

It's Facebook Official:

The Relationship Status as Shaping  
Intimate Identity Performance

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# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	3
1. Introduction	4
1.1 Research Outline: Theories and Methods	6
2. Background	9
2.1 Second Selves and Identity Tourists	9
2.2 Social Network Sites and Identity Singularization	11
2.3 Software-Based Society	11
2.4 Social Network Sites as Mediated Spaces	13
3. A Multi-Layered Approach to Studying Facebook	16
Software	
3.1 Software Design	16
3.2 Software Use	21
4. Relationship Status Design	24
4.1 Why Study Interface?	24
4.2 Describing the Relationship Status	25
4.3 Analyzing the Relationship Status	26
5. Relationship Status Use	36
5.1 Researching Relationship Status Use	36
5.2 The Themes of Relationship Status Use	38
5.3 Discussion	44
6. Conclusion	47
References	51

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

From a technological perspective, the social network site and the web that preceded it share a host of underlying similarities. Well before the wall, the post and the feed embraced their digital denotations, early internet inhabitants were crafting versions of themselves on personal websites, compiling lists of links to their friends and sending personal messages in the form of email. Unlike their predecessors, however, social network sites can be seen as more actively prodding the user to enact online space in specific ways and according to specific (yet subtle) philosophies. To begin with, this prodding was weak. Sites like Bebo and MySpace preserved much of the idiosyncratic flavour synonymous with early cyberspace, communicating a sense of individual eccentricity. Regularized formatting may have begun in earnest, but users were still afforded a reasonable degree of flexibility in constructing and customizing their online personae. As an integral element of the Web 2.0 movement, these spaces initially evoked ideas of great liberation. Here was a quintessential example of Henry Jenkins' (2006) 'participatory culture', a locus of media convergence that dissolved longstanding distinctions between producer and consumer.

We should have known it was too good to be true. Now that the dust has settled and the applause quietened, the adverse effects of this so called 'social media revolution' are beginning to emerge. Most importantly, perhaps, what was once a gentle prodding of user activity has now become more of a shove. The dominant social media institutions of today have been widely criticized for their restrictive designs, which often promote some types of performance at the expense of others (e.g. Cover 2012; van House 2011; McNicol 2013). This is no more evident than in the case of Facebook, which not only encourages but also in fact enforces performance of the 'real' self, as outlined by the very scriptures of the site (Facebook 2014). Misrepresent at your own peril, for any profile deemed inaccurate, deceptive or fraudulent by system administrators stands to be terminated. This process of identity singularization has expedited the dissolution of longstanding perceived boundaries between online and offline space, conflating notions of 'real' and 'virtual'. As a result, social network sites like Facebook are best approached not as fantastical alternate realities but rather particular places in which we manage and manoeuvre our daily social lives.

From a networked perspective, society is primarily and most prominently constructed through relations and the patterns formed by these relations. To understand the broader social implications of Facebook, then, it is important we investigate its treatment of the relation. In a relatively early contribution to social media literature, Judith Donath and danah boyd (2004) contend that 'public displays of connection' constitute one of the most salient features of the social network site, serving as crucial identity markers that facilitate navigation of the online world. Subsequent research has addressed these connections from a host of different angles, ranging from how certain users maintain their friendships (Lewis & West 2009) to how software platforms engineer them (van Dijck 2013). But it is not just our 'friend' relationships that are played out through social media space. As Facebook engineer Lars Backstrom acknowledges, "romantic relationships also form an important aspect of the everyday practices and uses of social media" (Backstrom & Kleinberg 2013: 1). In addition to its unnuanced articulation of our social networks, Facebook also affords a unique tool through which to perform our most intimate of bonds: the relationship status. By virtue of this iconic interface feature, the site encourages users to make public their intimate identities and thus perform their romantic narratives before friends and family. To articulate a romance through the relationship status is, for many, to go 'Facebook Official', a term that Urban Dictionary (2006) defines as 'how you know shit's real'. This further emphasises the extent to which Facebook has permeated our everyday lives, with the digital emblem of the status ostensibly serving to elucidate our 'real' relations.

So how is Facebook influencing intimacy? A growing body of psychological and sociological studies indicate that the site is responsible for a range of romantic outcomes. At the adverse end of the spectrum, Facebook use has been linked to jealousy (Utz 2011), partner surveillance (Tokunaga 2011), compulsive internet activity (Kerkhof et al. 2011) and an obstruction of the post-breakup process (Marshall et al. 2012). By means of a counterpoint, research has also identified potentially beneficial effects in the form of reducing romantic uncertainty (Stern & Taylor 2007), legitimizing romantic relationships (Mod 2010) and facilitating intimate interactions (Hales 2012). A defining characteristic of these empirical studies is that they frame the human user as an autonomous agent and the social network site as a neutral platform that merely facilitates online connectivity and representation. From this perspective,

Facebook is essentially understood as serving a compliant, intermediary role between users, who mobilize the space as an extension of their natural abilities. But are social media institutions really this passive? As Sander De Ridder (2013a) points out, our intimate identities can be more profitably viewed as *mediated* through particular software systems, which shape our digital practices through their deep symbolic powers. Accepting this position, it becomes imperative that we consider software design in relation to software use when investigating the way in which Facebook shapes our romantic lives. To this end, the primary research question of my thesis can be formulated as follows: in what ways and to what extent does the technological design of the relationship status shape our everyday performances of intimate identity?

### 1.1 Research Outline: Theories and Methods

In seeking to answer this question, I will progress from a broad investigation of Facebook's software to a specific analysis of its relationship status. The broader part will draw from a large and varied body of literature in an attempt to arrive at a robust theoretical framework for conceptualizing and analyzing Facebook's mediation of user performance. Here, I will first illustrate the extent to which digital technology has become embedded within our everyday routines, proposing the notion of mediation as a useful lens through which to unpack this convoluted development. Acknowledging the non-linearity of the mediation process, I will then introduce José van Dijck's (2013) 'multi-layered approach' to social media platforms. This involves accounting for the political-economic and socio-cultural powers that inform software design and direct software performance, while concurrently recognizing the potential for varying forms of user practice. I will invoke Manuel Castells' (2009) political economy of networks to identify and address the political-economic implications of social media design, arguing that Facebook perpetuates a double-logic of empowerment and exploitation. Complementing this perspective, I will also use Judith Butler's (1990; 1993; 1997) notion of performativity to illustrate Facebook as both reflecting and promoting the prevailing socio-cultural frameworks out of which it has evolved. These market and cultural layers of design will then be considered in dialectical relation to our everyday uses of the site.

Turning to the relationship status itself, the second part of my thesis will deploy an adapted version of van Dijck's multi-layered approach to expose the variety of ways in which Facebook shapes intimate identity performance. Here, careful consideration will be given to both relationship status design and relationship status use at the level of user interface. Paul Newland (1999) formulates a series of questions with which we can interrogate interface design, focusing on the differences it creates, the contexts it stabilizes, the norms it recirculates, the learning mechanisms it requires and the interactions it sustains. While varied in their specific objects of inquiry, these questions essentially provide different lenses through which to address the same central issue: how interface design informs interface use. Drawing from Newland's approach, I will perform a critical interface analysis of the relationship status as it appears to the user. This will be aimed at identifying the specific political-economic and socio-cultural powers that are embedded within and recirculated through Facebook's romantic interface feature. Interface analysis is useful in that it illustrates how the relationship status may come to promote the performance of some intimate norms at the expense of others. However, this method is also limited in that it is unable to shed light on how we interpret and appropriate these norms.

Illuminating the user side of the struggle, I will conduct qualitative thematic analysis on a sample of blog entries that ponder relationship status use and meaning. The narrative structure common to the blog makes it a particularly fruitful source of insight into our Facebook mediated tales of romance. Blogs also tend to provoke relatively forward and open reflection, another important quality considering intimate feelings can be difficult to communicate via face-to-face interaction (Constable 2003). When it comes to theorizing across multiple qualitative accounts, thematic analysis is a useful method for facilitating the detection of common patterns and the creation of conceptual groupings (Jupp 2006). Consistent with the work of Jennifer Fereday & Eimear Muir-Cochrane (2006), I will use three layers of coding in an attempt to unearth thematic elements from within the dataset. Here, first-order coding will create descriptive labels that categorize text fragments, second-order coding will capture the meaning of larger segments and, finally, third-order coding will extract any underlying patterns of usage. On the whole, this qualitative approach will seek to expose the subtleties of relationship status use, evoking a rich vein of insight.

But there is a price to pay for such richness: my findings will be limited to the in-depth consideration of particular user experiences and not easily generalized to broader populations. Moreover, the use of pre-existing blog entries will preclude the collection of detailed user demographic data and thus restrict the exploration of how intimate performance may vary in accordance with age, sex or ethnicity.

Throughout the thesis I will approach Facebook not as a 'virtual' environment but rather a particular everyday place in which we perform our identities. In addressing the implications of these performances, I will depart from Jeffrey Weeks' ethico-political stance that strives for 'radical pluralism' of intimate identity, whereby "no attempt should be made to reduce human sexual diversity to a uniform form of 'correct' behaviour" (2002: 242).

Escalated by the rise of ubiquitous social network sites like Facebook, the integration of software systems with daily routines means that new power structures now influence our lives from the 'inside' (Beer 2009). While Facebook's relationship status may only represent a small aspect of the site, it still provides an illustrative example of the way in which software design can change the face of our social relations. By ignoring the impact of such features, we risk blindly accepting any malignant design decisions that will increasingly guide our society as we progress to an even more digitally advanced age. It is time to address these decisions and assess their broader ramifications.

## 2. BACKGROUND

In this chapter, I sketch digital technology's broad progression out of the box and into the fabric of our lives. New media literature boasts a myriad of theories that seek to expose the convoluted relationship between the technical and the social. While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to provide a comprehensive summary of the enterprise, I introduce a number of key ideas that might be deemed emblematic of their time. To begin with, consideration is given to the works Sherry Turkle (1984; 1995; 1999) and Lisa Nakamura (1995), who offer pioneering accounts of the computer and the internet in relation to the self. Here, I seek to highlight early conceptions of cyberspace as a playground for identity exploration, conceptions that have since been shattered by the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies in general and social network sites in particular. I argue that Facebook's enforcement of 'real' identity makes it the locus of the ongoing transition away from an anonymous 'virtual' environment, accelerating the internet's pervasion of our everyday lives. Drawing from the ideas of Lev Manovich (2013) and Jaron Lanier (2010), I then stress the contemporary inseparability of software and society before identifying some concerns that have arisen in the face of this development. Finally, I introduce the notion of mediation, as described by De Ridder (2013b), advocating its usefulness for the study of intimate identity performance on Facebook.

