

**Technology, time and transition in higher education : two different realities of everyday Facebook use in the first year of university in the UK.**

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# **Technology, time and transition in higher education – two different realities of everyday Facebook use in the first year of university in the UK**

Within the range of websites and apps that are part of first-year undergraduates' digital environments, the social network site Facebook is perhaps the most popular and prominent. As such, the ubiquitous nature of Facebook in the higher education landscape has drawn much attention from scholars. Drawing on data from a longitudinal connective ethnography, this paper uses two ethnographic stories to explore further the realities of social media usage by newly enrolled undergraduate students in a UK university. These ethnographic stories tell two differing tales - one of connection, intent, use and organisation - the other, of disconnection, disengagement and unrealised expectations. Facebook structures students' time at university both through connection and disconnection practices and examples of these are presented under two headings '*I'm always on it*' and '*Being academic*'. First-year student experiences of Higher Education and social media use are not uniform, but nuanced and responsive to their specific ecosocial systems.

## **Keywords**

Ethnography, Facebook, time, timescales, dis-(connection), university, undergraduate, student experience

## Background & Rationale

There has been a link between the social network site Facebook and young undergraduate students since the website's inception by students studying at Harvard University in 2003. This paper presents empirical research exploring this link between Facebook and the use of it by undergraduate students studying in Higher Education at one UK university. At the start of this study in 2009, academic research into Facebook use was nascent but over the last six years it has become a burgeoning area (see Wilson, 2012, for a review of social science Facebook research). In a special issue of *Learning, Media and Technology* published in 2009, Selwyn and Grant (2009) contended that we should ask 'what social software is *actually* being used for in education settings, as well young people's experiences and views of social software both within and beyond the walls of formal education' (p. 83). The observation of the actualities of social software use drove the present paper's research approach - i.e. to look in depth at individual students, their Facebook Profiles and how they used them in everyday life. This research therefore focused on the role Facebook played more broadly in the student experience of university; the changes that go on when students join university; the challenges they face in becoming undergraduate students and the part Facebook plays in this transition.

### *Facebook in the lives of undergraduate students*

Digital technology is now pervasive and ubiquitous in the lives of undergraduate students in the UK. The predominant literature regarding technology in Higher Education (HE) is positive and stresses the potentials for technology to be transformative within the sector (Bradwell, 2009; CLEX, 2009; Ipsos MORI, 2008; JISC, 2009), with a push towards institutional change, integrating social software and the accompanying attributes to learning and teaching. CLEX (2009a) suggest 'young people inhabit the Web 2.0 world with enviable ease' (p.1) and that these technologies enable 'instant communication, collaboration, information creation, participation and sharing' (p.1). There are tensions in viewing these findings in such a positive light. The data from the majority of these reports is survey-based and not longitudinal. Facebook sits within this 'digital environment' of an undergraduate student (Murdock, 2006) and this digital environment is inherent and intrinsic in their everyday life (Beer & Burrows, 2007). Facebook is part of the informal and formal backcloth of the undergraduate digital environment.

The literature on Facebook use and HE covers a range of topics, from the use of Facebook for and to support teaching and learning (CLEX, 2009; Greenhow & Robelia, 2009; Manca & Ranierit, 2013; Mazer et al., 2007), the relationship between staff and student use of the site (Hewitt & Forte, 2006), the impact of Facebook on academic achievement (Kirschner & Karpinski, 2010; Karpinski, 2009; Pasek, 2009) and the social implication of using Facebook at university (Ellison et al, 2007; Madge et al., 2009; Pemepek et al., 2009; Steinfield et al., 2008; Yang & Brown, 2013). The use of Facebook for learning and its educational value has received much attention (see review by Manca & Ranierit, 2013). This debate shifts between the more formal approaches of Facebook as a proxy Learning Management System (LMS) (Wang et al., 2012), to the informal use of the site for collaborative classroom activities (Lampe et al., 2011). Research on student views of Facebook as a learning tool has primarily

found that it is first and foremost used for social purposes, sometimes used for informal learning or student-to-student discussions of academic matters but rarely (if ever) for formal teaching purposes between staff and students involving formal assessment (Madge et al., 2009).

