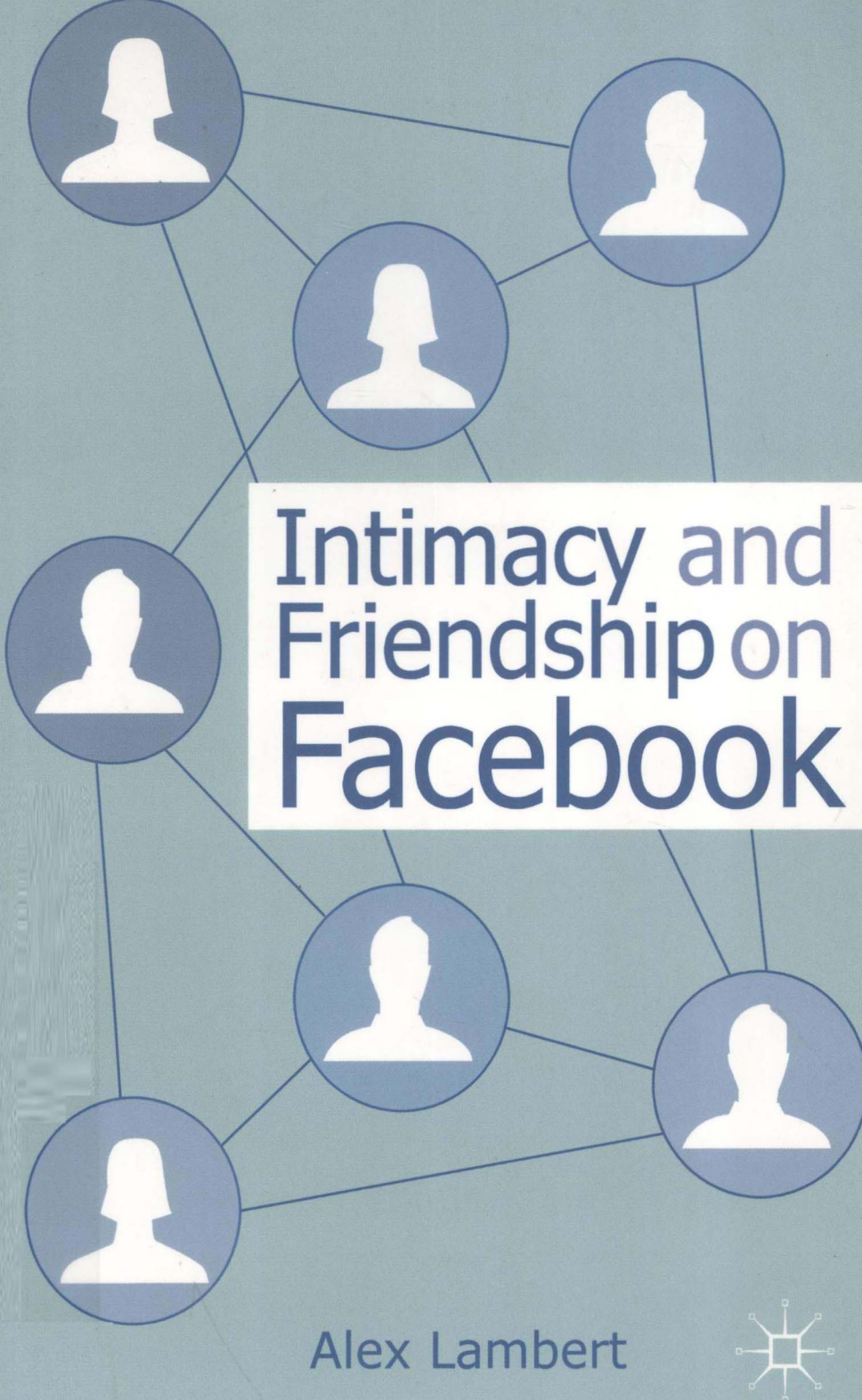

Intimacy and Friendship on Facebook

Alex Lambert

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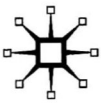

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Introduction

For many people life goes on within a complex media ecology. Within this ecology *social media* have become a dominant genus and Facebook the dominant species. Facebook's massive population, third to India and China, makes it a significant global phenomenon with deep-reaching social and cultural effects. Consequently, Facebook has fallen under the microscope of social scientists from numerous disciplines and generated a rich body of political, economic, legal, psychological, sociological, anthropological and technological insights. These construct Facebook in different ways, and this suggests that Facebook is not one 'thing'. Rather, it is an assemblage of protocols, software, interfaces, media, content, contracts, marketing, public relations, surveillance systems, bureaucracies, shareholders, users and global and local cultures – the list goes on. I am concerned with one 'field' within this arabesque: Facebook's influence on everyday social relationships and identities. Facebook is having a significant effect on these phenomena which, I argue, can be theorised in terms of *intimacy*.

