework of kinship relationships in which to explore friendship with strangers on *The Roost*, especially in relation to the site's visible MyFriends list.

In the era prior to the influences of social media, friendship was a private affair between the parties, whereas on a social networking site, friendship ties have been shown to be public information displayed online and, as such, are open to scrutiny by the broader population (see boyd 2006; Carter 2005). As I outlined in the previous chapter, the visibility of MyFriends is not an unusual practice on social networking sites where friendship-links underpin the fabric of social networking (see Baym 2010; boyd 2006; Carter 2005).

Exploring Paine's idea of "communication closure" in relation to *The Roost* and the visible MyFriends lists, even though the MyFriends list provides a view of individual friendships within the social spaces of the community (public display), the character of those friendships remains private and closed. The list of names publicly on display are the personal friendship *choices* (invite, accept, reject) of an individual within the community, which does not account for how those friendships are being conducted in private or what meanings are attached to those friendships. The MyFriends list is a form of communicational closure. Further, within the list and not open to public scrutiny are

sub-sets of MyFriends that are also contained by communicational closure and each of these sub-sets also have a range of meanings attached to them.

Social capital and friendship

In recent times, the theory of social capital has been examined by a diverse body of scholars across the social sciences to understand older peoples' use of technology. Putnam (1995:67) described social capital as referring to "features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit". Quality of public life and social institutions are influenced by the "norms and networks of civic engagement" and these are directly linked to the importance of "social bonds within a group" (1995:66). The social capital framework is used to understand "individual productivity" in relation to society as a whole (1995:67). This social connectedness leads to, for example, better schools, lower crime, and more effective government. Social capital is, in essence, a public good. Thus, the more civic engagement and social connectedness there is, the greater the social capital in that society, therefore, everyone benefits. While Putnam lamented that social capital was on the decline in the USA in 1999, he failed to take into account of the impact the Internet was having on the formation of alternative networks and social connectedness.

Bourdieu (1997) took a different approach to argue that social capital varies among individuals and is "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources linked to possession of a durable network" (1997:51). According to Bourdieu, "the reproduction of social capital presupposes an unceasing effort of sociability, a continuous series of exchanges in which recognition is endlessly affirmed and reaffirmed" (1997:52). The exchanges are posited by Bourdieu as an investment (competence) that is profitable to the social capital of the individual (1997:52). For Bourdieu, social capital is not a public good but an asset of the individual or group that participates in social networks.

The theory of social capital is based on economic principles (Coleman 1997). Taking a closer look, the inference is that if the social capital of older people is high, society benefits thereby reducing the burden of the ageing population on society. It is therefore not surprising that researchers are examining social capital especially in relation to seniors and the elderly. The impacts of both negative and positive social capital have become key public health policy questions related to ageing populations around the world.

Research has shown that increased social capital for older people has been linked to reductions in loneliness and social isolation (Gray 2009), increased emotional and social support (Ashida and Heaney 2008; Gray 2009), productive ageing (Warburton and McLaughlin 2007), social ties (Blit-Cohen and Litwin 2004; Goode 2011), social awareness (Erickson 2011), and quality of life (Russell, Campbell, and Hughes 2008). Social capital theory does not explain how friendships are formed or what the character of friendship is. In this chapter, I present an alternative perspective to that of social capital theory to examine friendship-forming from the perspective of my participants and their understandings of what these relationships mean to them.

Reflexivity: friends and friendship in the field

Anthropologists do not work in a cultural vacuum; friendships are formed in the field of study to create ethnographic context. It is well documented that while in the field anthropologists develop relationships with key informants that often involve the formation of bonds that are understood between the parties to be friendship (Bell and Coleman 1999; Carter 2005; Desai and Killick 2010; Firth 1999; Okely 1992; Powdermaker 1967; Rabinow 1977). These ties are often sustained well beyond the research project timeframe and can even span over the lifetime of the researcher and informant (Firth 1999). For me, the goal of making friends was directly linked to a pathway for research outcomes. How else would I retrieve meaningful information? Like many anthropologists in the field, I too formed close friendships with participants

over time culminating in offline contact via emails, letters, phone calls, Skype, and eventually home visits.

When I asked myself "who will be my friend" on that first day in the field and this question was serendipitously answered with greetings of friendship from the Welcome Wagon and other members of the community, friendship-forming became an exciting potential worth pursuing on *The Roost* (see Chapter 2). Nevertheless, of all the messages I received on that first day, none of the greeters or well-wishers invited me to be their friend. It was not until the second day, as greetings continued being posted on my guestbook, that I received three friend invites.

These three potential friends left messages on my guestbook, as well as an invitation to become a MyFriend. BrightStars (a female from America), NewFriend (a male from Canada), and LillianGrace (a female from New Zealand) had each posted a greeting on my guestbook and concurrently sent me a MyFriend request. I immediately accepted these requests and the system added them to my MyFriends list for public display.

BrightStars remained one of MyFriends throughout the course of my fieldwork, although the only contact we had was via graphics that she would post to the bulletin system. As outlined in the previous chapter, these posts confirmed her online presence with me. Our friendship-link was sustained by her online presence and the occasional visit to her profile by me. NewFriend was enthusiastic and interested in the research project and willing to "help in any way possible", but his interest waned within a couple of months. After the initial enthusiastic offer of help, the only contact I had with NewFriend was in the form of religious content bulletin messages and an occasional guestbook entry. I found these repetitious posts irritating, so it was with some relief when I recorded that he had deleted me as one of his MyFriends. LillianGrace initially embraced me as MyFriend, became a participant in the research project, and over time became a valued and close friend. From day one, our contact was frequent and over time became deeply personal, and has remained so to this day via email.

Within a month of joining, I had thirteen friends and this steadily increased and occasionally decreased to 33 friends over 14 months in the field. This number is substantially less than my participants (and many other members) and reflects two sets of circumstances related to working in the field. First, as I have mentioned elsewhere, my status as a researcher on the site was publicly visible on my homepage, and while members were willing to interact with me knowing that I was taking notes (often joking with me about it), they were less inclined to befriend me. The second reason influencing the number of MyFriends was personal. My approached to forming friendships (in any situation) required input from me that was sincere and genuine, and this necessitated investing in time and effort, especially while establishing friendships.

The site was constantly busy and active over a 24 hour cycle every day; participating, observing, and documenting this activity limited my ability to effectively maintain a larger set of friends. To this extent, once I had reached saturation point for maintaining established friendships, my interactions with the broader membership, while genuine, did not foster or encourage closer ties with new people unless they were Australian. This was especially pertinent once the focus-group was well established as I had not anticipated the quality and quantity of detail that members were willing to share of their lives.

Although I personally interacted with and took notes on over 150 members during the course of the fieldwork, there were many other members with whom I came into contact. Social interaction was limited to profile visits (looking at and noting homepages) or reading posts on the various forums and blogs where I occasionally left comments. I also came into contact with other members of the community via interest-groups where I would read comments and post comments. These interactions were general community interactions on topics of interest but more often related to bantering fun amongst the broader community membership. I likened these interactions to bumping into an acquaintance or even a stranger on the street where friendly social interaction occurs but remains outside the parameters of a nurtured relationship.

The sheer volume of data generated during online research creates limitations on the ability of the researcher to befriend every person that is met online and it is even more difficult to take detailed notes on every single encounter (Boellstorff 2008). Many of these encounters were fleeting moments with members of the broader community where opportunities for intimate sociality exist but are not always acted upon. Even though these encounters were not acted upon, they did provide the context for being a member of a larger online community (boyd 2006; Carter 2005; Kendall 2002; Markham 1998).

As my study was concerned with Australians, I focused my attention on those members who were Australian and their international friends. Initially, befriending was a mechanical process. Everyone who asked me to be a MyFriend was accepted, and I approached Australians who visited my profile before inviting them to be a MyFriend. Some MyFriends joined the focus-group while others remained as a MyFriend but declined to join the research group. Others stayed as a MyFriend for a short time and then left, and a few I removed due to lack of contact.

One Australian participant and MyFriend deleted her profile from the site midway through the fieldwork. Sadly, I was unable to find out what happened to her. Another, initially enthusiastic American participant, Malcolm, blocked me from any contact within a few weeks of inviting me to be his MyFriend. When I made enquiries, I was told that this was "quite normal behaviour for him". While I found this behaviour strange, I accepted it and respected his privacy. I maintained this respect for privacy whenever anyone failed to respond to a MyFriend request or removed me as a MyFriend.

A few of the friendships I established stretched beyond the fieldwork timeframe and into the present time (2016), whereas other friendships formed during my time in the field became static after I left only to be reignited during periods of return. Returning to the field was a matter of locating friends/participants and leaving a message to say that I

had returned, after which our interactions resumed as if they had not ended. Interestingly, on a couple of occasions I was emailed to reinstate focus-group members who had accidently deleted themselves from the inactive group. The reasons were mostly nostalgic but they also did not want to miss out on any "future activity!" (Carrie 2013, JulieAnn 2011, and LillianGrace 2014).

As my research involved older participants there was a constant fear in the back of my mind that perhaps some of my older participants might die (Myerhoff 1979). Sadly, this nagging fear was realised in May 2015 with the death of my most senior participant, Carrie. Carrie was more than a participant in the research endeavour; as well as being the "elder" of the research focus-group, he also became my mentor and friend. Our friendship was based on mutual respect, honesty, and trust intermingled with large doses of humour and playfulness.

We were in contact daily on *The Roost* and frequently by email, and on "special occasions" we would talk on the phone. (For Carrie, every chat on the phone was a "special occasion"). After I left the field, every week we shared a couple of hours on Skype at "sippers time" when his wife would "allow" him his "medicinal dose of one glass of wine" prior to dinner. We shared life matters as well as intellectual pursuits on a range of topics not always connected to my research. We engaged in many debates related to world events including climate change, terrorism, religious fundamentalism, refugees, and war. We discussed politics (each of us polar opposites), love, sex, death, family life, and relationships.

As it became more and more difficult for Carrie to "gad about" he would often expound the "joy of Google" where he would "keep abreast of this or that". His capacity to engage with an eclectic assortment of topics was without rancour and offered this researcher a perspective on life that only the wisdom of a lifetime of living, including surviving duty during the Korean war, can offer. Some of these insights came from long, detailed, and carefully crafted "ponderings" in the focus-group and via email,

while others were spontaneous and 'off the cuff' during Skype conversations. The loss of Carrie was and still is difficult to manage academically. Even after death, his contribution to this project continues to be enormous. It is impossible to ignore that without meaningful rapport with my participants and members of the broader community, the insights expressed by members within these pages would not have been possible.

Friendship and ageing

Ageing is about change. It makes sense that as we age and change, the ways in which we develop and foster relationships would change too. How we choose friends and what those relationships mean to us varies greatly from one person to the next and, perhaps somewhat frustratingly for researchers, for older people this changes over time as our friendship network naturally diminishes. Coleman, et al (2015) found that towards the end of life, family ties became increasingly more meaningful. Elderly people preferred to maintain their independence (including friendships) for as long as possible due to a reluctance for becoming a burden on family members. Maintaining friendship outside of family relationships remains an important requirement for older people.

Jerrome and Wenger (1999) noted that a characteristic of friendship as we age is that our friendship network regularly changes too, and that we continue replacing friends well into extreme old age. They call our attention to a common strategy amongst much older people who broaden their definition of a 'real friend' to include new friends such as acquaintances (1999:665). To fulfil the need to have friends, as long-time and established friends diminish due to death or relocation, it was found to be common practice for older people to transition someone from the status of acquaintance to one of a 'real friend'. This transitioning of relationships can be extended to the online context to explain forming of new acquaintances and friendships that older people form online.

Kaufman (1986:110) found the opposite to Jerome and Wenger in that her older informants in the USA had no expectations or basis for creating new friendships. She states:

> All of those who discuss friendship state that one does not make close friends when one is old. They feel that friendships depend on building a life together, looking forward to the future and sharing expectations. When one is old, there is no future, few expectations, and thus no basis for the creation of friendships.

Fortunately for older people today, the Internet has opened new pathways and fresh opportunities to source new friends that were not available at the time Kaufman (1986) and Jerrome (1992) completed their research. Online, older people now have access to a wider circle of possible friendships that can be sourced from around the world; strangers who under the right circumstances can transition from stranger to being a friend. Further, they are able to source these friendships from the comfort of their own homes and in their own time. Saser, from the research focus-group, clarifies this key point:

> I live alone, am retired and have limited mobility, and aside from daily contacts with my aged Aunt who lives behind me, and my daughter, I miss the daily contact with others I enjoyed in my younger years. [*The Roost*] for the most part fulfils that need.
>
> No matter if my hair is combed, or I'm in my PJ's, or in pain, I can log into [*The Roost*], and immediately am "in my mind" young and active, travelling and visiting friends and people I don't even know all over the world, and learning new exciting things.
>
> If I feel like participating in a group, or chatting with another human being, I can do that 24/7. And if I don't feel like it, I am not "expected" to do so. But if I stay away too long someone comes looking who cares. That opportunity brings me much happiness and

> fulfils a needed sense of well-being that I had lost after retirement.
> (Saser 2010)

In her study of sociability in old age in the UK, Dorothy Jerrome (1992:72) found that for older people, "friends are chosen on the basis of shared interests". During a discussion on friendship, participants expressed a priority for shared interests as a criterion for friendship-forming, which was noted in relation to evolving and changing interests as one ages. In the introduction to this chapter, Carrie pointed out "as we age we change and so do our interests" therefore forming new friendships "will encompass the changes that ageing does influence" (2010). This view was not unique to Carrie. Nearly all participants expressed similar views. AussieWoman added, "of course there are all our offline friends which again like online friends can and do change as we grow and change ourselves" (2010).

Ageing and changing are not perceived as a mystery. Carrie and AussieWoman expressed a common thread of conversation within the group; they had lived through enough life changes to adapt and accept change.[36] Life changes are expected to involve changing friendships and evolving and changing interests and these will influence relationship choices. Friendship is experienced as something that is fluid and changes over time. Rather than broadening their definition of friends and friendship, change was experienced as an intrinsic and inevitable part of the ageing process that influences friendship choices as we age, and technology offers a pathway for friendships to emerge.

[36] As an interesting aside, during a discussion on technology and computers, participants were quick to point out that they did not fear computers because they had learned to use other technological innovations, such as the electric iron and automated washing machines, they had had to learn how to use. Coleman et al. (2010) found that the older adults in their study were more accepting of technologies similar to those they already knew. As self-selecting computer users, my participants were less fearful of technology as a whole, because they had already experienced technological innovations over the span of their lives.

Socialising with peers

Prior to online communities, both Boissevain (1974) and Jerrome (1992) noted the importance to older people of a network of peer-related friendships formed within groups and/or clubs. Boissevain's analysis was on the cultural structures of club sociability while Jerrome focused on the social integration of older people into clubs. Jerrome (1992:72) determined that "the existence of friends is a measure of social success, important at all ages but in later years a sign also of continuing vitality and social involvement." I agree with both these scholars when they argue that sociability and friends are important contributors to feelings of well-being and social inclusion for older people.

Although *The Roost* is an online social networking community, it is not dissimilar from the groups and clubs that Boissevain and Jerrome studied. Augé (1995:52) has argued that places have at least three characteristics in common: people want them to be, "places of identity, of relations, and history". A place has to "come to life" and is composed of the "journeys made in it, the discussions uttered in it, and the language characterizing it" (1995:52). Shenk and Sokolovsky (2001) urge researchers to consider the issue of community as an environment for positive ageing experiences. *The Roost* offers seniors an opportunity to positively engage with others. The environment of *The Roost* is a place that brings together an older peer group in one place on the Web where social activities and social interactions occurs that assist in contributing to feelings of well-being and social inclusion (see chapter 7 for further discussion of this).

More importantly, as Sasers pointed out in her testimony above, the added benefit of an online community is that sociality occurs twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. For my participants, the ability to be able to socialise online with peers "24/7" was a significant factor to their enjoyment of the site and the social interactions they shared. As one member succinctly put it, "[*The Roost*] is a sociable social site for socialising!" (Carrie 2010). Inclusion, involvement, and integration within the culture of *The Roost*

played a significant role in members' enjoyment of the site. The positive impacts of online sociality also contributed to feelings of self worth as valued members of society (see discussion in chapter 7).

In all areas of the site where social interaction occurred members referred to *The Roost* as a "Club for oldies". Indeed, even within the site there were groups with "Club" included in their title; there were clubs for women, books, technology, computers, dog lovers, gardening, car enthusiasts, food, and many more. The club concept resonated with the experiences of the members, and Carrie articulated this well with the following thoughts:

> As is generally the case where one becomes involved in joining a new social group/club/etc, one will, after initially being accepted and then left to absorb the atmosphere, one will tend to naturally gravitate towards a small "clique" where ones "instinctive" unspoken search for the company of apparent compatible acceptance may be felt and invited to join. (Carrie 2010)

It is interesting to note that Carrie mentioned the instinctive nature of friendship forming; however I am not pursuing a psychological line of enquiry here, because my interest is in a socio-cultural perspective on friendship. Recently many scholars have brought to our attention that for older people being a member of a club creates a sense of belonging (Biniok and Menke 2015; Burmeister et al. 2012; Danely 2015; De Schutter and Vanden Abeele 2015; Kanayama 2003).

Age is the specific thing that sets *The Roost* apart from other social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace.[37] In a study of 60-70 year olds using Facebook, Van House (2015) found that overwhelmingly the most popular content for her group were photos of family, friends and children of friends, as well as friend's travel, and this is

[37] MySpace is discussed in chapter 6.

consistent with my own participants' experiences of Facebook. As the following comments show, my participants felt that Facebook was for younger people and for keeping an eye on family (children and grandchildren) but not suitable for peer-related activities or for making new friends.

> [*The Roost*] is the first social networking site that I ever joined & I LOVE it! The folks, the creativity, the various groups. My children kept telling me to join Facebook so I did but it doesn't have the appeal that [*The Roost*] has for me. (Quirita 2010)

> I've got a Facebook account. I only got that because my kids post pictures/videos on their pages & it's often the only way for me to 'get' the pictures! I check their pages occasionally for those. (JulieAnn 2010)

> I do have a Facebook page, but don't think much of it. I really only keep it to keep an eye on a couple of the grandkids. (VicGirl 2010)

Socialising with peers was a significant factor to the enjoyment of the social interactions experienced on *The Roost*. The above testimonies were common themes expressed throughout the site in forums, groups, and blogs, and illustrate the perceived differences between belonging to a peer group (or club) to socialise and the duty associated with social networking among family members. On *The Roost* a sense of belonging is contextualised within the framework of friendships in a club-like environment of peers.

The 'belonging friendship'

On *The Roost*, accepting a MyFriend invite does not immediately create a friendship. It does, however, create a community-member bond where being part of the community or group becomes meaningful and creates a sense of belonging (see Biniok and Menke

2015; Jerrome 1992). Using two case studies from Friendster and MySpace of 13-30 year olds, boyd has pointed out that "friendship helps people write community into being in social network sites" (2006:10), which she links to Jenny Sundén's (2003) concept of writing oneself into being in order to exist online. Friendship not only assists in building community on *The Roost*; it also sustains it via a shared sense of belonging.

On *The Roost*, community requires repeated and continued vitality of presence, which begins with the hand of friendship from the Welcome Wagon as a rite of passage into the community to create an immediate sense of belonging (see previous chapter). Those initial MyFriend requests can be thought of as "belonging friendships", contextualised in *'The ABC's of friendship'* later in this chapter.

Jerrome (1992) has argued that for older people simply belonging to a group is a form of meaningful social interaction. This sense of belonging also forms the social identity of the group as aged related peers. The following experiences expressed by participants help to clarify this point:

> There is the feeling of belonging to a community when people reach out to each other with all the various ways that we can do online now. (AussieWoman 2010)

> We've all been around the block a few times - if you know what I mean! HAHAHAHA!!! So - we find a lot of maturity here among ourselves and don't have to put up with too much crap! Sorry! That seemed the best way to say that! (Mia 2010)

> I think my time on [*The Roost*] has been the most positive. I don't know if it's dealing with an (there's no easy way to say this) more mature group of people. I'm old too!!! LOL!!! The majority of the people here are warm, kind and always ready to help or lend a hand. (MooMoo 2010)

The belonging friendship informs the social identity of *The Roost*. Although not necessarily known to each other, at least until friendships have been formed, there is an understanding that as everyone in the community is "mature", age and ageing is a life trajectory everyone has in common to share. Age is, therefore, an important entry point to belonging for members of this community.

Burmeister et al, (2012) revealed that for older Australians on the social networking site, GreyPath, freedom to be themselves was a critical aspect of the enjoyment they shared with each other. On *The Roost* the concept of freedom to be one's self is linked to maturity and, as Mia so eloquently remarked, not having to put up with "too much crap". There is an unspoken understanding amongst this older group that there are differences between younger people online and older people; therefore, being amongst peers is preferable (avoiding "crap"). The ability to express the joys and tribulations of ageing with peers was very visible in the social participation and interactions amongst members. These interactions were visible to all members in forums, groups, blogs, and in guestbook entries.

Baym (2010:111) has pointed out that visible interactions on social networking sites are "linked to social identity and social status", while Jerrome (1992) pointed out the importance of a sense of belonging to older people. Combining social identity, accessibility, and belonging is a compelling explanation for the positive experiences articulated so well by Saser earlier in this chapter; views that are also shared by others:

> [*The Roost*] has become a huge part of my life. I've always been a homebody - stay at home mom, etc, and now being retired with a small income, I don't get out a lot. So this is a great hobby for me. I 'talk' to my friends (all over the world), use my creative abilities, and keep my brain active. lol (JulieAnn 2010)

> It is difficult for some of us to actually go out and seek friendship, but when you join [*The Roost*] you seem to instantly have people sending you friendly invitations to be their friend. Even though it's only a cyber friendship in most instances, it seems to meet the need. Not all those invitations will result in friendship but many can be very genuine and rewarding. (Blitz 2010)

> It's a place where older people can make friends with others from around the world, share interests with each other, learn about other places in the US and the world. I'd describe it as a place to "meet" and communicate with each other. There are many groups to go to with interesting things to participate in. (Mia 2010)

While friendship forming adds to the personal enjoyment of being on the site, there are many other activities that contribute to building and sustaining the community. Sociality between members also included helping and obtaining help when needed. Many researchers have shown that peer-supported learning of technology has ongoing benefits for older people (Blit-Cohen and Litwin 2004; Burmeister et al. 2012; Gietzelt 2001; Jobling 2014; Russell, Campbell, and Hughes 2008; Sayago and Forbes 2013; Xie 2011). Support for learning computers combined with access to help from peers played an essential role in the enjoyment of the site:

> I have fun in creating my page, chatting with friends, finding pretty graphics to exchange, and interacting with people in the Forums - helping and getting help with computer problems and issues. (JulieAnn 2010)

> I am learning to make my own graphics with the help of some very talented and generous members. (LillianGrace 2010)

Peer support and help played a crucial role in sustaining membership that added value to the experience of being online.

The 'belonging friendship' begins when all new members receive welcome messages offering help and support as well as extending the hand of friendship. A sense of belonging is inextricably linked to being mature where age is the baseline for commonality as an immediately identifiable shared interest. No matter how many friends one has, being visible in the MyFriends list serves to reinforce belonging (identity and social status) regardless of whether or not there is any communication. MyFriends confirm proof of belonging to this community.

Choosing friends

Inviting someone to be a friend was an opportunity to extend sociality to other members as well as creating the public MyFriend list. Without exception, at the time of my research, all the participants had initially accepted MyFriend invites from strangers regardless of whether there was any potential of actually becoming a friend, yet at some point during their time on *The Roost* they rationalised their MyFriends list into meaningful categories based on compatibility and social contact. Choosing friends on *The Roost* is a binary process. Members were free to choose to send an invite to a member to become a friend or they could choose to accept (or not) an invitation request for friendship from others. The following testimonies illustrate the cultural practice on the site to accept requests for friendship.

> I do not like to say no to an invitation of friendship. How could you possibly know if there was any common ground? (AussieWoman 2010)
>
> I have a problem refusing anyone who requests my friendship in [*The Roost*], because it appears to be a slap in the face. I have never yet refused, nor have I been turned down. (LillianGrace 2010)

Even if nothing eventuates from this friendship link, MyFriends remain unless there is reason to remove them. It was acceptable to have a MyFriend listed even though no social interaction occurred between them.

> I don't have a huge number of friends...46 in total...as I stopped trying to gather friends ages ago! I just couldn't keep up...a big time issue! It all became a bit too much as I was trying too hard to contact everyone on my list and wasn't getting very much out of it. After stepping back a bit and just contacting people I felt compatible with, I relaxed and started to enjoy the interaction. At the moment, I'm only in touch fairly regularly with about 13 people, some contact with 6, and no contact - 27! I have no idea what to do with the 27 as I've nothing in common with them and really no interest at all. (Essie 2010)

> I think I have about 60 but there would probably be only about twenty of those with whom I correspond regularly. As well there is probably another 20 that I don't hear from at all. There are also a few friends outside My Friends list but they belong to groups that I am in and we often exchange a note or two. (Blitz 2010)

> I mainly accept people who I have things in common with: hobbies, likes or dislikes, etc. (JulieAnn 2010)

Sometimes, but not very often, MyFriends were removed:

> I did choose to 'drop' a couple of friends who are very religious; I respect their beliefs, but sometimes that is in direct conflict with my own religious/political beliefs. I don't want to get into arguments over religion or politics. (JulieAnn 2010)

As the above comments illustrate, MyFriends consisted of members who *requested* to be friends as well as those who were *chosen* as friends. At first glance, it appeared as though members had many friends but the experience of these friendships was that everyone had many more MyFriends than actual friends. Accepting a MyFriend request involved basic manners of being polite and caring enough not to disappoint others. Kaufman (1986:109) found that friends were those who "share lifestyle and interests"; this can be extended to the online context. Choosing who would be a friend to socially interact with was based on personal interests and personal interests were linked to compatibility (like-mindedness, common interests, shared hobbies, and so forth), but this did not preclude accepting invitations to become a MyFriend.

All the participants had people in their list that they had minimal or no contact with. Haythornthwaite (2002) uses the term "latent ties" to describe potential relationships within a group that have not been activated. This adequately describes the people in the MyFriend list where no social interaction occurs but the possibility of a friendship might develop at a later stage. Within the social spaces of the broader community, latent ties exist with all members where the possibility for social interaction exists and new friendships may emerge outside the MyFriends list.