There is now a close relationship between Facebook use and being a student. For example, Kirschner & Karpinski's (2010) findings suggest that 'Facebook is not a separate activity' (p.1241) in the lives of the student participants in their research on the impact of Facebook on academic performance. Their quantitative data suggests there is a detrimental relationship between Facebook use and academic performance, although their qualitative data reports Facebook as having no effect on academic performance. Despite this, the theme of the paper is one of the negative impacts of Facebook on academic performance. Elsewhere, Selwyn's (2009) findings were that Facebook forms a vital part of student life experience and proposed that students' use of Facebook was not cause for alarm and that it was 'business as usual' (p.15), on Facebook. Here, students were found to be discussing similar things on Facebook as they were face-to-face and presenting themselves as students normally do.

As these studies suggest, the intrinsic link between Facebook and being a student is woven into every area of student life and is highly significant in relation to the social side of university. The social role Facebook plays at university is a key element in a range of studies. Madge et al. (2009) found that 55% of respondents made 'virtual' university friends before they started university, and the primary usage of Facebook by students was reported to be for developing social circles and talking about work (as opposed to doing it). West and colleagues' (2009) findings replicate this, showing that Facebook-supported friendships were highly significant during students' time at university. Woodley & Meredith (2012) suggest that Facebook is a medium whereby students in transition can be supported by the university through giving them information and access to networks. Facebook can support students in their social network development, which is important within the early stages of starting university. In this sense, Facebook can perhaps be best understood as a space for social interaction, which is viewed by some commentators as being to the detriment of academic performance, and by others as an integral element of 'becoming' a university student.

Yet while there have been a number of such studies of Facebook and undergraduate students, within these, there are limited longitudinal studies or those that explore at a micro level, in depth, the individual experiences and narratives of students' lives. This is an important, alternative lens through which to view the actualities of student experience of technology. The remainder of this paper will therefore consider this more micro-focused approach.

### ***Theoretical framework - Time and everyday life***

One of the key elements of being a university student is the various encounters with time. In particular, the transitional period of the first academic year of undergraduate study life is full of temporal references - new beginnings, leaving past friends and histories behind and looking forward to the future career and life beyond. University life could therefore be described as a liminal period; a threshold to cross before entering a 'professional life' beyond (Turner, 1967; Carnes, 2004). The transition

period for first-year students is socially constructed as an important 'time' in their lives by parents, friends, the media and educational researchers (Brooks, 2002; Cheeseman, 2010; Preskey, 2013). A student may be moving away from home for the first time, having a chance to experience different norms from their previous experiences. It is a process whereby students come to understand how to use their time, be that in academic life or university social life. They have a great deal more independence and the chance to 'manage' their time and the previous learned 'clock-time' approach can be challenged (Adam, 1995). In the first year transition period, old temporal norms are given a chance to be challenged and changed.

Students find themselves in what appears to be a predominantly social situation, beginning with 'Orientation Weeks', 'Welcome Weeks' and in the UK 'Freshers Weeks' which are designed to induct students into new expectations of them and new ways of working. These everyday social interactions can be described as 'timescales' within an 'ecosocial system' (Lemke, 2000). The first of these two elements – a 'timescale' – ranges from a heartbeat to a conversation, to an education or a relationship. Lemke (2000) asks us to consider how these events add up to 'social life?' and, it follows, 'on how many different timescales is our social life organized?' (p.273). The timescales in an undergraduate's life might span from the time spent writing and sending a text message to a chance meeting in the library, to a study group or the time it takes to prepare an assignment for submission. These timescales can be understood, therefore, to add together create the second of these elements – i.e. the ecosocial system of being an undergraduate student. The notion of a 'human ecosocial system' (p.274) is based on the model of an ecosystem (a coral reef, for example). Here, Lemke proposes that people who are linked by the same communication network may interact far more than those who are spatially closer (their neighbours, for example). He proposes that these social practices are hyperlinked and relational, and that within an ecosocial system such practices are interdependent. This could be observed in the university setting through undergraduates' communications across their university experience; with lecturers, friends, student services, parents and friends from home. Through the present research, therefore, this notion of timescales was applied to Facebook practices and these *Facebook Timescales* underpinned the analysis of the Facebook Profiles of the participants in the study, the details of which follow.