I began this project as a grounded ethnographic study of the influence of Facebook on everyday life. Soon, intimacy emerged as the central concept which explained the participants in my study. Facebook offers amazing opportunities to enrich interpersonal life and generate intimacy. However, Facebook also makes intimacy problematic, and this determines much about how my participants use it. These benefits and problems spring from Facebook's peculiar publicity. When people become Facebook 'friends' they grant a kind of public access to each other's personal profiles (called 'timelines'). That is, when people create personal Facebook networks, they construct publics out of social connections. Much has been said regarding this process, though much has been missed with regard to how it influences intimacy. Publicity

provides the opportunity to sustain interpersonal connections in a rewarding fashion, in particular through a kind of gregarious group intimacy. Publicity allows zones of gregarious intimacy to expand unpredictably in playful and affectionate ways.

However, publicity also makes it difficult to control intimate information. Disclosures circulate beyond their intended audiences, disclosures that are free to act on the minds of unknown others. Indeed, some of these unknowns will have been 'friended' (*verb*) because of a nascent politics of intimacy associated with the popularisation of Facebook. When intimate information is circulating in this way, participants experience this as a kind of loss of self. The intimate self is 'doubled', and the unreachable, undetectable agency of this double causes insecurity. Who knows what the intimate self is saying, doing, becoming? At the same time, my participants experience various problems to do with Facebook's mediated nature. In order for a person to participate in its intimate spaces, Facebook demands that the self be constantly updated. A surplus of information builds up which exceeds the attentive capabilities of every user. Consequently, the attention of others and the resulting possibility of interpersonal acknowledgment becomes scarcer. This further animates the desire for dependable, regular acknowledgment and interaction. Furthermore, the mediated gaze of one's Facebook friends, invisible but potentially 'there', encourages the production of intimacies. But while this impels the production of subjectivity it can also lead to the user feeling objectified. This is further enhanced by the sense of alienated connection which can sometimes occur when witnessing the intimacies of Facebook 'friends' who, nonetheless, are not friends at all. All this – the compulsion to update, self-objectification, alienation through connection – is felt as intensely frustrating, and this hides a more subtle form of insecurity.

I understand these problems as disruptions in the nature of subjectivity, objectivity, space and time. Here, I find Martin Buber's distinction between 'I–thou' and 'I–it' relationships highly useful. The former describes a transcendent sense of connectedness, while the latter describes the recognition of worldly objects, which occurs when standing apart from them. The former describes relation, while the latter describes separation. In regard to human relations, the 'I–thou' is achieved when two people are within a dialogical space – a co-present space in which each perceives the other's intentional conscious presence directed at himself or herself. Intimate spaces have this nature because intimacy involves seeing and treating another as a subject rather than as an object. Facebook is very different from the kind of

co-present social spaces which concerned Buber nearly a century ago. Facebook offers the opportunity for a different kind of dialogical space, for a different kind of intimacy. Yet this spatiality is precarious. It can sometimes become inverted such that participants see others and themselves as objects rather than subjects. Interpersonal intimacy is deferred. In order to understand this, intimacy must become a broad, flexible concept, capable of understanding 'I–it' relations. We must understand the transmutation of intimacies from affectionate self-disclosures into different objects, such as media, texts, images and interfaces.