The ABCs of friendship

In a study focusing on the variable identification of friends under differing circumstances, Jacobson, (1975:232) found that for his male participants the concept of "friends" was polysemic; that is, it had many meanings such as "old friends", "close friends", "business associates" and "acquaintances". I expected my participants to share similar categories to identify their friends, so it was not surprising when Carrie offered the following "friendship scale" for the focus-group to consider:

> [a] overly casual in that the "friend" has maybe several hundred whom they can in no way do justice to within the true meaning of friend.
>
> [b] a less casual friend who may have a hundred or more friends but does occasionally visit and take a mild interest in ones page/activities.
>
> [c] a closer friend who is in reasonably regular contact and with whom one has some things in common.
>
> [d] close friends with whom one communicates on a regular daily/weekly basis with a lot of common interests.
>
> [e] the really close friend/s with whom one may also have contact off-site i.e., email and perhaps actually visit if living close handy. (Carrie 2010)

During a study on friendship definitions for older people in the USA and Canada, Adams, Blieszner and de Vries (2000:130) found that their respondents used their own terms to describe friendships and that "it was not appropriate to assume that people share common criteria for friendship". That was certainly the case for members on *The Roost*. Only two people in the group chose to use Carrie's "scale". Quirita had a few friends who were category D and some who were C, and BluePenguin was able to put her friends into C, D and E. The rest of the group preferred to use their own words and thoughts to describe the relationships they had with their MyFriends.

The following exchange between SeniorAusMan and Carrie on the topic of friendship categories is interesting because it demonstrates the level of dedication by the participants to engage with and think about the topic of friends and friendship. SeniorAusMan was not an active member of the focus-group. His input was sporadic and his responses were too brief to be of much use to me or the group. Eventually, he messaged me to say that he no longer had time to continue in the group and left,

however, he did remain on MyFriend list throughout the duration of my time on *The Roost*. Nevertheless, SeniorAusMan did join the conversation on friends. His input was brief:

> I don't categorise anyone on [*The Roost*]. I feel that each and every person who has either asked or agreed to being my friends on [*The Roost*] are all equal. I have yet to get to know everybody. In the "real world" I have some very close friends and a lot of acquaintances. Some I have known for over 30 years some only 30 seconds. (SeniorAusMan 2010)

Although SeniorAusMan did not yet know all of his MyFriends, he gave them the benefit of doubt as he expected to get to know them over time. He did not say what he would do if he found someone in the list that did not meet his requirement for friendship, nor did he offer any insight on how he would decide who to be friends with or what the meaning of friendship was to him other than all were equal. SeniorAusMan's utilitarian approach of equality to the friendship discussion irritated Carrie so much that he emailed his frustrations to me. I reassured him that all comments were valid and valued; be that as it may, the next morning the following response from Carrie had been posted to the group:

> Methinks that we have now come a long way in trying to unravel and to clarify in our own thinking the whole spectrum and meaning of "friend/s", in that in the beginning, most of us active participants tended to view the initial premise in a rather brief, generalised manner but as we have progressed into dealing and redefining our understanding of the meanings, we are coming to the conclusion that our previous use of the word was actually rather short on substance and a lack of realizing its complexity, which is now slowly becoming more apparent.

> My efforts to fulfil this requirement resulted in my making a judgement value on all those on my "friends" list in order to try and give a reasonably logical assessment of the nature of the meaning of the word "friend" as it applied to those members in their relative interactions with me, resulting in my placing their involvement in a relative order, which necessitated, to my mind, creating a "category" to assist in acquiring a reasonable percentage formula.
>
> So i am somewhat intrigued by SeniorAusMan's definitions and assessments on his understandings of the nature of friends as he sees it, and his dismissive objection to the use of "categories". (Carrie 2010)

In his post Carrie chastised SeniorAusMan for his perceived lack of thought for the topic as well as his lack of participation in the focus-group. Manners on [*The Roost*] do not preclude the ability to speak one's mind! While some in the focus-group found the categories a useful tool to think about their various friendships, SeniorAusMan was not the only person in the group who claimed not to apply a deeper meaning to each of the people in their list of *Roost* friends.

After going through her list of MyFriends and dividing them into groups by the type of contact she had with each (a form of categorising!), LillianGrace concluded, "I have not put my friends list into categories. I see no need to. I know who my real friends are" (2010). Even though she found it unnecessary to categorise her friends, she inadvertently refers to Carrie's 'ABCs of friendship' to capture the complexities of the sentiment expressed by the group with the following detailed testimony of her friends:

> [I have] over 200 members, many of whom I quite frankly don't have anything in common with and don't want on my list. Several times I have deleted people, only to have them ask again to be my friend. Oh yes, I'm always "going to" sort out that list to just those I want on it. This never happens.

There are only two people in [*The Roost*] that I contact every single day. There are a good many more that I contact several times a week. There are some that I gave my private email address to, only to find they use it for sending me jokes or videos that I don't want. I still need to analyse that, and decide why I gave them that address and for what purpose I would like them to use it.

I didn't choose most of the friends I have in [*The Roost*], but I still value many of them and would not like to lose the occasional contact that we enjoy. I am not officially a friend of [Carrie], we are not on each other's Friends list, and yet I value him well above many of the people on my list.

What do I want from these people on my Friends list, and what can I offer them? That varies. Some of them I exchange confidential information with, which may or may not have anything to do with [*The Roost*]. Some I can be myself with...if I say Bugger they don't mind. I don't usually write that in a [Roost] message.

Some of them I can ask for help with [Roost] issues. True, I can go to Forums and Groups for help, but I find the personal touch with good friends far exceeds what you get in a forum because I am on the same wavelength as my close friends and it's easier to get our messages across.

Another very important characteristic of friends is their sense of humour. When I find a friend who shares that with me, I am elated and look forward to the banter that goes on.

I have also found some friends who will discuss what I call serious subjects, offering some excellent points of view and more importantly some information that I didn't have before. There isn't much I won't discuss, only religion and politics. There is a lot to learn about other countries, especially for people like me who do not travel overseas. (LillianGrace 2010)

The most common characteristic of MyFriends on *The Roost* was related to time and how much time was spent interacting with each person. The amount of time shared together significantly increased or decreased how the friendship was defined. As expected there were variations between individuals on the value or qualities that drew a friend closer. When seeking friends (inviting rather than accepting), compatibility was the most important criteria.

Interestingly, there was reluctance to name friends during this discussion, which demonstrates the nature of friendship being a private relationship between the individuals, confirming Paine's (1969) theory of "communicational closure". Confessed "Best Friends Forever", Essie from Australia and Quirita from Canada, who met on *The Roost*, shared events of their lives on a daily basis. Their friendship was based on the commonality between them of being adoptive parents. Their "plan" was to "save and meet face to face" either in Australia or Canada depending on "who saved enough money to travel first". Without naming her friend, Quirita indirectly referred to their close friendship within the broader context of friendship and its meanings to her:

> I wrote some blogs about the challenges of family life. Several times, throughout the writings, I extended invitations to the readers to write & share with me THEIR story because I wanted it to be a 2-sided experience, not just about me.
>
> As a result, I received numerous letters from folks who shared similar experiences to me. I was thrilled to hear from adoptees. Some of the letters were from women who were now raising their grandchildren & were legally or felt like adoptive parents. I remain in contact with several of these contacts & many have become Class D friends! (Quirita 2010)

Using Carrie's category [d] *close friends with whom one communicates on a regular daily/weekly basis with a lot of common interests*, Quirita described the closeness she felt towards new friends who shared her passion as adoptive parents; this closeness is

related to remaining in contact with friends, but she does not mention her close relationship with Essie.[38] Their relationship (best friends forever), while private to the focus-group, was not a secret, yet it was not mentioned during the discussions on friendship in which they both participated. Other than LillianGrace's testimony to her friendship with Carrie, no one else named their friends. I understood this to be due to the nature of the openness of the focus-group whereby not all were friends with each other, but drawn to the group out of interest. It is also plausible that no one wanted to hurt another members' feelings by categorising their friends publicly. There is also the issue of trust between friends that communicational closure provides.

In a discussion paper, Caroline Haythornthwaite (2002:388) posits that "consideration of the strength of ties between communicators" can help in understanding the impact of "new media on social relations". She uses strong, weak and latent ties to understand these relationships and makes several key assumptions regarding the ties we make. She states, "the characteristics of ties hold in the mediated environments as they do in the offline environment" and that "online exchanges are as real in terms of their impact on the tie as are offline exchanges". She emphasises that "it is the **tie** that drives the number and types of exchanges, not whether the tie is maintained on or offline, or via any combination of the two" (2002:388 bold in original). For my participants, the characteristics of their friendship ties express the inter-personal aspects of friendship via the MyFriends categorisations; some were strong, some were weak and quite a few were latent but for a variety of reasons were considered to be meaningful within the context of their everyday lives.

After a lengthy and complex discussion amongst each other, LillianGrace captured the supporting structure of friendship on *The Roost* with her comment, "I am an active member, and I seek other active members as friends". Being active, reciprocating, and being engaged with friends involves a high degree of personal involvement or as

[38] I learned about the closeness of the relationship between these two women initially via email from each of them and later during a home visit with Essie.

Graham Allan (2010:242) pointed out "friendships need servicing". Views of friendship were multiple faceted but included shared activities, shared interests, and shared values (Adams, Blieszner, and de Vries 2000). Time and frequency of contact were a structural characteristic of friendships linked by reciprocity and the gift of time. Friendships in the list were delineated based on the amount of contact shared, but even if there was no contact these friends remained in the MyFriend list as a matter of either courtesy or to remain as a potential new friend.

Etiquette: manners and community friendship

For this group of older people, age-identity and a sense of belonging were linked by friendships that included an appreciation for manners. There was an expectation that because everyone is older, an understanding of manners and their use was an already acquired skill that should be utilised. Bourdieu (1997:51) states that "manners may be included in social capital insofar as, through the mode of acquisition they point to, they indicate initial membership of a more or less prestigious group". *The Roost* is a prestigious group defined by the age of its members, and these members come from an era in which manners were considered to be important. Age does not necessarily indicate prestige, but the fact that *The Roost* participants generally adhered to expected standards of polite behaviour meant that they were able to signify themselves as members of a prestigious group.

Using manners was a characteristic of friendship that was appreciated, even expected, from the membership. There was consensus amongst all the participants that manners should be brought to the online context. At the very least, "please" and "thank you" were considered an essential courtesy between members. Where interactions were publicly visible, civility and politeness were a social practice that was an expected and appreciated cultural norm as the following testimonies indicate:

> I think a lot of online manners should be the same for when we know people in person, as far as saying thank you, please, and I've noticed members here are so very nice in that respect. (MooMoo 2010)

> On the whole I believe all the members are well mannered and considerate of others the same as they would be offline. (Saser 2010)

> I can't recall ever getting a message that I thought was deliberately impolite, people in [*The Roost*] are well-mannered. (LillianGrace 2010)

> My observations on [*The Roost*] are that everyone takes and gives on [*The Roost*] uniquely with the understanding that there are, in fact, community rules that we all try to fit in with, including, for the most part, bringing our offline manners with us to our online interactions. (Seniorita 2010)

Community members were polite, courteous, and well-mannered. This is consistent with the findings of research into older people online by Burmeister, et.al (2011) in Australia, and Kanayama (2003) in Japan. Older people, including members of *The Roost* do not want to socialise in an environment where personal values of being polite to each other do not exist.

Participants shunned, and certainly would not befriend, anyone who failed to meet these unwritten minimum standards. Nevertheless, a member's manners during social interactions on the site could make or break ties within the community. Rude behaviour was condemned with the consequence of social isolation from the community. In public forums, groups and blogs when rudeness was observed, members swiftly acted to warn the offending member (see chapter 5). On a personal level, members who did not conform to standards of politeness were likely to be ostracised by the membership.

> Being rude, crass, sexist, discriminating, vulgar... is another story. I, as a rule, stay away from such people both on [*The Roost*] & in my life. (Quirita 2010)

> I have occasionally seen rather unpleasant posts in the past, but generally ignore them and just don't get involved with the person in any way. (NTLady 2010)

Although good manners were an essential characteristic of online communication and social participation, participants were able to discern empathetically between good manners, bad manners, and someone simply having a bad day. [39] AussieWoman pointed out these differences thus:

> I feel a little sad for those who feel that they must be rude as if they are being threatened in some way. I guess it makes such a person feel slightly better for having, so called, got one up on someone. How sad is that behaviour? Maybe they were just having a very bad day of their own and didn't quite realise how things would come across to others. I think that we can all be oblivious sometimes at the hurt we unintentionally give out online and offline. (AussieWoman 2010)

Manners were a prerequisite to building relationships both online and offline for this older group. Relationships were initiated and sustained through the collective values and ritual practices defined as manners. Manners also contributed to the values attached to meaningful social interactions as well as influencing who amongst the membership they choose to associate with either as a personal MyFriend or someone they could

[39] Anthropologically, empathy is defined "as a first person-like experiential understanding of another person's perspective" in which a person "emotionally resonates with the experience of another while simultaneously attempting to imaginatively view a situation from that other person's perspective" (Hollan and Throop 2011:2).

interact with from the general community. For members of *The Roost*, manners were considered to be an essential social practice that was required to interact with others.

Etiquette: font size matters

Another characteristic that was central in promoting positive opportunities to form friendships was the use of larger font sizes to communicate with each other. In the previous chapter I discussed font size as a graphic that adds personality to communications, as well as a method for ease of reading. Choice of font, colour, and size was also understood to be something that should be reciprocated when replying to messages. This was a unique and significant etiquette related to the site. Explained thus:

> Originally, I was told not to 'shout' (use CAPS)....but some of our older members have visual problems & always use caps so they can see what they are posting. I don't use caps (well, except for stressing something). I use size 3 font...hoping that most people have no trouble reading that. I think that here on [*The Roost*] it 'should' be considered good manners to use a larger font. (JulieAnn 2010)

> CAPS on, I find it too hard to read and a strain on the eyes, it is a lot better to enlarge your font size. I think that in [*The Roost*] it is a courtesy to use a larger font size and I usually use the size 4. (AussieWoman 2010)

And reciprocating font size:

> The best choice is a bigger font size. I personally think capital letters are harder to read. Responding in the same size font as the sender should be ok, or if you are the original sender bear in mind that [*The Roost*] is primarily for oldies and choose at least a 3pt. It also

> depends on the font. I'm using 4pt right now, because my chosen font is smaller than most. (LillianGrace 2010)

As a general guide, LillianGrace claimed to be using 4pt, however, in a word document her choice converted to font face Trebuchet MS size 14. The same size 4pt used by AussieWoman in Times New Roman converts to size 14, and size 3pt in Times New Roman used by JulieAnn equated to font size 12 in a Word document (the same as this document). Keeping in mind that the default font size of the site was times new roman size 8, it becomes obvious that any increase in size would be welcome.[40]

Font size, font face, and a readable colour mattered and was valued by members when communicating with each other on the site. On a social networking site for older people, where manners are considered to be important, reciprocating font size when communicating with each other was a technique used by members to demonstrate thoughtfulness and consideration for others. This is especially relevant to researchers who are seeking to design social networking sites for older people (for example, see Bernard, Liao, and Mills 2001) or as a design feature to promote social interaction (see Pelaprat and Brown 2012). Pelaprat and Brown (2012:13) have argued that the difficulty of designing for reciprocal recognition on social platforms is that reciprocal exchange is often difficult to track due to its "ad hoc" nature. On *The Roost* reciprocating font size to overcome website design problems had not become obvious until participants shared their views related to manners related to socially interacting with each other on the site.

[40] In one of my responses to a participant during the discussion on manners, I inadvertently used Times New Roman size 10 to respond to Blitz who had used Arial size 14. This caused much bantering reproval at my expense from the group members!

Etiquette: the gift of time

Denise Carter (2008) established that an important concept for friendship online is the exchange of gifts (time, objects, and artefacts) in creating networks of friendship that emphasise reciprocity and trust. Pelaprat and Brown (2012:14) suggest that practices of reciprocal exchange online are a "return-action of recognition" of regard to someone who has generously acted to recognise us in the first place. The notion of time as a gift (reciprocal actions of regard) became apparent during discussions on *The Roost* related to responding to greetings and messages. Reciprocity of greetings and messages was steeped in "good intentions", but not always followed through. Nevertheless, time spent (or lack thereof) responding to messages was an indicator as to whether a friendship could be fostered and sustained. The following testimonies illustrate the complexities of exchange and reciprocity within the community.

> I think common courtesy should be practiced: respond to messages, be polite, etc. When someone leaves me a comment, I try to visit their page & leave a comment. (JulieAnn 2010)

> I do try to go to peoples pages and leave a note if they have written to me however I probably don't do it as often as I maybe should. Again it is the tyranny of time and I do not have a fast connection and takes a while to load graphic heavy pages. (AussieWoman 2010)

Reciprocating messages was not a universally agreed requirement amongst the participants. To reciprocate or not generated a lively discussion from opposing camps. This fractiousness was related to the bulletin messaging system and available amounts of time to interact with MyFriends. As I explained in the previous chapter, the bulletin messaging system of the site is used exclusively for those in the MyFriend list but its function was to primarily serve as an indicator for vitality of presence. The influence of time and bulletin message use is explained by Quirita and JulieAnn in their following statements:

> There is NO WAY that I can keep in contact with 100 people. I DO have another life!!! That's where the Bulletins come in. I read the Bulletins every day. I don't read all of them because by now, I know that some of them are just webshots or cute graphics or recipes. But some folks do actually write a bit about their previous day or their plans for that day or whatever. They are communicating or exchanging or... nurturing a relationship.
>
> When things get crazy busy around here ... I just don't get around to replying. I should! I would if I could! But I can't! I just don't have the time to do so! Then, I feel guilty that I'm neglecting all my friends so, I have the choice of doing nothing or sending everyone a quick hello just to touch base. Then, when I have more time, I get down to writing a few personal emails. (Quirita 2010)
>
> Lately, between illness and other things going on in my life, I haven't been able to visit all my Friends pages as often as I'd like. I do try to do that once a week, but like everyone else, sometimes my 'wishes' don't meet 'reality'. I realize many of us get busy & don't have time to always return comments or messages; that's when Bulletins come in handy. (JulieAnn 2010)

Others did not feel the same way towards bulletin messages. For some, bulletin messages were an impersonal and annoying form of communication. Saser provided an alternative view of the bulletin messages:

> I don't understand the underlining feeling from members who seem to think that every comment or Bulletin demands an answer from the receiver. I don't understand this because maybe there were no real issues to be addressed in the receiving comment, and the receiver does not have anything important to respond back to the sender. I have a couple friends that will continue to respond to each response I send to them even if it is a clearly "Nite Nite". They in turn will send

> it back with a Nite Nite to you. This seems pointless to me. (Saser 2010)

And a quandary was raised by Seniorita:

> I read in a Forum recently of a new member who was asking how to delete her entire account because she didn't want to be a member anymore. She went on to say she really liked it here but had become so overwhelmed with nice comments and Bulletins, she was embarrassed she could not keep up with them to answer every one because of personal and health problems and she didn't want to hurt anyone's feelings.
>
> I thought of that, and it really bothers me that it may have happened more times than we know. In our delight to touch every person we can every day, has that caused misunderstandings on the other parts side about responding? I just don't know and if there is a day that I don't particularly feel like responding to my mail, I would like to know that the sender do not expect me to do so, and that it will not create hard feelings. For me it is a quandary. (Seniorita 2010)

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, bulletin messages do serve a purpose on the site as indicators for vitality of presence. While reciprocity is appreciated by some, it is not a requirement for everyone. In her study of sociability in old age in the UK, Dorothy Jerrome (1992:72) found that for older people "friendship is characterised by a high degree of personal involvement". VicGal captured the sentiments being expressed when she remarked, "people who become friends are the ones who reciprocate interest by writing more often and in greater depth" (2010). Her comment illustrates both "time as a gift" (Carter 2008) and "return-action of recognition" (Pelaprat and Brown 2012). On *The Roost*, time constraints as well as the content of the message are the major influence in how messages are responded to. A lack of response, however, is cause for reconsideration of that person's place in the friendship list.

Reciprocity

Anthropologists have a long history of interest in the symbolism, types of bonds, and obligations formed and upheld in giving and exchange relationships.[41] In anthropology the acknowledged canons for gift-exchange began with Bronislaw Malinowski (1961[1922]), who paid attention to the exchange system in Melanesia known as the *kula* through which objects were strategically traded to improve the status of those who obtained them. Malinowski also noted a separate system of barter called the *gimwali* which resembled a market (without money) to haggle for the best deal.[42] Malinowski argued that gifts are given without expectation of receiving something in return; the gift is altruistic and pure.

Following Malinowski, the French sociologist, Marcel Mauss in his seminal book *The Gift* (1999[1954]) analysed the *potlach*, a feast of Indian tribes in the Pacific Northwest, whereby the public gifting, as a system of exchange, creates wealth (objects, people, emotions and belief) that are always strategic and reciprocally embedded as an obligation; the gift is understood to be a symbol of the giver and not a product of economic relations. Gift exchange as analysed by Mauss demonstrates connections between individuals and others and between individuals and things.

Malinowski and Mauss's theories continue to fascinate scholars and dominate discourses related to gift-exchange including contemporary understandings of

[41] Due to word limitations it is necessary to restrict this discussion to a brief acknowledgement of the large, prominent, and dominant theoretical perspectives within anthropology (especially in relation to economics). My aim is to contextualise online gifting and gift exchange within these historically important perspectives as an entry point to understanding gifting and gift-exchange online between friends.

[42] Malinowski argued for a "pure" gift, but later retracted this and accepted the notion of reciprocity (see Hann 2006; Peebles 2010).

reciprocity that underpin online activity.[43] There are no markets, bartering, or economic concerns on *The Roost*, yet gifting occurs within the social relationships of friendship. For example, reciprocating font size is a thoughtful gift of regard related to manners and politeness that does not attract an obligation in return, yet time as a gift does require reciprocity if friendship is to meaningfully continue between the parties.

Contemporary scholars are rethinking classical theories of the gift (couched as reciprocity) to explore its connection with how social life is conducted online.[44] Pelaprat and Brown (2012) have suggested that dominant theories on interaction (for example rational choice theory) that explain social life online are built on the assumption that actions, including those of reciprocity, are self-interested or altruistic. They argue that these assumptions ignore how "social actions that solicit a return-action seek to neither profit nor benefit but rather express a desire to draw in others into social life and relationships" (2012:1). They define practices of reciprocal exchange as symbolic exchange where "the function of giving and reciprocating is not to benefit", rather it is a social mechanism used online to be recognised by others (2012:13). In these cases, reciprocity becomes a return-action of recognition of regard. The point they make is that a return-action is a critical social mechanism found in diverse social practices online. Pelaprat and Browns' (2012) argument is compelling and explains gifting on *The Roost*. Gifting of images and time, is an action of regard that not only allows friendships to emerge but also sustains these friendships over time.

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[43] Other renowned scholars who have contributed to theories of reciprocity include Sykes' (2005) critique of anthropology and theories of the gift; Derrida's (1994) examination of the impossibility of the pure gift; see Venkatesan (2011) on rethinking Derrida's (1994) concept of the pure gift; and Laidlaw (2000) who argues that a free gift makes no sense as an obligation always emerges. For a review on the historical perspectives of reciprocity see Hann (2006) and Peebles (2010).

[44] For examples, see Pearson (2007) on power relations; McGee and Skågeby (2004) for a discussion on gifting motivations and goals related to gifting online and the design challenges these present for applications to assist with online gifting; Humphrey's (2009) analysis of the social motivations online related to physical gifts. In an offline context, also see Laidlaw (2000) and Venkatesan (2011).

The experience of online friends

My participants say that being online is as real as sitting in the same room with a friend. Some time ago Denise Carter (2004:110) pointed out that forming personal relationships online were "no longer distinct and separate from the real world", to argue they were "part of everyday life", and this is still the case today. Even though friendships remained solely online on *The Roost*, these friendships were considered by all participants to be genuine and "real", and in many cases, such as Quirita and Essie, were "more meaningful" than friendships offline. It is imperative not to underestimate the meaningfulness of the relationships formed online by this older group, because these relationships significantly contribute to feelings of social inclusion and connectedness in their everyday lives. The experience of online friendship expressed in the following testimonies demonstrate the depth of friendships formed with peers on the site.

> My hubby knows all my online friends by their nickname, real name & place of origin. I talk about these people regularly & they are as 'real' as any of my offline friends. (Quirita 2010)

> I feel that the friends on [*The Roost*] are real.... BUT I guess you can never be 100% sure that the person you are corresponding with is who they say, you have to trust that they are. But I guess that is like everything in life. I think some friends are more real than others, meaning that some just become acquaintances while other become friends in the real sense of the word even though we will probably never meet. I feel we share each other's joys and happiness as well as the ups and downs and isn't that what real friends do. (Blitz 2010)

> My online friends are every bit as real to me as my offline ones, because they are literally there. If I ask them a question, they answer. How much more real can you get than that? It's as good as a phone, and I have even spoken to a couple of them on the phone. The only

> distinction is the physical propinquity. There is nothing imaginary about my online friends, in fact some of my long-term friends who have emigrated to Australia are no more real than those I never met in person.
>
> I never use, or even think of, the term "real life". To me, everything I do is very real, and imagination involves people or things that couldn't ever be or happen. (LillianGrace 2010)

For members of *The Roost*, there is no distinction between a friendship formed online to one formed offline; each relationship is based on its own merits using values gained from life experience. Friendship on *The Roost* is motivated by a desire to spend time with age peers who have values, morals, and interests compatible with one's own, which are firmly grounded in an understanding of the self (Paine 1999) as someone who is mature with an abundance of life experience to lean on. On this basis, friendships formed online are meaningful and real.

Conclusion

This chapter contributes to ethnographic understandings of and the growing body of anthropological literature on friendship from the perspective of older people who are socially connected online. I have argued that friendship-forming is a multi-faceted process that arises from existing friendship patterns that evolve and change as circumstances change during ageing. The Internet provides new pathways for older people to source and extend their friendship circles to meet these changes. As Carrie pointed out in the opening comments to this chapter:

> *The interests we had many moons ago, and made friends with, those same interests will have changed. So, perhaps with new friends we have made recently and may make now, will encompass changes that ageing does influence. (Carrie 2010)*

Change in itself and varying likes and dislikes are accepted facets of the ageing process. These changes are motivations to forge new and compatible friendships with strangers. Social interaction with new people affords opportunities to form friendship ties that are worthwhile and meaningful, and it does not matter where these friendships are developed.

A sense of belonging to a group is generated by MyFriends links which includes shared age, shared values and morals, and shared interests. These characteristics provide the impetus to seek out interactions with other members of the group. Friendship links that are public and visible comprise subsets of communicational closure that are characterised by high degrees of personal involvement and reciprocity. The closer the friendship between two people, the greater is the frequency of contact.