## Methodology and Method

The aim of this study was to explore undergraduates' use of Facebook in their first year of university.

The following questions frame the research presented in this paper:

1. What role does Facebook play in the lives of transitioning students?
2. Can we learn anything new about students' experiences in HE from considering the role of time in students' lives?

My approach in this project was firmly rooted in the constructivist school of thought (Creswell, 2012), not searching for the truth or trying to prove one dominant view but interested in the phenomenon being studied and coming to understand how people experience Facebook use at university through a range of ethnographic means.

### ***Connective ethnography***

The term '*connective ethnography*' is used by Hine (2007) and Leander and McKim (2003) to describe ethnographic studies in which the field sites span both digital and physical spaces. In studying students' Facebook use, I observed that they very rarely operate in a single domain, space, or site, whether digital or physical. Students access Facebook from their smart-phone on the way to lectures or they chat to classmates on Facebook Chat on their laptops while sitting next to them in a lecture. This duality of spatial use is a common and an important theme when exploring Facebook use in HE. A connective ethnography therefore describes the use of two or more field sites and describes the connection found between them. The everyday uses of the Internet are more nuanced than switching between one physical site and one digital site. In this study the field sites were the participants' Facebook Profiles and the physical environments of the university – the library, the halls of residence, the lecture theatre and the cafes. The connective ethnographic approach, allowed for observation both on Facebook and face-to-face, to go beyond the online/offline dichotomy, which can sometimes exist when researching social media. Exploring the complex relationship of the embedded and ubiquitous nature of Facebook in a sample of undergraduates' lives.

### ***My Facebook Friends (FbF)***

The study took place over one academic year (2010 to 2011) and worked with a sample of first-year undergraduate students from a relatively high status 'Russell Group' university in the north of England (Northam University). The study consisted of three stages of data collection: the first stage was a digital survey questionnaire of the full population of new undergraduate students at the university (4650 students) in August 2010; the second stage was a longitudinal connective ethnography of a small sample of these respondents (n=6), called my Facebook Friends (FbF); and the final stage was a full population survey at the end of the academic year (June 2011). The data in this paper is drawn from two of the longitudinal ethnographic participants, my FbF - Josie and Tomas. Informed consent was gained from each of the participants of the ethnography after an initial face-to-face meeting where the study was described and research ethics and Facebook were discussed at length.

### ***Ethnographic stories***

The stories of Josie and Tomas follow. These stories are produced in the style of the ethnographic monograph (Atkinson & Hammersley, 2007), therefore providing thick description of the actualities of students' Facebook use (Geertz 1973). The stories were written using direct quotes from interview data and direct copies of Facebook Status updates and Comments or other Facebook interactions observed. The time period of each story is, the first semester of university (September 2010 - December 2010), for Josie's story and semester 1 exam period (December 2010 - February 2011), for Tomas' story.

## **Josie and Tomas - Stories of connection and disconnection**

The stories that follow take two themes - Administration (in Josie's story) and Disconnection (in Tomas' story). These stories of life at university illustrate in Josie's

story examples of connection, intent, use and organisation. In Tomas' story they illustrate examples of disconnection, disengagement and unrealised expectations.

**i) Josie's story - 'this uni is run on Facebook'.**

This is Josie's story of her first semester at university and how Facebook is intertwined with and helps her organise her life at university.

**RECENT ACTIVITY**

*Josie updated her current location to Northam.*

*27<sup>th</sup> September 2010*

*OWW! Uni Lesson Number One - No one tells you anything... Taadaa: German Seminar at 9 tomorrow morning...*

*Oooh look... 8 hours away! Loads of notice! Oh and that there is set reading for Intro Lectures? Lecture 2 fine! But if you're gonna do that ...NOTICE... Really feeling reading 3 Intros to Music Psychology at 2 in the morning...*

*01.46*

*Luckily some new classmates I'd met in Fresher's week read that status update and they said apparently that reading is for AFTER the lecture...*

*Sleep.*

*28<sup>th</sup> September 2010*

*First classes over, not too painful. Here come the auditions...so much to fit in this week and I'm off to watch IronMan 2 with the Film Unit later.*