### 2.1 Second Selves and Identity Tourists

The most vital question we can ask of any technology is how it changes us. First published in 1984, Turkle's *The Second Self* explores the early interplay between computers and society, taking particular interest in the vast potential for certain software to influence our awareness of the self and the other. For Turkle, the objective computer that does things *for* us is inextricably woven within the very fabric of the subjective computer that does things *to* us, catalysing changes "not only in what we do but in how we think" (1984: 18). The computer is also described as evocative in the sense of being a potent 'projective medium' with great representational affordances. While the archaic apparatus discussed in her book may have depreciated with time, the relevance of Turkle's notion has aged with grace. If anything, the subsequent explosion of the internet has in fact

amplified the mediatory role of the computer, transforming the dynamic of our on-screen interactions. Unlike the second self of the 1980s, which was largely informed by a one-on-one exchange between person and machine, the internet-fuelled second self is constructed through an intricate network of social relations. As Turkle herself explains, “increasingly, when we step through the looking glass, other people are there as well” (1999: 643).

The relative anonymity of early online behaviour qualified ideas of cyberspace as an egalitarian playground for identity exploration. Released in 1995, Turkle's *Life on the Screen* suggests that the practice of constructing ‘virtual’ personae also serves to nurture aspects of the ‘real’ self, giving rise to a ‘pastiche of personalities’ that challenge traditional conceptions of identity as singular and static. Internet experiences, she argues, underline the value of approaching our ‘stories’ in several different ways while encouraging us to “think of ourselves as fluid, emergent, decentralized, multiplicitous, flexible and ever in process” (1995: 263-264).

Exploring a similar theme in the same era, Lisa Nakamura (1995) reflects on the practice of ‘identity tourism’, whereby internet users ‘computer crossdress’ and cast themselves as different race, gender, age and the like. Tourism is a particularly fitting metaphor in this context, implying a certain ease and fluidity with which we can negotiate the online self for the purpose of exploration, curiosity or pleasure. For Nakamura, the technology of the internet offers ‘unprecedented possibilities’ for controlling self-performance, with participatory mediums like chat rooms and forums facilitating radical and pluralistic identity exploration. By the same token, she laments that the enactment of these identities often fits within traditional ‘discourses of racial stereotyping’, which, in turn, serves to perpetuate the stereotypes themselves (1995: 2). Clearly, Nakamura’s idea of tourism does not quite share Turkle’s early optimism for web-enabled space. Like Turkle, however, it does characterize online play in terms of multiple and fluid self-constructs (regardless of how racist, sexist or ageist these constructs may be). Conceptions of cyberspace as a place of identity experimentation were popular during the formative years of the commercial web, yet they are far from congruent with contemporary accounts of social media space.

## 2.2 Social Network Sites and Identity Singularization

Today, it appears the incognito playground of early cyberspace has all but closed its gates. In stark contrast to Nakamura's identity tourist, the social network citizen is commonly expected to perform gender, race and age in a way that reliably reflects the 'real', sharply lifting the veil of anonymity once coterminous with web-enabled space. Facebook's enforcement of singular, 'authentic' identity performance makes it the locus of this shift. Launched in February 2004, the site initially limited registration to Harvard students only, who were made to sign up with their university email addresses and thus forgo the possibility of pseudonymic self-construction. Access was soon extended to the rest of the Ivy League before further broadening to include a range of American, Canadian and British universities. By September 2006, the doors had been opened to everyone and internet users of all backgrounds began rushing in to craft their standardized online profiles.

Aided by a stream of angel investor-funded gambits, participation figures grew exponentially – to the point that Facebook now boasts an astronomical one billion monthly active users, over 500 million of whom are reported to log in each day (Clayton et al. 2013). In spite of its departure from institution-based registration, however, the site continues to impose tools of singular identity, with its design and operation based on the expectation that users will create faithful profiles of their 'real' selves (Facebook 2014). The ubiquity of Facebook Connect – whereby users can access third-party platforms using their Facebook identities – is such that these profiles are then diffused throughout the web and connected to a greater range of daily practices.

## 2.3 Software-Based Society

In cultivating an almost fully 'nonymous' environment, Facebook has expedited the blurring of traditional boundaries between online and offline space (Zhao et al. 2008). This is a prime example of how, increasingly, software is sinking into and sorting out our everyday lives. Contemporary Western society is now fully integrated with and dependent upon software systems, which not only shape our understanding of the world but also play a crucial role in its construction (Grosser 2011). For Manovich, software is therefore becoming (or has perhaps

already become) our interface to society at large, “a universal language through which the world speaks, and a universal engine on which the world runs” (2013: 2). This is why the once seemingly simple distinction between ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ no longer captures the elaborate and somewhat elusive process through which online technologies permeate our lives (Bakardjieva 2005; Silverstone 2006). Web-based platforms have caught up with society and, in doing so, shattered idealistic notions of cyberspace as a fantastical ‘alternate’ reality (Lovink 2012). As Oliver Burkeman aptly puts it, “the internet is over ... [and] this, for outsiders, is the fundamental obstacle to understanding where technology culture is heading: increasingly, it’s about everything” (2011: n.p.).

The ongoing pervasion of software places a huge level of responsibility in the hands of digital architects, whose creations provide an extension of our being and thus guide the way in which we relate to the world and to one another through it. For Lanier (2010) this is an alarming development, as it now takes no more than a ‘tiny group of engineers’ to recalibrate our cultural understandings through direct manipulation of our cognition. In his influential *You Are Not a Gadget* manifesto, he draws from the advent and subsequent proliferation of musical instrument digital interface (MIDI) to illustrate this point. Created in the early 1980s, MIDI allows for the digital representation of musical notes based on patterns that indicate keyboard manoeuvres. As such, MIDI can only describe the rigid expression of the keyboardist rather than the curvy, pliant spectrum of sounds afforded to the likes of the violin player. In spite of this constraint, however, MIDI has become the standard scheme with which to articulate music through software. Early programs were innocuously designed to complement the technology and before long it had become too entrenched in digital music gadgetry to dispense with. To borrow Lanier’s terminology, it had become ‘locked-in’, restricting musical performance to that which can be represented on and through the MIDI system.

The story of MIDI demonstrates just how easily software projects can unwittingly transform the future of human experience. In doing so, it also highlights the importance of debating design decisions before they are subjected to the rigorous process of lock-in. As Lanier explains, we must be acutely aware that the “consequences of tiny, initially inconsequential decisions are often amplified to become defining, unchangeable rules of our lives” (2010: 9). The social significance of these rules is such that any ideas that do not fit

within the prevailing representational scheme risk being delegitimized over time. Compounding the problem, those ideas that are in fact represented through software risk being deprived of the meaning they once carried in natural language. For example, there is a tendency amongst certain Facebook users to boast of the number of ‘friends’ they have accumulated on the site, with some tallies pushing well into the thousands. In order to actually consider these relations ‘friends’, however, the meaning of friendship must be diminished, as no person can sustain that number of social relations according to the traditional definition of the word. Like the MIDI note, then, the notion of friendship is reduced through the rules of the software system.

So how should we conceptualize social media software given its ever-intensifying integration with our lives? As compelling as Lanier’s idea of ‘locked-in’ technological design may be, a well-rounded understanding of the relationship between society and technology requires consideration of more than just the software-driven forces that press down on us. This is because society and technology are not hierarchically ordered entities, but rather ‘mutually intertwined’ in determining software performance (van Dijck 2013). Regardless of how directive a given program or platform may be, the human user is still capable of appropriating or undermining its prescribed usage (Bijker 1995). By taking everyday user practices into account, the seemingly rigid design of specific software systems can be understood through a more nuanced lens. Social network sites are not mere intermediaries that passively facilitate online sociality, but nor are they monolithic empires that fiercely determine all user activity. Rather, they can be profitably viewed as serving a *mediatory* role (De Ridder 2013a; van Dijck 2013; van Loon 2008), whereby their symbolic powers guide (rather than comprise) our everyday uses and interpretations (Silverstone 2002).

#### 2.4 Social Network Sites as Mediated Spaces

The notion of mediation overcomes the limitations of a technologically deterministic viewpoint while still addressing software’s vast impact on society at large (Bakardjieva 2005). In relation to social media, mediation can be understood as a complex, non-linear process in which the meaning of an idea is influenced by the affordances and constraints of the specific platform

through which it passes (Livingstone 2008; Couldry 2008). On the one hand, this impels us to think of institutions like Facebook as relatively powerful cultural artefacts that shape the potential for user performance. On the other, it reminds us that such performance is not entirely prescribed. To *shape* an activity is not to *dictate* an activity, and the process of mediation leaves us enough room for both compliant and seditious interactions. Clearly, then, an understanding of social networked sites as mediated spaces requires consideration of both the way in which software systems are designed and the way in which they are used.

Seeking to demystify storytelling practices as they unfold through social media, De Ridder (2013b) highlights 'technology' and 'participation' as two vital dimensions of the mediation process. In this context, *technology* can be viewed as ordering the world by providing discursive and material structures that promote some performative rituals over others. While these structures are inevitably moulded by the culture in which they are developed (Morley 2007), they also inevitably mould the culture in which they are used. Silverstone (2002) describes this as a 'dialectical process', whereby media institutions become involved in the general circulation of cultural symbols. Somewhat paradoxically, these technologies both enable and suppress *participation*, seen here as the extent and flexibility of our involvement within digitally-mediated space (De Ridder 2013b). While the emergence of Web 2.0 may have cultivated a rise in participation numbers, this development is not necessarily concomitant with a rise in instances of democratic participation. Indeed, Nico Carpentier (2011a) argues that digital participation is in itself an act of democratic struggle, an endless negotiation of the various cultural forms afforded by technology. Taken together, these technological and participatory dimensions can reveal additional layers of social media complexity, illuminating the constant tension between digital media owners and digital media users as they each seek to establish the meaning of a platform (Feenberg 2009).