The default position on *The Roost* is that everyone sharing the same social space is a potential friend and, as such, those who seek to be a MyFriend are accepted unless that person has not met the minimum standard for manners, in which case they are rejected. Everyone is given a 'benefit-of-the-doubt-opportunity' to become a MyFriend and will remain a MyFriend until such time they prove to be untrustworthy. Earlier in this chapter, I noted that Paine posited that trust was a requirement of friendship. How then is trust developed in an online environment? Trusting the online presence (profile information, images, conversations) was the default position for members during social interactions. In the next chapter I explore trust and trusting the online presence.

5

Trusting the Online Presence

The aspect of TRUST has never been an issue with [The Roost], because my friendships there can be terminated at any time.

I have nothing to hide in my communications on [The Roost]. Anything private doesn't get that far. As far as an online community is concerned, it is only my playground. Once I perceive a friend from there has the potential to be worthy of a deeper friendship, that is when I seek to exchange emails, I don't send general emails to multiple recipients. I rarely forward anything to more than one person at a time.

The quality of TRUST varies with individuals. I have got to know these email friends well enough to realise that they are not going to share my business with anyone else. I am selective with the information I disclose, and to most of them I send the kind of material I know they like to receive. That in itself mostly eliminates multiple recipients. I don't feel that I will ever know these people in person, so I don't "bare my soul" as it were. None of my online friends gossip about each other, not even when we are both members of the same "Group" within [The Roost].

I was 23 when I learnt the value of keeping my mouth shut. A sister-in-law at the time used to tell me things about our mutual relatives, which alerted me to the fact that she probably also told them things about me. That stood me in good stead for life. If people gossip to me about others, I assume that I'm not exempt from being talked about to others, and close friends we never will be. It would be the same online.

When my husband died, an Adelaide friend was there for me every step of the way, and she is the only person to this day to whom I have disclosed all of the dreadful details of that event. In fact I haven't told any other person, on or offline, everything that I told her. She is still my friend, and I still tell her things about my home, life and family that I don't tell everyone else. We share those kind of details with each other.

The other trusted friend is the Pole from Poland. I was trying to remember the other day how we managed to get so close, and it has been a series of events over several years, starting when he faced a traumatic and personal event. I went to his [Roost] page and one of us requested friendship and now we don't even know whose idea it was. I did read all the info on his page.

Early in 2012 a strange event occurred, sorry I'm not willing to tell the exact nature of it, but I did tell it to [my Polish Friend] because I knew from his page that he would be receptive. I would trust [him] with my life. Over the years he has sent me helpful books. When I wanted a computer keyboard like his, I ordered one from Amazon where he got his, and Amazon declined to send it to NZ. So [he] bought one, had it sent to his home, and forwarded it to me. I paid him. That, and the books, cemented our friendship.

I have asked, and he has answered, questions about his spirituality. We talked on Skype for a while but mine had no sound, so we settled for emails. Now, several years on, we exchange day-to-day occurrences, and he is my most frequent email friend. Both of us are widowed and in our 80s and there is absolutely no romantic association with our friendship. The kind of information I gave to my Adelaide friend is not the same as that which I share with [my Polish Friend].

I am a "one-off" person, no two friends are identical, and each friend is treated as special in their own way. My choice of friends both on and offline inevitably involves people with the qualities I most value, which are intelligence and humour. To me, trust is instinctive after having online dealings with people over a length of time. (SilverLilly, 2016)

This chapter contributes to understandings and the growing body of anthropological literature on trust by examining these concepts from the perspective of older people who use social media. What can be said, then, about SilverLilly's testimony and the way she experiences trusting relationships online? And how is forming trusting relationships online for older people situated within contemporary academic debates of trust online?

Not all contexts are the same, and not all online contexts are the same either. Baym (2010), Bird (2003), Boellstorff (2008), boyd (2006), Burmeister, et al (2011), Carter (2005), Kendall (2002), Miller and Slater (2000), Miller, et al. (2016) and others have all researched similar but different online environments from a variety of perspectives utilising multiple methods, including participant observation over extended periods of time. The experiences of trust for older people online contributes to this emerging body of knowledge. To understand trusting relationships online, consideration must be given to the fact that members are older and successfully engaged in blending their offline lives with their online sociability. As SilverLilly's testimony reveals, and previous chapters have examined, older people bring their offline values, concerns, and experiences to the online context.

I begin this chapter by contextualising SilverLilly's testimony in order to place it within contemporary scholastic debates concerning trust. It is common practice for anthropologists to develop friendships as well as trusting relationships with participants and the broader community (Boellstorff 2008; Carter 2005; Kendall 2002). I discuss my own experiences of rapport in the field, which were similar to anthropologists working offline, as well as to those who have worked online. As gossiping and gossipers were a concern for SilverLilly, I anthropologically examine the concept of gossip within the context of the death of her husband. Gossip on *The Roost* was a mechanism used to gain and share accurate information throughout the community after an unconfirmed condolence message was posted on SilverLilly's homepage. Trusting online cues are then examined as a method that allows trust to emerge between strangers.

Life experience, gossip, and intimacy

As SilverLilly's assertions make evident, older people have well established understandings of trust and all that this encompasses including the management of distrust. In the first instance, SilverLilly made it clear that she has the ability to "terminate friendships" on *The Roost* when it suits her. Although she has not explained this point, she is referring to those of her MyFriends (and other members she comes into contact with) that she has not had time to become acquainted with. These strangers may not meet her values and share her interests, or may prove to be rude or "unworthy". It is also a statement that clarifies her position should she meet and befriend someone who breaches her moral values.

SilverLilly points out that, "she learnt the value of keeping [her] mouth shut" when she was 23. Now in her mid 80s, the lessons learned from a gossiping family member 60 years earlier have "stood [her] in good stead for life". From life experience, she learned that those who gossip to *her* probably gossip about her to *others*, and "close friends [they] never will be". She goes on to say that none of her online friends "gossip about each other, not even when [they] are members of the same group within [*The Roost*]". Clearly, SilverLilly has experience with gossipers on *The Roost* and strives to avoid those who do engage in gossip. For the sake of family harmony, she may be forced to tolerate her sister-in-law, but an online friendship can be ended without further consideration. Having the ability to terminate friendships, including MyFriend requests, strikes to the heart of managing distrust online; SilverLilly is always in control of her friendships. In this way, she manages her online friends in order to gather people around her that she *can* trust.

To develop friendships online, she interacts with a member as a MyFriend on the site until she is satisfied that this new friend has "the potential to be worthy of a deeper friendship". Once this is established, she engages in offsite emails with this new friend in order to know them "well enough to realise they are not going to share [her] business

with anyone else". She has four email addresses that I am aware of, which she uses "dependant on the situation and the person/s involved"; one of these is restricted to "trusted recipients only". This means that emails sent to this address are vetted prior to being opened, and need to be approved by her before the email can be retrieved.[45] Weckert (2005:114) has proposed that, while there may be dangers and risks trusting online, care is taken to negotiate these, and that with respect to trust, "the on and offline worlds are not so different". In vetting emails, SilverLilly is exercising caution by screening the sender before accepting any unwanted intrusions.

In her testimony, SilverLilly points out that "the quality of trust varies with individuals" and that she is "selective with the information [she] discloses". Based on her life experiences, SilverLilly understands that by being selective she is still engaging with some risk when extending an opportunity to "know someone better", even though she is aware that this may not work out in her favour, so she exercises restraint and prefers not to "bare her soul". Silver (1989:293) has suggested that intimacy is a strategy used to establish trusting relationships:

> The agendas of modern personal friendships are unprecedentedly various and idiosyncratic, the outcomes of an infinity of elective encounters between modern individuals. Intimacy in such circumstances is not only an intrinsic good, but a strategy of establishing trust. Only thus can one seek to acquire the kind of knowledge about the other which permit the open lines of moral credit, of trust—unshaped by formal codes or necessitary contingencies—that the modern friendship ideal celebrates.

Restricting intimacy, at least in the early stages of developing trust, allows SilverLilly time to assess new friendships. Initially she trusts the person enough to share her private email address, but does not necessarily have confidence that the new friendship will

[45] The first time I used that particular email address, I was not a trusted recipient and received a message advising me that I had to be approved by SilverLilly before she could retrieve and read the content.

blossom or be sustained over time (Seligman 1986). Sharing intimate information establishes a "deeper friendship" in which confidence grows and trust is affirmed.

SilverLilly's "Pole from Poland" is a "trusted friend" that she is "close" to. In fact, she is so close to him that she "would trust [him] with [her] life". Their friendship started in the blog section of the site. SilverLilly blogs on *The Roost* and regularly reads and comments on other members' blogs. Blogs are an interesting and useful added source of publicly shared information about a member. SilverLilly was not satisfied enough with the content of the Pole's blog to initiate a MyFriend request; she desired more information about him before deciding whether or not to add him as a MyFriend. She sourced additional information from his homepage; details such as location, age, likes and dislikes. Baym (2010:62) has shown that additional cues assist in building identities online, and it is these cues that allowed SilverLilly to assess, accurately in this instance, that he "would be receptive" to her disclosing a "strange event" to him. The important process to note here is that after reading his blogs, she visited his homepage and it is from there that a MyFriend request was initiated. Although she does not disclose to us the intimate details of the event that drew them close together ("sorry I'm not willing to tell the exact nature of it"), it is something very private and intimate that she felt comfortable discussing with him. Gathering knowledge of the stranger online is significant because it allows trust to emerge although lack of information restricts trust (see chapter 6).

The trust and shared intimacy between SilverLilly and her "Pole from Poland" would eventually lead to exchanging home addresses and bank details. Both are in their 80s and both are widowed; however, SilverLilly makes it clear that there is "absolutely no romantic association in [their] friendship". Non-romantic friendships are common between men and women on *The Roost* and this is not dissimilar to the friendship Carrie shared with his American friend Katie75, although both Carrie and Katie75 were each married rather than widowed. Unlike older people using dating sites where romantic

liaisons were actively sought (see Malta 2007), *The Roost* limits sociability amongst members to friendship.[46]

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, close friendships are generally kept private from the broader community (communication closure). I did not know about SilverLilly's "Pole from Poland" friend and have no data at all of his membership on *The Roost*. Their friendship appears to have developed after I left the field. Even though they are not the same, she links "the kind of information" she gave to her Adelaide friend and that which she shared with her "Pole from Poland" to two trusting relationships she formed online, and these friendships form part of her everyday life. She also made it clear that she was "selective" with the information she shared with each individual friend. This appears to indicate a tier of trust or, as SilverLilly expressed it, "the quality of TRUST varies with individuals". The degree of intimacy-sharing varied albeit both of these trusting relationships were "deeply" meaningful to her.

SilverLilly also states that "as far as the online community is concerned, it is only my playground". Here, she is separating the community (broader membership) from the "deeper" friendships she forms online. This is an important distinction related to her social interactions with everyone on the site. The site is social and playful with many activities to occupy time spent online (see De Schutter and Vanden Abeele 2015; Nimrod 2010). There are numerous opportunities to interact with members who are not necessarily MyFriends. These interactions and activities are playful and fun. However, when there is a crisis, the community unites to offer support and comfort. [47] I will show later in this chapter that SilverLilly contradicts the "playground" statement after her

[46] The site does not advertise opportunities for romantic liaisons; the emphasis is on friendship. If there were romantic liaisons, these were private affairs. I did not witness any declarations of romantic love during my fieldwork.

[47] Much research is devoted to health and care of older people that omits fun. See Nimrod (2010) for an analysis of "fun culture" in online communities for older people. Also see De Shutter and Vanden Abeele (2015) on the "joy of play", and for the use of emoticons and graphics as fun communicative tools that older people use in online communication see (Kanayama 2003).

husband died and the community rallied to support her in her time of grief. This does not in any way diminish her understanding and use of the site as a place for fun, rather it adds another dimension to the characteristics of the site that makes it an attractive place to participate in socially.

Pahl (2000:61) has pointed out that "individuals, out of their own volition, work out how they should behave with their friends. At the heart of this ideal is the notion of trust". Trusting is at the heart of understanding the relationships that older people form on *The Roost*. Trusting online has been found to be a concern for older people (Burmeister, Weckert, and Williamson 2011; Gibson et al. 2010b). The experiences of older people using social media are important, because they offer a lens through which to conceptualise contemporary understandings of trust online to include the voice of older people. For SilverLilly, trusting the online presence to initiate friendships—some more meaningful than others—is shaped by her life experience and strong moral values.

Pahl (2000:65) made a valid point when he stated that, "we still do not know what trust is, other than some kind of belief in the goodwill of the other." Goodwill is evidenced on *The Roost* via the Myfriends list where members generously add friends when requested, essentially giving them the benefit of the doubt in becoming a friend. I argue that goodwill is a gesture of trust with strangers that extends beyond offline relationships to include online relationships with strangers too.

Trust: contemporary debates

Trust online is a contemporary and interesting concern. How do we trust strangers online? Many scholars agree that trust, and its partner distrust, must be contextualised by the circumstance in which it is engaged, and that there is no definitive theory that encompasses all situations and all circumstances (De Laat 2005; Ess 2010; Fukuyama 1995; Gambetta 1988a, 1988b; Hardin 1996, 2006; Luhmann 1988; Pahl 2000; Pettit 2004; Seligman 1986, 1997; Silver 1989; Weckert 2005). Contemporary understandings

of friendship now include relationships formed online. I agree with Pahl (2000:50), who rejects the sociological position of the "commodification of social relationships" in online communications. This model implies that trust is concerned with economics and institutions on a national scale linked to social capital, which is not the case on *The Roost*. It is not surprising, therefore, that the literature related to trust online is divided into two distinct ideologies. On the one hand, some scholars have argued that trust is not possible online (Pettit 2004) and on the other some have argued that it is (Carter 2005; De Laat 2005).

The Roost is a small online community in which friendship forming between strangers is the primary activity and this activity is related to social connections and sociability. Social relationships on *The Roost* grow from the social interactions (vitality of presence) that members share with each other. In the following section, to explore trust and trusting relationships, I draw from the literature a particular view related to trust and sociability online that persists within the literature and is relevant to the context of my fieldwork.

Trusting the online evidence

Philip Pettit (2004) has posited that trust between strangers online is impossible due to what he refers to as "lack of evidence" which he claims hinders trustworthiness. He asserts that online "everyone is invisible, in their personal identity, to others" (2004:108). According to Pettit (2004:118), in order to trust someone there must be "the existence of independent witnesses to the act of trust" to provide motivation to "perform as expected", which he links to a desire for the "esteem of others". Without this evidence, trust online cannot be experienced. He asks and answers two very important questions related to online social interaction:

> Is it ever likely to be the case, with the individuals I encounter on the Internet, and on the Internet only, that I can come to think of them as

> loyal or virtuous or even prudent/perceptive: that is, capable of recognizing and responding to the long-term interests that they and I may have in cooperating with each other? And is it ever likely to be possible for me to invest trust rationally in such contacts? I think not. (Pettit, 2004:118)

Even though Pettit (2004:118) thinks that trust cannot rationally be formed online, he offers three distinct sources of evidence (face, frame, and file) which he claims we rely on when we form beliefs related to "loyalty and virtue and prudence/perceptions in everyday life". According to him, these need to be addressed if trust is to be formed online, although he argues they are not available to us on the Internet. The evidence he suggests offers a framework through which to examine trusting relationships online. He proposes the following elements in support of his position:

> Firstly, the evidence available to me as I see and get cued—no doubt at subpersonal as well as personal levels of awareness—to the expressions, the gestures, the words, the looks of people: in a phrase, their bodily presence. Call this the evidence of *face*. Second, the evidence available to me as I see the person in interaction with others, enjoying the testimony of their association and support: in particular, see them connecting in this way with others whom I already know and credit. Call this the evidence of *frame*. And third, the evidence that accumulates in the record that I will normally maintain, however unconsciously, about their behaviour towards me and towards others over time. Call this the evidence registered in a personal *file* on the people involved. The striking thing about Internet contact is that it does not allow me to avail myself of such bodies of evidence, whether face, frame or file. (my emphasis, Pettit, 2004:118)

Only by resorting to the objects of "face", "frame" and "file" can trustworthiness be established. Alarmingly, he goes on to say:

> In view of these difficulties...the possibility of rational, primary trust in the virtual space of the Internet is only of vanishing significance. It is a space in which voices sound out of the dark, echoing to us in a void where it is never clear who is who and what is what. Or at least that is so when we enter the Internet without connection to existing, real-world networks of association and friendship. (2004:119)

In short, Pettit suggests it is not possible to trust strangers online. I dispute Pettit's analysis that trust cannot be established on the Internet with strangers, because these elements are in fact available to us online as a source of reference (cues) to establishing trusting relationships. I have shown in previous chapters that the characteristics named by Pettit as "face" (gestures etc), "frame" (witnesses), and "file" (accumulated information) are all available in online communications. Further, strangers use these elements to form trusting relationships with strangers.

On *The Roost* and elsewhere online, the characteristics suggested by Pettit for "face" are evidenced in communications and interactions by the use of personal photos, graphics, emoticons, and text emphasis. The evidence for "frame" is witnessed by MyFriends and the broader community membership during interactions that members publicly share in guestbook entries, forums, groups, and blogs. Further, knowledge obtained from members via these public interactions are additional to profile information and assist in friendship decision-making with strangers. And finally, the evidence for "file" online are the impressions of those with whom we interact, which are gathered over time spent online with strangers on *The Roost* (and elsewhere), including via emails, messengers such as Skype, and 'snail mail' to name only a few forms of communication.

The problem, Pettit (2004:118) suggests, is that, "there won't be any way of tracking that person for sure, since a given person may assume many addresses and the address of one person can be mimicked by others". I concur that this may be a problem in some

situations online where anonymity is desired (for examples see Ess 2010),but this is definitely not the case on *The Roost*. On *The Roost*, members choose, as I have shown previously, to have a stable and reliable online identity in order to make genuine friends with strangers.[48] As far back as 1998, Don Slater's (1998) research on Internet Relay Chat (IRC) showed that trust between strangers was being engaged in online communication even though Internet service provider identity was masked and anonymity was often coveted by users. Many esteemed researchers of social media (mentioned throughout this thesis) have shown that trust online can and does exist between individuals and groups, and this trust is transferable from online to offline encounters (see Carter 2005; Kendall 2002; Miller and Slater 2000). On *The Roost*, accumulating evidence of consistent behaviour allows trust to emerge between strangers whose online identity, although anonymous, is stable.

Trusting invitations

Paul de Laat (2005:170) employs a distinction between three types of Internet communities and their goals in order to argue that trust in relation to risk can be established online. His categories are "trading communities" for buying and selling goods where there is a risk of losing money. Next is "task groups" which focuses on academic or professional topics where the main risk is related to fair sharing of knowledge and contribution of effort by participants. Finally, "non-task groups" are those where recreational topics or group support are the focus and in which vulnerabilities related to "exposing" personal information are a concern. These online communities use "emails, bulletin boards, mailing lists (or listserv groups), Usenet groups, personal websites, chat rooms, and the like", meaning any space on the Internet where people gather and interact with each other (De Laat 2005:170). Non-task groups often display intimacies as long as they feel confident that someone will return them.

[48] When there was "lack of evidence" or evidence was withheld, trusting the online presence was shown to be problematic, which is discussed in the following chapter on distrust.

De Laat (2005) argues that moral intention attributes trustworthiness to "virtual partners" and generalised acts of trust are shown in online forum postings. Although moral intention does not communicate explicit trust of a stranger, it does indicate that that there is someone out there who can be trusted; he calls this a "trusting invitation" (2005:178). People reply in a "trusting fashion" and in asynchronous modes of communication people have time to think over their responses to reply in a trusting way. Cycles of trust between individuals are observed publicly which serve to generate esteem amongst members to build individual reputations as trustworthy. This is certainly the case on *The Roost* where "trusting invitations" and displays of "generalized acts of trust" are evident in postings throughout the site, including those quoted throughout this thesis. Accepting invitations provides a pathway for trust to emerge between strangers.

Trust as a moral value

In a study of Australian seniors online, Burmeister, et al. (2011) list four key moral values expressed in participant's language use on an Australian seniors social networking website called GreyPath.[49] Burmeister, et al. were investigating moral values that could be usefully incorporated into web design for older people. The key moral values they found were "equality, freedom, respect, and trust" within a broader spectrum of universal values: "human well being; human dignity, justice, welfare, including human welfare and physical welfare, and human rights" (2011:239). Burmeister, et al, successfully demonstrated that trust is a "moral value" for older people (2011:247). This is consistent with my participants' views on trust; for example it would be morally wrong to lie about personal information.

[49] A senior in Australia is someone over the age of 60. While GreyPath is for Australian seniors, and *The Roost* draws its membership from around the world, the age group under study is similar to the age group on *The Roost*. For that reason, comparisons can be drawn that are relevant to *The Roost* membership experiences.

Within the GreyPath community four key values were identified in language use—freedom of expression, fairness (equality), respect, and trust. Freedom of expression related to the opportunity to freely express themselves within the boundaries of "certain types of content and censorship by management" (2011:242). The boundaries on GreyPath are conditions of behaviour imposed by management that govern behaviour on the site. Fairness related to the "just treatment of others and was linked to the moral value of respect and freedom" (2011:244). Respect was considered an important value, and for GreyPath participants was directly related to "fair treatment of people from other generations", for example, older people should be offered respect and older people were expected to listen to younger people (2011:244). Trust was linked to respect and was "instrumental in forming relationships within the online community" (2011:244). Trust on GreyPath was also related to the notion that GreyPath was a safe environment.[50]

On GreyPath, it was found that "trust is the default position" for participants and members as it is on *The Roost* (2011:247). For their participants, Burmeister, et.al., (2011:247 found that "in a situation where trust would normally be expected and where no signs of untrustworthiness are evident, it is a sign of disrespect not to trust". This was undoubtedly the case on *The Roost* in relation to members where profile information was considered trustworthy enough to become a MyFriend at least until proven otherwise (see previous chapter on friendship). Acceptance of anyone asking to be a MyFriend was related to goodwill and the good manners (respect) that older people understand and accept as part of their everyday lives. As I have argued elsewhere, manners are important to older people, and the default position on *The Roost* is one of faith in the lessons learned from life experience; further, offline values including moral values are brought to the online context.[51] Nevertheless, in any community trouble can present itself, and this default position of trusting was challenged when established cultural norms were disrupted (see chapter 6).

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[50] Trusting the site and the site administrators on *The Roost* is discussed in chapter 6.
[51] For a discussion on the moral dimensions of social life in anthropology see Beldo (2014).

Trust as a moral value, observance of consistent evidence of online behaviours, and acceptance of invitations are affordances utilised by members of *The Roost* in which trust can, and does, emerge between strangers. Trusting relationships also involve intimacy and personal disclosure. I now return to SilverLilly's testimony and her reference to her trusted Adelaide friend: that friend was me.

Rapport and intimacy in the field

In his historical analysis of trust and friendship as moral ideals, Allan Silver (1989:294) came to the conclusion that, "intimacy is an optimal strategy in seeking knowledge of the other on which to base trust". I agree with Silver. Both online and offline, knowledge of the other is the pathway through which to build a trusting relationship or not. Online, Kendall (1999:70) found in her own ethnographic research that, "spending time with other participants and getting to know the particular norms and understandings of the group allows researchers to build trust and to learn to interpret participant's identity performances in the same way that participants themselves do". Although it was a slow process, I learned to trust SilverLilly's words online, including in messages, blogs, and emails.

I will never meet SilverLilly or many of the people I write about here, yet going through my research data and reading the messages and emails from her released an avalanche of memories and emotions. For me, the intimacy of shared thoughts and feelings between us was powerful and the trust tangible, and it was gratifying to read in SilverLilly's testimony that my sentiments were reciprocated. Initially, I found her forthright and direct dialogue confronting, but over time I understood her online mannerisms to be a style of social interaction that expressed her honest and caring approach to life. She frequently used graphics to temper the content of her messages and, over time, I gradually came to know her well. As SilverLilly said, a "deeper friendship" grew between us.

SilverLilly embraced the site and participated in many of the activities that were available. Her familiarity of how the site worked was outstanding, and she assisted me and others by generously sharing her knowledge and experience. Her blogs were generally related to sharing memories of her life. Myerhoff (1979) showed the reiteration of life histories by older people to be a valid and important component of the ageing process. Blogging on the site facilitated this not just for SilverLilly, but for many others too. Her blogs were always popular and generated interest that prompted other members to share their own memories of life experiences. I also blogged on the site and we often responded to each other's blogs by sharing relevant comments related to our own experiences.[52] The content of SilverLilly's blogs supplemented the content of her homepage by adding another dimension of her personality that I enjoyed, and it also provided another source of knowledge connected to her offline life experiences. Baym (2010:111) refers to this type of content as a component of the "social identity" cues used online that help shape how we perceive others.

SilverLilly's contribution to the focus-group was always thoughtful and generous. The focus-group was a daily activity for me as questions were asked and answered, and clarifications sought. Participants responded in their own time, sometimes taking up to a week to contribute. However, SilverLilly was always prompt, and if I was ambiguous with question structure, I could rely upon her to seek clarification (often for the benefit of the whole group). All of us were able to read and respond to each other's comments and experiences, and over time this developed into a rapport amongst us where personal views, often intimate, were shared openly and honestly. My participants linked the sharing of personal opinions to trust in me, as well as the privacy of it being a closed group from the rest of the community.[53] As MooMoo and Blitz emphasize below, all opinions were respected and valued, and any problems that arose were discussed in an equally respectful manner.

[52] I could relate to her blogs because she was from the same generation as my mother.
[53] Problems associated with the differences between closed and private groups are discussed in chapter 6.

> I think it's the trust in you that we have developed that makes it easy to share our personal opinions with you and the group. (MooMoo 2010)

> I can't think of a situation where I would have posted any of the information I have shared with the group in 'the public domain'. I have felt 'safe' and comfortable sharing in the environment that you created with the group. (Blitz 2010)

I felt that privacy was critical if the research project were to succeed. Privacy settings on the focus-group prevented non-members from viewing the content of the discussions. Offering a secure and private area for participants was conducive to gaining trust and rapport within the group where genuine opinions and experiences could be expressed and shared.[54]

Many months of questions and answers had transpired before I invited participants to discuss their views on death and dying in the focus-group. As it was a sensitive subject, I felt that a high level of rapport was required.[55] At the time, I knew from our personal email conversations that SilverLilly's husband had been ill, but I had no idea of the gravity of the situation.[56] SilverLilly contributed intimately to these discussions without mentioning to any of us that her husband was terminally ill. She shared her thoughts with us:

> I regard death as the completion of life, but that doesn't stop the grief when someone I love dies. I have lived long enough to have seen so

[54] Unlike Boellstorff (2008:78), who created individual focus-groups per "blurb" or topic, my focus-group remained opened as a forum for members to come and go at their leisure for the duration of my fieldwork. Comments were often posted months after a topic seemed exhausted to be refreshed with new thoughts to discuss.
[55] All the participants were pragmatic about death, and willingly shared their personal thoughts on death and dying. Death was understood to be part of the ageing process, to which no one was immune.
[56] Had I known, I would have postponed the discussion.