**RECENT ACTIVITY**

*Josie attended Film Unit Presents: IronMan2.*

*29<sup>th</sup> September 2010*

*Life is MAAAAANNNNNIC! So many random commitments already, I'm in the pantomime as the evil stepmother (and the mother of my bf!!) and the chamber choir. The singing society and light entertainment society should be fun. I'll get on the committees hopefully. I've joined the University of Northam Music department page for updates on the course. More auditions later and exploring around the city me thinks.*

**RECENT ACTIVITY**

*Josie likes Music (University of Northam).*

*8<sup>th</sup> October 2010*

*I nearly missed out on a Music social 'cos I didn't get the Event invite :( I've joined the group now so I won't miss anymore. What a fab night, the music crew are ace, so glad I went.*

**RECENT ACTIVITY**

*Josie is attending Moooosic social.*

*I'm invited to a friend's 20<sup>th</sup> birthday flat party at the weekend, which will be fun as long as I can fit the party in after the pantomime rehearsal and the three pieces of coursework I have to do before Monday.*

*23<sup>rd</sup> October 2010*

*In my role as the dual honours music rep, I'm asking folk if they have any gripes or happiness to share with me before the next rep meeting. I hear from people who are studying Music alongside another subject. People have Messaged me some issues about timetabling, the departments I work with are terrible at informing us about when things change. Plus I have a really nasty timetable, with one day that is 9 til 4 so I don't always get to know what's going on. We're lucky 'cos we can use Facebook to find out when things are cancelled and when things have been moved, from other students' postings. But it shouldn't be like that. I'll bring it up at the rep meeting.*

*8<sup>th</sup> November 2010*

*The organiser of the pantomime contacts me via a Wall post on Facebook and links the new script for me to read and print out. It looks fantastic; I'm really excited about this part. She also checks I can attend the sketch rehearsal next week. Anything to do with a society is done on Facebook, I'm committee member of a couple and I'd really struggle without it.*

*11<sup>th</sup> November 2010*

*The Mooosic social! It's away day tomorrow and we've planned via Facebook to all go out tonight, the hangovers will be hilarious!*

*14<sup>th</sup> November 2010*

*I had a lovely trip to Tesco's with Ellen and must now knuckle down to a German essay, sound and science poster, vocab learning, Faserland and a reading.*

*15<sup>th</sup> November 2010*

*Helen (the music rep) and I are using Facebook to gather peoples' thoughts on the postgrad room in the music department becoming a computer room. I asked them via uni email, but no-one ever reads that so a Status update on Facebook will get more people to reply. I had 30 Messages via Facebook message so that will be good to feedback at the reps meeting.*

*19<sup>th</sup> November 2010*

*Rachel invited me to see the new Harry Potter film tonight by tagging me in a Facebook Status update. Harry Potter.... Ahhhhhhh.....*

*30<sup>th</sup> November 2010*

*SNOW!!!! Everywhere! It's so deep, I see by looking out of my window while I'm still in bed. I check Facebook on my Blackberry mobile phone to find the Status updates' of friends asking whether lectures are cancelled? I check my uni email, I have it sent direct to my Blackberry.*

*All lectures cancelled and uni closed!*

*I update my Status accordingly and then roll over to catch up on some much needed sleep.*



*1<sup>st</sup> December 2010*

*My music lecturer has posted an interesting link on Facebook, definitely worth a look. It's nearly the end of semester one and I'm feeling like I'm getting the hang of this uni life. I like that we have a more informal connection with some of the members of staff and I'm more likely to look at a Facebook link than if it was emailed to me at my uni email account. There is so much spam there. I can't always be bothered to check it properly. No-one bothers to email, all my band rehearsals, all my choir rehearsals, meeting up with people to work, all of that, it's done through Facebook.*

**ii) Tomas's story - Disconnection: *I don't want to be 'here' anymore***

Tomas's story was somewhat different to Josie's as he did not stay the whole year at The University of Northam. He interacted on Facebook much less and used the site differently. Here follows Tomas's story of the end of semester one and the exam period therein. It tells of his feelings of disconnection in relation to the use of Facebook but also to university life.