In sum, then, I have argued that Facebook is contributing to the ongoing conceptual conflation of online and offline space, curtailing early ideas of technology-based identity exploration through its stubborn singularization of the self. This is a crucial way in which software is seeping into society and sorting our everyday routines, a process that has bestowed

digital architects with unprecedented levels of social responsibility. In light of this situation, I put forward the notion of mediation as a useful tool for unpacking the complex, non-linear and transformative interaction between the social and the technical. In the following chapter, I examine how market and cultural powers have come to shape the technological design of Facebook and, by extension, the performative flexibility of the user. Complementing this approach, I also examine the extent to which we can either comply with the intended usage of the site or effectively subvert it.

### 3. A MULTI-LAYERED APPROACH TO STUDYING FACEBOOK SOFTWARE

This chapter recognizes the owners and users of Facebook as locked in a constant struggle to define the social meaning of the site. Using a multi-layered approach, as proposed by van Dijck (2013), I begin by framing software design as inseparable from the political-economic and socio-cultural powers that circulate its development. These powers, I argue, ultimately give rise to the restrictive categories and boxes through which many of our Facebook performances are mediated. Acknowledging the other side of the struggle, I then pause to consider these design features in dialectical relation to everyday user practice. On the whole, the chapter aims to broadly illustrate how Facebook's software is *shaped* by market and cultural powers and *negotiated* by users. This lays the foundations for the critical analyses of relationship status design and relationship status use, which feature later in the thesis.

#### 3.1 Software Design

As Facebook continues to pervade our everyday routines, the market and cultural powers embedded within the site become increasingly difficult to unmask (De Ridder 2013a). If, however, we accept social media institutions not as passive facilitators but rather active mediators of user practice, it is crucial that such powers are understood. What we require, then, is a model that recognizes the various, interrelated forces that shape the design of social media software. To this end, van Dijck's (2013) multi-layered approach provides a useful framework for understanding Facebook's symbolic power. This approach combines analysis of the social media platform as a socio-cultural artefact with consideration of the political-economic forces that underpin its development. Departing from van Dijck's method, I use Castells' (2009) political economy of networks to address the broader market environment out of which Facebook has emerged. This is followed by an investigation of the cultural power of the site through the lens of Butler's (1990; 1993; 1997) theory of performative identity. In deploying this nuanced approach, I aim to arrive at a more intricate

understanding of why Facebook’s software promotes some cultural forms at the expense of others and how these forms may guide user practice.

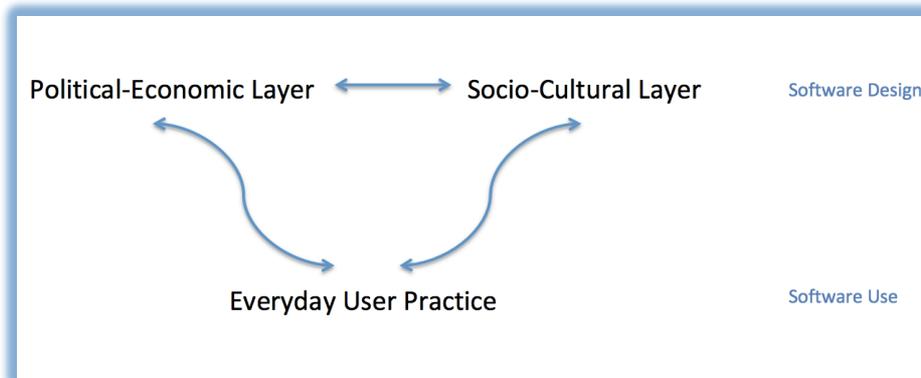


Figure 1: Understanding mediation through the multi-layered approach. Adapted from De Ridder (2013a).

### 3.1.1 The Political-Economic Layer

Political-economic forces play a complex role in the Facebook mediation of social performance, perpetuating a double logic of empowerment and exploitation (van Dijck 2013). As far as empowerment is concerned, users are actively encouraged to participate within the blue boundaries of the site. Ideas are shared, stories are told, movements are started and, on the whole, a greater number of voices are heard than would ever be possible through the traditional channels of mass media. For Castells, the ubiquity of this self-communication both multiplies and diversifies the entry points for social discussion, arousing an “unprecedented autonomy for communicative subjects to communicate at large” (2009: 136). By the same token, our communicative performances provide economic value to the owners of the software systems through which they pass and, moreover, only exist insofar as they fit within the parameters set by these systems. This ensures that the ‘unprecedented communicative autonomy’ we have been granted is rigorously “shaped, controlled and curtailed by the growing concentration and interlocking of corporate media and network operators around the world” (Castells 2009: 136). In order to fully understand the workings of these corporate institutions, it is important we consider their economic strategies in relation to the affordances and constraints provided to the user. This critical

political economy approach to social media investigates how the market dynamics of software design come to shape and structure public discourse by forwarding some cultural forms at the expense of others (Fenton 2007).

Facebook continually advances the cultural form of being social and, in doing so, simultaneously constructs and reflects the importance of delineating social ties (De Ridder 2013a). In part, this is achieved through the site's focus on connectivity, which van Dijck describes as not only a 'fundamental user need' but also the "most transformative force in early 21st century cultures" (2013: 143). At the log in page we are told that Facebook helps us 'connect and share' with the people in our lives and, accordingly, a significant portion of our participation on the site involves forging and fortifying our network of social connections. This commonly cited notion of 'participation' conveniently conceals the fact that *all* of our networked activities contribute to the financial worth of the site in that they allow it to gather valuable metadata. As van Dijck explains, "the number of connections users make through a platform raises its monetary value, so that is why a site's architecture pushes users to constantly connect to others, to promote the formation of new groups and communities" (2013: 147).

Facebook's owners do not only want to connect us, they also want to identify *who* it is they are connecting. Participation in the online socialization afforded by the site is contingent upon some degree of self-representation from the user. Therefore, performance of the self can be seen as a necessary condition of involvement within this mediated space (Thumim 2012). Herein lies the economic importance of the site's 'real name policy' (Facebook 2014). Facebook co-founder and current CEO Mark Zuckerberg claims that his platform's enforcement of 'real' identity is aimed at fostering a more 'authentic' world in which information is shared with openness and freedom (Kirkpatrick 2010). But a moment's reflection reveals some glaring financial incentives that lie behind this somewhat contentious ideology. Facebook's servers are primarily composed of data amassed by the immaterial labour of the user, with the monetary value of the site resting on its ability to harness this data for the sake of advertising dollars (Grosser 2011). Advertisers obviously want to know the demographics of those users who receive their advertisements, and identity tourism doesn't quite fit this model. Thus, by prompting users to consolidate their 'virtual' and 'real' selves into a single, faithful representation, Facebook enhances the value

of its data in that it allows for highly refined target advertising. Given we freely hand this data over to the site, our online performances might be seen as an example of Tiziana Terranova's (2000) 'netslavery', a process whereby internet users voluntarily (though perhaps unknowingly) serve the digital economy by producing and circulating content at no cost.

Through its imposition of pre-determined inventories of self-representation, Facebook ensures the production of distinct advertising niches. Gender and sexual orientation, for example, can only find expression through one of very few rigid labels afforded to the user, making it easier for marketers to target particular user groups on the basis of binary constructs such as male/female or gay/straight. For Joseph Turow, this is a process of 'marketing discrimination', an economic strategy in which marketers increasingly rely on software systems to "generate ever-more-carefully defined customer categories – or niches – that tag consumers as desirable or undesirable for their business" (2006: 1).

Taken together, Facebook's relentless promotion of both connectivity and (authentic) self-representation perpetuates the felt need to formalize and articulate social relations. As far as intimate identity is concerned, this might be seen as reinforcing the late-modern progression of romance out of the private realm and into the public arena (Plummer 2003), with the medium itself becoming an active participant in the political dialogue (Rowe & Myers 2012). But if the political-economic logics that permeate the site have indeed played a role in shaping everyday understandings of intimacy, what exactly might this role be? Moreover, how might it relate to the ethico-political project that advocates 'radical pluralism' of intimate identity? Before addressing these questions, it is important we first examine the way in which socio-cultural norms manifest themselves within the design of the site.

### 3.1.2 The Socio-Cultural Layer

No social network site can be meaningfully separated from the socio-cultural environment in which it has evolved (van Schewick 2010). Facebook is both ordered by and ordering of its social surroundings, giving rise to a transformative 'media flow' in which particular values ooze from society into software design and then from software design back into society (Couldry

2008). In seeking to expose the mediatory role of the site, it is therefore important that we consider the normative cultural frameworks within which it operates.

Rob Cover trumpets social constructionist theories as allowing us to “expand on the critical frameworks through which social media activity can be contextualized within the broader cultural practices of identity” (2012: 178). To this end, Butler’s notion of performativity provides a useful lens through which to understand how Facebook’s design draws from available social dialogues and, in doing so, consolidates them as the norm. While her work is widely regarded as a critical, queer perspective, it can be usefully deployed in relation to our more general intimate identities (Cover 2012). Most crucially, perhaps, performativity stresses that identity formation is played out in accordance with a number of culturally-given discourses and practices, which become stabilized through the reiterative process of citation and repetition (Butler 1990). Thus, we come to understand ourselves and our relations through a ‘nexus’ of pre-determined categories and labels, creating fictional narratives of coherence so as to satisfy the cultural expectation that we remain somewhat consistent and intelligible over time (Butler 1993; 1997).