> many of my friends and most of my relatives reach the end of their lives, and no matter how many times it happens, it's never easy.
>
> For [my husband] and myself, we don't want a funeral. We have discussed it and if we can't have an eco funeral, which is not yet established in our area, then we want to be just taken away with no fuss, and if our friends and rellies [relatives] would like to organise a memorial service later, that's fine.
>
> We don't believe that we, as dead people, will know anything about what happens to our deceased bodies, neither will we care. Different people have different beliefs, and nobody knows for sure what happens to our identities when we die. Sometimes I think that dying might be an interesting experience, that will provide answers that a lifetime of living has not provided.
>
> One more thing, I am a firm believer that a dying person is not afraid to die. People don't go out kicking and screaming, as you may have noticed, but what confirmed it for me was my brother. At one time he thought he was dying. He didn't have a near-death experience as such, like tunnels with lights at the end. What he did have was a total "I don't care" feeling. I'm dying and it doesn't bother me one little bit. That spoke volumes to me, and I believe that when my turn comes, I won't care. (SilverLilly 2010)

Less than a month after this discussion, SilverLilly's husband died. As I transcribed my ethnographic notes of the day, two events simultaneously unfolded. First, the trust between myself and SilverLilly was revealed, and, secondly, the mechanism for disseminating important community information on the site was exposed. My intention in the following analysis is to theoretically contextualise trust and the role of gossip as a method of information gathering that benefits a community. The unfolding and intertwined events are recorded in chronological order to highlight the multidimensional layers of communication and relationships that are possible online.

Trusting online relationships: researcher or friend?

It was a shock to me when I routinely visited SilverLilly's homepage and saw a note left by a member expressing condolences for the loss of her husband. Earlier in the month, she and I had been engaged in email conversations regarding personal family matters related to women's health and raising children, the content of which could only be shared between trusted friends, and it was my turn to reply. Conscious of intruding at a very private time, I sent her an email saying that I was thinking of her. She responded thus:

> Hi Di, Just to let you know that my husband died last night and I don't want [*The Roost*] to know, I couldn't stand all the blessings and stuff. I haven't been online today but will be again tomorrow. [He] is gone from the house and there won't be a funeral, according to both of our wishes. I'm spending today telling people who need to know, and tomorrow will have to inform some business thingies like the bank etc. I will be back online for sure asap. Love from SilverLilly. (2010)

SilverLilly's email was consistent with her shared views on death posted in the focus-group earlier and served as another indicator consistent with the genuine and honest responses that were shared within the group. It was also obvious to me that there had been an indiscretion that she did not know about. Further, she made it very clear that she had no desire for members of *The Roost* to be informed. Aside from my emotional response to SilverLilly's news, her direct, no nonsense response created a dilemma for me. Should I tell her about the guestbook message of condolence or allow her the opportunity to discover it in her own time? Am I a friend or a researcher? Was it possible to be both?

Knowing SilverLilly as well as I did, including her dislike for gossipers, and also knowing how much the site and all the social interactions meant to her, I chose the latter option. I believed that she would handle any indiscretions in her own way and

would appreciate no meddling in her private affairs from me. Further, as a researcher I felt it would be inappropriate to interfere in her online affairs. I responded to SilverLilly's email in the no-nonsense style that we were accustomed to using with a message of condolence:

> Hi SilverLilly, My sincere condolences. I will respect your privacy and say nothing to anyone on [*The Roost*]. Love, Di. (2010)

As well as conveying sympathy, the intention of my note was to reassure her that I would respect her privacy and not post the information to the focus-group discussion board.[57]

The condolence message left on SilverLilly's homepage became a source of interest and concern amongst members of *The Roost*. This concern created a series of communication events that can be contextualised within anthropological understandings of gossip. The term gossip is fraught with negative connotations. I wish to emphasise that gossip can be both negative and positive, and in the situation that unfolded, gossip was engaged in for information seeking and clarification purposes.

The role of gossip

Gossiping has been analysed by anthropologists in a variety of cultural situations and has been found to be sometimes negative and malicious, but also community building and positive (Brison 1992; Gluckman 1963; Haviland 1977; Paine 1967; Van Vleet 2003). Haviland (1977:172) suggests that gossip plays a role in collection of ethnographic data that helps to inform, but not exhaust understandings of the culture under study. In these studies, culture is understood as collectively understood meanings

[57] After she publicly announced her husband's death, I did post a condolence message to the focus-group, which every member of the group responded to.

that embody shared history, identity, world view and ethos. More than forty years ago, in a discussion paper on gossip, Max Gluckman said:

> Gossip does not have isolated roles in community life, but is part of the very blood and tissue of that life...It is possible to show that among relatively small groups, gossip, in all its very many varieties, is a culturally determined process, which has its own customary rules, trespass beyond which is heavily sanctioned...the social affiliations of gossip, and even scandal, have important positive virtues. (1963:308)

Gluckman's interpretation of the structural mechanism of gossip as a culturally determined process is useful in understanding online community gossiping and the ways in which gossip is delivered.

After sending SilverLilly my email, I received a bulletin message from a member who had seen the unconfirmed guestbook message of condolence on her homepage. This bulletin message was circulated to 66 MyFriends. There was an element of urgency in the bulletin, which read as follows:

> Rumours are flying...if anyone knows what's going on with her husband, please let us know! (Anon, 2010)

The sender of this message was seeking more information from their MyFriends regarding the unconfirmed condolence message, but concealed any reference to the death of SilverLilly's husband. The only source for these "rumours" was the condolence guestbook entry left on SilverLilly's homepage. At the time, SilverLilly had 200 MyFriends and any of these MyFriends (as I did) could have visited SilverLilly's homepage and read the condolence message. In fact, any member of the community could have visited. Alerted to a problem, any of the recipients of the bulletin message

who were interested or curious would have immediately gone to SilverLilly's homepage to look for activity there.

It is interesting to note that the member seeking information did not appear to trust the condolence message left on SilverLilly's guestbook nor responses from MyFriends, but was comfortable enough in our relationship to seek further information and clarification of the situation from me via a private message. The private message was less guarded:

> Someone said that SilverLilly's husband died...have you heard anything? (Anon 2010)

At this stage, SilverLilly had neither denied nor confirmed her husband's death to the community. "Someone said" is a significant indicator that the member was gathering information and "have you heard anything" implicated me in this process. As I had committed to SilverLilly not to disclose any personal information to *The Roost* community, I was unable to respond to the private message (Fieldnotes 2010). This information seeking behaviour is linked to anthropological understandings of gossip. In this instance, the gossip was in response to the "rumour" of an unsubstantiated condolence message left on SilverLilly's homepage that would remain a rumour until SilverLilly confirmed that her husband was deceased.

Paine (1967:282) offers an alternative to Gluckman to posit that gossip is a form of "information management" that is self-serving. Gossip, as Paine outlines is also "a very important way of obtaining information" between groups (1967:282). Gossip on *The Roost*, in this instance, supports the notion of obtaining and sharing information online that directly benefits the community as well as the person concerned. The myriad of MyFriend groupings and private group memberships on *The Roost* overlap with each other within the broader community, and these social arrangements facilitate the dissemination of information.

On *The Roost*, one individual has the ability to start gossip amongst their group of MyFriends but the nature of these overlapping friendship groups allows information to be shared with the broader community via friends of friends. The groups overlap not only between friends of friends in MyFriends lists, but also with friendships in forums, blogs, and topic-groups. My interpretation of the initial bulletin message was one of seeking clarity regarding SilverLilly's situation from trusted MyFriends in order to gain accurate information. At first glance this appears to be self-serving, however, after many months interacting with Anon and observing their interactions within the community, I came to know them extremely well as a nurturer of the site and its members. SilverLilly's husband's death was greater than Anon's self-interest in knowing what had happened; instead, the motivation was to alert the caring community to this tragic event.

Gossiping to clarify an unconfirmed death was not harmful or scandalous, rather it was a method for gathering and sharing accurate information for the benefit of the community. Gossipers distribute information in order to acquire the information that they seek (Paine 1967). Online, Anon was certainly doing this by distributing information (Has he died?) in order to gain accurate information, but the motive was not for personal gain, rather, death was an event taken seriously by this older group that required accurate information if the community were to support SilverLilly appropriately.

There are cultural rules on *The Roost* in respect to death. Death is considered a serious matter in which support is needed and offered by members. Members act swiftly at these times to offer support and sympathy. The problem with the guestbook entry of sympathy on SilverLilly's homepage was that it had not been confirmed by SilverLilly, and this created an atmosphere of hesitation within the community while facts were in the process of being confirmed or denied via the mechanism of gossip. Gossip was a form of information management that appears to be community serving as a culturally determined process of caring.

Gossip and cultural competence

John Haviland (1977:171) studied gossip in Zinacantan, Mexico. He thoughtfully posited that, "one can gossip only in a culture one is competent in". In Zinacantan, Haviland found that gossip was a powerful instrument for "manipulating cultural rules" (1977:170), but that, "an adequate account of cultural competence must encompass the native's ability to gossip" (1977:171). Online, the concept of "cultural competence" is noted by length of membership and participation on *The Roost*; the longer a member has been in the community, the greater their cultural competence.

Members' status is awarded by a star system that rewards social interaction on the site (see chapter 2). This is similar to Bird's (2003:62) listserv where membership hierarchy provided "a sense of structure and continuity in the group". On *The Roost*, the more involvement and knowledge of how the site functions, the greater the number of stars awarded to the member. These members hold knowledge of the community gained over the length of time they have been participating and socially interacting with members that includes the history of significant community events as well as knowledge of members past and present. This knowledge, when shared with new members provides a sense of continuity of the group. Unlike me, both SilverLilly and Anon had witnessed previous death announcements, including the death of community members.

The website was created in 2008. Anon had been a member since April 2008 and had 5 orange stars, which was the maximum awarded during my time in the field and 13,695 public social interactions. SilverLilly had been a member since March 2008 with 5 orange stars and 28,211 public posts. To put this activity in perspective, I joined in Oct 2009 and had 1 orange star and 1,426 public social interactions at the time of SilverLilly husband's death. Both SilverLilly and Anon were foundation members, and as such, were respected by the broader community for their knowledge and experience on the site where old-timer (length of time) members carry some authority within the group, especially in relation to past events, past members, and resolving community

difficulties (see chapter 6). As an active, participating member Anon certainly had acquired the cultural competence to gossip in search for accurate information, and as a respected community member any information she provided would be deemed to have come from a trustworthy source.

Written text as gossip

Online, information is transmitted via some form of text that can be read and saved. Is it gossip if everyone can clearly read what is being discussed? When a message is posted in a form that can be read, the text cannot be altered thus reducing the risk for individual embellishments or omissions evidenced in verbal gossiping (Brison 1992). Communicating via the bulletin system and elsewhere creates a written record of what is being said between the parties involved. It can also be copy and pasted to others. In this context, gossipers can be held to account. This is very different to Van Vleet's (2003:492) ethnography in a Bolivian Andes community where gossiping as a social practice included different interpretations of events that were found to be intertwined with discourses of envy and progress, and where gossipers create "order from complicated and contingent occurrences of everyday experience". Gossiping online is accessible to scrutiny because it is not verbal and, therefore, less likely to be misinterpreted or embellishment in the same way that verbal communication can be (Brison 1992; Haviland 1977; Van Vleet 2003).

In a populace where ageing and death is normalised and understood as an expected occurrence, it was essential that when a member or loved one dies, information pertaining to this event is accurately relayed throughout the community; and this was achieved through the mechanism of gossiping. Under normal circumstances SilverLilly would have been the person to make the announcement of her husband's death to the community. The fact that a death had been announced and not confirmed was the catalyst for Anon and other members' actions.

In accordance with SilverLilly's wishes, I chose not to respond to Anon's private message seeking information from me until I heard back from SilverLilly. I did, however, feel compelled to alert her via the messaging system on the site that I had received a message seeking information regarding the veracity of her husband's death. Within moments a response arrived in which she outlined the events that had transpired that had alerted *The Roost* community to her husband's death:

> **Subject**: re rumours
> [Jan] informed me that there was a message on my page that I might like to remove.[58]
>
> [I know who left the message on my page]. I wonder how many members have seen it.
>
> I think in the morning that I'll use the Twitter box and tell people that he died, and I don't want any messages. Can't stand all the blessings and prayers.
>
> Thanks for your discretion, I know where the leak came from, it's not that it's a secret, I just want a chance to avert the blessings and prayers.
>
> I'll be back online in the morning, only came here tonight to get rid of the [family member's] informative guest book entry.
>
> All is well, kids have all been and one is staying the night. Yeah, I'm super-sensitive in that respect.
>
> Thanks for your message,
> Love SilverLilly. (2010)

[58] As I have outlined in previous chapters, SilverLilly and other members cleared their guestbook entries as they read and responded to them as a matter of housekeeping practice. This was another source of data that I learned to rigorously capture and save offline.

While online, SilverLilly added a message to her homepage twitter box. The text font she used was large, bold, and the colour she chose was crimson red. No graphics accompanied the text which read as follows:

> On [date] I lost my husband, [his name], after a very happy 28 year marriage.
>
> I would appreciate no questions or messages at this time. I will not answer them, thank you for your understanding. I have temporarily changed my profile settings to Friends Only and will change it back at some later date.
> SilverLilly. (2010) [59]

While SilverLilly was online updating her homepage and removing the guestbook entry, which under normal circumstances was a daily routine for SilverLilly, Anon responded to SilverLilly's wishes and issued a second bulletin message asking her MyFriends to refrain from posting messages and to respect her wishes by not offering "prayers or other religious notes". As a MyFriend of Anon, I was privy to this bulletin message and somewhat relieved to receive the second one. The last thing anyone would have wanted to do was to add further upset to SilverLilly's already stressful situation. A bulletin message asking members not to "post any prayers" was a useful and helpful announcement that respected SilverLilly's wishes. My interpretation of these events is that there is no scandal, jealousy, rivalry or envy involved. In this case, the evidence points to goodwill and concern for a fellow member.

As I have mentioned in previous chapters, the site has a 'shoutbox' on its homepage and individuals have a space on their homepages called a 'twitterbox'. Similar to Twitter, both boxes allow members to leave a comment in a few words.[60] SilverLilly placed her

[59] Changing her homepage setting to Friends Only prohibited viewing and commenting on her homepage by anyone other than those listed as her MyFriends.
[60] The Twitterbox on the site needed to be activated for it to become visible on a homepage. Most people had not activated their twitterbox.

announcement on her homepage using the twitterbox, however the community condolence messages came via the shoutbox. My observations were that the shoutbox was predominantly used to report weather conditions and birthday wishes, although it was extensively used during New Year celebrations. The comments scroll off the page as each new comment is added. It holds approximately seven comments at any given time. I made the decision to observe the shoutbox, because SilverLilly had told me she would use the "twitterbox" to announce her husband's death.

I missed her actual announcement, it having scrolled off as other comments replaced it, but I was able to watch new comments as they scrolled in. Knowing that SilverLilly was not interested in receiving "blessings and stuff", but also knowing her as a friend, I took it upon myself to copy the messages for her in case she changed her mind. I already knew her views on death and dying from discussions in the focus-group, but I also had personal experience with the stress related to a loved one dying. Silver (1989:274) suggests the following:

> Friendships are grounded in the uniquely irreplaceable qualities of partners—their 'true' or 'real' selves, defined and valued independently of their place in public systems of power, utility and esteem. Friendships so conceived turn on intimacy, the confident revelation of the self to a trusted other, the sharing of expressive and consummatory activities...[that is] appropriately interpreted through knowledge of the other's inner nature, not the content or consequences of actions.

My friendship with SilverLilly had become closer months before the death of her husband. I felt I knew her well enough to collect information that one day, in a calmer state of mind, she might like to receive. As a researcher, I knew she would want me to document the event, but more importantly, as her friend I felt she might regret not knowing who cared enough to offer condolences irrespective of the content of those messages. This intimate knowledge of a trusted friend led me to capture the comments

of the shoutbox. To do this, it was necessary to sit up all night to be able to copy and paste them one by one as they scrolled from members living in different time zones around the world. As predicted by SilverLilly, nearly all of the messages were "blessings and stuff"; religious in content with many prayers offered.

As she said she would do, a few days after her husband's death, SilverLilly wrote a blog on the site outlining the circumstance of his death and their life together. SilverLilly was and is an accomplished author; she has the ability to transport you with her words.[61] In the blog she explained that she wanted to tell the community of her husband's death in her own time and in her own words, but that someone else had done that already. Due to the unexpected "meddling" of a family member, she received messages that she "did not want", but thanked those who "abstained". SilverLilly's blog was an intimate and stirring account of his death in his well-loved chair, and a moving tribute to their life together. Her blog generated an unprecedented number of comments—39 in total—producing the most comments received for a blog during my time in the field. Many of the blog comments were infused with sympathy and condolence images related to death of a loved one; for example, doves, flowers, hands in prayer, angels, and so forth. After I had read her blog, I sent SilverLilly the following message:

> I read your beautiful blog and will post something there for you to keep. For now, I want you to know that I saved all the posts that were made in the shoutbox just in case you might want to read them. Let me know if you would like to see them and I will forward them to you. Love and hugs, Di. (2010)

From our shared intimate and personal conversations, I knew that given some time, SilverLilly would want to read the messages of support from the community. Her response was the reason I had stayed up all night:

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[61] Unfortunately, I am unable to copy it here for privacy reasons because the text is searchable. In paraphrasing, I deliberately use very simple language as a tool to prevent use of search engines to identify the original source. For a discussion on this method see Markham (2012).

> What a wonderful friend you are, to think of saving those messages for me. Yes please, I'd love to read them.
>
> I woke up early so I got up, I hate living alone. I imagine things. I suppose plenty of people live alone and I will get used to it.
>
> Thank goodness for [*The Roost*].
> See you soon, Love SilverLilly. (2010)

This closeness translates into a trusting relationship. As Ray Pahl (2000:63) noted, "without trust, friendships will fail". Older people have life experience; they are able to convey compassion and empathy gained from these experiences. Her grief was palpable to me from so far away. In her words and in her lack of graphics, so uncharacteristic of her online communicative style, she expressed her grief: "I imagine things".

In her time of grief—during the immediacy of that grief—SilverLilly sought the support of her online friends and acquaintances; "thank goodness for [*The Roost*]". Many on the site are widowed or have experienced the death of loved ones. There is no shortage of compassion and empathy demonstrated from within this group of older people. Messages of sympathy flow during times such as the death of a loved one or a member. Under these circumstances, turning to the community for support makes sense.

In her testimony which began this chapter, SilverLilly stated, "as far as an online community is concerned, it is only my playground." When SilverLilly reached out to the community, via her blog and individually thanked each person who left a message in the shoutbox, she contradicts her meaning of "playground". As a daily activity, *The Roost* is a rewarding and fun place to share time with strangers, yet during a deep and very personal crisis for SilverLilly, as it is for others, the shared interactions transform from analogies of a "playground" to a meaningful place for support, compassion, and mutual understanding.

Trusting relationships online were not something unique or special to myself and SilverLilly; other participants and the broader membership experienced similar. Quirita and Blitz expressed what many on the site told me:

> The rapport that I've established with some of my online friends feels deeper even though I'd never meet those individuals face-to-face. I think the key elements in establishing this sort of deep rooted relationship are trust and conversation and communication. I trust that what my online close friends share with me is true. In the same way, what I share with them is true & not exaggerated or made up. (Quirita 2010)

> I feel that any online interaction has to be based on trust. You trust that people are being honest with you, but I guess we can never be 100% sure about these things. But with most aspect of life you do have to trust and take that chance and when you do the results can be very enjoyable and worthwhile. (Blitz 2010)

Initially, judgements about a member are based on profile information and possible life-interest compatibilities. Homepages are also the source of photographs of member's family, pets, homes, and offline lives. These identity cues assist in drawing strangers together in friendship when there is no evidence to the contrary (Baym 2010:101; Hooi and Cho 2014; Ma, Hancock, and Naaman 2016; Misoch 2015; Nguyen, Bin, and Campbell 2012). In doing so, trust emerges as a significant and meaningful value.

Forums, blogs, and groups are other spaces for social interaction in which to elicit further information about members. This is consistent with Carter's (2005:152) group in the online community of Cybercity in which she found that "authenticity is situationally negotiated". Checking profile details and homepages is a ritual of the site that promotes social cohesion at least for members on *The Roost* (also see Whitehouse and Lanman 2014). As SilverLilly, Quirita, Blitz, and others have explained, members accept or take

at face-value the information provided on a profile and considered it to be truthful. Contrary to Pettit's analysis, trusting relationships are formed between strangers online provided the motivation for forming these relationships is not to purposefully deceive.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that trusting the authenticity of online presence is a key element in making friends with strangers online. Anthropologically examining older people's experiences of trusting relationships formed online adds the voices and experiences of older people to emerging research concerned with analysing trust online. My ethnographic data contributes to this emerging research to show that trust is not only possible, but can be and is formed online for this older group.

The default position for this older group of people using social media is one of trust as a gesture of goodwill. SilverLilly's testimony supports this position. Trust as a moral value, matters for older people and is an important component in the multi-dimensional relationships that members experience, whether it is "best friends forever" (as was the case for Quirita and Essie in the previous chapter) or something as simple as trusting offers of advice or support. For members of *The Roost*, MyFriends, close and distant, together with activity (online presence) contributes to meaningful social interaction for this older group of people. This is so much so that the meanings attached to friendship are considered to be no different from those offline, to the extent that in SilverLilly's situation, she would trust an online friend with her life. These relationships are informed by offline morals and values learned from over sixty plus years of living, but offline contact is not necessarily required for trusting relationships to be formed in social media.

Death is a major community event that forms part of the history and identity of the group. Gathering and sharing information via the mechanisms of gossiping was shown to be a positive influence for the community and a source of comfort and support during

a personal crisis for a valued member. In this instance, the function of gossiping was shown to be a culturally determined process for caring.

The rapport and trusting relationships formed between members of *The Roost* would not have been possible without the belief that the site was a safe and nurturing environment in which to participate. Trust is able to emerge with cooperation between the administrator/owners of the site and the members to create a nurturing online environment in which older people feel safe and secure enough to trust the online presence. In the next chapter, I introduce the ways in which the site is nurtured and accepted as safe and secure, the implications for social interaction and friendship-forming when this is challenged, and the problems associated with disruption and distrust during a large influx of new members.

6

Trusting the Site: Disruption and Distrust

Image 18 "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog".© Peter Steiner, 1993

As discussed in the previous chapter, trust is a requirement of interpersonal relationships formed on the site. This chapter adds to contemporary discourses and emerging anthropological literature concerned with distrust by examining how familiar social phenomena related to suspicion of outsiders translates into the online context through some of the techno-cultural features of social media practice. Trust between members of *The Roost* is not possible without trust of the website and the website administrators, however trusting the website was problematic. In this chapter, I discuss from the perspective of my participants events that breached participants' perceived trust in the website's security. I conclude the chapter by analysing a dramatic and unexpected series of events related to a large influx of MySpace users joining the site.

This group of over 290 newcomers brought with them new ways of interacting with members that disrupted established social practices causing distrust and disharmony within the community.

Trusting the site was related to enforcement of codes of conduct; for example, no profanity and showing respect towards members. Members perceived the actions of the administrators, who intervened when required to deal with spammers, enforce the age restriction, settle disputes between members or making changes to the way the site functioned, as essential requirements for maintaining trust of the site. Without this trust, it is doubtful that members would be willing to share so much personal information with each other.

Fukuyama (1995:26) has posited that, "trust is the expectation that arises within a community of regular, honest, and cooperative behaviour, based on commonly shared norms on the part of other members of that community". Jerrome (1992:22) found that, provided older people "have certain things in common, a sense of solidarity and a shared interest in making things work, they will develop social systems which promote harmony and contain conflict". This was certainly the case on *The Roost*. *The Roost* community engages with the moral values that older generations are familiar with and these form the culture of the group in which trust is embedded, and it is these shared values that allowed the emergence of trust in the online presence.

In her study of a media fan listserv, Bird (2003:60) found that the rules and codes of conduct watched over by the list-owner, Cynthia, helped to restrict "flaming and insulting posts" and, further, should the need arise to discipline a member, she was "overwhelmingly supported by the members". Burmeister, et al (2011) also found that the moderated site of the Australian seniors website, GreyPath, created a trusting environment for older people. On *The Roost*, both the owners of the website and the membership moderate the site to provide a nurtured sense of place that the membership supported and endorsed.

Trusting the site

On *The Roost*, the site administrators were proactive in ensuring harmony between members as well as providing a safe environment for their membership. The administrators imposed rules for behaviour from members, rules for forum structure, and guidelines for blog content. Bad behaviour could result in being banned from the site, and disputes between members that were aired in public through forums and blogs were dealt with publicly. Discussion was always encouraged and the diversity of members' opinions and views were to be tolerated, including during disagreements. Public settlement of disagreements served to remind all members of this policy. While opinions were encouraged, the consequences for name-calling invited warnings related to the rules of behaviour for the site. Even though disagreements were frequent between members, name-calling was rare.

The responsibility for managing the site was shared by both administrators, although it was Admin1 who primarily interacted with members. For administrators, spamming and, therefore, the safety of members was a major concern. The following notice is an example of several such notices posted during my fieldwork that dealt with issues related to spamming and deceitful behaviour:

> As many of you know, two profiles, [female username] and [male unsername2], were recently banned, then deleted from this site. They were actually one person, not from the US, and misleading members. I know he is joining other social networking sites as well and using new and other "nice" sounding names. We check out any new members if we are suspicious to protect our members from being misled in any way. If anyone is ever suspicious of a member, contact us immediately via the Contact Us link found at the bottom of each page.
>
> Just a reminder, don't share your personal info such as email address with a new member just because they are nice or friendly; make sure

> you know who you are talking to. Again, if you are in doubt, and think someone is up to no-good, use the contact us link found at the bottom of each page.
>
> In the case of the recent deletions, just because someone joins that is up to things like this does not in any way harm you - unless you give them your address/phone number, etc. They cannot do a thing to you here other than mislead you and try to get personal info from you by befriending you. We have been on the web since 1994 and know the patterns of these people, and we continue to make safety one of the most important things on this site. (Admin1 2010)

This notice serves several purposes. First, it demonstrated that the administrators were monitoring the site to "protect" members from "being misled". The members were included by inviting them to report anything they perceive as suspicious. This is important because it builds confidence in the community; it reassures the members that their worries or concerns will be taken seriously by the owners of the site. Second, information was provided on how to remain safe on the site without being fearful of enjoying the opportunities the site offered for making new friends. The warning "make sure you know who you are talking to" before sharing personal information was intended to encourage members to continue making friends in a careful and thoughtful manner. And, finally, being on the "web since 1994" alerts the members to their IT knowledge and extensive online experience adding credibility to any actions they might take as responsible, capable, and caring site owners. The notice serves to affirm that the administrators are trustworthy and can be relied upon to have members' best interest at heart. In short, the administrators controlled the environment, which in turn created confidence in the management of the site which allowed trust in the site to emerge.