*2nd December 2010*

*Tomas likes The University of Northam (Education).*

*There is something so arbitrary about 'liking' someone's comments. It's so superficial, you press the like button and that's it. I mean you don't have to think about it.*

*8<sup>th</sup> December 2010*

*I would really like to be at a different university. I don't fit in here. I have an interview for another university.*

*I find the workload here too light and it's not meaningful or productive. The cultural adaptation I found very difficult. I find I cannot really talk personally with a British person, they don't really want to know how you are. I think the internet and social networks trivialises communication and makes people have an illusionary view of themselves.*

*I find Facebook a very superficial form of communication.*

*18<sup>th</sup> December 2010*

*Tomas attended TEDPrize@UN LIVE Webcast.*

*Tomas commented on Vlada's link.*

*Tomas likes The INK Conference (Communications).*

*20<sup>th</sup> December 2010*

*Back home, seeing my family and real friends. The people I have met on my course and in Northam are great but it's not like they can be my real friends after such a short period of time.*

*12<sup>th</sup> January 2011*

*I'm using Facebook much less as I've had direct contact, meeting up with my good friends from home.*

*17<sup>th</sup> January 2011*

*I never post a status update to say what I'm doing. I don't use it to share how I feel. Instead to share other information that they might find interesting, like political things.*

*I like to upload my art photography so people can give me feedback. I like the idea that people can enjoy something that I did. The feedback is a good thing, not related to self-esteem.*

*20<sup>th</sup> January 2011*

*Tomas is accepted to Middlewood University to start in September 2011.*

*30<sup>th</sup> January 2011*

*I want to meet the people in Middlewood University as real before I add them on Facebook. I mean, how could you make friends on Facebook before meeting them? I want to make friends for them, because I like them and we have things in common, not just for having something on my Facebook Wall.*

*6<sup>th</sup> February 2011*

*Facebook is a very powerful communication tool, I can know people I wouldn't be able to contact in other ways, many people. I use it to communicate with a few friends who use it too. It's not about my personality or identity. Sometimes even for work related things but not for serious things. I don't have anything against Facebook it's just that it cannot be everything, everywhere. Certain things work really well, feedback from friends for example when they comment on my photos. What I don't like is that it dominates everywhere.*

*18<sup>th</sup> February 2011*

*Tomas deactivated his Facebook account.*

## **Exploring the stories**

We can now explore the data presented in these two stories which tell of some of the realities of Facebook use at university. Josie's story is first - her 'always on' use of Facebook and her connection practices. Then follows the data from Tomas's story of disconnection and disengagement.

The importance of the interconnectivity of the relationships between time, university life and Facebook emerges throughout both these stories. Life at university is rigid; structured by the academic 'year', the 'semester' and the weekly timetable. But for many students, life is also free and unstructured, away from the confines of home and school. The chronology of the university calendar is a dominant structure by which the staff and students organise their lives. Undergraduates are concerned with time and how to spend their time and Facebook reflects this concern. Facebook therefore plays into this chronology and segmentation of life.

*i) Josie's story - 'Facebook organises my life at uni'*

The first semester for a new student is full of new opportunities, new activities, new people and new places. Josie leads a busy life.

Josie used Facebook as her go-to space to find out information about university. She observed that: 'this uni is run on Facebook'. Examples of this can be seen in what could be termed as, more 'official' or formal uses of Facebook. Josie Liked the University of Northam Page. This meant she received any updates the Page made straight to her News Feed.

*RECENT ACTIVITY Josie likes Music (University of Northam).*

The importance of being a member of a Page or Group (the collective spaces of Facebook) was shown when Josie nearly missed out on a social event as she 'didn't get the Event invite'. She subsequently joined the Group. From then on she automatically got updates to her News Feed and Notifications of any Events to which the members of the Group were invited. In her role as the dual honours rep, Josie took advantage of the affordances of the university *being run on Facebook* to ask her course mates what 'gripes or happiness' they had to share, through Facebook Messages. She received thirty Messages in reply. She found she got more responses this way rather than via university email, which, she said, 'people hardly checked'. Facebook was used in place of more traditional methods of communication, such as a notice on the door of a lecture theatre, or an all-class email, to inform students of timetable changes. This was most likely to be a student-led practice. Josie found this a useful but unsatisfactory method of communication. She said: 'I wish the university was more organised and that lessons were not rearranged at all'.