Both the problems and solutions I discuss are elements of a socio-cultural state of affairs, which I term 'intensive intimacy'. Problems are experienced in an intense fashion. They involve intense emotions such as frustration, nausea and insecurity. Concurrently, the solutions to these problems involve intensive social labour. That is, the intensive surveillance and organisation – the *bureaucratisation* – of social ties and the intensive management of personal information. Interestingly, this intensive quality has become a normalised part of everyday life. It is often *not* a subject of self-reflective thought. This is partly because intensive intimacy is not new and did not begin with Facebook. Rather, it is the result of changes in the nature of complex social relations and forms of technological mediation which arguably have been occurring since the onset of Industrial Modernity. Mobility and photography, for instance, are both tied up with intensive intimacy, and neither began with Facebook. However, Facebook fixes the different characters met throughout a mobile lifespan in an online public space and, hence, demands that they be considered, organised, accepted, rejected, blocked, tagged, edited and so forth. It allows photographic self-portraits to reawaken intimacies, but turns photographs into complex objects which must be continually negotiated. Hence, Facebook further amplifies these deeply structured processes which I associate with intensive intimacy.

Yes, Facebook creates social and self-expressive opportunities which previously did not exist. However, I argue against the idea that Facebook marks a radical paradigm shift in the way we construct our identities and interpersonal relationships. Certain commentators describe such a shift in relation to privacy and intimacy. It is said that users are no longer concerned with their own privacy, that we live in a new age defined by complicit sharing without negative consequences. This position, held by people in power such as Facebook's CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, attempts to legitimate many of the functional innovations that have subverted user privacy. Another position holds that people purposefully

expose their private, intimate lives to public audiences. Here, intimacy is no longer framed in terms of interpersonal relationships. Intimacy has supposedly transformed from a 'relational' to an 'instrumental' aspect of human association, into a performative tool for garnering attention and esteem and, hence, narcissistic gratification. Facebook and like social network services (SNSs) are thus thought to be emblematic of a broader shift toward a 'culture of narcissism' in which meaningful relationships cease to significantly motivate people. In this sense people become objects, 'its' rather than 'thous'.

Two paradigms are clear: On the one hand, private, dyadic intimacy which is characteristically 'other-concerned'; on the other, public, narcissistic intimacy which is essentially 'self-concerned'. The 'I–thou' and the 'I–it'. However, intensive intimacy reveals, I argue, the struggle between these two paradigms rather than the dominance of one over the other. Yes, people desire a form of public intimacy. However, this remains *interpersonal*. Moreover, people still desire privacy, yet they must grapple with a variety of socio-technical contingencies which make privacy, intimacy, friendship and identity problematic. In a way, intensive intimacy is a framework which helps the understanding of these contingencies, whereupon 'thou' and 'it' conflict, diverge, overlap and enfold one another.

In Chapters 1 and 2 I explore existing literature relevant to the task at hand. Chapter 1 looks at literature which deals with aspects of interpersonal intimacy on SNSs, specifically relationships and self-disclosures. Given that these play out publicly, I turn to cultural criticisms of public intimacy, probing their values and limitations.

SNS research has heavily focused on privacy, the performance of identity, and social capital. Certainly these are very useful concepts, although the relationship between them is often underexplored. I synthesise these frameworks so as to understand intimacy on Facebook. In Chapter 2 I cover privacy, performance and social capital literature, and argue that a more fine-grained, qualitative understanding of each is required. In this vein, I ask: How can we understand intimacy problems in terms of privacy problems? To answer this, privacy cannot be thought of generically. Specific risks and contexts, as well as appropriate theories, must be identified. I also ask: How is intimacy performed on Facebook? In response, I go beyond Goffmanian theories of performance. Facebook asks us to probe the mediated, textual nature of performances. Finally, social capital involves relying on others for intimacy, but how does Facebook influence this? There is more to social capital than its effects, though SNS literature has heavily focused on one such effect:

elevated self-esteem. Social capital also involves exchanging social resources. How can these resources be conceptualised in terms of intimacy? How does this moment of exchange play out on Facebook?

In Chapter 3 I detail my methodology. Research into SNSs is dominated by deductive methodologies. Although some ethnography has been produced, there remains a need for fine-grained, qualitative research. Also, deductive approaches have produced a range of useful but disparate concepts. There remains a need for conceptual *relations*, for theory. I utilise ethnographic techniques to gather data and employ grounded theory techniques to develop a conceptual, rather than descriptive, understanding of this data. My hope is to produce a theoretical account and a collection of new concepts which others will find interesting and useful in their own studies.