Seligman (1986:619) posits that "in all cases confidence is based on knowledge that social interaction and/or exchange is set within a context, within a system that qua

system, will impose sanctions in the case of an abrogation of agreements". [62] Accordingly, confidence is linked to obligations, responsibility, and mutuality. On *The Roost*, when difficulties arose from time to time causing minor disruption, the administrators took their obligations and responsibilities seriously and were swift in dealing with these problems, including the restructuring of the site for the benefit of members (discussed in detail below).

In keeping the site "safe" for older people, the responsibility was also shared between the administrators and the members. Anyone who saw a problem was encouraged to report it to the administrators, and members were more than willing to assist with constant surveillance of the site (Foucault 1975). Members were especially vigilant regarding spammers, and bullying of any kind was not tolerated. Reminders similar to JulieAnn's, below, were often posted throughout the site by members:

> Admin has always told us to let them know if we see something suspicious; there's a note on the Home Page right now reminding us of that. They rely on members to let them know what's going on, since they can't be everywhere at once. (JulieAnn 2010)

Reminders by long-time members similar to JulieAnn's message were frequently shared amongst members. It was common practice for members to alert other members to a problem (for example spammers) and this was then followed by reporting to the administrators for action, "I've let Admin know" (Jenny 2009) or "I've reported it to Admin" (Saser 2010). Comments such as these reinforce the safety elements of the site; someone was always watching and willing to moderate for potential problems for the benefit of the whole community.

The Administrators were understood by the membership to be trustworthy; they monitored and acted when there was a problem in a timely and efficient manner. The following example of the administrators listening to the community during a

[62] Qua means essential to something else.

particularly disruptive period amongst blogging members, demonstrates the willingness of the administrators to find solutions to problems that meet the requirements of their membership. The notice was posted on the site's homepage as well as in the blog introduction area:

> Update on Blogs: We have received numerous emails from members regarding blogs and have decided to go with something new; something many of you have requested: it seems the consensus is to have as many ways as possible to share and comment on things.
>
> Blogs may be used for anything you want to share with others. It gives a nice, open place for others to comment and access. One thing to keep in mind is to post things that encourage comments; don't just post something because you can. And, keep in mind there are many places to post things such as a quote or scripture; keep blogs as a place to encourage (hopefully positive!) interaction! So for all those who want to share with others. Have fun!! (Admin1 2010)

This "update to blogs" by the administration was received positively by the blogging community and settled many discussions—mostly negative—over an extensive period in which changes to the blogging rules were being sought. After a period of doldrums and negativity, blogging once again was revitalised and remained an active and interesting area on the site for the duration of my fieldwork.

On the social side of the site, the administrators listed members' birthdays on a daily basis and featured member profiles on a monthly basis as well as posting daily tips related to using the site and/or computers. These activities provided an opportunity for members to socially interact with each other on a personal level by expressing birthday greetings or congratulatory messages for being selected as a 'profile of the month'. The administrators also provided computer technical support, sourced new free (shareware) software for members to use (for example, photo enhancing programmes, password generators, and so forth), and they reviewed changes to the Windows operating system to offer tips that helped members with these changes. This was supplemented by

technical forums and groups run by members to help members share knowledge.[63] This valuable free and reliable source of daily assistance from knowledgeable people as well as computer savvy peers assisted members to be independent rather than relying on busy families or engaging expensive IT professionals (Sayago and Forbes 2013; Xie 2011).

The administrator's involvement in the site did not go unnoticed or unappreciated by the members. Comments such as Grammie's, below, were frequently posted in open forums, groups, blogs, and in bulletin messages throughout my time in the field:

> Administration DID work hard to make this a nice place to be, and I for one want to say "THANK YOU FOR SUCH A GREAT SITE". (Grammie 2010)

The involvement by the administrators was understood to be a personal commitment to the membership that also contributed to creating a trusting atmosphere in which to participate with each other. The administrators worked to establish a nurtured and caring environment, and members considered it to be a safe and trusted online environment in which to socially interact. Weckert (2005:113) proposed that trust can emerge when we choose to act in a trusting manner. Acting in a trusting manner makes us vulnerable to others but "if nothing bad happens" this allows trust to become known. He goes on to say, "if the online environment is such that it is conducive to people acting as if they trust, genuine trust can emerge" (Weckert 2005:113). This was undoubtedly the case on *The Roost* where trust between the administrators and the members created a nurtured environment even when there were difficulties.

[63] At the time of my research, participants and the broader community were using either Microsoft XP or Windows7. Changes to an operating system caused deep stress for older people who were used to using their "old system". Many complaints, worries, and frustration were expressed in the computer forums where help was sought after upgrading. I also spent many hours over the phone with Carrie when he upgraded from XP to Windows 7 but I was unable to assist him when he upgraded from Windows 7 to Windows 8 until I had upgraded my father's operating system after which we helped each other.

Members felt confident that their information and their interactions with each other were contained within the website, however, it was also common knowledge that some sections of the site could be accessed without logging in; a "backdoor" to the site.[64] Nevertheless, even with this knowledge, participants considered the site safe and secure. Unfortunately, many areas of the site were not secure and these beliefs were challenged half way through my fieldwork during a focus-forum discussion on privacy and security. In the next section I discuss the implications for the site not being as secure as everyone thought and how this impacted on participants and member's trust of the site.

Distrust: breaches in site security

During my fieldwork, it was evident to me that members and my participants were very comfortable sharing information about themselves and their offline lives with each other and with the community via information shared on their profiles and homepages. It was also evident that many trusted the site to be secure with their data and their "in house" activities. This raised questions for users in relation to their views regarding online privacy as well as matters related to perceived security of the site. Emerging research (Burmeister et al. 2012; Burmeister, Weckert, and Williamson 2011; Hope, Schwaba, and Piper 2014; Nef et al. 2013; Van House 2015) has shown privacy and security online to be major concerns for older people online, yet for members of this group, privacy and security seemed, at least on the surface, not to be a concern.

In the focus-group, I invited my participants to do a Google search of their name and online usernames to assess what a search revealed about themselves. I was surprised to learn that for all those who participated, it was an exercise none had engaged in before, and for some their findings changed the way they viewed the security of the site. The tenacity of these older people to do a thorough search amazed me; not only did some of

[64] I was alerted to this "backdoor" access by Carrie. Without logging into the site it was (and still is) possible to combine the website address and a username to access that person's profile and some of the content of their homepage.

them do a search with Google as their search engine but they also searched using other search engines such as Bing, Yahoo, and Ecosia (Aussiewoman 2010). As Saser (2010) explained, "I used all the different search engines I could think of". As expected, the results surprised everyone even though participants' reactions to their findings varied. In the following testimony, Carrie, who signed up to *The Roost* using his real name, and who knew about the backdoor to the site, said:

> Online I would prefer not to have any datum regarding myself at all. However as for my user name on [*The Roost*], I have no particular objection as long as the display of my pages do not reveal any sensitive matters that are not already available to [Roost] members. I found nothing of concern or to worry about.
>
> In consideration of privacy, I feel it is akin to ones house/home in which there is the outside, which is on public view and which most people like to present a nice orderly appearance, and of course the inside, which one endeavours to keep private except to chosen visitors. Therefore, on [*The Roost*] I think one can do both. That is, present a public face and also have a private space for ones friends to whom one can also communicate confidentially via messaging. (Carrie 2010)

Carrie was the oldest member to participate and the least worried by his data being on the Internet. He was also well versed in accessing profiles without logging into his account, and this knowledge alerted him to be cautious with his "public face". This was not the case for Blitz and others.

Blitz shared her concerns related to the privacy of "closed" groups. Closed groups are invitation only groups (explained below). In these spaces, it is widely assumed that discussions are private and not shared with the broader community. Blitz posted her results for the focus-group:

> When I Googled my [Roost] profile name, I found numerous items of mine. What I was surprised about was the [one] club, of which I am a member, is supposed to be private, but there in Google were jokes that I had submitted. It would seem that the only safe way to ensure privacy is with messages. I found this a little strange because I thought you would have to log onto [*The Roost*] to view someone's page. (Blitz 2010)

Blitz's concern was for the sexually explicit jokes and other humorous material related to men that were often posted in the group. According to Mia, who moderated the group, the intention of the group was to provide a "safe place for members to talk about anything they wanted" (Mia, email 2010). This material, discovered to be freely available on the Internet, while intended as banter and fun amongst women, would be embarrassing to all concerned if any members were able to view the content.

It was not surprising that during the discussion, the "backdoor" breach caused some consternation for those who were not aware of it. At no time did anyone post how to access the backdoor; however, JulieAnn clarified the use of it for the group:

> That's called 'lurking', lol. Well, I'm sure SOME of them are 'looking' to see what it's like...but I'm pretty sure a lot of those are members who want to see what's going on without actually logging in are snooping. I can't do that: I read something & I want to reply! (JulieAnn 2010)

Lurking is defined as an online activity in which people read content but are not actively seen to be present (Bird 2003; Carter 2005; Kendall 2002). Lurking on *The Roost* was perceived as "looking" or "snooping" without actually logging in; it was also a pathway to "snooping" without leaving a footprint of a visit to that person's homepage (discussed in previous chapters). In other words, the person being "snooped" on would have no knowledge of who was viewing their data (including guestbook entries). It is not possible to do this with a profile that has been set to private. Private profiles and

private groups were a source of distrust amongst members which is discussed in the final section of this chapter.

There were mixed views related to how much responsibility the administrators should accept for their information being on the net. Should the administrators give warnings about personal information being freely available in search engines? Saser was unsure:

> I'm not sure if all members are aware that this is possible and of the security risks involved with the "tell all" method. Should the administrators publish a warning to each member? I don't have an answer because there are those who will do as they want regardless. (Saser 2010)

And Carrie's carefully crafted response:

> The onus is after all on one's self to ensure that whatever data of a sensitive nature that one wants to place in/on ones page is done so with security in mind with regard to its placement. (Carrie 2010)

At no time during my fieldwork did I become aware of any warnings from the Administrators to the membership that some internal data from the site was accessible on the Internet. Further, at no time during these discussions did anyone suggest that the Administrators should be alerted or held responsible. From this, I concluded that knowledge of the backdoor was a useful tool to the participants and members who knew about it. Clearly, for some, backdoor access was perceived as more important than the breach in site security of personal data, and those who did know about it, such as Carrie, were mindful of where they placed "data of a sensitive nature".

The search generated enormous numbers of pages of search results for some participants who had popular names and usernames, and these participants had difficulty finding data on themselves. Aussiewoman thought her username was "unique to her", but was concerned to discover that many other people on the Internet shared her

choice in username; yet she was surprised to find that the unique signature she used across all her online platforms was available in the search results. For Aussiewoman, the security of her username on *The Roost* was not an issue; however, the much-used personalisation of her signature was "a troubling surprise". On *The Roost* it was a common and popular practice to use signatures (see chapter 3).[65]

A surprise for me was LillianGrace's findings. As a prolific blogger on the site, I expected she would find her blog contributions; however, she did not. LillianGrace informed us:

> LillianGrace revealed a whole lot of [Roost] blogs, none that I had written, but some I had commented on, including just about every picture that [UKmale] has ever posted in a blog, things like cathedrals and other buildings. Why on earth would those be associated with LillianGrace, and yet not one of the 100+ blogs I have written showed up. (LillianGrace 2010)

UKmale is a *Roost* blogger and the search engine found her comments on his blogs. This baffled LillianGrace (and me) because she was unable to find her own blogs within the search pages; however, many of her blogs can be found using a search of her username. Instead of each blog being individually listed, the search redirected to the blogging homepage of *The Roost* where her blogs are available to read.

Alerted to the amount of data they were finding, concern was raised for Mia who appeared not to find anything on herself or to fully understand how to search[66]:

> When I do that - nothing comes up. And when I Google Mia - the only thing that comes up is a bunch of websites & articles [not about me]. (Mia 2010)

[65]My own signature remained on the site for the duration of my fieldwork. In 2016, a search of my signature using Google generated one reference but this was not related to me or my profile on *The Roost*.
[66] As with all my participants, Mia is a pseudonym. A search of her actual username produced over 200,000 hits which effectively buried her *Roost* identity in the search.

Concerned for Mia, Blitz followed up on her comment with the following advice and help:

> Try doing a Google search by typing your name like this "Mia" in the search box. It will then just search for that name exclusively. You may be surprised. (Blitz 2010)

Blitz's concern was twofold. First, she was worried that Mia had missed an opportunity to find information about herself that might change the way she viewed security on the site, and second, she was a member of Mia's group which was the source of the private comments that were being revealed during searchers.

There was confusion over the meanings of the terms 'closed' and 'private'. A closed group is an 'invitation only' group in which you are either invited or request to join. Either way, to join you must be approved by the moderator of the group. In a closed group, it is possible for all members, including those who have not joined, to read the comments but it is not possible for non-members to leave a comment. As JulieAnn pointed out earlier, commenting is only for members of that closed group. Alternatively, a private group is also invitation only or closed, but has the added security measure of being set to 'private'. In this situation, only members of the group can view and comment on the content of the group.[67]

The problem with Mia's private group was that she had set her group to 'closed' but had not set her group to 'private', meaning that anyone could read the posts and these were the comments revealed in the searches. Mia did not return to tell us if she found anything of concern after Blitz's help, although she did post the exercise in her closed

[67] When I started the research focus-group, it was invitation only but not private. It was Carrie and LillianGrace who advised me of this error, and it was JulieAnn who tested the settings with me to be sure that what was said in the focus-group remained inaccessible to non-members of the group. I reviewed these setting regularly throughout my fieldwork (and continue to do so) to ensure the privacy of participants.

group. The feedback from those who searched themselves in her group were similar to those expressed in the research focus-group.

The following experience for Quirita's search affected me. Quirita had previously given me access to her blogs (copies via email); they are moving, often heart wrenching accounts of her children and their lives. I felt responsible for her discovering that her intimate and personal blogs were freely available on the Internet. Sveningsson-Elm (2009:75) has noted:

> The fuzzy boundaries between private and public parts of online environments may make it difficult for users to grasp the gradual transition between private and public spaces...and users may not be aware of the fact that their actions and interactions maybe observed by other people, even perfect strangers.

Public private spaces online are fraught with ethical dilemmas that are contextually situated and difficult to resolve (Markham 2012; Markham and Buchanan 2012). While I knew it was possible to access homepages without logging in (a fuzzy boundary in itself), I did not know that other areas of the site, such as blogs, were publically available on the Internet. Upon reflection, it was naive of me not to have known this. Had I known, I would have been more thorough in my preparations for the focus-group member discussion on privacy, but I am not sure the outcome would have been any different. On the one hand I felt responsible for my participants discovering their information was available publicly, and on the other I felt it was important that they discovered this. For Quirita,

> The biggest surprise was finding that all of my blogs were readily available if I entered my [Roost] login name. That, I did NOT like. When I shared my blogs on [*The Roost*], it was not my intention to share them with the whole world!! I was a bit surprised & somewhat upset.
>
> I guess that it was rather naive on my part to think that posting a blog on [*The Roost*] was somehow keeping it somewhat private.

> DUH!! ;-) Because those writings were rather personal, I decided to delete all my blogs from [*The Roost*]. Anything left on the web is now old news or of no consequence. I WILL be more careful in the future! Thank you for bringing all this to my/our attention, Tis a lesson well learned. (Quirita 2010)

Quirita felt betrayed by the administrators. The site is not secure, and even though she deleted the blogs, at the time they were still available in Google cache. As I write this in 2017, her blogs are no longer available in the Google cache. A simple exercise that I thought would be informative and useful impacted profoundly on at least one of my participants, but it also changed perceptions for this group concerning security on the site.

Contrary to emerging research that indicates privacy, trust, and security online are significant concerns for old people, trusting the site, and each other, reduced these concerns for members of *The Roost*. From a position of trusting the site to be secure, my participants did become aware of the risks involved when sharing information online. While this did not create distrust of the site or of each other, it did alter, at least for some, the nature of what they would be willing to share on the site in future. As Blitz noted:

> I was not overly concerned about things at present, but I am glad that I found out that my profile is so accessible, as I will be more careful as to what I do put in it in the future. (Blitz 2010)

In this section, I have discussed trusting the site as a nurtured space between the site owners and members, and the problems associated with trusting the site when it is not entirely secure. In the next section, my concern is with documenting the processes of a major event that caused disruption and distrust amongst members and the impact this had on the community. I now turn to the problem of distrust caused by a large influx of new members that disrupted the cultural practices of *The Roost* community.

Disruption and distrust

When I joined the site in 2009, there were 12,219 members. Over a period of seven months the membership steadily increased to 12,617 but in April of 2010, and over a period of three months, there was a dramatic drop of 929 members. At first glance this would not seem problematic, yet it impacted on the enjoyment of the social interactions on the site. One of my participants, Essie, sent me an email in which she lamented that the site "seemed to be less busy and quieter", and another participant, JulieAnn, had posted in one of the forums her concerns for the "significant drop in members". On the homepage, a membership counter recorded daily membership statistics and members started to notice the declining numbers. In response to the disquiet of the members, the Administrators removed the counter.[68]

The increasing popularity of Facebook might be a possible explanation for the dramatic decrease in membership at this time. During this period, Facebook was experiencing enormous and rapid growth (Owyang 2009, 2010). Members were discussing Facebook and the pressures from their children and grandchildren to join them there within the forums and groups. Many members were joining Facebook and posting on *The Roost* about their experiences there (see chapter 4). Nevertheless, by early August numbers started to steadily increase again: peaking at 12,217 when I left the field. The initial influx of new members, 292 over a four week period, was due to the arrival of a large group of disgruntled MySpace users.

The reasons given by the MySpace refugees for migrating to *The Roost* were related to unwelcome changes to the functionality of the MySpace website design and its new emphasis on attracting younger users. Brems, explained their move to *The Roost* in a forum post:

[68] I was able to monitor membership statistics via the membership search page. Searches were possible using the categories of username, country, male, female, and age or a combination of these.

> We came because MySpace is making big changes and there are more to come. They are going to change our pages to 3.0 which means we can't decorate them the way we used to. Our CSS boxes will be gone. Other changes include making it hard to comment to our friends. (Brems 2010)

Lanes added,

> Most of us came because of the impending changes to the way MySpace operates and the software that allows us to customize our pages. Those are being drastically changed and they are changing their main focus and aiming at the 18-30 year old group of people ... also musicians, artists, and the like. Not regular people. I personally have pretty much given up MySpace, although my page is still there, I won't be going back. (Lanes 2010)

These unwelcome changes on MySpace forced some older MySpace users to source a new site for social interaction and creativity amongst age appropriate peers. Unwittingly, however, these newcomers brought with them non-conforming behaviours that generated disruption and anxiety within the established community of *The Roost*. The non-conforming behaviours that caused major problems were related to profile pages being set to private (members could not access information), private groups (members were not invited to join), and what was deemed inappropriate content in blogs.

Most social network sites offer various levels of privacy control related to visibility within the network. The boundaries of public and private space are negotiated by using these settings to adjust audience visibility of profile information to exclude unwanted audiences from viewing profiles (Altman 1977; Tufekci 2008). In 13 months in the field there had been no events that created so much disruption in the community. I extended my time in the field to observe how this disruption would be managed and what the

outcome for the community would be. My focus is on private profiles and private groups, because these two activities created an atmosphere of suspicion and distrust.

Private Profiles

A major concern for existing members was that new members were creating private profiles. Private profiles prohibit views of the data contained within. This choice effectively blocked a source of valuable information when seeking new friends amongst strangers. It was also not possible to leave guestbook comments to welcome new members to the site (see chapter 2, welcome wagon). New members were announced daily on the site's homepage specifically so they could be welcomed, and members accustomed to this ritual became frustrated and suspicious of people who were using private profiles. First, they were unable to welcome them, and second, no information was available to help assist in the friendship decision-making process. This caused quite a commotion on the site.

Established community members were asking in public forums, groups, and blogs "how can you trust someone who doesn't give you access to their profile information?" (JulieAnn, LillianGrace, SilverLilly Carrie and many others, 2010). The newcomers were also perceived as being "unfriendly" (LillianGrace and others 2010). Private profiles meant that it was impossible to gather any knowledge (likes, dislikes, demographic information, and so forth) pertaining to these new members; the cues to identity that were essential in friendship-forming decision making with strangers.

As I argued in the previous chapter, some knowledge of the other is central to developing friendships. Without this knowledge a situation emerges that supports Pettit's (2004) notion of "lack of evidence", which prevents trust from emerging. These self-disclosing cues are a requirement if trust is to be established online (Hooi and Cho 2014; Ma, Hancock, and Naaman 2016; Misoch 2015; Nguyen, Bin, and Campbell 2012).

In the following accounts, no graphics or emoticons (gesture cues) were used in any of the discussions; an indicator that tolerance in the community was very low. In one of the forums LillianGrace made the following point:

> Ever since the arrival of new members from MySpace, we are getting a lot of unfriendly people who don't want us to see their pages. I can live with that, but there's no way I will accept a Friend Request from a person who keeps their page private.
>
> To new members: I am not the only one with this attitude, so if you keep getting rejected, think about your account settings, and maybe the reason you're rejected is in there,
> LillianGrace, the original LillianGrace.[69] (2010)

The problem was that the newcomers, most of whom had not been welcomed to the site, had no access to form *new* friendships from the established membership (old-timers) all of whom were strangers. The newcomers had grouped themselves initially with their MySpace friends when they joined *The Roost* and were reaching out to a new pool of strangers to form new friendships. These MyFriend requests were being rejected by the community due to lack of access to shared profile information. As LillianGrace pointed out, "no way I will accept a Friend Request from a person who keeps their page private". These sentiments were being reiterated elsewhere on the site too. In the following public comment, JulieAnn responded to LillianGrace in an effort to help her understand what was happening by offering suggestions that she hoped would assist with a smooth transition of newcomers with established members:

> LillianGrace, I don't think they understand that. MySpace and Facebook are such that you MUST have private pages. They'll soon realize this is different. If you get a request from someone with a private page, send them a message explaining you'd like to know

[69] The reference to "the original LillianGrace" is related to one of the new members choosing a similar username to LillianGrace. In an email to me, LillianGrace was "annoyed that someone else was using her username" and she was "worried" that members might "mistake their identities".

> something about them before accepting. Others have told me they aren't used to Forums, so I'm now putting a message on my 'welcome' telling them to check out the Forums for tips/help. (JulieAnn, 2010)

In spite of JulieAnn's effort, LillianGrace was not satisfied and replied:

> They seem to be using blogs as a Forum. Wonder where they put public announcements in the sites they came from? I've stopped welcoming people because of not being able to access their pages. I know a number of my friends also won't accept Friend Requests from private-paged members. It's their prerogative to block us, and it's ours not to accept them. It just makes an unwelcome division in what used to be a friendly community. (LillianGrace 2010)

LillianGrace was making the point that these changes, which she perceived to be a threat to the established cultural practices on *The Roost*, were creating an "unwelcome division" in the community. She was not alone with these thoughts. Across the whole site many grievances similar to the following were being publicly expressed:

> I think most of them are thinking that [*The Roost*] works the same way as MySpace or Facebook or any of the other social networks. [The Roost] is different, and those of us who have been here for a long time want to keep it that way. (Grammie 2010)

> Seems to me if you just got here you might, just might want to get to know a few of the people here. Said it before, why the walls on [*The Roost*]? Seems a little silly to me, Be Kind. (Scott 2010)

The fear of change brought disruption and distrust. Established *Roost* members did not want to lose the friendly, supportive, and nurturing environment they were accustomed to. The community of *The Roost* did not want their online culture to change.

There is no doubt that an unwelcome division of the community was taking place. As these discussions were all over the site, it was impossible for the newcomers not to notice or be aware of the problems the community were expressing with their arrival. Brems, one of the new members from MySpace responded in great detail to these concerns by posting an explanation of MySpace, including a synopsis of the attitudes of the new members. Her tone was conciliatory:

> I don't know about Facebook but on MySpace no one HAS to have a private page - nor is mine. I don't accept a friend request from private pages either. Our announcements are either in our status, which is on our homepage. It's a place where we can see all our friends with their profile picture and name. There is a small box underneath it to leave a message to that friend. All mutual friends can see it as well and we talk back and forth. We also use bulletins for this purpose. There is a comment box at the bottom of our bulletins and friends can reply to the bulletin there. All friends can see it and talk back and forth. Of course, if you want to send a private message you just hit "reply to bulletin" and it goes directly to their message box and no one else can see it. I've never seen a blog used as a forum. We can reply to blogs and it is usually to make a comment on the content of the blog. As for the forums here on [*The Roost*], my friends and I have them and belong to others. I really enjoy them and we would not have a way to stay in touch as much without them. One more rumour I would like to put to rest is that most people on MySpace have 1,000s of friends! Most of us have under 200 friends. We like to keep in touch on a daily basis and would not have time otherwise. I have met the nicest people here and received warm welcome from all. If you want to know more just ask :-) hugs, Brems. (Brems, 2010)

Reading Brems's description of MySpace, it is obvious that it is a social media site very similar to *The Roost* (see boyd 2006; boyd and Ellison 2007). Brems and other MySpace users went to great lengths to appease members, yet this forum topic was not

the end of the discussion. There were also accusations that thieves were amongst the newcomers.