Josie used Facebook to support the organisation of her workload. She found out that an essay which she thought was due the following Friday was due in the next day. She described that her other Friends had been discussing how they were getting on with it on a Status update. Josie then commented on the Status and found out the deadline was the next day. The immediacy that Facebook gave Josie in keeping up to date with course knowledge, while also giving her an understanding of the wider News items and how these impact on the university.

The winter of 2010 brought particularly heavy snow to Northam. Josie's first port of call in the morning, from her bed using her Blackberry mobile phone, was checking Facebook to gain information about whether the university was open for classes. Her Friends asked each other through a Status update if university was open. No-one knew the answer. Josie switched to her university email, on her Blackberry. The official source of snow information came in the form of an email from the Facilities Department. The email said university was closed. Josie then relayed this information across to everyone on Facebook through a Status update:

*All lectures cancelled and uni closed!*

Josie was happy that she was FbF with one of her university lecturers. This meant when the lecturer posted an interesting web link as their own Facebook Status, Josie could see the link. The lecturer shared information this way rather than via email,

which Josie preferred. She explained the informal connection with the member of staff meant she was more likely to engage with the information. Also, there was too much spam in the uni email and so she did not like to use it.

Josie used the Facebook Events feature to keep up to date with what was happening in the various university societies she is a member of. These extra curricular groups are run for students by students and Josie was a member of a range of them, from the 'Film Unit' to 'Singsoc' (the Singing Society). It is perceived by students (and promoted by university) that being a member of a society, and particularly if you are a member of the organising committee, is an important and useful skill which can be added to your CV and is something that employers are interested in (Bradley et al., 2013; Future Track, 2012). Facebook affords many of the societies a means of communication and Josie told me that without it she would find it difficult to undertake her role as secretary on the Singsoc committee. She explained that changes often occur to meeting times or rooms and so having the ability to contact many people at once, quickly and for free, was important. The use of the Facebook Event function meant that an event (a film screening, for example) could be publicised to many people and they could choose to attend or decline. She found Events added structure to her 'hectic' university schedule. Josie led a busy life, academically, socially and through a vast array of extracurricular activities. Facebook accentuated this in her mind as it acted as a diary, keeping her entire social, academic and extracurricular activities in one place.

Josie used Events to structure her time and this is very much situated within the temporalities of university life (Adam, 1995). The perception Josie had that 'this uni is run on Facebook' could be said to stem from her regulated and repetitive use of Events to organise everything. The real-time narrative (Miller, 2011) of the Facebook clock was punctuated by Josie's Events and the Events of her Friends that she could see in her News Feed. These told Josie what she should be doing and when. This was similar to the structure of the academic timetable and yet for her social and extracurricular life.

## ***ii) Tomas' story - Disconnection: I don't want to be 'here' anymore***

The end of semester one is a combination of 'calendar times' and 'when times' (Adam, 1995). The end of the calendar year heralds the Christmas break and this also was the end of the taught sessions of semester one. It was a hectic time of year since, concurrent to preparing to go home, when students may have assignments due and exams to revise for. The structure of the semester dictates that the vacation period separates the activities of teaching and assessment. Tomas did not have a positive experience at the University of Northam. He felt on many levels that he did not fit in. Tomas' experience of the first year at university could be described as somewhat different to Josie. Tomas decided to leave the university in January 2011 at the end of the first semester. The reason for this, he told me, was that this university had been his second choice and that he really wanted to go to an elite University. He found the workload at Northam University 'too light and it was not meaningful or productive'. Tomas felt this about the course he had chosen, the students on the course, the way other students used Facebook and the general student experience at Northam University. In choosing to leave the university at the end of the first semester, Tomas

was disconnected with this key 'when time' of year (Adam, 1995). At the time of end of semester exams, when the rest of the student body was revising, preparing for exams and writing papers for assessment, Tomas was packing up his belongings to move back to his home country. This disconnect, at a time of year when everyone else was coming together and bonding over the shared difficulties of re-learning a semester's worth of work, meant that Tomas felt an extra element of not belonging.