The notion of performativity can be usefully extended from the physical realm of the body to the mediated realm of Facebook, further dissolving the problematic real-virtual dichotomy. In fact, given the conceptual conflation of online and offline space, social media activity might be seen as no less ‘performative’ than the activity of any other domain. But just how flexible are these performances? While no domain is entirely free of constraint, one persistent criticism of social network sites in general is that they perpetuate a particularly diminished sense of participation (Carpentier 2011b; van Dijck 2009; Lewis & West 2009). Driven by the financial imperative to generate distinct advertising ‘niches’, Facebook imposes a number of fairly reductive identity toolkits, demanding that certain aspects of our lives are expressed through the simple ticking of a box. As such, performance does not arise through the autonomous act of *naming* but rather the more constrained act of *selecting* a name, or category. This is emblematic of Maurizio Lazzarato’s (2009) neoliberal idea of choice, whereby the economy masquerades itself as a ‘proliferation of choices’ yet only actually offers the consumer a limited selection that is ‘fixed and determined’ by prevailing power structures.

The particular selection of identity constructs afforded by Facebook has been clearly informed by the culturally-given discourses and practices to which Butler refers. There exist no new or unconventional categories within the identity inventories of the site but rather a condensed range of standard and stable options. As Cover laments, the site's representational tools provide "limited scope for playing out an identity in accord with anything but the most simplistic and simplified discourses articulating only the most limited normative choices – at least around gender, age and relationship status" (2012: 182). Echoing this sentiment, Ann Light (2011) criticizes the 'apolitical design' inherent to social network sites like Facebook; that is, design that perpetuates the status quo through the distribution of conservative cultural constructs. According to the notion of performativity, these constructs might be seen as producing coherent identity formations over time through the process of continuous citation and repetition. If this is indeed the case, the great danger is that we ultimately come to absorb the limitations of the software or, as Fenton puts it, "imagine ourselves through the means of mediated self-expression" (2012: 140). Returning to the vision of intimate identity as radically pluralistic, we should be highly critical of any spaces that stifle political negotiations of gender and sexuality as well as any structures than promote the passive reproduction of cultural norms rather than encouraging their transformation.

Clearly, market and cultural powers are closely connected. While the former drives Facebook's promotion of immense connection and faithful representation, the latter moulds the appearance of our resultant identity performances. Working in tandem, they do not aim to enhance the performative potential of the site but rather to inform the facilitation of a healthy bottom line. Of course, in and of itself, this general insight says little about the specific ways in which Facebook might mediate our intimate identities. What it does provide, however, is a solid foundation from which to launch a more focussed investigation.

### 3.2 Software Use

As useful as market and cultural insights may be, they imply a relatively linear relation between social media institutions and social media users. Are we

really so powerless to transcend the normative frameworks to which we are exposed? Rounding out the multi-layered approach, the consideration of everyday user practice in relation to Facebook's political-economic and socio-economic layers helps to assuage any overly deterministic claims, exposing the intricacies of the mediation process. In doing so, it also raises questions as to whether spaces like Facebook can ever really be seen as 'apolitical' in Light's (2011) sense of the term, since we always have some control over the meaning ascribed to our technologically mediated performances.

While Facebook's owners may impose rigid representational frames during the design process, its users can both consciously and unconsciously appropriate these frames for their own purposes and according to their own attitudes and beliefs. In an early account of the way in which society manoeuvres technology, Pinch and Bijker (1984) refer to the 'interpretive flexibility' of digital artefacts, which can mean different things to different groups. Over time, they argue, the extent to which these interpretations vary may lessen, with the social norms that circulate a technology's use effectively sanctioning some rituals over others. Nevertheless, user flexibility remains in principle and there always exists the subversive potential for users to undermine prescribed usage patterns.

The internet, as the expansive technological foundation upon which social network sites are constructed, is in a state of flux (Feenberg 2009). As such, Facebook is better viewed as an ongoing process than a fixed construct, an evolving scheme of constant reconfiguration (van Dijck 2013). New ideas emerge and the software system adapts to accommodate them, while the users, for their part, freely choose to accept, resist or entirely reject the ever-changing designs to which they are subjected. Given the economic value of the site primarily rests on our connecting and self-representing, the nature of these user choices has serious ramifications. For example, De Ridders (2013a) suggests that many of Netlog's (a Belgian social network site) previous users abandoned the social network site because they were not happy with its incessant promotion of being popular. This is why, while extremely useful, consideration of the political-economic and socio-cultural layers of Facebook's software is ill equipped to account for the mediation process in its entirety. Only when everyday user practices are examined in relation to the market and cultural powers of the site does a clearer picture begin to emerge.

To summarize, I have argued that Facebook performativity arises from the coalescence of software design and human activity. Driven by economic considerations, the site pushes us to connect and to self-represent through specific templates, which serve to produce advertising niches. These templates cannot be seen apart from the broader cultural milieu out of which they have been developed and therefore tend to reflect and reiterate the cultural norms that circulate their development. However, some agency is still afforded to the users, who are free to either adhere to the expected performance of the site or completely undermine it. Returning to the subject of intimate identity, this nuanced perspective allows us to address the normative frameworks through which our romantic ties are performed, while exposing the potentialities for emancipation within everyday life practices. In the following chapter, I critically analyze the relationship status at the level of user interface, seeking to unearth the market and cultural powers that may have influenced its design.

## 4. RELATIONSHIP STATUS DESIGN

While market and cultural powers pervade all aspects of software design, they are most readily observable at the level of interface. I commence this chapter by outlining the rationale for studying interface, before describing the specific interface elements that comprise the relationship status. Departing from Newland's (1999) framework for critical interface studies, I then analyze these elements in terms of their performative affordances and constraints. Based on my findings, I contend that the political-economic and socio-cultural layers of Facebook's design ultimately encourage a flattening out of our romantic performances whilst also ensuring they adhere to Western norms and icons.

### 4.1 Why Study Interface?

As Matthew Fuller (2008) points out, there exist no 'super X-ray specs' for the standard software user, no magical apparatus capable of taking us behind the screen such that we can see all the components of the underlying system and the electrical charges that animate them. This inaccessibility can be partly attributed to the highly confidential and proprietary nature of commercial software design, which renders available research techniques and paradigms of little genuine assistance (Graham 2005). But the inner workings of software are also difficult to study because they reside on such a fine temporal and symbolic scale and across such a vast range of quantities of data that they have an intrinsically different materiality to that with which we are able to deal with unaided (Wright 2008). Thus, for the purpose of this research, it is most practical and feasible to investigate the market and cultural powers of the relationship status at the level of *user interface*, understood here as the symbolic handle that makes software accessible to the user by providing a point of access to its core data and structures (Cramer and Fuller 2008).

The concept of user interface can be usefully described in relation to the concepts of platform and protocol, with the meaning of all three terms spilling out of the technical domain and into the social. *Platforms* are either hardware or software structures (or a combination of the two) that help to code market and cultural practices into *protocols*: the formalized sets of rules and standards that regulate communication between computing systems (Galloway & Thacker

2007). While protocols themselves may be ‘relatively indifferent’ to the content they accommodate, their usability is still determined by the way in which they are constructed by their programmers and controlled by their owners (Galloway 2004). As such, their logic can be seen as inherently arising from within institutions. This logic then interacts with the user through the simple and often symbolic elements of the *user interface*. Some elements are technical, taking the form of buttons, menus, stars and the like. Others are regulatory, such as the rule that prospective Facebook users must state their date of birth before they are granted access to the site. Together, these elements serve to steer online performance in accordance with the internal and largely obscured protocols of the platform.

Interface constitutes such a fundamental element of new media technologies that we often come to take our interface interactions for granted. As Newland explains, this software-based era has diminished our propensity to “take stock and reflect on the process of interface creation and consumption” (1999: 83). The challenge, he argues, lies in exposing the particular philosophies that become ‘embodied’ in interface design and exploring the ways in which they interact with the user. This first requires a detailed description of the interface in question.

#### 4.2 Describing the Relationship Status

At the level of interface, Facebook’s relationship status allows its users to articulate their intimate identities by selecting one of eleven pre-determined categories: ‘single’, ‘in a relationship’, ‘engaged’, ‘married’, ‘it’s complicated’, ‘in an open relationship’, ‘widowed’, ‘separated’, ‘divorced’, ‘in a civil union’ or ‘in a domestic partnership’. With the exception of those categories that imply an absence of romance (‘single’, ‘widowed’, ‘separated’ and ‘divorced’), this process also requires users to select a romantic partner from their existing friend networks. It is only after the friend accepts their relationship request that the relation itself becomes official in the eyes of the interface. At this point, a link is formed between the new lovers and prominently displayed in the ‘About’ section of their respective profiles, binding them in what might be considered the social media equivalent of holy matrimony. Accompanying the link is the wording of the relationship category that has been selected by the couple and

also a small love heart icon. Unless the users have reconfigured their privacy settings, this information is visible to anyone and everyone with a Facebook account, regardless of whether or not they are 'friends' with the romantic partners.

To strike up a Facebook relationship is also to create a 'Life Event', whereby the relationship status enters the News Feed and is made available for liking and commenting. Here, the love heart icon of the About section is replaced by two simple human pictograms, which serve to represent the couple. The implied gender of these figures varies in accordance with the gender categories selected by the partners when they first created their profiles, taking the form of male-male, female-female or male-female. In an important recent development, Facebook now allows its users to select a 'custom' gender and a 'neutral' gendered pronoun after they have identified themselves as 'male' or 'female' during the sign-up process. However, when either or both partners select these new categories, the pictograms revert to a male-female representation, with no alternate images afforded to accompany the expanded terminology. Over time, any adaptations to the relationship status generate further life events. When re-defining an existing relationship (such as the progression from single to engaged) the iconography goes unchanged. When terminating an existing relationship, however, (such as the progression from married to divorced) a broken heart icon supplants the human figures. In order to better understand how Facebook may mediate our intimate identities through its relationship status, it is imperative that both the technical and regulatory elements of this interface design are systematically analyzed.

### 4.3 Analyzing the Relationship Status

Newland (1999) affords a systematic set of questions for interrogating interface design, which serve to address its creation of differences, stabilization of contexts, recirculation of norms, requirement of learning mechanisms and maintenance of interactions. Taken together, these questions provide a useful litany of lenses through which to examine the central issue of how interface design informs interface use. Drawing from Newland's model, the following analysis concentrates specifically on context stabilization and norm recirculation, each of which are considered in light of the political-economic and

socio-cultural powers that circulate Facebook's software. A total of five regulatory and technical elements of the relationship status are studied<sup>1</sup>.