As I have previously described, JulieAnn was considered an expert at making graphics ("sigtags") for the site. In the following public post her annoyance is obvious:

> If you like my sigtags, I'll be happy to make one for you. If you like my graphics, I don't mind sharing: but please RIGHT CLICK & SAVE to your OWN computer! So please be 'polite' and do not 'copy' other people's graphics. (JulieAnn 2010)

And from Saser:

> I have been very concerned in the past few weeks for all the negativity that seems to have invaded our community - not only all the talk about the "new members" but the constant posting of people "stealing" bandwidth. That is a problem that should be dealt with. (Saser 2010)

It was my observation that several of the newcomers were equally as gifted as JulieAnn at creating spectacular graphics that had not been seen on *The Roost* before.[70] I was surprised by JulieAnn's accusations. JulieAnn had always been generous with sharing her graphics, and often made them for members as gifts or when asked. Accusing the newcomers of theft was at odds with her generous spirit but indicative of the heightened distrust that had developed throughout the site. This accusation of theft was directly related to suspicion and distrust of the newcomers. Offended by this allegation, several MySpace users were quick to point out that they had not been copying her images and using them elsewhere. Cara, a newcomer whose profile was set to private, defended the MySpace users:

[70] I had approached one of these new members for samples of her graphics as ethnographic ephemera. She was delighted and shared several with me.

> The feeling on [*The Roost*] has been and continues (in many cases) to be that if someone makes their page private that they are trying to "hide" something. While in reality, most of us (because we've maybe learned the hard way) are simply trying to protect what we have on our profile from people we don't know. If someone wants to leave their page open for virtually anyone on the Internet to access, that's fine, but they shouldn't be surprised to find items from their page all over the web either. I doubt very much if anyone from [*The Roost*] habitually lifts other members photos, but you can bet that there are hundreds of other people out there doing just that. (Cara 2010)

It is ironic that Cara defends limiting audience visibility of her own profile from people she does not know, but in order to know strangers she would require access to these very same strangers' information as part of the friendship-making process.

Members on both MySpace and *The Roost* utilize PhotoBucket for making and storing graphics.[71] The problem, according to MySpace users, was a fault of the website PhotoBucket and not related to them "stealing" JulieAnn's images; anyone could save an image from a website and upload it to their PhotoBucket account but this was not necessarily one of them. In the spirit of conciliation, JulieAnn accepted the explanations from the MySpace newcomers putting an end to this forum discussion on theft but not an end to continuing disharmony and distrust amongst members on the site.

In this section I have discussed the ways in which electing to have a private profile created suspicion and distrust of the newcomers. Suspicion and distrust were directly related to lack of knowledge of the stranger without which trust could not emerge. In fact, lack of knowledge fostered resentment, frustration, distrust, and a fear of change to the cultural norms of the community. As Weckert (2005:113) suggests, by not "acting in a trusting manner" the newcomers blocked any opportunity for trust to emerge between the new members and the established membership. In the next section I discuss the problems associated with private groups.

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[71] Use of graphics is discussed in chapter 3.

Private groups

It was not uncommon to have private groups on the site. In one of the established private groups, a conversation started regarding the creation of numerous new private groups by the MySpace newcomers on the site. The conversation highlighted how change impacts on established norms within the community and how change caused disruption and distrust. As I have previously discussed, the creation of invitation only groups was an accepted cultural practice on the site. During my time in the field, it was rare to be rejected from joining a group and my own experience in joining these groups was positive, yet when the newcomers set up their groups to private, members became disgruntled and suspicious of this activity. I begin this discussion with a comment posted by BluePenguin:

> Yes, I am a member of a closed group. Closed because we all came from another site together and sometimes talk about experiences we shared at another site. I guess I'm objecting to the blatancy of some of the new groups...by invitation only...sounds so unfriendly and hoity-toity. (BluePenguin 2010)

BluePenguin was complaining about the new private groups even though she was a member of a private group that she and her friends had started twelve months earlier when they came to the site from elsewhere. It is interesting to note that at the time of joining *The Roost*, she and her friends valued the privacy of being able to talk about the experiences they shared at their old site, and the sanctuary of privacy no doubt allowed for discussion of the difficulties transitioning to *The Roost*. She was also a member of other private groups on *The Roost* such as the research focus-group. In the interim twelve months, she had integrated into the culture of *The Roost* but now found the newcomers' behaviours to be "unfriendly" and "hoity-toity". This unfriendly and pretentious behaviour was considered to be objectionable.

According to Naz, an old-timer, the problem was related to everyone being accustomed to the few private groups that existed and had seemingly forgotten the function of private groups. In a heated forum discussion, she provided her thoughts on the matter:

> How come all of a sudden there is such a conversation going on about Private Groups? I have been on the [Roost] since it first started and up until now there never has been any discussion about them. People join the [Roost] to get away from all of the drama of My Space etc. Why do some think that anyone that has a private group has to explain why it is private. If you were the survivor of a terrible rape and wanted to share and support others would you want that group to be open to anyone? Let's not turn the [Roost] into a place where it is not enjoyable anymore. The administration struggle long and hard to keep the [Roost] going and it seems like this should be our main concern supporting the [Roost] and let all Friends do as they please. Just my two cents worth. (Naz 2010)

Not only was Naz pointing out the unreasonableness of everyone's concerns related to private groups, she also reinforced the value of the site to all members and the potential harm these discussions were causing to the site. In this instance Naz was reminding members of the core social values of sharing, support, and friendship. Nevertheless, owners of established private groups were also faced with the difficulty of allowing newcomers into their private groups. Mia also expressed her apprehensions for her own group:

> As for the large influx of new members to [The Roost], I <u>will</u> let those join once I've gotten to know them a bit and feel I can trust them. BUT....I don't want LOTS of new people joining at one time. What I will do as more new members ask to join, is tell them that there IS an adjustment period going on within [The Roost] and that they should learn their way around [The Roost] and to ask me again to join in 2 or 3 months time...that way...it won't be a big influx all at one time. (Mia 2010)

Mia was in the same position as everyone else. She was unable to access information related to people wanting to join her group from their profiles to assess whether or not they were suitable candidates for her group. The concerns expressed in her post are related to maintaining harmony for her own group; she was anticipating trouble from newcomers and wanted to avoid the disruption that might ensue from accepting people into her group of whom she had no knowledge. Further, waiting two to three months would allow her time to observe newcomers social interactions elsewhere on the site, for example, in forums, blogs, and guestbook entries left on members' homepages. These observations by members are what Pettit (2004) labelled "face" or the witness to social interactions that are used as a method for evaluating trustworthiness. As I have documented in chapter 4, it takes time to get to know strangers online. On *The Roost* there is also a process of enculturation. In my own experience it took approximately two months to confidently participate in the community (see chapter 2).

Enculturation, co-operation and compromise

After the initial consternations expressed throughout the site regarding private groups and closed profiles, complaints and grievances began to subside. In the following account, Ellie from MySpace speaks about her experiences settling into *The Roost* community. Although she claims it took her only a few days to "feel at home", it did in fact take her longer.[72] She states:

> It took me three or four days to feel at home ... and about a week to fall in love. This is a place I have been looking for my entire life I think. I finally fit in somewhere and it is amazing. Thank you, every single one of you, for being here, being loving people, and making this place a home. A place where I can be me ... a place where I have wonderful friends, and a place of love and support. (Ellie 2010)

[72] A few months after this comment, Ellie was embroiled in the splitting of one group to form a new group on the site, and later, she was involved in disharmony amongst bloggers regarding blogging guidelines.

Although some of her friends left because they found the site too difficult to navigate, Brems had a similar experience:

> Some of my friends have already left and gone back to MySpace. They said they found it too hard to navigate here. I have settled in and really enjoy my new friends...But, I am retired and have a lot of time to spend looking around :-) I think it's great! One last thing about "them" and "us"...we are not from another planet...we are your neighbours. (Brems 2010)

The MySpace newcomers were certainly active on the site and proactive in trying to alleviate community concerns. According to Jerrome (1992), older people develop social systems that promote harmony and contain conflict. After a period of six weeks of disruption, complaints and distrust, positive comments started to appear ending much of the discussion and disruption on the site. The tone of the posts from old-timer members changed from distrust to co-operation. Saser captured the mood at the time, although there were many similar posts across the site including in the blogs.

> All of us were new members at one time and came from somewhere. For what reason a member joins (unless it is a spammer) is entirely up to that member. When we join we become a member of a community. People have different ideas and true there is not perfect harmony in every community whether it be online or offline - that's what makes the world go round.
>
> I remember shortly after I joined I privately made a negative comment about something- what I don't remember - but what I do remember is what the person I said it to told me, if you don't like something here or you disagree, then move on to something that you do like. And that is true. There is so much here to enjoy. (Saser 2010)

And BluePenguin's change in perspective from "hoity-toity" to:

> Let's ALL work to change the "us" and "them" to WE!
> (BluePenguin 2010)

As predicted by Mia, it took two to three months for the newcomers to merge comfortably with the rest of the community. Some of the private profiles were unlocked while others remained closed. The private groups remained private, but old-timer members were invited to join these groups (me included). Some groups were started jointly between old-timers and newcomers, for example, JulieAnn and former MySpace user, Ellie, started a group together in which all members were welcomed.[73]

The final say on all of these public forum discussions came via an interjection from the site administrator:

> I just want to say welcome to anyone who comes and please keep in mind that the complainers are a very small percent of [*The Roost*]. No matter where you go, you will find some who complain, some who are trying to be possessive, some who find fault, etc., but the majority are just here to enjoy. So do just that.. enjoy! (Admin1 2010)

It is interesting to note that the administrators missed the point of many of the complaints over this period, underestimating the meaningfulness of the established cultural practices on the site that allowed trust and trusting relationships to emerge. At stake was the very essence of the site's success; an online community embedded with trusting relationships. During this period, *The Roost* was at risk to changes that were not culturally acceptable to the majority of the membership and the complaints reflected this fear. Pettit's (2004) argument that a lack of evidence online would not allow trust to emerge came close to realisation for this group. Without trust the site would fail to

[73] I was also invited to join a private writing group during a difficult time with the blogging community and noted that the members were a mixture of newcomers and old-timer members.

provide the nurtured and nurturing space for older people to socially interact, and the possibility of members migrating elsewhere in the same way that the disgruntled MySpace users came to *The Roost*.

Changes to the way a site functions and its usefulness to members can have dire consequences for older people. Burmeister et all (2012:14) noted that on GreyPath changes made to the site significantly altered the demographic of the group from predominantly 70-80 years of age to favour people in their 60s, and that this was due to "cognitive challenges" in learning to managing new structures and tools. On *The Roost*, disruption and distrust caused anxiety for older people who were comfortable with the established cultural norms. However, when these were dramatically disrupted by a large influx of newcomers an environment was created that allowed the emergence of suspicion and distrust to flourish. Fear of losing the friendly, nurtured space in which to socially interact with strangers placed the community at risk of losing its friendliness; a risk that the Administrators failed to fully understand. As Fukuyama (1995) points out, when the shared norms and behaviours of a community are disrupted, trust struggles to emerge. Nevertheless as Jerrome (1992) has argued, when older people have a shared interest in making things work, the development of a social system that promotes harmony and contains conflict reveals itself.

Conclusion

Creating an engaging online community requires trusting relationships between the administrators and the membership. Trusting the security on the site was shown to be problematic, but was considered important enough that when the administrators betrayed that trust by allowing information to circulate on the Internet, participants expressed caution in their future use of the site. Although this did not inhibit friendships from forming, it did impact on how personal information would be shared in the future.

Given the opportunity, older people were able to discuss these problems thus allowing cooperation to emerge between the newcomers and the established community. Time

allowed the established community members to interact with new members until "them and us" became "we" and trust once again emerged in which the cultural norms of the site were reinstated and maintained. A nurtured online community of peers is more likely to be successful when trust is established through a collaboration between administrators who act and members who monitor.

In the following chapter, I examine the ways in which details shared on profiles blends with the offline social world of my participants in subtle but significant ways. I was interested in the ways in which online self-disclosures and representations of the self fuse with the everyday self. I was curious about what home visits and face-to-face interviews would reveal about my participants that was not shared online. This was an essential component of the research project that fills an anthropological gap in the literature. I present a case study of a home visit with one of my participants to explore the ways in which online information and interaction are inextricably entwined with my participants' understandings of the self and their offline social worlds.

7

The Inside Out Self: A Case Study

Image 19 Home interview with NTLady, 2010

"This is me. What I put online is who I think I am." (NTLady, 2010)

Behind every piece of text and every graphic posted on *The Roost* is a complex thinking and feeling mature person who resides in a matrix of culturally constituted meanings. For my participants, socially interacting online is not experienced in isolation to offline social worlds. As I have shown in previous chapters, when bringing one's self to life online, older people choose names from their offline social worlds and share personal information on profiles as cues to their identity; they also bring their offline morals and values to the online context. For my participants and others on *The Roost*, the relationship between their online self-representations and their offline self converge sufficiently to encourage meaningful social interactions in which new friendships with strangers are formed. In chapter 5, I argued that these friendships and social interactions are based on trusting the online presence. Further, I have shown that social interaction online plays a significant and meaningful role in their everyday lives.

There is no doubt that technology (the mechanics of a computer, and the structure in which data is stored and transmitted between them) is separate from a human being, yet footprints of the self scattered across the Internet are not devoid of human feelings, emotions or lived experiences when placed there. [74] Why would they be? Online we are sharing something of ourselves with others, and for members of *The Roost*, sharing aspects of ourselves and our social lives is intended to target strangers in the hope this will resonate with other like-minded people in order to make new friends.

The notion of 'the self' has found multiple forms in social theories applied to online and offline identity. They include: the true self (Giddens 1991), the managed self (Goffman 1990), the reflexive self (Cohen 1994a), the relational self (Laing 1969), the imagined self (Turkle 1984, 1995), the experienced self (Markham 1998), ageing and the subjective self (Jerrome 1992; Kaufman 1986), the ideal self (Ellison, Heino, and Gibbs 2006), the virtual self (Boellstorff 2008) and the multiple online self (Baym 2010). Each of these scholars offer theoretical frameworks in which to think about the self but they do not explain older people's experience or perceptions of their self online or the relationship this has to their everyday self.

In our everyday lives, we choose those aspects of ourselves that we wish to share with others depending on the situation we find ourselves in. It is not a mystery that we hide some aspects of our lives and reveal others (Goffman 1990). I have, for example, a different relationship with my children than with my doctor or teachers. Sharing ourselves with others is also contextually determined by the relationship (friendship, lover, mother, student, barista, bus driver, and so forth), our emotional circumstances (happy, troubled, lonely, unwell), the length of the relationship (1 hour, 3 months, 55 years), and, of course, levels of trust concerning these relationships. All of these situations do not change who we think we are, although they do change how we might reveal our inner self to others.

[74] See Nardi (2015) for a discussion on the affordances of digital technologies (the technological turn) that produce "virtuality".

For my participants, there were no multiple separations of the self (Baym 2010), and there was no evidence of "the opposition of the "digital" to the "real"" (Boellstorff 2016:397); rather, in the ontological sense, there was a feeling of being "me" (Brey 2014). This chapter contributes the voices of older people to these discussions of the self to present alternative understandings of the self and how social media provides a platform to express the experiences of the ageing self. In addition to participant observation online, meeting participants offline was a major element of my research project that offered an opportunity to explore the convergence of online self representations with the everyday self. I am concerned in this chapter with the ways in which this convergence takes place.

Experiencing the self with others

As a framework to understand online experiences, Markham (2003) developed three conceptual ideas to assist in explaining these experiences: "Internet as tool, Internet as place, and Internet as way of being. Using this framework she found that "the self's relation to Internet technologies is much closer and one can begin to see a collapse of the distinctions that separate technology, everyday life, self, and others" (Markham 2003:9). Setting aside the conceptual ideas of "tool" and "place" (discussed in previous chapters), this "way of being", she has suggested, is inseparably joined to and woven into lived experiences (Markham 1998). My participants express the lived experience of the self online as "this is me"; "this is who I think I am", and more often, "I'm the same online as I am offline".

On dating sites, Ellison et.al (2006:415) have shown that cues of an ideal self in profiles mediate "the tension between impression management pressures and the desire to present an authentic sense of self to establish veracity of identity". Even though the information placed online is self-selected and within the constraints of the medium being used, profile information located on *The Roost* attempts to convey, as one

member explained, a sense of "this is me or at least as much as I am willing to share in a profile until you get to know me better" (SilverLilly 2009). As older social media users, participants and members were less concerned with impression management and more interested with providing information that would confirm a sense of "this is me".

A short time ago Baym (2010:154) looked to a future where "new media are not cyberspaces juxtaposed with the offline to be talked about in contrast to one another", and scholars are now shifting towards this view. In support of Baym and others' call to rethink the relationship new media has in our lives,[75] Miller (2013:10) has argued that:

> We need to move from overwrought, moralistic and simplistic arguments based on dualism between online and offline to an appreciation that most people now engage with a mix of communication and identity platforms which usually include a multiplicity of online and offline identities *without any clear break between these*. Online is now as integral to everyday communication and self-representation as is the telephone or television, and we should abandon the idea of a separated out 'virtual' domain. (my emphasis)

I agree with Miller and argue that, for my participants, online and offline experiences are not contrasted with each other but converge in meaningful and genuine ways that are woven into everyday experiences (Ingold 2012). My participants do not separate their online experiences from their offline experiences into 'imaginary', 'disembodied' or 'multifaceted' categories alongside 'real' selves. As NTlady emphasized in a research focus-group discussion, "What I put online is who I think I am" (NTlady 2009).

Participants reiterated in comments to me and to each other how their interactions online were "real" and "meaningful" and how their interactions felt "no different from sitting in the same room with a friend". Without doubt, the subjective experience of the

[75] See also Boellstorff (2016) and Brey (2014).

social interactions they have online are embodied, meaningful experiences. Collapsing the distinctions that separate technology, everyday life, self, and others, it becomes possible to develop a framework through which to conceptualise the convergence of online social interactions with face-to-face meetings that does not marginalise or diminish the online experiences of my participants (including myself).

Anonymity

It is well documented that communications online can be crafted to dupe even the most experienced online users (Ess 2010; Glance 2015). Media reports constantly highlight the dangers associated with deceitful activities online creating moral panics (Cohen 1972) related to new technology; however these reports do reinforce the importance of remaining safe online, especially for children, and to some degree older users too (Grimes et al. 2010). These are serious concerns. Nevertheless, anonymity in some social media platforms, for example Reddit or Second Life, are a design choice in which self-disclosure, while remaining anonymous, is related to the audience with which one is interacting (Boellstorff 2008; Ma, Hancock, and Naaman 2016). These platforms are not designed specifically to make new friends with strangers, nor do they have monitoring like that of *The Roost* outlined in the previous chapter.

Kendall (1999:66) has suggested that "anonymity does not equal an absence of identity; rather, it carries with it a set of assumptions about identity which hold until proven otherwise". She names this "identity continuity" (1999:68). Members of *The Roost* rely on "identity continuity" of its members to constantly update profile information, shared photo albums, blogs, as well as to share personal experiences in forum discussion groups in order to establish the veracity of identity claims. On *The Roost* the audience is age-peers; deceitful behaviour is not tolerated, and anonymity becomes less significant when sharing personal information and daily life experiences with each other. Nevertheless, sceptics might argue that online it is impossible to know for certain how

much of this self-disclosure is accurate and truthful. Yet, as I have already argued, on *The Roost* trust flourishes between members.

For my study, face-to-face meetings were an opportunity to observe the "reflexive project of the self" both on *and* offline (Giddens 1991:231). Online all my interactions with my participants and other members were positive and friendly. I genuinely felt as though I knew everyone I interacted with rather well; some, as I have mentioned elsewhere, I came to know better than others. I was curious as to how my online experiences of these astute older people would develop in face-to-face situations. Would online profile information and online social interactions lead to disappointment, false interpretations, and personal awkwardness, or would I find myself engaged with someone I felt I already knew?

It was not common practice on *The Roost* to meet friends face-to-face, and the majority of members preferred to maintain their friendships only online. In part this was related to friendships being formed from around the world; many members cited distance and finances as inhibiting factors to meeting, while others were content with the convenience of sharing their lives with friends in an online context only. More often, the physical constraints and limitations of age were considered a deterrent in making travel plans. The few who had met someone from online shared Carrie's experience:

> The actual meeting was no more or less than I had expected, with no surprises, as I had formed a view and impressions from both her profile and various exchanges on [The Roost]. (Carrie 2010)

I spent many months developing rapport with my participants in the hope of meeting at least some of them, and as the months ticked over, I worried that this significant component of the research might not be possible.

Bridging online with offline

A turning point to meeting some of my participants came during a discussion in the research focus-group on the differences between a graphic with a message posted online and a postcard received in the mail. It was a surprise to discover that nearly everyone in the group had not received a postcard in the mail for many years. I thought it would be fun (and it was) to invite my participants to share in receiving a postcard from me and returning one in kind. This interesting and fun exercise became a bridge between online and offline relationships between myself and some of my participants. It also revealed those who were willing to disclose their full names and addresses to me and those who preferred not to.[76]

Milne (2010:2) has shown that "presence is an affect achieved in communication (whether by letters, postcard or email) when interlocutors imagine the psychological or, sometimes physical presence of the other". Of course, online all our interactions had been through typed text and graphics; however the postcards were a physical presence including the handwriting on the back of the cards (see Danet 2001, especially chapter 4). Receiving and sending postcards generated a lot of excitement, including from those amongst the focus-group participants who chose not to participate. This social sharing of emotions (Rimé 2016) is evidenced in the following accounts shared in the focus-group discussion:

> When my hubby came in a little later, I was so pleased to show it to him! His comment "Well! I've never seen you get this excited over an email card or graphic!" I've greatly enjoyed reading about & 'feeling' the excitement of those members who already received theirs. (Quirita 2010)

[76] All the participants had signed consent forms that included information about me, my supervisor's contact details, complaints procedures, and other important research information. This information, while it did include my full name, did not include my home address or personal phone numbers.

> I'd just been reading the last few posts here when my husband brought in the mail...now, being a man, he takes his time going through it, lol...but I saw the postcard & knew it had to be from you...so I grabbed it! I was more excited about getting the actual postcard from you in Australia than getting graphics on my page, lol. And you know how much I love graphics. (JulieAnn 2010)

And from Saser, who chose not to participate:

> Since I did not participate in this project, I questioned my right to comment, but I've just gotta tell you and everyone else how much I've enjoyed reading all your work selecting each one, the process of mailing, and then looking at the postcards and reading all the comments. Your description of the process you went through was intriguing, and I can actually feel the excitement of each person when they responded online. I think I've enjoyed the project as much as if I had participated. (Saser 2010)

Postcards were considered to be tactile and personal by all those who received them. Postcards also bore the handwriting of those involved and this added a personal and intimate dimension to our online interactions.[77] Postcards brought the physical presence of the other to these interactions (Milne 2010). There was also the added pleasure of the ability to place something physical on a fridge where other family members could see them or pinned to a board near the computer as a keepsake.

> I for one, definitely prefer fetching in a postcard from the letterbox in place of a graphic on the computer....it is far more personal! I've put mine on the fridge! (Essie 2010)

[77] It was interesting to note that the hand writing style on all of the postcards was in script, learned at a time when cursive was taught in schools.

Interestingly, it was unanimously agreed by all those concerned that the content of the message, whether by graphic postcard or physical postcard, was considered to provide the same experience (feelings) regardless of the format the message arrived in.

> I have to say that I did feel it was a more personal experience. However, had I received the same text with a graphic online I think I would still have experienced the same friendly feeling, but I would not have the postcard as a keepsake. (Blitz 2010)

Palriwala (2005:157) noted of anthropologists doing fieldwork at home that "the anthropologist observer was/is the observed and vice versa". An unintentional outcome of this exercise was it confirmed for my participants that I was, indeed, a "real person" as opposed to an elusive researcher distanced from everyone's lives.

> Lovely to hear from you personally, it goes to prove what we knew anyway, that the people we encounter online are real people, with a real address, and probably the same joys and problems that we have. (LillianGrace 2010)

Aside from being observed, the "personal" connection expressed by LillianGrace relates to my private home address rather than my University contact details. Revealing my private details created a bridge between myself and my participants that facilitated meeting participants as a more personal and intimate experience. I was fortunate to be able to stay with participants in Perth, Hobart, and rural South Australia and to interview participants living in Adelaide and those visiting Adelaide from the Northern Territory in my own home.[78] In the following section, I explore the fusion between offline social worlds and online sociability based on face-to-face interviews and home

[78] I am grateful to the generosity of my hosts during the home-stays and to all those I met for their valuable contributions to the research endeavour.

stay visits. My interest is related to how self-disclosure and narrations of selfhood online (Cover 2016) converge with the everyday self.

Everyday lives, Everyday selves

I never thought of myself online as being "mediated by ephemeral experiences of liminality", as if somehow my 'self' becomes transitionally separated from the embodied me to become a "virtually disembodied interpretation" of myself (Waskul 2005:50). This makes no sense to me at all. Disembodied is an unfortunate term that has been used to explain the information and interactions we share online with others at a time when researchers were endeavouring to understand how the Internet was facilitating sociality online.

Baym (2010:105) noted that "digital media seem to separate selves from bodies, leading to *disembodied identities* that exist only in actions and words. This disembodiment opens up new possibilities for exploration and deception", and "disembodied identities online can also be multiple" (2010:106). Disembodiment implies a mind/body split (Cartesian dualism) that assumes no involvement of bodily experiences, yet bodies are part of experiences that include emotions, empathy, excitement, interest, and sensorial engagement with others (Crampton 2013; Gieser 2008; Rimé 2016).

In the disembodied model, the physical person and the expressions of the self reduced to text or images on a screen are purportedly devoid of the thought and care of the person who placed them there, because that information is placed *somewhere* away from the physical self. In my opinion this is a very narrow view of our use of social media. Each piece of information—each cue *placed* online—is the result of an intended act of self-representation expressed by a self-aware person, and the embodied person reading that is not devoid of bodily experiences, for example joy or hurt (Cover 2016). Disembodiment was not the experience of members of *The Roost* nor was it mine; our

experiences and interactions with each other were embodied, as expressed, for example, in the recounting of each other's experiences in the postcard project.[79]

My readings of profiles were never associated with imagined disembodied data. The words and images conjured, for me, an embodied person sitting by their computer at home or when not present online going about their daily business. One of the groups on *The Roost* encouraged members to post photos of their desks to share their offline social space with each other (Augé 1995). Attached to these photos were descriptions of where the desk was positioned in the home, if it had a window with a view, who used the space and if it was shared, and the space's previous use, for example a bedroom converted into a study after children had left home. These photos and descriptions shared with members placed the self contextually within the framework of their offline social world.

As I have mentioned elsewhere, on profiles and in comments throughout the site on a daily basis, lives and everyday selves where updated, shared and celebrated. From mundane local weather reports to the arrival of a new grandbaby and everything in between, information circulated that was not isolated from everyday lived experiences. As Mia states:

> I spend HOURS on the computer every day...mostly on [*The Roost*]! When I'm not doing that...I'm cleaning, doing laundry, running errands, reading, cooking, and spending time visiting my kids! (Mia 2010)

At the time Mia posted her comment, her signature had been changed to include the following graphic:

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[79] For a discussion on virtual embodiment see Boellstorff (2008; 2016).