In Chapter 4 I discuss my participants' core motivation for using Facebook: the 'performance of connection'. This constitutes what researchers employing the grounded theory method call a 'basic social process'. This process occurs in all aspects of social life, although it takes on novel properties and dimensions on Facebook. On the one hand, it describes the desire for sociality in and for itself and, on the other, the performance of this sociality toward a broad public such that a social connection is recognised. In seeking this recognition, participants take their relationships as subjects of self-conscious thought and labour and in this way sustain the interpersonal intimacy therein. The ultimate performance of connection achieves a playful, gregarious interaction. The performance of connection works through claims on social capital, which generates social spaces. These spaces have a private, intimate nature which aids in self-conscious identification and heightens the pleasure of belonging.

In Chapter 5 I describe how the performance of connection takes on unique properties in relation to distant ties. Facebook allows distant and estranged ties to be reclaimed and sustained through online interactions. Participants utilise Facebook to overcome the loss of distant ties, and this infuses their online encounters with these ties with a specific kind of intimacy. However, not every distant tie is reclaimed and sustained. Many remain weak ties, floating in the grey area of one's Facebook network. On the one hand, this potentiates unexpected, surprising moments of sociality. On the other, it sometimes engenders conflict between those who have radically changed their opinions, desires, and feelings toward one another.

In Chapter 6 I describe the social surveillance practices my participants engage in. People use Facebook to gather information on their

connections. Often this information informs future interactions. However, Facebook offers the opportunity to connect with people without performing these connections. Between these two poles exist a gamut of 'surveillance contexts' which depend on who is being watched, why they are being watched, and the socio-technical context which frames the moment of watching. Surveillance can often be habitual; however, it becomes self-conscious when participants engage in what they term 'spying', the furtive observation of information which would be impossible or inappropriate to gather in other forums. Spying points to an interesting point of tension in the evolving fabric of intensive intimacy. Participants recognise that it is increasingly normative, yet they also experience a kind of moral self-consciousness when spying on others. I conceptualise the various aspects of this moral dilemma in terms of voyeurism. This voyeurism is unique and is indicative of a process I term 'prosthetic intimacy', the constitution of self through the technologically mediated integration of someone else's intimacies. In this chapter I also explore the way in which Facebook allows information to move into the realm of 'first-hand judgement' and, hence, gives it an objective quality.

Chapter 7 delves into the problems my participants experience with regard to fulfilling their main goal, the performance of connection. Participants accumulate a heterogeneous amalgam of social ties on Facebook with differing gradations of intimacy. While theorists have looked at how this creates problems by compromising one's ability to keep social contexts separate from one another, I explore how it creates problems for intimacy by undermining regular performances of connection, by subverting dialogical spaces.

In Chapter 8 I conceptualise, in terms of the 'negotiation of intimacy', the novel solutions my participants invent for these problems. On the one hand, this involves the control of information flows and the organisation of social connections. This reins in, shelters, protects and silences intimacy. On the other hand, this involves mobilising specific kinds of intimacy so as to generate specific kinds of social interactions. The mobilisation of intimacy is particularly interesting, as it involves making claims on various 'kinds' of social capital. The accumulation of these 'capitals' over time can lead to regular performances of connection. The most important of these is 'intimacy capital', the careful investment of which will lead to rewarding performances of connection. However, if intimacy capital is not properly invested, and intimacy is badly negotiated, people can alienate audiences and, hence, stifle the performance of connection. Here, I observe nascent

norms with regard to what is acceptable public information and what is considered *too intimate*: disclosures which nauseate, alienate, 'miss the mark' and bore. Overall, participants come to actualise a rewarding form of public intimacy which is thoroughly interpersonal: gregarious playfulness. This playfulness is both a desired outcome in and of itself and is the result of a series of reflexive experiences with the pitfalls of public intimacy.

In the conclusion I reflect on how inquiries into 'intensive intimacy', on Facebook and in other domains, may continue. The research presented in this book is by no means conclusive but, rather, is an inductive journey which must be taken up in different fields and applied to varying cultural groups. As our lives are becoming further entangled with social media such as Facebook, it is important to recognise how intensive processes are both enhancing our interpersonal experiences and jeopardising them. Will we be able to keep up with the pace of change? Will we be able to develop the emotional and social competencies needed? What factors determine such competencies? How are they learnt? How are they managed from within and without? How are they made objects of value, not only for ourselves, but for the businesses which subtly design the digital architectures of our social lives? Hopefully, these questions stimulate further scholarship in a burgeoning and baffling world.