#### 4.3.1 Regulative Element 1

*In order to articulate their intimate identities through the relationship status, Facebook users must select one of the eleven pre-determined relationship categories.*

The market powers that underpin Facebook's software development dictate a need for carefully defined consumer niches, which espouse effective target advertising. By offering just eleven pre-determined relationship categories, the site is able to rigidly order our intimate identities, helping marketers to predict our buying behaviour. For example, the 'engaged' status allows the likes of wedding advisors and honeymoon planners to target prospective customers with consummate ease and precision. But while this may be a great convenience for the advertiser, it also marks a great blow to the performative flexibility of the user. To express our intimate identities via the relationship status is to define them using the restrictive language of the interface and thus neglect a diverse and culturally complex array of alternatives. In fairness to Facebook, this language system is gradually expanding, having grown to accommodate 'widowed', 'divorced' and 'separated' in 2009, and then 'in a civil union' and 'in a domestic partnership' in 2011 (Inside Facebook 2011). But given the immense spectrum of human emotion that accompanies the experience of romance, can our most intimate of ties ever really squeeze within the confines of a ticked box? As Lanier argues, the incredible intricacy of our social world is such that we "should leave open the possibility that the relationship can't be represented in any digital database" (2010: 27)

Lanier's (2010) concern for 'locked-in' design decisions is also of relevance to the relationship status and evidence of the lock-in process can already be found within the rival social media space of Google+. Unveiled in 2011, Google+ affords romantic performance via its own interface feature, which also happens to be called the 'relationship status'. Rather than expanding or at

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all descriptions of the interface listed in this thesis are correct as of February 24, 2014.

least rewording Facebook's range of options, however, Google's version offers precisely the same definitions as that of its predecessor, from 'single' to 'in a domestic partnership' to 'it's complicated'. In doing so, it serves to further endorse these particular romantic formulations at the expense of any others that fall outside of the representational scheme.



Figure 2: The relationship categories afforded by the relationship status

If Facebook simply allowed us to *write out* a relationship status, many of the existing labels would undoubtedly still arise. But, almost paradoxically, these labels would somehow be different. To type a term like 'engaged' into a text box is to instantly convey a more subtle sense of intimacy than to select the same category from a multiple-choice database. This is because the term has been freely constructed over any other possible combination of letters that denote a similar meaning. We are not 'betrothed', 'ringed' or 'spoken for'. We are 'engaged', and we have spelled this out in our own language and according to our own beliefs. In this scenario, users would clearly have a little bit more freedom to illustrate the intricacies of their romantic bonds. But the affordance of a custom-composed relationship status would also welcome an onslaught of nonsensical and unconventional constructs, impairing Facebook's financially lucrative ability to target neatly ordered user groups with relevant advertisements. This is a prime example of how the political-economic layer of software development ultimately influences user practice. Fuelled by capitalistic imperatives, Facebook imposes a finite list of relationship status boxes, which can be ticked or unticked as part of our restricted identity performance. The

convoluted interaction between the social and technical is such that we then run the risk of seeing ourselves and each other through this rather limited lens.

#### 4.3.1 Regulative Element 2

*Facebook users can only list one romantic partner through the relationship status.*

By locking-in some ideas, interface design is also responsible for locking-out others, which face extinction as notions of online and offline continue to conflate. While the relationship status allows users to identify themselves as 'in an open relationship', it prohibits the listing of multiple partners. In doing so, it effectively delegitimizes the belief that romance can arise from the interplay of more than two participants. This is in spite of the fact that polygamy is recognized by civil law in over forty non-Western countries and widely practiced elsewhere in the world. It is also in opposition to the growing choir of anthropologists who now contend that we are genetically predisposed to maintain multifarious intimate partners, having evolved from egalitarian hunter-gatherer tribes that shared sexual interaction in much the same way as property and paternity (Ryan & Jethá 2010). Taken together, these developments suggest contemporary conceptions of monogamy are little more than social constructs of predominantly Western origin.

If Facebook's primary motivation is to monetize its data through effective advertising techniques, why would the relationship status prohibit polygamous performance? The answer here may concern the prevailing culture out of which the site was born. While a demographic breakdown of Facebook's staff is not available, broader Silicon Valley research indicates that the technology industry is dominated by Caucasian men, with a particularly acute underrepresentation of ethnic minorities in upper-level management (Shih 2006). Given the Western origins of the site, then, it is perhaps unsurprising that the relationship status has come to reflect Western notions of intimacy, reinforcing the longstanding normative expression of romance as a one-to-one paradigm. This arrangement ensures traditional monogamous ideals are continuously reproduced rather than transfigured over time. In doing so, it also protects the site from conservative political critiques. From the perspective of the Facebook's owners, this is surely

a convenient outcome. From the perspective of a political project that strives for radical pluralism of intimacy, however, it is precisely this kind of ironclad interface design that we should be questioning.

### 4.3.3 Regulative Element 3

*For a romance to be recognized via the relationship status, both partners must select the same category.*

Another important aspect of the relationship status is that – with the exception of the ‘single’, ‘separated’, ‘divorced’ and ‘widowed’ options – each partner must select the same title in order to have an intimate identity recognized. This means we cannot list ourselves as ‘in a relationship’ to a spouse who has selected ‘it’s complicated’. The interface demands that partners either come to a mutual agreement as to the status of their relationship or give up on using the feature altogether. In part, this regulative rule helps to promote cleanliness and consistency. The feature would be rendered nonsensical if, for example, one user were ‘married’ to another who was ‘single’. But, as Backstrom acknowledges, the mutual categorization of romance is also important in that it helps the site to organize its social neighbourhoods into ‘conceptually coherent groups’ (Backstrom & Kleinberg 2013). In turn, this allows for the provision of more engaging News Feed content and the presentation of more relevant advertisements.

Facebook’s enforced mutual definition of intimate identity is at odds with more traditional accounts of romance, whereby congruence is not necessarily expected of the partners’ respective relationship labels (Welch & Rubin 2002). For example, one partner may consider a relationship to be ‘going steady’ while the other classifies it as a ‘casual fling’. In natural language, relationship definitions are individually constructed and interpreted, with different labels signifying different levels of perceived significance. The same cannot be said of Facebook’s relationship definitions, which are constructed by the architects of the site and imposed on the users courtesy of an ‘eleven sizes fit all’ philosophy. By demanding that one label is mutually agreed upon, Facebook effectively irons out any quirks that might have flavoured individual interpretations of the intimacy, further homogenizing notions of romance in general. Even the most

complicated of relationships, by virtue of their very complicatedness, can be defined with the swift click of a button: this user is now in an 'it's complicated' with that user. Ironically enough, it's an incredibly simple process.

When it comes to mapping the trajectory of these mutually agreed upon categories, Mark Knapp's (1978) relational stage model is one of the most influential theories from which to draw. Using the 'dual staircase' as a metaphor, Knapp frames the romantic experience as a process that passes through ten overlapping and somewhat nebulous stages of escalation, stabilization and descent. Each stage is considered of equal importance to the romance itself, which ebbs and flows and, inevitably, evaporates over time. By contrast, the Facebook-mediated romantic trajectory falls into more official stages. Categories like 'engaged', 'married', 'in a domestic partnership', 'in a civil union', 'separated' and 'divorced' all reflect the legal progression of the relation, whereas Knapp focuses on emotional and intimate development. If we approach the social network site not as a 'virtual' environment but rather an everyday life place, it would appear that Facebook is ordering our everyday life performances of romance into more rigid and formalized narratives.

#### 4.3.4 Technical Element 1

*The relationship status is prominently displayed on each partner's profile and accompanied by the icon of a love heart.*

Once a relationship category has been mutually agreed upon, there exist only two remaining possibilities for representing the tie: prominent display in the About section of each partners' profile, or no display whatsoever. Middle ground is simply not afforded. Given the default option is prominent display, it would appear the designers of the site regard the status as a significant identity marker. If we 'like' an actor, dancer, musician or sports star, such information is heaped with a pile of other 'likes' and relegated to the periphery of our timelines. If, however, we like a certain special someone and the affection is made Facebook-public, our romance is granted prime real estate. Indeed, it nestles in just below other important identifiers such as name and profile picture. This central space is only made available for the romantic relation, ensuring that social, family and professional relations are made to take a figurative backseat.

Consequently, there is an implicit prioritization of the romantic relation over the 'friend' relation that otherwise defines our social connections.

Sitting alongside the prominent relationship status, the appearance of a couple's romantic iconography is also determined by the site. Regardless of the category a romance takes, it is invariably paired with the heart symbol, an ideograph that traditionally represents deep endearment and is often translated to the word 'love'. Curiously, this means an 'it's complicated' status is bestowed with the same iconographic implications as 'in a relationship', 'in a domestic partnership' or even 'married'. It doesn't matter whether a couple of teenagers have gone Facebook Official after holding hands for the first time or a couple of grandparents have decided to have their fifty-year marriage recognized online, the symbol of romance will not vary. Conversely, reverting from romantic involvement to a 'single', 'separated', 'divorced' or 'widowed' status engenders a broken heart, imbued with connotations of lovesickness and despair. The user has no say over this representation. Of course, broken or not, the subtle icon is unlikely to have us reconceive romance in any drastic sense. Nevertheless, it serves as yet another example of how Facebook prescribes the form that romance can take.



Figure 3: The prominent positioning of the relationship status

Facebook's use of the love heart also illustrates the extent to which software design is woven through its surrounding cultural milieu. Having emerged in France during the Middle Ages, the ever-ubiquitous heart symbol is widely considered a product of Western culture. As with notions of monogamy, however, Facebook enforces it as a global norm. This in spite of the fact that non-Western cultures have made use of their own unique symbols throughout the ages. The maple leaf, for example, has long been used to represent romance in Japan, while the Chinese associate apples with intimacy and adoration. In order to fully participate on Facebook, users of these backgrounds must do away with their traditional symbols of intimate identity and adhere to the Western standard. If this standard is then passively accepted without regard for its exclusions, we run the risk of blinding ourselves to alternate forms of romantic iconography, inadvertently performing our intimacies in line with the prevailing Western norm.

