



HUG ME, GRAFFITI FOR ME, MESSAGE ME,  
POKE ME, MATCH ME AND LOVE ME. IS THERE ANYTHING WE WOULD NOT BECOME

# FACEBOOK

OR DO FOR A SOCIAL NETWORKING SITE?  
THESE DAYS WE CANNOT GET ENOUGH OF OUR SIGNIFICANT INTERNET OTHER.  
BUT WHAT ARE THE REAL REPERCUSSIONS?

WHAT ARE THE PSYCHOLOGICAL, SOCIAL  
AND CULTURAL RAMIFICATIONS FROM THE GLOBAL FACEBOOK PHENOMENON?

# FOCUSSED

FROM SOCIALISERS TO NETWORKERS AND  
EVERYTHING IN BETWEEN, JESSICA GEORGE DISSECTS AND EXAMINES ALL ASPECTS  
OF THE DIGITAL BEAST THAT IS FACEBOOK.

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My tumultuous relationship with the social networking site, Facebook began when I shunned it, partially out of fear I'd become obsessed as my uni friends had, and partially because, with a slow internet connection, I tended to avoid any websites that involved photo uploads. But a few months later with a faster internet connection and a growing curiosity, I filled in a Facebook profile. I remember that first moment of being asked to represent myself in a digital identity. I wasn't quite sure how well I could fit myself into one page, but as I typed in all of my favourite bands and listed some of my favourite books, I realised how much I enjoyed this caricature of myself. She was so much cleaner and cooler than the real me. With time, my relationship with Facebook has seen ups and downs; I've managed events on the site, reconnected with old friends, and even done some creeping around old high school acquaintances' profiles. The other day, as I clicked the 'accept' on a friend request, I took a moment to think about the sometimes weighty responsibility this website has given me in managing my online persona. Taking a wild guess, I assumed that I'm not the only one getting caught up in analysing and hypothesising about the *whys* of Facebook.

With over 90 million members, Facebook has sparked the interest of sociologist and psychologist researchers looking to understand the social implications behind such social networking websites. The Facebook Project, started by a graduate student at University of Illinois, is an ongoing research project focusing on everything from peer interaction to business marketing on this website. The researchers at The Facebook Project are delving deep into users' interactions with Facebook. I took it upon myself to embark on some similar, but far less extensive, research of my own by interviewing and polling Kiwis aged 20 to 50 on their involvement with Facebook. If anything, this research is selfishly motivated, a way for me to comfort myself in knowing I'm not alone in my sometimes confusing relationship with Facebook. Although I can't claim a full scientific study with all the bells and whistles of a team of researchers, I did have an

ample glance into the Facebook interactions and digital identities of a fair number of Kiwis.

The majority of people I polled, whether or not they were members of Facebook, held an opinion on it; even the ones who say they couldn't be bothered with the website spouted off a few heated words. Those few whom I polled who are not members of Facebook, cited that they felt it would quickly become a time-waster. Which I can heartily agree with; I really should be working instead of battling my digital pet with a giant ant to gain more gold coins. It's no wonder that a few non-members whom I polled replied that soon after joining they were scared off by what they found to be an overwhelming number of applications, or just found the whole experience a bit off-putting. One of the respondents noted that getting a 'request for friendship' made her feel uncomfortable. I can't say I felt all too comfortable being virtually *poked* for the first time either.

### **FACEBOOK HAS SPARKED THE INTEREST OF SOCIOLOGIST AND PSYCHOLOGIST RESEARCHERS LOOKING TO UNDERSTAND THE SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS.**

These non-members weren't making me feel better about my involvement with Facebook. They were just cementing the reasons why I had doubted signing up in the first place, so I looked to Facebook members for answers as to why they are signing on. According to the feedback I collected, members of Facebook vaguely agree with non-members in that it has the potential to be a time-waster, but it depends on how the user approaches his interaction with Facebook that makes him continue logging on. Amongst the participants of my questionnaire who are Facebook members, slight distinctions emerged, forming three groups. We'll call them Socialisers, Conformers, and Networkers and have a closer look at each.

The first group, the Socialisers, recognise Facebook's flaws, but even with their complaints, they enjoy other aspects, notably wall-posts, photo sharing and being kept aware of what friends are up to.

They use Facebook to keep in touch with close friends, especially those overseas. As someone who is technically overseas at the moment, I can relate well to this. They are not looking to meet new people via Facebook and recognise that it is not a substitute for face-to-face interaction, although they may try to achieve face-to-face interaction as best as they can, with profile photos ranking highest for what they are drawn to on user profiles. Socialisers feel uncomfortable or annoyed when receiving a friend request from someone they've had little or no social contact with. They have accepted these types of requests mostly due to social pressures, listing "not wanting to be rude" or "because they were a friend of a friend" as reasons. I've fallen into this trap a few times. The most upsetting scenario was accepting the friend request of someone who appeared to be a friend of a friend. Minutes later I received an email from the newest edition in my online menagerie in which he'd superimposed his profile photo onto one of my photos. The subject line of the email read, "The plot thickens". Needless to say, moments later I'd deleted him from my list and revamped my privacy settings.

The second group, the Conformers, share similarities with the Socialisers in that they are not looking to meet new people, and they stick to utilising Facebook for photo sharing and keeping up with close friends. What makes this group quite distinct from the previous one is their disdain for Facebook. When one was asked why he didn't simply delete his profile, he said this: "Essentially, I continue to use Facebook for the same reason that I drive a car, drink alcohol at parties (sometimes), or go to the viaduct on a Saturday night (even less sometimes). I don't particularly like it, and there are far more appealing alternatives, but for reasons out of my control society has adopted these things as a way of life, and if I want to fit in I need to adopt them myself." Another member of this group mentioned that he'd contemplated 'digital suicide' a few times, but couldn't bring himself to do it. I have to admit, I've thought about it before, and wondered what would happen after pulling the plug on my digital identity. Would my friends download a digital cemetery application? Maybe

battle my Facebook ghost with a giant ant? More likely, I'd just feel out of the loop.

### **THE RELATIONSHIP I CREATE WITH MY DIGITAL ME AND THE PEOPLE I CHOOSE TO LET INTO HER WORLD ARE ALL RELATIVE TO HOW I APPROACH FACEBOOK.**

Perhaps less affected by social pressures are the third group, the Networkers, unique in that they were the only group who cited that they are looking to meet new people. They appear to separate their personal lives from Facebook, using it as a means to keep up to date on and involved in certain communities that they also involve themselves with outside of the internet. This group looks at Facebook as more of a networking opportunity. One person cited that Facebook friends are not the people you'd have over to watch a video, but more so "acquaintances that you make due to a common interest and to network." For these users, event listing is also important in maintaining involvement. The event listings on Facebook have become a digital calendar, always ready to remind me when the next art or music show is coming up. I might even go as far as saying it's brought me out of the house more.

And with that last realisation, I am satisfied with my research. Looking back I can see myself fitting into each of the three groups. My interactions on Facebook can leave me feeling self-conscious and in turn have me giving into social pressures, but I have ample control over this *digital me*. The translation from *me* online to *me* in person is a big leap, but I'm happy to know that *digital me* can help her creator to keep up with a best friend in Brooklyn, check out photos from a dress-up party, and remind her to go see an exhibition. The relationship I create with my *digital me* and the people I choose to let into her world are relative to how I approach Facebook. As long as I use it as a gateway into real-world sharing rather than falling into the web of numerous applications, then I am happy to keep her out of the digital cemetery for now. M

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