Image 20 Graphic announcing the impending birth of a granddaughter

Kaufman (1986:166) found that family members, especially children and grandchildren, were an important source of meaning for her informants that contributed towards a "larger scheme to create a continuous self in old age". The carefully placed graphic was symbolically important. It indicated that in Mia's offline world—the one she brings to the online context—she was preparing for and excited about the pending arrival of a granddaughter. Mia was transitioning from the role of parent to one of grandparent; a celebration of one of the rites of passage that older people welcome, commemorate, and acknowledge with each other, family, and community (Van Gennep 1960). On *The Roost*, it was common to see announcements of expected and the eventual birth of grandchildren. After the baby's birth, Mia, the proud grandmother, made the announcement and received many congratulations from members and friends.

Narrations of selfhood on social networking sites according to Cover (2016:3) are "just as much a performance as any other "real life" act, and adequately constitutes a sense of self and identity". Offline daily rituals narrated in guestbook entries or in forums as daily updates to busy offline social lives provided a sense of self and identity to others.

> Up about 8:30am--dress, make bed, turn on computer. Then read paper, check what's going on [The Roost]...take pills about 9:30am with tea. Have a breakfast snack cake about 11am. On the

> computer...then stop for any chores that need to be done. If we need anything, we'll run over to the grocery or WalMart. Today I took a neighbor to her eye doctor appointment. Tomorrow we've got a memorial service for my husband's aunt followed by a family luncheon. (JulieAnn 2010)

> Today is my day I do volunteer work at the Handicapped Respite Centre. I leave at about 9.10.a.m. Assist clients in cooking steak and onion pie, pizza, and scones. Also worked in the computer area helping clients with any problems they were having on the computers. (Blitz 2010)

For my participants and other members of the community, there seems to be no differentiating the online self from the offline self as both of these merge. It is impossible not to have one without the other. I will come back to this later in the chapter.

NTlady's (2009) description of the way she experienced herself online—"This is me. What I put online is who I think I am"— was similar to my own experience and those of other members. There appeared to be no conscious effort to separate everyday lives from those experiences shared online with this group; if anything it was the opposite. As Carrie explained:

> The period of my existence during which vanity and ego were perhaps very much part of my presence, is now well behind me. I now take refuge in being an eccentric old fogey to whom adoration and homage is no longer of any importance to my self esteem, therefore I no longer feel the need to portray myself as anything other than "ye olde fogey" that I am! (Carrie 2010)

Why hide the self or who you think you are? The purpose for using social media for this older group was to share as much accurate information as possible about one's self for

the sole purpose of making new friends. While we may manage impressions of the self (Goffman 1990), utilizing self-disclosure (Misoch 2015) to expose a reflexive self (Giddens 1991), these tools are engaged every day in our interactions with others depending on the situation and the context in which we find ourselves. Narrations of the self are inextricably woven from everyday lived experiences for this older group (Ingold 2012).

Communication on *The Roost* is not synchronous as it is with face-to-face talk, phone calls or instant messaging, although posting messages can sometimes appear as if there are no time delays. Baym (2010:8) has pointed out that communication that is asynchronous allows people time to "manage their self-representations more strategically". Self-representations on *The Roost* include profile information, comments, graphics, photos and the posting of personal experiences, short videos of families and pets, and holidays. Meaningful profile updates such as births of grandchildren and great grandchildren, deaths of loved ones, significant wedding anniversaries, and so forth, announce daily social lives as lived experiences. My participants and members told me that time allowed them the opportunity to upload new information about themselves to their profiles but it also afforded them opportunities to "think before writing or commenting" (Aussiewoman 2009; Carrie 2009; JulieAnn 2009; and many others). It is well documented that as we age our thinking ability slows and language reaction times slow down too (Williams and Nussbaum 2012). This does not mean that the content was embellished or diminished, it means that for this older group time affords an opportunity to be self-reflexive and self-aware to accurately portray the circumstances of their lives and selves that they wished to share. Meeting participants face-to-face including some in their homes afforded me the opportunity to participate and observe their offline social worlds. In doing so, I was able to compare the relationship between online narrations of the self with the physical self; in the flesh, so to speak.

Encounters, narration, and experience

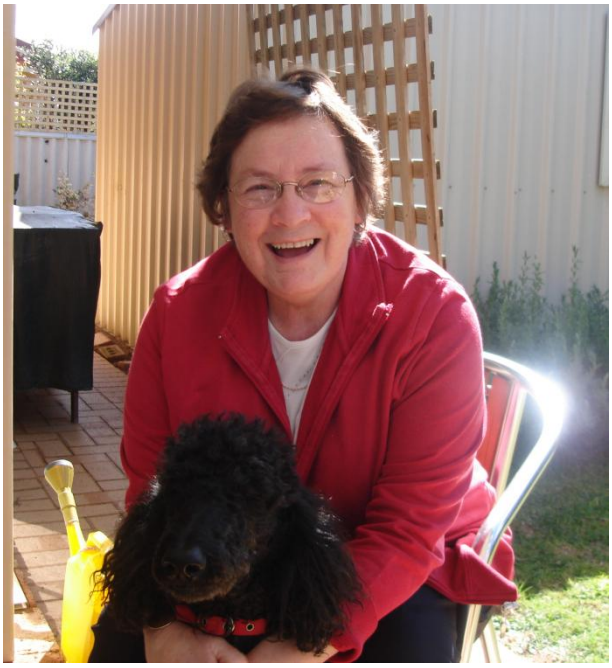

Image 21 Home visit with Essie, Perth. Photo taken August 2010.

"I personally don't think there's any difference meeting someone online compared to meeting someone face-to-face!" (Essie 2009)

Scholars have shown that narrations of the self across the life course contributes to feelings of well-being in old age (Crampton 2013; Danely 2016; Kaufman 1986; Myerhoff 1979; Shenk and Sokolovsky 2001; Wilińska and Anbäcken 2013). The voices of my participants add the subjective experience of ageing to this discourse by moving away from the medical gaze of health and policy discourses concerned with "successful ageing" (Shenk and Sokolovsky 2001; Wilińska and Anbäcken 2013; Willcox et al. 2007) to an holistic account of what their narrations mean to them (Ingold 2012).

Anthropology and its methodology of participant observation offers a space in which to frame the experience of ageing in the universally dominant health and social science

discourses within the literature related to successful ageing and government health policies (Danely 2016). In the tradition of anthropology, I immersed myself into the social world of my participants to examine the subjective experience of ageing from the perspective of my participants and gain an understanding of their everyday lives (Crampton 2013; Danely 2016). I not only met with members, I also met with their family members and friends, helped around the home (gardening, cooking, dishes), went on outings, engaged in hours of conversation, and I also observed their computer activity.

As a necessary precaution for meeting strangers, all ethical and safety protocols were followed when organising meetings. It was agreed to initially meet in public spaces, for example in the open spaces of airport lounges or coffee shops. I did not anticipate any problems, and I am pleased to say there were none. Each person I met was uniquely individual, as were their profiles and our interactions. There were, of course, differences in gender and age. The people I met were between the ages of 58 and 85 and this meant there was variance in the physical aspects of ageing, both in appearance and agility. Each face-to-face meeting was akin to meeting a friend that I felt familiar with due to our online interactions with each other, and my analysis of their homepage.[80] There was, however, one exception, TruckdriverSA. Even though we did become friends over time, this friendship cannot be attributed to our online interactions.

By contrast to the homepages I had been viewing on *The Roost*, TruckdriverSA's homepage was unusual. When I visited his page, it was bereft of information, lacked colour and images, and he had retained the generic layout. There were no greetings on his guestbook. In the 'likes and dislikes' box he had placed the statement "men at work: under construction". He had been a member since 2008, had logged in recently, gave

[80] Unfortunately, there is not enough space to detail each of these visits. I have made a conscious choice to discuss AussieWoman as the case study for these visits. My analysis of the data collected online from each of the participants I met, as well as the social interactions we shared online, provided similar outcomes to those expressed in this chapter when I met each person face-to-face. The physical constraints of ageing not evidenced online are referred to later in this chapter.

his age as 58, was Australian, and he had five friends. I made contact via *The Roost* messaging system; however, TruckdriverSA's preferred method for interaction was via Yahoo Messenger.

On his *Roost* homepage he had placed a photo of himself (younger version), and on his Yahoo Messenger profile the following graphic surprised me:

Image 22 Profile image offsite, TruckdriverSA

"Sharing online is the same as sharing face-to-face." (TruckdriverSA 2010)

We chatted for over a month online before he felt comfortable meeting me face-to-face. Our chat conversations were easy going, friendly and sometimes playful, but he was suspicious of my researcher status and credentials.[81] We arranged to meet for coffee at a well-known and popular cafe in a beach suburb of Adelaide. When we met for the first time, it was obvious that his profile photo was a younger version of himself, and I found him to be shy and reserved. It struck me that his profile on *The Roost* also seemed reserved.

TruckdriverSA had been introduced to *The Roost* by a female friend. At the time, he was single and looking for a partner. He said the site reminded him of "lavender and mothballs", the welcome wagon greetings "didn't seem genuine", and he went on to say that, "even though my profile is very bare, and even knowing nothing about me, they still wanted to be friends". He felt there was "pressure to be part of the club", but that it

[81] I had provided TruckdriverSA with research information and a consent form, which he signed when we met, whereas all other participants returned consent forms via email.

was not the kind of club he wanted to belong to, so he rarely visited. He had also turned off all notifications from the site.[82] He started using computers in 1984, and had been using the Internet since 1990, with much of his online time spent in "various chat rooms".

Over subsequent coffee meetings at the same cafe, TruckdriverSA revealed that he was a naturist, and that his primary goal for being online was to find a woman who understood the naturist lifestyle. He was active on sites that promoted the lifestyle he chose, as well as on the dating site Oasis. He gave me access to these profiles. The difference in content was striking.

On these sites he used the same username, had uploaded a current photo of himself, and the information he placed there closely related to his life, lifestyle choice, and desire to meet someone who was like-minded. Of the spaces online where he felt comfortable, he said, "sharing online is the same as sharing face-to-face". He felt he was able to "get to know someone really well online", especially if they "shared things in common". The lack of information on his homepage on *The Roost* was evidence that the site was not of interest to him; however his narration of his self on the sites that were of interest provided extensive information not dissimilar to those of the other participants I met.

Unlike my other participants, TruckdriverSA had something to hide, his lifestyle choice, and this was evidenced in the brevity of his profile, his discomfort on *The Roost*, and his reserved shyness when we initially met. TruckdriverSA was unusual because our friendship developed over time via face-to-face meetings rather than through profile information and online social interactions.[83] Clearly, *The Roost* is not everyone's preferred social medium, and not all members share the same enthusiasm for the site or the possible friendships that can be formed there. This points to a self-

[82] He deleted his profile on *The Roost* towards the end of 2010.
[83] TruckdriverSA and I remained friends until he phoned me in 2015 to let me know he had "met the love of his life and was moving interstate", after which we lost contact.

selection process related to personal choice. The rest of my encounters with participants, and their narrations of the self, were very similar to AussieWoman.

AussieWoman and I became friends online very quickly and she was the only participant I met who did not have a photo of herself on her profile and did not share one with me prior to meeting. The source of the rich data in the following section comes from both online data and offline hand written field notes. I draw on her profile information, self-reflexive testimony, and home visits to discuss in depth the link between online and offline sociality and narrations of the self. The following section contributes an holistic and inclusive perspective of the everyday life of AussieWoman. I begin by presenting subjective narrations of herself online and follow this with my own experience of meeting and staying with her in her home.

Online narrations of the self

Image 23 Simile of AussieWoman's profile image 2009-2016

In the generic profiling information on *The Roost*, AussieWoman placed details of where she lived, stated she was retired, and gave her age as 63. She had been a member since 2008. Other information she shared included her star sign, religious affiliations, as well as likes and dislikes. She placed emphasis on family ties (children, grandchildren,

and spouses), a love of music (including a music player), listed gardening as her "passion", healthy food, pets and animals, the Internet, and friends "both online and offline". At the time, she had 59 friends, was a member of several groups, and maintained an online presence by actively participating in forums, including the focus-group. During my time in the field, AussieWoman's homepage only changed twice, which was related to updates of the photo album of her garden. Other than her profile image and the photo album, there were no other images on her profile.[84] In the 'about me box' AussieWoman offered a glimpse into her social world that included her children and her spouses as well as stating:

> There are so many wonderful things to do in a day including having a nap if I want to that I quite love being retired. I have enjoyed all my life although some parts a lot better than others, as happens to all of us. The slide show is a few pictures of my magic garden. (AussieWoman 2009)

As discussed in previous chapters, these self-reflexive entries contributed by AussieWoman to her profile are subjective, self-aware identity cues for visitors to her homepage (Baym 2010; Hooi and Cho 2014; Ma, Hancock, and Naaman 2016; Misoch 2015). Sharing on her profile the themes of home, nature, family, friends, health, Internet and hobbies are conscious choices that bring her identity and selfhood online (Cover 2012), and are *intended* to offer visitors a glimpse or a sense of the person that AussieWoman "thinks" she is. These themes were reiterated and expanded on by her during focus-group discussions.

Early in the research focus-group discussions, I asked participants to share a snapshot of a week in their offline social worlds.[85] AussieWoman recorded her week for the group thus:

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[84] For privacy reasons, I have removed any identifying information.
[85] Within the confines of the private group, participants were willing to share information about themselves that they would not necessarily share with the broader community (see chapter 5).

My weeks are usually all the same as I live at the edge of a small village and do not have a car. I go shopping with my neighbour and friend once a fortnight and we go to yoga once a week. Most days I also fit in a 20/30 minute walk round the local paddocks.

I get up when I wake naturally [without an alarm clock, yah :)] anytime between 6am to 8/30 am depending how late I went to bed which could be as late as 2am or later, though usually about midnight.

I tend to cook in lots and freeze individual meals so that I do not spend a lot of time in the kitchen which is a relief after cooking for a very big family for more years than I like to remember.

I have about an acre of magic garden which I spend a lot of time in although not as much since the computer came into my life. I turn the PC on to warm up etc while I go and make my first dandelion tea when I first get up in the morning. I then spend several hours signing petitions, reading/answering email, clicking about 50 or more charity clicks which help feed children/animals sort of thing.

I tend to have a breakfast come lunch anywhere between 10am to midday depending how carried away I get with other things. I do the washing about once a week whenever the basket is full. lol

I do a lot less housework than I used to and do it when the mess really gets to me as basically I am a tidy person. I have a combustion stove so the house always seems covered with fine ash from the fireplace no matter how careful I am.

The last few weeks have been very busy outside as I have been picking stinging nettles to dry to make a nettle infusion drink which

I drink twice a day the rest of the year. This helps me have a lot less pain in my abdomen which can be very crippling.

I haven't been round much as I had an awful bout of sickness which totally knocked me out and put me to bed for over a week as my small bowel stopped working and when it started again wasn't very pleasant either. I pray that that doesn't happen again. :)

I have been rescuing caterpillars from amongst the stinging nettles and putting them back outside as I put some in a box and raised them just to see what they turned into. That was fascinating in itself as I watched them turn into pupae and then hatch into magnificent butterflies. Wow nature is wonderful!

It is now 11.07 am and I am still sitting here and I am not dressed, have not done any yoga and haven't eaten. I sometimes get panicky as the days fly by and I haven't done half the things that I intended to do. The PC can get blamed for a lot of inactivity in other directions though I do try to keep a healthy balance. Having said that I do need to go and attend to the body right now. :)

I also have one big cat who is half wild. :) :)

In the privacy of the research focus-group (amongst friends), AussieWoman offered a more intimate and detailed account of her daily life than on her profile. These conscious representations of her offline social world and world views confirm her profile choices within the social matrix of age peers on the site. The themes of health, retirement, family, gardening, Internet, animals, and nature are included. Her lifestyle is portrayed as alternative (nettle tea, raising caterpillars), she has incorporated details of her health,

the importance of her activism (daily clicks), as well as providing insight into her everyday routine practices and rituals (turning on the computer, cooking, walking, cleaning, yoga). And although she lives in a remote place, she enjoys living in the country free from the constraints of her large family. For the reader or potential friend, it is not difficult to form a sense of who AussieWoman is and the life she lives.

On *The Roost*, AussieWoman and I exchanged very few personal greetings on our guestbook pages, and private message exchanges on the site were limited although external emails were frequent; however, in the research focus-group AussieWoman actively contributed by recording her thoughts, feelings, and experiences in great detail. She also interacted with other members of the group by commenting on their input to the various topics. These interactions in the focus-group were another source of knowledge—additional cues—related to AussieWoman (see chapter 5, trusting the online presence). As I have mentioned elsewhere, intimacy and closeness deepened our friendship, so I was delighted when she asked to be involved in the second half of the project: the face-to-face component.

Convergences: digital meets real

AussieWoman was the only participant who had not shared a photo of herself with me; her profile image was of a butterfly, although she did have access to photos of me on my profile.[86] Similar to Carter's (2005:122) arrangements to meet her online participant "Zosma", AussieWoman and I prepared for my first visit by speaking a few times on the phone to exchange detailed directions on how to find her home, because she was living in the country outside of a small town. Neither of us were surprised to discover that talking on the phone was an extension of the easy banter we shared in our online social interactions, and interestingly we both used our online names during these calls, and would continue to do so when we met. Carter (2005:163) noted that when she met

[86] You will recall the discussion in chapter 3 related to AussieWoman's story of her butterfly avatar.

Zosma they also referred to each other by their online names, which she believed was a strategy for maintaining their "authentic perceptions" of one another (also see Kendall 2002; Miller and Slater 2000). While I agree with Carter to some extent, I also believed that the person I had met online, and assessed as a truthful and trustworthy friend, was the very same person I was talking to, so for me her online name was a nickname. Switching between online names (nicknames) and real names felt comfortable and natural to both of us although this was not unique to us alone; it was the same with all the participants I met or talked with on the phone or Skype (Miller and Slater 2000).

AussieWoman's house was set back on a rural block of several acres with a one acre garden surrounding the house that was in full bloom and beautifully maintained. Her property was a short distance off the main road and approximately thirty kilometres from the nearest town. My first thoughts as I drove in through the gates were that AussieWoman liked to garden. I knew this from her profile information and other online discussions, but now I could see for myself that her words online accurately represented this.

Image 24 Narrated themes: place, garden, nature in a remote location.

As is customary in the Australian country, I drove carefully down the long, dirt driveway to avoid creating a cloud of dust and made my way to the back door of the house. AussieWoman came out to greet me before I had time to get out of my car. I would learn later that she would have observed me coming into the property from the vantage point that her desk offered, which was located in front of the big window of the computer room at the front of the house.

My perceptions of her physical self from our online interactions were that she was a warm and caring person (and she was); however, AussieWoman was nothing like I had imagined her to be physically. I had imagined an older looking woman worn by illness, with dark eyes and dark hair sprinkled with silvery greys. To my surprise, AussieWoman was neatly dressed with her long white hair tied back on her head, which had been carefully secured with a butterfly clip, and she was wearing makeup. Her blue eyes (not dark at all!) twinkled and her smile was warm and welcoming; she looked surprisingly youthful for her 63 years. We hugged. It seemed natural to do so; two friends meeting rather than two strangers meeting for the first time.

AussieWoman seemed a little nervous.[87] I was someone she had met on the Internet, a researcher coming to explore her home, her routines, and her offline social world. We had formed a friendship bond (Firth 1999) online and both wondered how this would converge when meeting face-to-face. She had generously offered to open her home to me for the weekend, and here I was, standing in her yard, a stranger yet not a stranger. I understood her nervousness, although I felt none myself. I had the advantage of previously meeting many strangers from online, some from *The Roost*.

Positioned just outside the back door was a large birdcage. Inside were Diamond Doves and AussieWoman shared their story with me. Many years ago, she had been given a pair and "bred them up". One day, in a "moment of forgetfulness", she had left the cage

[87] We had prearranged to cancel the home stay should there be any discomfort when we met, I would return home.

door open and the whole flock had escaped. This distressed AussieWoman because, as captive birds, she feared that predators such as foxes and cats would have "got them all". She "started again" and the cage was now full of "happy pinging" (egg laying) birds. It was a lovely story that talked to me about AussieWoman's capacity to love all creatures and in the telling of the birds' history, I was reminded of AussieWoman's story about the butterfly as her choice of image on *The Roost* (see chapter 3). The butterfly she said was "the symbol for change" that she had adopted for her "self" when she was in "a state of constant change". Kaufman (1986:166) has pointed out that older people create a "continuous self in old age" from the integration of "memories of the self with their present condition and knowledge of the self". Her choice of avatar seamlessly converged with her circumstances; past and present.

We made our way into the warmth of the kitchen, complete with the wood stove that covered her home in "fine ash". She made me coffee, and I was not surprised that she made tea for herself infused with nettle picked from her own garden. We sat under the front veranda to talk. The veranda was enclosed by a low wall that served as a frame for the view to her garden and the "local paddocks" she had described that she "walked most days for 20-30 minutes". At the boundary to her property, tall gum trees swayed in the breeze where parrots, galahs, magpies and cockies bickered amongst themselves in the long branches; nature at her doorstep. The openness of the countryside, and the three-hour drive to her home, were evidence of her isolation; without a car, AussieWoman was dependent on the generosity of her "neighbour and friend" to take her "shopping and to yoga once a fortnight", and her Internet connection provided a "door to the world".

She named the veranda "the bower" because it reminded her of the outback and was like an "oasis with parts of greenery". It has special meaning to her as a "protective spot" or "little shelter place" that she "invites" visitors into. I felt honoured to share this space with her and it did not feel too dissimilar from the privacy shared between us in our personal emails. Our meeting was akin two old friends catching up after a long absence

from each other. I told her my story and hers unfolded too. Sometimes it was impossible to objectively remain on track with interview questions and easier to let the conversation ebb and flow with a life of its own.[88]

Image 25 Home stay visit: The Bower

I found myself drawn into her warmth and willingness to share herself with me. We exchanged personal information—life stories—details that were not shared online; the kind of details that confirmed but at the same time embellished her profile information that said: "I have enjoyed all my life, some parts better than others, as happens to all of us". Trusting her online presence, her truthfulness, authenticity, and consistency online merged with trusting each other face-to-face, confirming what Carter (2005:163) referred to as maintaining "authentic perceptions" of each other online.

Coleman et al. (2015:220) found that older people identify the significant roles played by perceptions of meaning and purpose in life, and that this contributes to a person's "continued flourishing and survival throughout adulthood and into old age". AussieWoman's garden gave meaning and purpose to her life, but so did her social connections online. The role of health issues, gardening, and the Internet were noted on

[88] I took handwritten notes during all of our conversations. For a review on interviewing techniques in anthropology see Koven (2014).

AussieWoman's profile as well as shared in her testimony in the focus-group as meaningful to her.

She was very mindful of the native wildlife and creating a sustainable habitat for the native birds and animals, including snakes, "all creatures need a safe place to live". In her garden, I noticed that she had placed many novelty fairies—hidden treasures—for the discerning eye to discover (see photo, below). Discovering these objects was akin to re-discovering AussieWoman from online.

Image 26 From graphics online to fairies in the garden.

For me, they connected instantly with what I knew about her based on our online interactions and her fondness for using fairy-like smileycons on *The Roost* as well as in emails (see chapter 3). Smileycons, small graphics and emoticons were chosen as an expression of her personality that she added to her online communications, and these were consistent with her personality and beliefs expressed by objects placed in her garden.

Meaningful social inclusion

The routine practice of turning the computer on in the morning was an everyday ritual that nearly all of my participants shared.[89] AussieWoman's morning routine was to also turn on the computer so it loaded while she made coffee. The computer was "old and slow" and took "forever" to be ready to use. Of course, there was no evidence of this slowness online; her comments and graphics appeared effortlessly in the same way that everyone else's did. By comparison to my fast ADSL connection and relatively new computer, the slowness of her computer and her patience waiting for it to load astounded me.

In 2001, her sister was updating her computers at work and gave one to AussieWoman. AussieWoman laughed as she recounted the story of how a computer and the Internet became such a "big part" of her everyday life, because at the time, "she didn't have a clue about computers". She recounted her first experience of being online:

> It was so exciting! A joyous, joyous time. I was beside myself with the excitement of it all. I was able to download graphics and themes for the computer and even the mouse. I found safe sites to enjoy. I suddenly came alive again because I was learning new things. (AussieWoman 2010)

For AussieWoman, the computer and being connected to the Internet "brought the world" to her. She explained, "I learned a lot from being connected online including how to use a computer; it is part of my life". The feeling of being connected to the world is significant and was shared by all of my participants. In the conclusion to their

[89] For example, "I turn on the computer within 10 minutes of getting up. It cheers me up" (JulieAnn 2010); "First thing I do is turn my computer on to connected to the outside world" (Carrie 2010); and "When I wake up, on my way to the bathroom, I'll turn on my computer!" (Mia 2010) were common themes.

longitudinal study of older people in the UK, Coleman et al. (2015:235) noted the following:

> The importance of a sense of contribution is perhaps one of the more under-rated aspects of individual identity in later life, and we should explore new ways of enabling older people to continue to feel involved.

The computer and its ability to connect to the Internet was, and still is, manifestly important to AussieWoman because it enables her to feel socially connected, involved, and a valuable member of society.

It was important to her that she did her "daily clicks". She does this fastidiously because "each click donates to a cause". I was puzzled by the "daily clicks". She explained that "by clicking on the advertisers who sponsor a cause, the advertiser gives financial assistance per click received". She told me that she felt "guilty" if she missed doing them. Her logic was "if everyone clicks once then that adds up to a lot of help for people and animals". Even so, she claimed to "burn out regularly" and needed to "take breaks from signing petitions and doing the daily clicks" by working in her garden. At the time I visited, she was trying to "cut back on forums and causes" that she is involved in. During these reflexive times, she says no to requests to be involved and would often "unsubscribe from others", however, she "always gets back into it" after a break to "rejoin her friends from around the world.[90] Like her garden, "daily clicks" were her passion too. AussieWoman's passion for online activism is not unfounded or wasted effort; researchers have found that online activism does instigate action both online and offline (Caissie 2006; Harlow and Harp 2012). These "passions", her garden and the ability to be connected online are about living her life as a contributing, worthwhile, and participating member of society as she ages.

[90] On subsequent visits, AussieWoman was actively participating in online activism with enthusiasm and a strong belief that she was helping humanity, animals, and the environment.