#### 4.3.5 Technical Element 2

*Changing a Facebook relationship creates a Life Event, for which two gender-specific pictograms serve to represent the couple.*

Although Facebook initially allowed its users to identify themselves as gender-neutral, this affordance was abruptly abolished in 2008. For the following six years, all new members were required to select either a 'male' or 'female' box during the sign-up process, precluding the possibility of more fluid self-performance. The site's product management team cited grammatical and translational issues for the change, issues that were purportedly raised by the users themselves (Gleit 2008). This is a perfectly reasonable explanation. Prior to the ruling, those users who did not specify a gender participated within the site as a 'they' rather than a 'he' or 'she', leading to some fairly clumsy News Feed phrasing (most notably, perhaps, 'User X has tagged *themselves* in *their* own photo'). Thus, by insisting that all users defined their gender, the site made its ongoing stream of information more legible, creating what it described as an 'enhanced Facebook experience' (Gleit 2008). But any gains in legibility were balanced out by losses in performativity, with this approach enforcing the

continuous reproduction of gender as both a biological fact and a binary construct.

Facebook crucially demonstrated its own awareness of the importance of gender fluidity in February 2014, when it unveiled the affordance of fifty-six new 'custom' gender options to accompany the traditional male and female constructs. Also introduced within this update was the ability for users to select their own gendered pronoun from a list of 'her', 'him' and 'them'. As Facebook software engineer Brielle Harrison explains, "There's going to be a lot of people for whom this is going to mean nothing, but for the few it does impact, it means the world" (as cited in Mendoza 2014: n.p.). But while the importance of these new performative options should not be understated, concerns remain as to Facebook's circulation of gender norms. Most significantly, perhaps, the new options are only made available to users who have already identified themselves as 'male' or 'female' during the sign-up process and must be selected from a peripheral section of the site. This might be seen as suggesting that any construct that falls outside of the longstanding male-female binary is abnormal or atypical.

As far as the pictograms of the relationship status are concerned, the expanded terminology has not led to an expanded range of gendered representations. Indeed, all Facebook couples are still depicted through the symbolic form of male-male, female-female or male-female once their relationships have been made 'official'. These figures are simple, straightforward and seemingly innocuous, closely resembling the common iconography that can be found on public toilets throughout the world. But beneath their pleasant surface, they can also be seen as reducing the gendered aspect of intimate identity. This representational scheme ensures that each partner is neatly displayed as either male or female and, by extension, that the relationship itself is displayed as perfectly homosexual or heterosexual. No alternatives are afforded to the passive user despite the fact that Facebook has an estimated five million transgender users whose intimate identities do not align within these normalized figures (McNicol 2013). Returning to Butler's theory of performativity, the small yet significant pictograms can thus be seen as 'constitutive categories', which serve to "keep gender in its place by posturing as the foundational illusions of identity" (1990: 33-34). Not only is the performance of gendered intimacy restricted through the regulatory functions of the relationship

status, the intimate partners have no control over this process after moving their intimacy online.



Figure 4: The gendered pictograms that accompany a Life Event

In this chapter, I have delineated the concept of interface design, arguing that it constitutes an important and ubiquitous yet often under acknowledged aspect of the software system. With a focus on intimate identity, I have described Facebook's relationship status as it manifests itself at the level of interface and analyzed the regulatory and technical elements of this manifestation. The following chapter seeks to overcome a technologically deterministic perspective by investigating the everyday practices of the users in relation to the constraints imposed by Facebook's most prominent tool of romantic expression.

## 5. RELATIONSHIP STATUS USE

In this chapter, I draw upon a thematic analysis of blog entries to highlight some of the most prominent ways in which the relationship status is used and perceived. Here, three key themes of varying strength are identified: validation, avoidance and appropriation. After elaborating on these themes, I discuss their implications for our performance and understanding of intimate identity.

### 5.1 Researching Relationship Status Use

In seeking to shed light on the everyday life practices of the relationship status, a thematic analysis was conducted on blog entries written by Facebook users. Blogs come in a great number of different shapes and sizes and can be broadly understood as personalized web sites that convey a sense of their authors' passions and points of view (Nardi et al., 2004). Blog entries often take the form of narrative vignettes, a characteristic that makes them particularly useful for examining our Facebook mediated tales of intimacy. They also tend to accommodate less reserved or restrained discourse than we encounter through face-to-face interaction, another useful quality for the current study considering romantic experiences are not always easy to communicate (Constable 2003). By the same token, a notable limitation of blog entries is that they rarely reveal the full demographics of their authors. Many of the blogs analyzed for this research lacked concrete insight into who was actually blogging, preventing examination of the extent to which relationship status performance might vary in accordance with age, sex, ethnicity and the like. More general social media monitoring and analytics indicates that just over half of the blogging population fall between the ages of 21 and 35, with an even breakdown of bloggers who identify as male and female (Sysomos 2014). However, in the absence of specific information regarding the current sample, this research makes no demographic assumptions.

A purposive sample for the research was constructed from the results of four Google Blog searches<sup>2</sup>, each of which related to notions of Facebook intimacy: 'Facebook Official' (118,000 results), 'Facebook Romance' (2,470

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<sup>2</sup> Each search was performed on January 5, 2014.

results), 'Facebook Couple' (3,310 results) and 'Facebook Relationship Status' (148,000 results). Given the high volume of results, investigation of each query was limited to the first ten pages, a total of 400 occasionally overlapping links. Unsurprisingly, not every link led to relevant content. Some blogs referenced an 'official' Facebook page rather than the idea of going 'Facebook Official', while others were essentially just spam aimed at directing traffic to a different website. To ensure a consistent process of selection, simple criteria were devised to systematically identify those entries that warranted inclusion within the final sample: (1) the author is a Facebook user, (2) the author makes reference to either the way in which the relationship status is used or the way in which its use is interpreted and (3) the author reflects on personal observations and experiences (rather than merely reeling off the findings of more formal studies). Of the 400 search results collected and recorded, 62 were deemed appropriate for the sample and subjected to further analysis.

Currently Facebook Official	Previously Facebook Official	Never Facebook Official	Relationship Status Unclear	Total
28	13	8	13	62

Table 1: Insight into the number of bloggers from the sample who (1) currently use the relationship status, (2) do not currently use the relationship status but have previously used the relationship, (3) have never having used the relationship status and (4) do not explicitly reference their current or previous use of the relationship status

Thematic analysis is a useful tool for theorizing across multiple qualitative accounts, aiding both the detection of common patterns and the creation of conceptual groupings (Jupp 2006). Consistent with the work of Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2008), the current research used three layers of coding in an attempt to uncover thematic elements from within the data set. At the most rudimentary level, first-order coding served to organize and categorize the information by labelling fragments of text. Interpretation was intentionally minimized during this process, resulting in a range of purely descriptive codes based on the denotative meaning of keywords. For example, those fragments that explicitly cited the relationship status as a means of moving private romance into public space were labelled 'public'. Probing beyond the layer of description, second-order coding aimed to generate superordinate labels reflective of the deeper motives and meanings that may accompany relationship

status performance. This required careful consideration of how the bloggers' descriptive language might have related to their interpretations of the relationship status and its common usage. Here, more generic codes like 'providing proof' and 'protecting privacy' surfaced, encompassing some of the first-order codes in an effort to capture the significance of larger textual segments. By comparing theme frequencies and identifying theme co-occurrence, third-order coding was then used to draw out any overarching behavioural patterns from within the data set. For this final layer, analysis sought to establish what it means to perform the relationship status in various ways and how the technological design of the site may mediate this meaning. The results indicate three general usage patterns of varying strengths: 'validation', 'avoidance' and 'appropriation'.

In the spirit of this thesis, which alerts us to the dangers of rigidly categorizing complex phenomena, the process of qualitative thematic analysis was considered particularly appropriate for understanding everyday relationship status practice. Qualitative approaches are broadly considered an effective way in which to unearth the subtleties of social processes as they unfold over time, revealing a richer vein of information and insight (Howell et al. 2012). However, it is worth noting that the conceptual grouping of information inherent to thematic analysis is still reductive and problematically implies that different accounts express the same meaning if they have been assembled under the same coding labels. This is an inevitable outcome of the research approach and the following section seeks to assuage any overly categorical findings by illuminating the subtle differences that exist within each theme.

## 5.2 The Themes of Relationship Status Use

While validation, avoidance and appropriation all constitute third-order codes, this is in no way meant to imply that they appear with equal frequency within the data. The notion of romantic validation is considerably more prevalent than that of avoidance, which is itself more prevalent than appropriation. This section seeks to elaborate on the first- and second-order codes that underpin these usage patterns and consider how and why the relationship status may have come to be understood in these ways.

### 5.2.1 Validating the Existence and Intensity of a Relationship

One clear and prominent pattern to emerge from the data involves using the relationship status to validate the existence of an intimate identity. Many of the blog entries use terms like ‘declaration’, ‘proclamation’ and ‘real’ to describe the act of going Facebook Official, suggesting a certain ‘proof’ of romance that arises through the interface feature. As one user explains: “a plus of making the relationship Facebook Official is that it makes it easier for us to assert the existence of a partner when we are apart ... [H]aving the explicit hypertextual links between our profiles is a digital representation of the social link and proof of existence/validity.” This process of validation is often framed as a necessary step in the contemporary development of romance, marking the precise point at which a relationship ‘officially’ gets underway. Here, it appears the interface does not merely come to *reflect* everyday intimacy but also plays a role in its *construction*. One blog entry refers to the ostensibly simple act of ‘pressing a button’ carrying far more emotional weight as it is actually performed:

*I asked her: make it Facebook official? And then it hit me. As someone who was single, it seemed so petty. But as someone who was actually in love, it was much more than that. It was some sort of public profession. It was like some sort of proclamation. I had a different angle on it. It wasn't just pressing a button. It was like some secret, only we both shared, now being public to the world.*

So how is it that the relationship status has come to ‘prove’ the existence of romance for certain users? In part, the theme of romantic validation may derive from the public linking of profiles. Facebook’s architects made a small yet significant alteration to social media romance when, capitalizing on the networked structure of the site, they allowed users to hyperlink to their partners rather than merely list them. The formation of this link requires both parties to consent to the same relationship category and thus mutually acknowledge a Facebook-generated definition of the bond.