Tomas therefore experienced disconnection both with the university and with Facebook. He described communication on Facebook as very superficial. Unlike Josie, Tomas did not make Friends with anyone on Facebook before starting university and he only made Friends with one person, a flatmate, on Facebook during his time in Northam. For him, being at university was not intrinsically linked to being on Facebook. He said that the two could operate independently; this is a different view from Josie, who described the interdependent link between university and Facebook.

Tomas described using his Facebook to 'share other information that they (his Friends) might find interesting, like political things' and that the way he saw other students using it was 'superficial'. Tomas, in this way, is disengaged with the dominant Facebook (and more general) student practices. He did not upload lots of Photos of himself out partying in Fresher's week or make Friends with his flatmates on Facebook before meeting them in person. Tomas described the other students he knew as being 'all play and no work'. I believe Tomas was very aware of his choices not to engage with Facebook and the university in a similar manner to the other students and did self-manage his Profile in this way. This is in contrast to Josie, who used Facebook to interact with her Friends on a daily basis, and Tomas' practices could be seen as disengagement with the site.

Tomas described how he felt of his time at university:

*the university wasn't what I expected it to be, it wasn't challenging enough.*

He felt that the first year was too easy for him and that this stemmed from spending too little time in a taught class. This lack of challenge on Tomas' part could be seen as him coming to terms with how to deal with what suddenly seems to be so much free and unstructured time. The previous rigid school timetable had ordered his life for a significant amount of time before he came to university but now he might have a class first thing in the morning and then one in the evening and he found this challenging.

Tomas did not use Facebook in the instantaneous manner that Josie did. He did not use the Chat function and he told me he preferred to email people. He would appear 'off' if his friends were to look for him on Chat. Tomas did not see Facebook as a place to chat. In this way, Tomas was managing his social accessibility (Quan-Hasse & Collins, 2008) by choosing how he could be contacted and the level of his presence on the site. Sometimes being present but unavailable (by turning off the Chat function for example) is not sufficient and therefore removing oneself from the network is needed. This de-presencing (Quan-Haase & Collins, 2008) from the site at this key point in the year could be seen as a form of time management, a decision not to be involved. Not sharing the same practices as the other students is something Tomas

experienced in relation to his Facebook use. He did not want to, or understand how to fit into the dominant structures and practices of the social network or the university.

## Discussion

The stories present some of the realities of social media usage by first year undergraduate students in the UK. The following section discusses the *Facebook timescales* of Josie and Tomas under two themes: '*I'm always on it*' and '*Being academic*'.

### *i) I'm always on it*

Josie used Facebook, and particularly Facebook Events as an organisational tool and it was important to her as the main form of communication between Friends and to manage her clock time (Adam, 1995) and timetables. The 'always on' nature of Facebook meant that Facebook was her first port of call when trying to find out information and yet it offered a liminal space (Turner, 1967) to 'be' in between the regulation of the organised structures of timetabled lectures and Facebook Events. Facebook offered a space where the smallest intricacies of student life could be planned and documented for all to join in. The 'always on' nature of Facebook offered many opportunities for socialisation for Josie - she could be in constant contact with their Friends while organising what to do.

In contrast to the time-regulated use of Events to run university life, Josie described her more general use of the site, much more intensely, as 'I'm always on it'. She automatically logged on to the site when she opened her laptop in the morning and she checked it on her phone on the way to university. Josie described:

*The beauty of Facebook is, it's always there, but also, it's always there*

and she went on to say:

*There is something about the rolling nature of Facebook that means it is never off. I can always be contacted and people think nothing of sending a Message or posting at 00.30, that didn't happen before.*

This 'always on' nature of Facebook use is liminal in its very essence. Checking or looking at Facebook is what Josie did in between academic study, socialising and taking part in Events. The practices described here as 'just checking' or 'doing nothing' are far more than that. Josie was making sense of the wider ecosocial system (Lemke, 2000) of her Friends (old and new) and the events and happenings of university life. The persistent and pervasive nature of Facebook use by Josie offers a view of how some students 'do' university (Davies, 2013). The 'always on' nature of Facebook meant that Facebook was her first port of call when trying to find out information, be involved in any of the new activities university life has to offer, organise a night out or understand an assignment. The always-on nature of Facebook meant that Facebook was viewed as a necessity as well as something of a hassle. It

was the go-to space for Josie to organise and manage her interconnected life worlds of the social and the academic (Wilcox et al., 2005).