We talked extensively about her online "activism". In a study of older adults (62-84 years of age) use of the Internet, Bloch and Bruce (2011) found that a significant proportion of their participants viewed the Internet as a tool for information consumption rather than for contributing to the public sphere. This was not the case for my participants.[91] For AussieWoman, the Internet facilitated in relieving loneliness; the kind of loneliness she experienced just after a "dark period" in her life, and the loneliness of social isolation that comes with living on a rural property without a car. She felt that by contributing to the various petitions this helped to "maximise the spreading of activist information". She also felt responsible for keeping a cause "moving" and "getting the word out there" and she firmly believed that "each individual who gets involved *can* make a difference". She said her "head was full of facts about a cause", but was unable to articulate where these facts come from nor did she care; "a belief in the cause" was enough to motivate her into "action".

AussieWoman absorbs news from the various sites she visits on the web but she "does not actually read any news sites". No newspapers are delivered to her home. There was no radio in the house for news and the television was only used to watch movies. I asked her where she sourced local and international news from and her response was from "friends" and "indirectly via the various sites" she visits. Sometimes she followed news items that had been shared by friends. For example, she was well informed about the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico (2010) and had sourced all of her information from a variety of websites including many environmental sites such as Greenpeace. In this way, AussieWoman remained well informed about the world in which she lives, albeit selective regarding the issues about which she sought more information. For AussieWoman, being selective about the news she followed meant that she was not "overwhelmed" by news that did not interest her. Regardless of the source of the

[91] Although this discussion is focused on AussieWoman, I wish to note that all of my participants contributed to the public sphere either by signing and/or forwarding petitions (I received, and signed, many during the course of my fieldwork), leaving comments on digital news articles, writing to politicians, making complaints, or adding their views to public discussions especially in relation to matters concerning seniors. Only a small proportion of time spent online was devoted to information consumption.

information, she used "common sense" to "pick" her way through the "masses of material out there" to draw her "own conclusions" based on her own "common sense beliefs" and her own research sourced from the Internet. Sourcing knowledge about the world in which she lives was certainly participating in information consumption that kept her well informed but this information was also the springboard that motivated her activism.

Internet activity was taken for granted until access was "shaped" by the Internet provider for exceeding download quotas and "changed to dialup speeds". At these times, "surfing the net" became "impossible" and "irritating". AussieWoman felt angry and abandoned by the Australian Government because living rurally she is not able to access reliable broadband at a reasonable cost [92]. This is an example of Latukefu's (2006:43) "urban-rural technological divide" referred to in the introduction to this thesis. Computer crashes were also a problem from time to time. Not having access to "the world" was a cause for concern for AussieWoman because she would have to wait for family, friends, or neighbours to help her. Lack of technical expertise has been found by many researchers to be the reason why many seniors choose not to go online (Bell et al. 2013; Bloch and Bruce 2011; Van House 2015).

While I was visiting, I encouraged AussieWoman to do her "daily clicks" and sat with her while she worked. She talked out loud to herself while she visited each page [93]. The sound of her mouse clicks seemed frantic and relentless. Some of the graphic images appalled me and I felt my heart strings being tugged. I could immediately understand why it is so easy to be drawn into online activism, especially when you feel strongly about each cause and believe that what you are doing will help others and animals (Caissie 2006; Harlow and Harp 2012). From the comfort of her chair, AussieWoman

[92] Internet reliability is problematic in remote areas of Australia. In 2015, the Australian Government commenced rolling out a National Broadband Network to bring fast broadband connections to most homes throughout Australia (Australian Government 2016a). Essential to AussieWoman's ability to "stay connected" was having access to friends who could help with computers and the Internet.
[93] This is very similar to Carrie and Essie and makes me wonder if I do the same! Do you?

felt that she "contributes to society in a meaningful way" and that she was "still useful to society" because she was "giving something back".

Reflections of the self: "who I think I am"

Image 27 AussieWoman with Friend. Photo taken May 2010.

"I hope that my online profiles reflect something of who I think I am" (AussieWoman 2009)

AussieWoman did not chat online, but did have a profile on several other social networking sites. I was curious to know if each profile presented multiple representations of the self as some scholars have suggested (Baym 2010; Goffman 1990). As far as divulging personal information online was concerned, AussieWoman made it clear that she did not offer any "health information" about herself or "personal practices", and her profiles on the various sites that she belonged to were set to "generalised information only". She was also steadfast in not providing any identifying information about her "children or their workplaces". She had an online name that she used in a variety of different ways and had "built up a reputation over the years" using variations of the same username. As I noted earlier in this chapter, AussieWoman identifies with, and "understands herself", through both her online and offline names.

Her main profiles were on Care2, Twitter, Facebook and *The Roost*, and she shared these profiles with me.

Care2's logo is "You Care. We Care2" and focuses on "a community of people who care". Predating Facebook, the site was started in 1998 (care2.com 2017). Social networking sites have been found to play an important role in contemporary activism to mobilise supporters both online and offline (Harlow and Harp 2012). AussieWoman joined Care2 in 2003 and it was the first social networking site that she belonged to. Her username was a combination of her online and offline names and she used the image of a butterfly for her profile. She shared her birth date but not the year of her birth and had uploaded photos of her garden. She was a member of 46 groups but claimed not to participate in any of them due to lack of "time" and, for this site, she considered herself to be a "casual activist". Care2 was the site where most of the petitions come from that she signed and it was also the site where most of the information regarding "daily clicks" came from. She had 176 friends, all of whom shared her passion for being an "activist". She placed emphasis on Care2 being a site where activism was the primary reason for having a profile on the site.

Twitter was "the place" where she was the "least guarded" and would "on occasion give personal information" such as "having one of those days, not feeling up to daily clicks today"; however, for AussieWoman generally Twitter was a tool for "getting the message or the URL of a cause out to the wider population". Her Twitter username was an online name only, but was a variant of all her other names. She used the generic Twitter page with no other decorations or visibly identifying personal information such as her age. She explained her Twitter account thus:

> I have 169 followers and 200 that I follow. Some are activists, some are just plain funny, I do tweet some of the petitions that I sign hoping to get a few more signatures. (AussieWoman 2010)

She did not consider Twitter to be a platform for making new friends: "Twitter has a bit of everything. I do not, or haven't yet, sent personal messages to anyone on Twitter although the ability is there." Instead, it was a source for news and a tool to "spread the word as much as possible" and this was achieved successfully by circulating petitions via the Internet.

On Facebook, AussieWoman used a combination of her real name and her online name and her homepage was decorated with a few graphics and some photographs of her cat. Her Facebook page was surprisingly scant on information about her (other than the activity of posted links), and there was no visible information regarding her age. Unlike the participants in Van House's (2015) study, whose friendship links on Facebook comprised predominantly of family and friends, AussieWoman had over six hundred "friends" on Facebook. The majority of these were activists, although family members and other friends were amongst them.[94] These friends had been gathered from sites where the interest for activism was shared; sites such as Care2.

The interaction tool on Facebook that AussieWoman used the most was the "poking" feature. She explained that clicking on 'poke' was a "way of saying I know you are there" or as a prompt to ask if someone was online. Van House (2015:10) refers to this kind of interaction on Facebook as "lightweight contact" (not intense or obligatory), although this does not necessarily mean a lightweight relationship. This seems not too dissimilar to the way in which graphics were used on *The Roost* to announce and reinforce presence online (see chapter 3). She used her Facebook homepage to create links to share the various causes she was interested in thus creating a "huge network of like-minded people", although she quickly pointed out that she did not interact with everyone on a personal basis due to time restraints.[95] Boyd (2006:4) referred to these as "gateway friends" (discussed in chapter 2). For Aussiewoman, Facebook was

[94] In 2016, AussieWoman informed me that she now had over one thousand friends on Facebook.
[95] Gifting of time is discussed in chapter 4.

considered an effective tool for disseminating information, rather than an environment for sociability.

The Roost was the only social networking site that AussieWoman belonged to that was friendship-based, and her friends there had all been sourced from within *The Roost*. She considered it to be quite different from the other sites that she belonged to where activism, rather than friendship, was her primary activity. She claimed to have more information about herself on *The Roost* compared with anywhere else, and my observations of her various profiles online showed this to be true. The reason for this she explained, was that it was a "social group" and she "likes" the people. On *The Roost* there was no information about her birthday, but her age was given as 63. She insisted that she provided her age because it was "a site for over 50s", and this meant "being with similar aged people". All the participants in this study preferred being with similarly aged people online (see chapter 4 on friendship). This is very different to Van House's (2015) study of older users of Facebook, where cross-generational relationships were valued as a useful way to connect with younger people (family members and their friends). AussieWoman's various profiles expressed the importance that she placed on the world in which lives and cares about, even though the emphasis for having each profile varied.

The internal youthful self

As we age, it is common to experience the embodied inner self as younger than our chronological physical age. Feeling younger than chronological age was a common theme expressed on *The Roost* by most members (myself included). Many scholars have examined this aspect of ageing (Biggs 2005; Clarke 2001; Featherstone and Hepworth 1991; Featherstone and Wernick 1995; Furman 1997; Hazan 1994; Kaufman 1986; Oakley 2007; Sokolovsky 2009). In 1987 Scheper-Hughes and Lock (1987) advocated for an examination of three ways in which to view bodily forms—the body-

self, the social body, and the body politic—to argue for the study of emotions in anthropology as an area of inquiry. They noted that the biological fallacy and related assumptions of the body are linked to the Cartesian dualism that separates mind from body, spirit from matter, and real from unreal within Western thought and research (1987:6).

Old age continues to be constructed in population ageing discourse using demographics devoid of the social body or the lived experience of ageing to inform policies and social interventions (body politic) that impact on older people's lives (Crampton 2013). I asked AussieWoman how old she felt (she was 63 at the time). Her immediate response was that she felt "somewhere between the ages of 35 and 40" and, while laughing, she disclaimed this by saying that "looking in the mirror confirms [her] actual age" but she added, "inside myself I feel younger". This was not an experience unique to AussieWoman. Without exception, every one of my participants felt considerably younger than their chronological age.

Kaufman (1986:166) has shown that later in life older people rarely see themselves as old; rather, the inner sense of self is an ageless continuity of identity. In a small study of women 61 to 92 years of age in Canada, Clarke (2001:458-60) found there were five ways that women in her group expressed the tension between the body and the self. She named them thus: 1) "The youthful older adult", which emphasises discrepancies between body and identity in terms of chronological age and the age that is felt, to differentiate themselves from their appearance, chronological age, and the ability of the physical body. In this way, the women were able to distance themselves from stereotypes of older people, as well as the physical realities of growing old; 2) "The masked older adults" who experience how they look on the outside, which belies their true identity from within. For these women, ageing is perceived as being forcefully assigned that is, therefore, undesirable and uncontrollable. The true self becomes less visible in the aged shell of the body; 3) "The entrapped older adult" perceived their ageing body as a prison constraining the youthful self. The imprisoned self is evident

during times of illness when physical limitations of the body manifest themselves so that chronological age becomes more salient; 4) "The fighters" were women who resisted the social pressure of having to appear younger (makeup, hair dye, toned body) to avoid a patronising, discriminatory youth oriented society. They desired not to feel the need to do this to remain visible and socially valued; and 5) "The realist" experiences of the self on the inside are congruent with their chronological age on the outside. These women were pragmatic about the physical realities of ageing. I found these categories interesting and my participants (including the men) experienced the self as combinations of these.

More importantly, Clarke (2001:60) found that all the women experienced "the inside self" as the "source and interpreter of meaning of lived reality".[96] The tensions between the body and expressions of the self are not entirely absent online. Graphics are used to represent the physical body (usually with humour), but the interactions we share can only come from expressing the internal self. Featherstone and Wernick (1995:7) have argued that the ageing body is inadequate to represent the inner self. I agree. The source of the way we think and feel, how we express ourselves to others, comes from within; the internal ageless self to be shared. Online the younger, inner self emerges while the physical shell, as a distraction, becomes significantly less important.

AussieWoman explained that her six hundred friends on Facebook were "just people who do not have an age" and that she was "just another person too". She went on to say, "we can't see the physical...can't judge on age or anything you write...words are ageless, text is ageless ... online we are ageless and I like that". She stated that she preferred not to put her age on some sites because "people will judge you by your age". AussieWoman's experience of being judged by her age are not entirely unfounded.

Williams and Nussbaum (2012:83) point to recurring findings that younger adults base their conversations with older people on stereotypic assumptions concerning elder's

[96] It would be interesting to do a similar study with older men.

failing physical and cognitive capabilities. AussieWoman's experience of younger people online was that "older people are not listened to because of their age". She also found that older people were judged by their use of technology and there were assumptions in some online communities she belonged to that "older people don't know about technology or using computers". For these reasons, she disguises her age on those sites and this allows her internal, youthful self to become visible online effectively negating the possibility of stereotypical cultural assumptions about her age. Amongst her peers on *The Roost* these problems are not evident where acceptance of age and ageing are the cultural norm.

Discussing the concept of managing the performance of multiple selves, Goffman (1990:76) suggested that "an individual accentuates certain matters and conceals others". Although she was careful with information she puts "out there", AussieWoman said she hoped her various profiles showed people something of "who I am". Even though AussieWoman kept parts of herself hidden from her online profiles, she is still able to reveal who she is by sharing her youthful self with others.

Miller (2013) was correct to argue for recognising that there is no clear break of the self in the mix of communication and identity platforms used on and offline. More and more researchers are recognising that the ways we use technology are embedded in our everyday lives and world views. Being socially connected online adds meaning to AussieWoman's life. The facts that she lives on a rural property thirty kilometres from the nearest town, rarely has visitors, and does not have a car, means that she is physically isolated and socially cut-off from her broader community. For AussieWoman, being socially connected online bridges the gap between social isolation and being a valued member of society. As with all the other participants I met, she brings her offline social word to the online context and these converge into lived experiences expressed as meaningful social interactions.

Communicating the youthful self

AussieWoman pointed out something significant to those who age; she said, "inside myself I feel younger". What *is* evidenced online in profiles and in comments, is the self-aware internal self of older people sharing themselves without the distractions of the physical ageing body. Online there is no evidence of slowed thinking (all of my participants), arthritic hands on keyboards (AussieWoman, Carrie, Essie), tremors in the hand controlling the mouse and curser (Carrie, HamradioNT), the walking frame (NTLady) or walking stick (Carrie), and vision problems (all) to name but a few of the conditions that one might expect as we age. On the contrary, every single day I was online, I was met with a vibrancy that belied these problems. AussieWoman was twenty years younger than Carrie (see prologue); online this difference in age was not noticeable, yet face-to-face the differences (other than gender) were striking.

Image 28 Home visit with Carrie. Photo taken November, 2010.

"I no longer feel the need to portray myself as anything other than the "ye olde fogey" that I am!"

Carrie was at the end stage of his life when I met him, while AussieWoman was still able to engage with her garden, yoga, and other activities. Face-to-face, evidence of the ageing, physical-self manifests itself, and to some degree becomes a distraction from the vitality of the inner self that is accentuated through text and images.

Predominant constructions of ageing by policymakers and other social intervention discourses (Crampton 2013) associate ageing with decline and dependency (De Schutter and Vanden Abeele 2015). These discourses ignore the experience of ageing from the perspective of those who are ageing. Empirical scholarship of ageing (Cohen 1994b; Coleman, Ivani-Chalian, and Robinson 2015; Danely 2016; Hazan 1994; Kaufman 1986; Lamb 2000; Myerhoff 1979; Sokolovsky 2009) has shown that the experience of growing old to be much more varied and complex than decline and dependency.

Every day I engaged with the internal, youthful inner selves of all of my participants as well as other members of *The Roost* community. Kaufman (1986:19) calls this "the expression of the ageless self" in which the self is given meaning that integrates diverse experiences for understanding and being in the present. Kaufman (1986:186) showed that the stories of older people are formed as part of the process of continually coming to terms with their heritage. She goes on to say:

> In old age people make new assessments of themselves as they create an integrated identity, account for the paths they have travelled, and form meaning for the rest of their lives.

Expressing the self online allows for the externalisation of the inner self—this is me—in stories shared online with others. Tafarodi, et al (2014:97) have shown that "personal identity involved continuity of the inner or private self—the intimately familiar *me*—across time and place" (emphasis in original). Identity continuity is important and significant to older people (Coleman, Ivani-Chalian, and Robinson 2015; Kaufman 1986), and online Kendall (2002) has shown that continuity of identity is linked to updating profiles with other information (photos, blogs, forum comments) shared

online. For older people, social media affords the opportunity for the internal youthful self to emerge thereby circumventing stereotypical social and cultural assumptions related to ageing and older people. It also provides a platform on which to share experiences of the self with others, including strangers, as a continuity of self across time and space, effectively liberating the internal self via communication online.

Conclusion

Notions of the self have been shown to have multiple meanings, yet for my participants there was only one self and that self was "me". In this chapter I have contributed to anthropological understandings of the self from the perspective of older people using social media to argue that online representations of the self converge with understandings of the self to reveal the inner youthful self during communications online. Even though the ageing process is accepted, and noted with humour, it is not considered to be the sole defining feature of the person, rather it is the internalised youthful self that emerges free from the constraints of an ageing external body that is celebrated and shared. This does not mean that the internal self is not available offline; it is and was during home visits, albeit a little slower and with the physical distractions that ageing does bring.

For this older group, online and offline experiences are not contrasted with each other, rather they converge as experiences of the self that are considered meaningful and real. Remarkably, narrations of the self online were detailed, honest and genuinely self-aware pieces of identity inextricably woven from the everyday self and not separated from understandings of who each participant considered themselves to be. Who can have a better understanding of one's self than one's self? The ability to be able to share the self with strangers in this way is why communicating online is so rewarding in meaningful ways.

In a broader understanding of the ways in which social networking sites facilitate connections for older people, there is no doubt that technology mediates interactions with others that are significant to the well-being and life satisfaction for this group. Older Australians and their international friends on *The Roost* did not perceive any significant binary difference between their online and offline selves, and not surprisingly as at first thought, they insist on providing enough information to converge their online with offline social worlds as one. There is just one self that is expressed in a variety of different contexts; the internal embodied self. How can it be any other way? After all, their lived experiences shape and form who they think they are.

8

Conclusions

Contrary to persisting perceptions, socially connecting online is not limited to younger members of society, older people are socially connecting too. It is increasingly important that we understand how older people are successfully connecting online and how they integrate those experiences into their everyday lives. The experiences of older people present a valuable alternative perspective to dominant constructions of ageing within the literature by policymakers and other social intervention discourses that associate ageing with decline and dependency.

The Roost is an online community of approximately 12,000 older people from around the world; the majority (90%) of whom identify as being over the age of 60. In 2009, I arrived on *The Roost* as a new member; a stranger amongst strangers. My aim was to explore the relationship between online social practices and offline sociality and what this means to older people in a world that depends on all forms of computer mediated communication. Over fourteen months I interacted with members every day; this space on the net became a place in which I laughed a lot and learned a lot, but more importantly I formed relationships with strangers who became friends.

In 2010, sitting at the bus stop in Hobart with Carrie and Nickie, Carrie asked what I would be writing about in my thesis. I answered him by saying that I would do my best to critically reflect on the experiences of a group of older Australians socially connected in a technological world. This thesis achieves this and more by contributing ethnographic perspectives on the experiences of older people to enhance the growing body of anthropological literature on ageing.

This thesis has argued that the experience of growing old is much more varied and complex than decline and dependency. By connecting the experience of older people's daily lives within the characteristics of their social settings (online as well as offline), a rich social context manifests itself that is separate from public health policies, popular cultural representations of ageing, and grievances related to the perceived burden of the ageing population in western societies. Embodied in every aged and ageing individual resides a strong connection to their youthful internal self that under certain circumstances is creatively shared with others to form meaningful relationships with strangers.

It is true that as we age our pool of friends diminishes over time. Technology, in particular social media, provides new pathways for older people to establish new friends. Even though these friends are sourced from strangers online it does not detract from the meaningfulness of those relationships; on the contrary, these relationships are often considered to be more meaningful than any other friendships. The experiences of friendships expressed in this thesis confirm that friendships formed with strangers online are considered to be important and valued connections that add sociability and social inclusion to members' everyday lives.

Age is an important entry point to belonging for members of this community. Jerrome (1992) showed that for older people simply belonging to a group is a form of meaningful social interaction. The act of joining a social networking site that is specifically created for the "older crowd" initiates, in the first instance, a sense of belonging and this forms the social identity of the group as one comprised of aged-related peers. There is an explicit understanding amongst members that everyone in the community is "mature"; age and ageing are life trajectories that everyone shares, and this informs the identity of the community.

Added to the initial sense of joining a group in which one belongs, the ritual of welcoming new members confirms that the site is indeed a fun place to belong where

people care about each other and friends can be found. The welcome messages are a crucial rite of passage that transforms a new member from being an outsider to an incorporated member belonging to a community where the door is always open and hospitality thrives. Welcoming shapes a culture of caring and social inclusion between members and the community.

Without the guidance of the welcoming ambassadors, new members are cast adrift to learn the cultural practices of the community without the support of the members who have cultural competence. The consequences when new members are not properly initiated into the community are dire; trust is threatened and fails to emerge between members, which allows distrust to flourish. Withdrawal of identity cues by strangers fosters an environment of resentment, frustration, distrust, and fear of threat to the cultural norms of the community.

There are contexts online in which trust can be nurtured and will thrive, and others where trust is constrained. Pettit (2004) has argued that it is not possible to form trust online. This thesis argues that under certain circumstances trust can emerge between strangers online. For older people to successfully connect with strangers, it is critical to provide a nurtured, caring, and safe environment. On *The Roost* the administrators are attentive and proactive in addressing problems of safety as well as acting on members' concerns. By engaging with their community promptly when problems occur, a trusting environment in which to participate with others is created. A trusting environment encouraged collaboration between the administrators and members, as well as between members to provide a sense of security. This is an important social practice that allows trust to emerge. Nevertheless, when the shared norms and behaviours of the community were significantly disrupted, trust failed to emerge. All the same, this group had a shared interest in resolving difficulties and had developed a strong social system that promoted harmony and contained conflicts that revealed cooperation as a cultural value of the community.

Older people bring their morals and values to the online context and rely on their own life experiences to negotiate the formation of relationships. Goodwill extended beyond offline relationships to include online relationships with strangers as a gesture of trust evidenced by member's generosity to add strangers as friends when requested. Although friends are publicly visible, the character of those relationships remained closed and private. Not all friends are publicly listed as a friend; many friendships are formed during social interactions with the broader membership, for example in forums, groups, blogs, and while playing games. These relationships add enjoyment to the social interactions members shared amongst each other as members of an age-peer community.

A variety of images are used on the site with a particular emphasis on animated graphics. Use of images begins by bringing one's self to life online with a profile image, which is directly linked to sharing self-aware cues of identity with strangers via a system of visible accessibility. Image use as a characteristic of social interaction was considered by members to be fun to create, curate, design and share in meaningful ways with each other. The use of graphics to celebrate calendar events from around the world promotes cultural diversity and social inclusion of the group. Further, reciprocating graphics is a social mechanism of regard that allows friendships to emerge but also sustains these friendships over time.

Images were symbols of meaning (friendship, ageing, caring, diversity) that shaped a culture of inclusiveness on *The Roost*. They were also an essential component for the meaningful social interactions shared with each other online that confirmed vitality of presence when juxtaposed with presence online where neglect and lack of vitality exists in the memorialised homepages of the deceased. In a group where unexpected serious health issues, such as heart attacks, are considered an everyday possibility, absence of vitality of presence was noted by members as a concern in guestbook entries of missing friends.

Older people bring their offline social practices to the online context. There was an expectation amongst members, that manners are an already acquired skill to be utilised with each other in the online context. This was evidenced in the social etiquette of reciprocating font size. Although formatting text is a tool of the site used to express personality and creativeness, it was also used extensively to overcome a design fault of the website in which the default font size was too small to be of practical use for older people. All members increased the font size when communicating in text to enhance readability. Significantly, increased font size extended beyond issues related to readability, increased font size was considered by members as an etiquette of good manners to be reciprocated confirming a culture of consideration for others. Further, learning and support amongst peers was understood to be a significant contributor to the enjoyment of the site.

Positive social capital for members of *The Roost* was extraordinarily high for individuals, the group, and for society. I agree with current thinking by social capitalist theorists (Erickson 2011; Goode 2011; Warburton and McLaughlin 2007) in that friendships formed on *The Roost* reduce loneliness and social isolation, increase emotional and social support, provide social ties that are meaningful, and improves the quality of life for older people. However, social capital theory did not explain how older people formed friendships with strangers, which is a key contribution of this thesis.

As I have noted elsewhere, behind every piece of text and every graphic posted on *The Roost* is a complex thinking and feeling mature person who resides in a matrix of culturally constituted meanings. The ways in which we communicate with each other has significantly changed. My time spent face to face with participants was extraordinarily valuable to the outcomes of this thesis. It is unfortunate that this component of the research was limited by lack of funding. More research that combines online and offline sociality of older people in Australia and their international friends is needed to continue building anthropological understandings of ageing in Australia. Further, the benefits of peer-to-peer learning of technology, within the online context of

a strong community of friendship and trust, cannot be underestimated. It is important to continue finding pathways for older people to embrace technology in ways that are meaningful to them. More research in this area will be advantageous to older people's enjoyment and use of social media.

I now return to the opening quote to this thesis. In 1997, discussing a global approach to the cultural context of ageing, Jay Sokolovsky proposed the following point as a realistic consideration of ageing that transcends cultural boundaries:

> Social change does not automatically reduce quality of life of the elderly…under certain conditions, massive societal change can have a positive impact on the lives of the aged. (Sokolovsky 1997:xxv)

Time has not diminished this point; it remains relevant today as the pathways for socially connecting with each other are being transformed by technology. There is no doubt that the Internet has created massive societal change. For some older people these changes have been problematic but for members of *The Roost* access to a community of peers on the Internet has had a positive impact on their social lives. Forming friendships, sharing life stories, being creative, a sense of belonging, having fun, and the ability to express themselves add significant value to older people's lives.

Notions of the self have been shown to have multiple meanings, yet for this group of older people there was only one self and that self was inextricably understood as "me". Narrations of "me" are self-aware identity cues woven from a deep understanding of the lived experiences that shape and form who we think we are. Technology affords older people the opportunity to express the self in a variety of contexts without the distractions of the ageing physical self, and this allows for the emergence of the youthful, unencumbered self—the inside out of the ageing self—that is revealed and shared with others. The ability to be able to share the self with strangers in this way is why communicating online for older people is so rewarding, and as real as sitting in the

same room with friends. After all, as NTLady said, "This is me. This is who I think I am". Indeed NTLady. This is who I think you are too.

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