1
Discovering Intimacy on Facebook

Positioning Facebook

Fundamentally, SNSs are online worlds which facilitate the creation of personal profiles capable of connecting people with other users (Lenhart & Madden 2007a; boyd & Ellison 2008). Profiles often afford forms of social interaction and the expression of personal information such as tastes, interests, political views, sexual orientation, and so forth (Stutzman 2006). They also afford the articulation of one's connections, commonly displayed as a 'friends list' (Donath & boyd 2004).

Profiles and connections can range from being 'semi-public within a bounded system' (boyd & Ellison 2008: 211), to being public to the entire Internet. SNSs are distinguished partly by these degrees of publicity. For instance, ASmallWorld is a relatively closed service in which people must be invited by users to join and access member profiles. On the other hand, Twitter is open to the Internet proper, and does not prejudice membership. Somewhere in between, Facebook affords varying degrees of self-tailored publicity. People can choose to set their profiles to 'public', thus open to anyone, or restrict them to 'friends only'. They can also customise individual posts such that only specific friends may see them.

According to boyd and Ellison (2008), SNS users connect with people they share a prior relationship with. Various studies confirm this (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield 2006; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe 2007; Zhao, Grasmuch, & Martin 2008). Where SNS networks are found to contain weak ties and strangers, these are explained as 'friends-of-friends' who are contacted through mutual friends to reap social capital benefits (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe 2011).

People use Facebook and like SNSs to socialise with their connections (Pempek, Yermolayeva and Calvert 2009), gather information on these

people (Joinson 2008, Rau, Gao and Ding 2008, Burke, Marlow and Lento 2010), increase their self-esteem and popularity (Zhao, Grasmuch, & Martin 2008; Zywica & Danowski 2008; Barker 2009; Ross et al. 2009), express their identities through novel forms of content and association (Zhao, Grasmuch, and Martin 2008, Liu 2008, Pempek, Yermolayeva, and Calvert 2009, Donath and boyd 2004), and entertain themselves through interactive applications such as social games (Rao 2008).

Scholars find that certain SNSs, Facebook in particular, are deeply embedded in everyday life, weaving through online and offline experience (Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe 2011, Debatin, et al. 2009, Tufekci 2008, Dwyer, Hiltz, and Passerini 2007). Facebook has been referred to as a 'pervasive technology', 'deeply ingrained in [peoples'] daily routines' (Debatin et al. 2009: 96). I am particularly concerned with how this rich entanglement influences intimacy.

In this chapter I review literature which either explicitly or implicitly investigates intimacy on Facebook and like SNSs. Modern conceptions of intimacy are firmly routed in relationships which share genuine love, liking, care and commitment (Inness 1992; Prager 1995; Jamieson 1998). As thinkers such as Giddens (1991, 1992) and Illouz (2007) note, the upkeep of healthy intimate relationships has become a central value in the West, vitally entangled with the ideal of personal happiness. These writers, combined with a host of social psychologists (Reis & Shaver 1988; Prager 1995; Parks & Floyd 1996; Laurenceau, Pietromonaco, & Barret 1998), emphasise the importance of self-disclosure in the construction of intimate relationships. Interestingly, 'self-disclosures' and 'relationships' (friendships in particular) constitute key areas of interest for SNS scholars. These are conventionally valued as private phenomena. Intimacy is fostered over time through private interactions in which both parties disclose and validate each other's emotional inner selves (Reis & Shaver 1988). Hence, a chief question is: what happens to these factors when they play out publicly on SNSs? In what follows, I interrogate how SNS scholarship has dealt with friendships, romantic relationships and self-disclosures; then I turn to a broader cultural critique of public intimacy.