But it is not just the *existence* of an intimate identity that appears validated through the site in these cases. The use of phrases like ‘display/show commitment’ and ‘show ... we’re serious’ indicate that the relationship status

can also validate the *intensity* of an intimate identity. By moving a private relationship into the ‘public’ space of Facebook, these users consider themselves to have signalled a deeper sense of connection, dispelling ideas of a casual fling. The partners must be serious if they are prepared to perform their adoration in front of friends and family, or so the logic goes. This conception of the relationship status is congruent with previous research, which reports that partners who go Facebook Official are likely to experience greater feelings of commitment than partners who refuse to publicize their ties on the site (Papp et al. 2012). For at least some users, then, Facebook is clearly seeping into everyday intimate practice, with the emblem of its romantic interface feature serving as something of a digital promise ring.

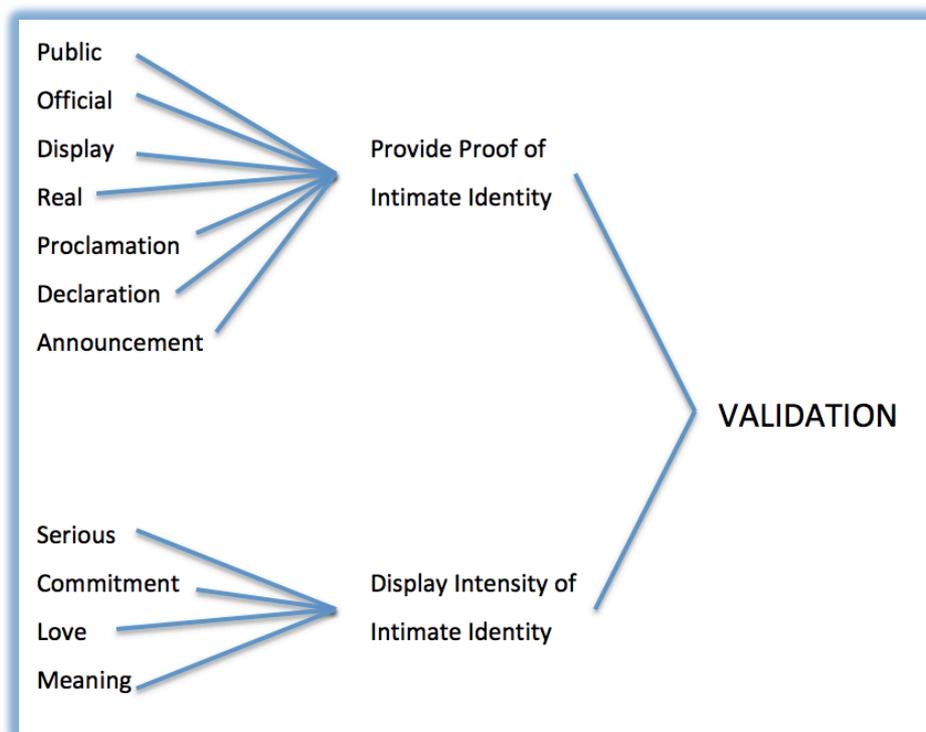


Figure 5: Unpacking the first- and second-order codes of validation

### 5.2.2 Avoiding the Use of the Relationship Status

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, not all users from the sample allow the relationship status to validate the existence and intensity of their romantic ties. This is because not all users interact with the interface feature at all. In stark contrast to the validation theme, the analysis revealed a counter-trend of avid relationship

status avoidance. Interestingly, this practice appears at least partly fuelled by a general agitation with the idea that social media institutions like Facebook are being used to substantiate our intimate identities. Terms like ‘validate’ and ‘define’ are explicitly cast in a negative light in some of these accounts. Embracing similar sentiments, one user speaks of wanting to ‘use my own terms’ when it comes to defining a romance, while another asserts that there is something inherently nonsensical about having a relationship ‘depend’ on Facebook’s interface:

*[Y]ou still need Facebook to validate your relationship? Clearly something about that just doesn't make sense. I think sometimes we get a little too wrapped up in the little details and what it all means. But at the end of the day, a relationship should be based on how you feel about each other and how you are together. Instead of letting Facebook define your relationship, do it yourself. If you have something genuinely great with another person, that's what matters. And, honestly, if your relationship depends on your Facebook status then you're probably in the wrong relationship*

There is an obvious contrast between accounts of this type and accounts that endorse romantic validation. While the site’s provision of a relationship status has impelled some users to publicize their intimate identities, it has also provoked others to push against these limited options. This reiterates the importance of not automatically assuming that Facebook dictates the social significance of its interface features or the way in which we use them.

Some users also cite privacy concerns as having driven their avoidance of Facebook romance, referring to their relationships with terms like ‘my business’, ‘personal’ and ‘private life’. But this does not imply their romantic narratives are unaffected by the site. As one entry notes, the relationship status has the capacity to influence romantic experiences even in the absence of its use:

*When my boyfriend asked me if I wanted to put our relationship status on Facebook, I said no. I valued my privacy and I was afraid of what would happen if we broke up and everyone heard about it through their News Feeds. This upset him; he thought I was*

*unsure about our relationship and that I didn't want other guys knowing I was no longer available.*

Accounts of this type suggest that, regardless of whether an intimacy is made Facebook Official, it has become increasingly difficult to entirely detach the relationship status from our romantic lives.

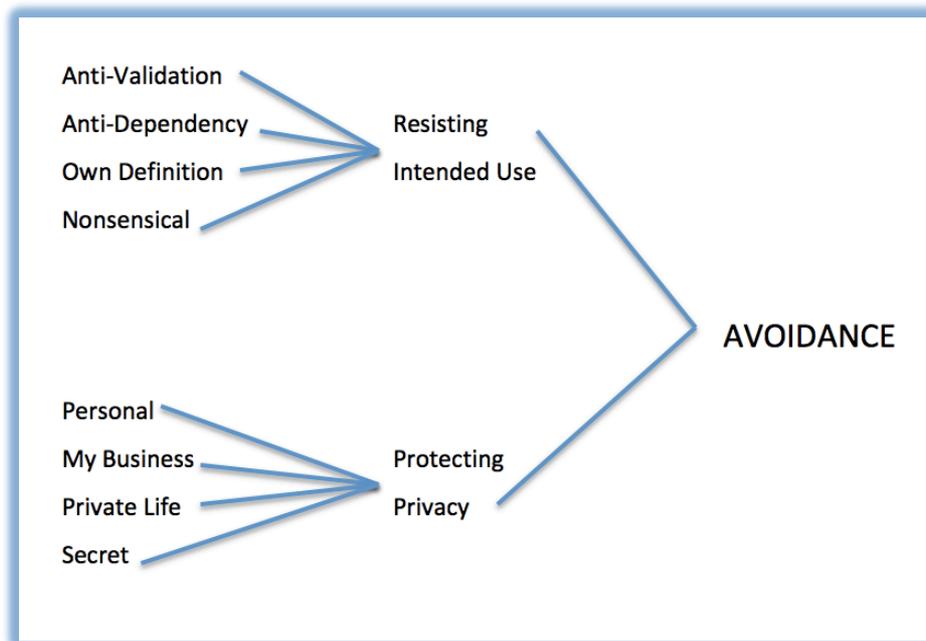


Figure 6: Unpacking the first- and second-order codes of avoidance

### 5.2.3 Appropriating Relationship Status Use to Display Friendship

Not every relationship status implies intimate identity. A less common but equally interesting theme to have emerged from the data concerns the appropriation of Facebook's interface to reformulate platonic social relations. Here, offline friends become online lovers courtesy of 'fake' engagements, marriages, civil unions and the like. These relations are generally performed not as an act of resistance or rebellion but rather of 'playful' misrepresentation, with users most often describing them as 'jokes' and 'gags'. But as one blog points out, the act of going 'fake' Facebook Official can also be seen as generating a more nuanced friendship link:

*My Facebook profile says I'm married and has for the last four*

*years. But it's not exactly true ... These Facebook 'marriages' between best friends have become the digital iteration of friendship necklaces, two halves of a heart, bought at Claire's and displayed as a proclamation.*

Rather than validating romance, the relationship status has been commandeered as a testimony of friendship in these cases. This is a particularly interesting development given social network sites have been previously criticized for their binarization of social ties into 'friend' and 'not friend' categories (boyd 2006; Hull et al. 2008; Solove 2007). By going Facebook Official, 'fake' romantic partners seem to have found a way to transcend the standardized 'friend' label with which they are initially assigned, prominently linking their profiles in a different space and under a different title. Again, this reiterates the importance of considering software design in dialectical relation to user appropriation, as the intended use of a platform does not necessarily inform its actual enactment.

By playing around with the relationship status, these users also effectively undermine the validity of more sincere romantic ties. Indeed, some of the bloggers who claim to have 'faked' a Facebook intimacy report having generated 'confusion', 'disbelief' and 'dismay' amongst their friends, who were initially unsure of the legitimacy of their status.

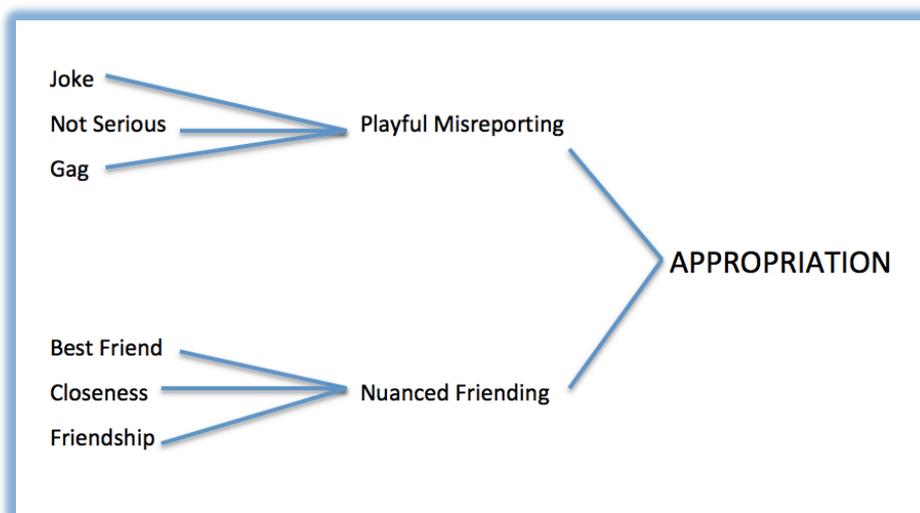


Figure 7: Unpacking the first- and second-order codes of appropriation

### 5.3 Discussion

Clearly, the relationship status is used in different ways and for different purposes. While some users go Facebook Official to validate their intimate identities, others undermine the legitimacy of the relationship status by striking up 'fake' romances with their friends. Then there is a group of users who refrain from engaging with the interface feature altogether, citing not only their disapproval of Facebook's restrictive language but also privacy concerns. These performance variations call into question the idea that social media institutions like Facebook uniformly affect our everyday practices. However, returning to the ethico-political perspective that strives for radical pluralism of intimate identity, the majority of usage and appropriation patterns exposed in this analysis are still rather concerning.