Part of the settling process into university is being able to manage all these commitments (Kidwell, 2005) and Facebook offered a useful, proactive and helpful way of doing this. What is seen as a highly organised and timely way to communicate is often viewed in sharp contrast with the organisational communication offered by the institution. Josie and her Friends used Facebook as a support and feedback mechanism to air grievances and give each other very timely feedback, which they felt they do not get from the formal structures of the institution. The liminal nature of Facebook is about connecting to people, places and events with similar interests - so important in the first year transition process.

## ***ii) Being academic – connection through disconnection***

The end of semester one was a time for 'being academic' in preparation for the end of semester one exams and coursework submissions. With this there were tensions with the dominant practices and structures of Facebook use as illustrated by Josie's story. This was a time to disengage from Facebook and to concentrate on studying. For Tomas, it was the time to disengage from the university all together.

Both Josie's and Tomas' stories illustrate the theme of '*Being academic*' which includes both connection (through Facebook) and disconnection (removal from Facebook or non-engagement). Tomas felt that he did not fit within the dominant practices of university life and he chose to disconnect with the university for good. Unrealistic expectations of what university life would be like could be seen as a reason for this disconnection. Pancer et al. (2000) found that if a student had a complex expectation of what university would be like before they started, they were more likely to cope when there. Tomas' story is contrary to this, suggesting that a student with a complex expectation of university in reality found university life unchallenging, making it difficult for them to cope with the lack of challenge. In the US, the National Survey of Student Engagement found that academic challenge is central to the student engagement construct (NSSE, 2002) and lack of challenge equals lack of engagement.

Light & Cassidy (2014) suggest that disconnecting within the social media environment does not always correlate with departing but 'can also act as socioeconomic lubricant' (p.1169). In this sense, Tomas saw that there were benefits of disconnection (Light & Cassidy, 2014) and chose to remove himself from the site altogether. In this manner it could be said Tomas was moving towards a different ecosocial environment and his disconnection was about connection and belonging to a group who are resistant to social media and prefer face to face interactions (see Light & Cassidy, 2014). In Tomas' story he was serious about studying, 'being academic' was important to him and wanted this to be his main focus while at university. In this manner he was using a different Facebook timescale to Josie, and found its constant presence unhelpful.

## Conclusion

The two stories, of Josie and Tomas, offer two differing views of the realities of social media usage, in the first year of university. The study took an interpretivist approach to explore the experiences and perceptions of students about their Facebook usage. The longitudinal connective ethnographic approach was firmly situated in the site of the everyday lives of the students and their everyday lived realities across Facebook and face-to-face observations. The analysis of these observations explores the different *Facebook Timescales* within their ecosocial systems and presents these timescales under the headings – ‘I’m always on’ and ‘being academic’.

There is a stark difference between Josie’s ‘*I’m always on it*’ constant companion use of Facebook and Tomas’ more detached and disconnected use. His choice to not take part in many of the Facebook practices Josie did (Status updates, Event notifications and Chat) illustrates their different approaches to using the site and illustrates that different students work within different Facebook timescales and belong to different ecosocial systems (Lemke, 2000) that exist within the university environment.

Tomas’ decision to depart Facebook evokes the notion of ‘*disconnecting as connection*’ (Light and Cassidy, 2014) as he chose to connect with his friends face-to-face in the physical environment as opposed to through the digital site. His disengagement from some of the Facebook practices that other students used shows us that not all students are using Facebook in the same manner. It also suggests that first year students’ practices flow between the digital and physical spheres, with Facebook structuring students’ time at university both through connection and disconnection practices. It is important to note that there is no one generic or common mode of Facebook practice amongst university students. Instead, practices of connection *and* disconnection vary between users with the same person varying in their practices at different times of an academic year and different times of their student experience.

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