Friends and lovers

People utilise SNSs to connect with strong and weak ties. Various studies find the latter number far exceeds the former. For example, Ellison and colleagues (2011) find that American university students possess a mean of 300 Facebook 'friends', but only 25 per cent are considered 'actual

friends'. Similarly, West and colleagues find users from the United Kingdom possess a mean of 200 Facebook 'friends', a mean of 82 'real friends', and a mean of 19 'close friends'. It seems Facebook users express complex gradations of friendship. Moreover, terms such as 'actual' and 'real' bring into question the relationship between friendship and authenticity (boyd 2006). It is important to probe the different benefits these different social ties provide. What benefits accrue from articulating one's strong, intimate friendships online? Ellison and colleagues (2007) understand this phenomenon in terms of social capital. That is, people's broader collection of weak ties offer opportunities to claim on bridging social capital, such as new information and the feeling of being in a broader community. On the other hand, people's relatively stable set of strong ties provides the opportunity for bonding social capital, for emotional support and solidarity. Scholarship elucidates how communication with these strong ties on Facebook has become an everyday aspect of social life (Goggin 2010; Robards 2012) which involves sharing emotional disclosures publicly (Mallan 2009; Sas et al. 2009). This suggests that Facebook has become an important tool for the reproduction of interpersonal bonds and, hence, interpersonal intimacy. However, just what this process involves remains fuzzy. One of the central aims of this book is to offer a more fine-grained, qualitative understanding of how this occurs, and what benefits Facebook offers in this regard.

Much of the research into SNSs and friendship has focused on adolescent groups. Within this field, the relationship between friendship and selfhood is highly significant. For instance, boyd's (2008a) influential ethnography into adolescents on MySpace views SNSs as autonomous spaces where youths can experiment with identity and friendship. SNSs offer a chance to develop experiences of intimacy, public 'face' and authenticity beyond the bounds of parental authority. Like boyd, Livingstone (2008) locates SNS friendships within developmental processes. Livingstone conducts a series of in-depth interviews with adolescent MySpace and Facebook users from the United Kingdom. Younger users cultivate a form of self-presentation on MySpace which Livingstone terms 'identity as display'. This involves a heavy focus on performing visual self-aspects. However, older youths abandon MySpace for Facebook, where they practice 'identity as connection', the performance of self through the signification of friendships. Robards (2012) notices a similar phenomenon while investigating the migration of Australian youths from MySpace to Facebook. Robards's participants reflect on the autobiographical, introspective nature of MySpace, which is considered

'juvenile', and they privilege the social interaction-focused Facebook, which is 'grown up'. The transition from one to the other is considered a ritualised passage into adulthood.

These ideas echo a central motif in the study of intimacy, namely that selfhood is achieved through voluntary, intimate relationships (Bellah et al. 1985; Giddens 1991). A more direct exposition of this will follow shortly.

The allure of SNSs extends beyond socialising with close friends. As mentioned above, people articulate both strong and weak ties online. What value lies in 'friending' people one does not share a close interpersonal relationship with? Based on an ethnography of teenage Friendster users, boyd (2006) suggests a series of reasons for sending and accepting friend requests. Users genuinely want to connect with actual friends, as well as with acquaintances, family, and colleagues. They also connect with others so as to see their profiles and gather social information. They connect to affiliate with popular peers and in turn look popular and 'cool'. They cultivate a list of friends as a performance of identity. Sometimes they are forced to connect due to social pressures and to avoid the awkwardness of saying 'no'. Hence, users do not follow one distinct strategy, and neither are they completely empowered. Rather, they are embedded within a fabric of different social pressures and motivations.

Research into Facebook also reflects these themes. Pempek and colleagues (2009) find American university students mainly use Facebook to 'keep up' with friends. Implicitly, this involves surveying friends, keeping informed as to what they are posting and who they are interacting with. Similarly, Joinson (2008) finds that people use Facebook to both watch and socialise with friends. He emphasises the powerful allure of social surveillance as a means of acquiring information on different ties. Tufekci (2008b) expands on this, finding that SNSs increased the ability to 'keep in touch' with a wide variety of connections. Facebook's own in-house research reveals that users passively survey about 2.5 times more people than they regularly interact with online (Marlow 2009). Collectively, these results suggest that users are motivated to friend weak ties so as to covertly monitor them. Authors suggest that much of this behaviour is driven by social curiosity, especially in regard to discovering how estranged contacts have changed over time (Joinson 2008; Tufekci 2008b; Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert 2009).

Indeed, Facebook is highly valued for its affordance for reclaiming distant and estranged ties. For example, Ellison et al. (Ellison, Steinfield,