Regardless of the relationship category selected, those of us who use the relationship status to validate our intimate identities are also implicitly reinforcing the normative cultural frameworks embedded within the site. This is because the act of going Facebook Official does not merely offer 'proof' as to the existence of a romance but also imbues the appearance of this romance with several problematic ideas. Most significantly, perhaps, those users who seek to *validate* their intimacies through the relationship status also necessarily *perform* their intimacies as perfectly heterosexual or homosexual, precluding the possibility of more challenging and culturally complex constructions. Moreover, the 'validated' relationship that emerges from this interface interaction is defined in Facebook's limited language and made to progress through formal (rather than emotional) stages of development.

Somewhat alarmingly, there is no evidence from the blog data to suggest that those users who deploy Facebook as a validation tool are even aware of the ways in which their romances are shaped and reduced by the site's interface. The relationship status is repeatedly framed as a useful representational feature in these accounts, without the scantest of allusions to the mediatory role of its underlying software. This echoes the findings of several other social media studies, lending further support to the notion that software's impact on society has become extremely difficult to trace. For example, in his exploration of the intimate narrative as it appears on Netlog, De Ridder notes that the users he interviewed were caught off guard by the

very idea that software might structure our romantic performances: “remarkably, the subject of the role of the software platform was very difficult to explain to them ... they were surprised by the question and did not know how to answer (2013a: 14). Similarly, van Dijck (2013) posits that ‘ordinary’ users generally conceive Facebook as a simple facilitator of pre-existing sociality without ever pausing to consider the way in which this sociality is ‘regulated’ by the site itself. Taken together, these insights suggest that the normative intimate frameworks entrenched within Facebook’s design tend to go unnoticed and, crucially, unquestioned.

The occasional practice of appropriating the relationship status to nuance Facebook friendship might resemble an act of resistance at first glance, however, closer inspection of the data reveals it is more of a joke than an active push against the refractory interface of the site. Furthermore, in spite of the ‘fakeness’ of these romances, the faux-partners are still articulating their faux-intimacy in Facebook’s terms and through Facebook’s icons. So although this playful endeavour may undermine the validity of other Facebook relationships, it does not overcome the prevailing representational scheme of the site. It is also worth noting that, while the current study makes no assumptions as to the average age of those users who claim to have performed a ‘fake’ romance, research conducted by Wolfram (2013) suggests that the ‘goofy’ misreporting of relationship status is usually only carried out by the youngest members of the site. This suggests that the practice of subverting the intended use of the interface might constitute little more than a short-lived adolescent rite of passage.

Only with the theme of avoidance is there any indication of intentional rebellion against interface design. Here, a handful of users assert that their romances are too rich and messy and difficult and wonderful to be squeezed into the confines of a ticked box. But while they have evidently taken to blogs to vent this disapproval, there is no evidence to suggest they have actually taken any action within Facebook other than simply not engaging with relationship status. Within the mediated space of the site, then, it would appear their avoidance takes the form of a silent, barely noticeable protest. These users may not be recirculating the problematic cultural norms built into the interface, but nor are they able to introduce new concepts that challenge the status quo.

On the whole, this chapter has highlighted the user side of the struggle to define a platform's social meaning. Through the process of thematic analysis, I have identified three prevailing patterns of relationship status practice – validation, avoidance and appropriation – two of which may not be congruent with the intended use of the interface. By the same token, I have argued that none of these practices are particularly promising if we are seeking a design that promotes radical intimate plurality.

## 6. CONCLUSION

As software continues to weave its way through the very fabric of our society, our lives are increasingly shaped and structured by the rules of software systems. Popular social network sites are at the forefront of this development and it is important we deal with them as such. Drawing from the relationship status as an ongoing example, this thesis has sought to investigate the variety of ways in which Facebook's technological design might mediate our performance of intimate identity.

I have argued that Facebook's enforcement of 'real' self-performance severely diminishes notions of the internet as a place of identity exploration and tourism. Rather than 'computer-crossdressing' as different race, gender or age, we are made to navigate the site in a way that promotes a singular and somewhat static sense of self. This means Facebook does not afford some kind of alternate reality for self-discovery but rather an everyday place in which we carry out everyday life practices. Crucially, the flexibility of these practices only stretches as far as the specific parameters that are shaped and set by Zuckerberg and his entourage of software designers, an arrangement that might be seen as emblematic of the more general integration of software with society. Seeking to avoid a technologically deterministic viewpoint while still addressing the implications of this development, I have proposed we approach social media institutions as serving a mediatory role, whereby they shape, rather than dictate, user performance.

To view social network sites as mediating performance is to recognize a non-linear interaction between the social and the technical. Departing from van Dijck's (2013) multi-layered approach, I have broadly addressed the political-economic and socio-cultural layers of Facebook's software design in dialectical relation to our specific uses and appropriations of the site. This has revealed two obvious financial incentives that inform Facebook's promotion of social connection and self-representation: the gathering of valuable metadata and the cultivation of neatly defined advertising niches. Through the lens of Butler's (1990; 1993; 1997) performativity, I have also emphasised the extent to which the appearance of these connections and self-representations can be seen as having drawn from prevailing cultural discourses and, in doing so, having reaffirmed these discourses as the norm. Of course, we are not forced

to use Facebook as its designers intended. Addressing the human side of social media performance, I have argued that we still have some power in appropriating the meaning of the site, regardless of how directive its software may appear.

The second half of my thesis has focussed on the mediation process in specific relation to Facebook's relationship status. This has involved a description of the status at the level of interface and a critical analysis of five of its regulative and technical elements. Drawing from Newland's (1999) framework for critical interface studies, I have carefully considered how these elements may have been shaped by the market and cultural powers that underpin Facebook's design and also how they may come to limit our intimate identity performance. On the basis of this analysis, I have suggested that the site promotes a form of romance congruent with longstanding Western norms and icons.

Finally, through the thematic analysis of a blog sample, I have sought to gain insight into our everyday intimate practices on Facebook. While there is some evidence of users resisting and appropriating the relationship status, I have found that, for these particular accounts, the interface feature most often serves to validate the existence and intensity of intimate identities. In doing so, I have argued that it may also validate the problematic normative framework of intimacy imbued within the site's design.

So, how does the relationship status shape our everyday performances of intimate identity? Fuelled by the market and cultural powers that circulate its development, this famed interface feature promotes a restricted sense of romance that adheres to longstanding and conservative Western ideals. Our intimate narratives are neatly ordered into one of eleven available boxes and defined through the fairly formal language of the interface, with the constant citation and repetition of these titles reinforcing them as the norm. In going Facebook Official, we are also necessarily performing our relationships as one-to-one while representing them as perfectly heterosexual or homosexual. Moreover, regardless of the particular romantic category we select, the interface of the site ensures our profiles and our friends' New Feeds are soaked with Western icons of intimacy.

While the thematic analysis conducted in this research has revealed patterns of relationship status avoidance and appropriation, these are few and

far between. More importantly, perhaps, they do not result in a more challenging and culturally complex performance of intimate identity but rather serve as playful signifiers of friendship or silent forms of protest. The fact that relationship 'validation' was identified as the most dominant theme of usage within the data suggests that many users not only use the relationship status as intended but also allow it to substantiate their romantic narratives. Perhaps this is because they are comfortable with the restrictive normative frameworks that the site imposes, but I would argue that it is more likely they are simply unaware of them. Of course, such restrictions are inevitable in social media space and often easily justified. But if we are to accept the ethico-political perspective that strives for radical pluralism of intimacy, it is crucial we consider the social implications of any design choices that stifle the performance of alternative romantic constructs. This is particularly true in the case of Facebook, which has increasingly come to order our everyday life practices.

Like all new media research endeavours, this thesis contains several methodological limitations that warrant consideration. Firstly, while thematic analysis revealed a number of different relationship status practices, the lack of available information regarding the demographics of the blog sample has resulted in little indication of how these practices might vary in accordance with age, sex, ethnicity or a litany of other variables. As a qualitative method, the use of thematic analysis also ensured that all findings were restricted to the in-depth experiences of the particular sample and not easily generalized to the wider population of Facebook users. Moreover, without having been able to pose specific questions to the members of this sample, it has proven difficult to predict the extent to which they may actually internalize their Facebook mediated performances of romance. Do those who validate their bonds through the relationship status actually maintain more normative conceptions of romance than those who avoid using the feature? For the time being, it is difficult to say. Future studies may benefit from a research design that allows for more concrete insight into user demographics and perhaps also an interview format that allows the researcher to prompt user reflection on specific ideas. In spite of the current limitations, however, I consider this thesis to have highlighted the importance of addressing the market and cultural layers of software design in dialectical relation to the everyday practices of software use. I

also hope my work might provide a useful foundation for future research on the intimate narrative as it unfolds on Facebook.

There is nothing wrong with loving the tools we are given to work with. Love the piano if you're a pianist, or love the skateboard if you're a skater. But it is important to consider the constraints of such tools as well as the affordances so as not to become entrapped within their limiting paradigms. If we allow software to define our intimate lives, we diminish the scope of the ideas that will be passed on to future generations and thus limit the individuality of future societies.

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