Computer mediated communication

1. Introduction:

Social network sites (SNSs) have become some of the most popular online destinations in recent years (comScore, 2007a, 2007b). Academic researchers have started studying the use of SNSs, with questions ranging from their role in identity construction and expression (boyd & Heer, 2006) to the building and maintenance of social capital (e. g., Ellison, Steinfeld, & Lampe, 2007) and concerns about privacy (e. g., Gross & Acquisti, 2005; Hodge, 2006). While these areas of inquiry are all important and worthy of exploration, a significant antecedent question has been largely raised: Are there systematic interconnection between the level at which users show online with their friends and offline with their counterparts, and are people equally likely to act in a similar or different way comparing their online and offline life? This article sets out to address this question.

2. Literature Review

2. 1Online & Offline: A Distinction

Online & offline distinction have been generalized from computing and telecommunication into the field of human interpersonal relationships. The distinction between what is considered online and what is considered offline has become a subject of study in the field of computer mediated communication. The distinction between online & offline is conventionally seen as the distinction between computer mediated communication and face to face communication respectively. Online is virtuality and offline is reality. Slater D. (2002: 533) states that the distinction is so far too simple. To support his argument that the distinction in relationships are more complex than a simple online offline dichotomy, he observes that some people draw

no distinctions between an online relationship such as including in cybersex, and offline relationship such as being pen pals.

Slater also asserts that there are legal and regulatory pressures to reduce the distinction between online and offline with a

" general tendency to assimilate online to offline and erase the distinction", stressing that this does not mean online relationships are being reduced to pre-existing offline relationships. He also conjectures that an online/offline distinction may be seen by people as " rather quaint and not quite comprehensible" within 10 years.

Individual's online activity also depends on his/her online identity or internet persona. This online identity or internet persona is a social identity that an internet user establishes in online communities or websites. Although some people prefer to use their real names online, most internet users prefer to be anonymous, identifying themselves by means of pseudonyms, which reveal varying amounts of personally identifiable information.

2. 2Friendship
In addition to differences in social cues in online and offline environments, friendship is defined differently on social networking sites than it is in offline relationships. MySpace defines Friendship as any kind of mutual relationship among its members. Adding a friend to a list of contacts is not necessarily an indication of feelings for that person. Rather, it is seen as an expansion of one's social network. In an ethnographic study of teenage users, boyd (2006a) distinguishes friendship from Friendship: the former refers to a close relationship between two people and the latter refers to an online tie that

connects people on social network sites. boyd (2006a) distinguishes between several types of online Friends including close offline friends and acquaintances, family members, work and school mates, admired people and strangers.

boyd's (2006a) and Dwyer's (2007) work suggests that most users do not take online friendships seriously and consider most of them to be superficial. boyd explains that some of the relative superficiality can be attributed to social pressures associated with " Friending" (adding friends to list of contacts) online. Some users, as according to boyd, (2006a: 25):

" prefer to accept Friendships with someone they barely know rather than going through the socially awkward process of rejecting them … while others hope that Friending a celebrity will make them look cool."

Bigge (2006) suggests that users accumulate friends to increase their social capital. The element of status associated with accumulating friends may explain the large number of friends that most users have linked to their profiles. According to Rosen's (2006) study, MySpace users link an average of 200 friends to their profile, many of whom they have never met face-to-face. This clarifies to some extent on the way most users' perception & attitude towards online and offline friends.

2. 3Purpose of being Online

Despite the alleged superficiality of relationships, users participate in social networking sites to develop new relationships, maintain older friendships, and expand their social networks (Dwyer, 2007; Gallant, et al., 2007; boyd, 2006a; boyd, 2007). Participants in Dwyer's 2007 study indicated that they use networking sites because they provide an inexpensive, easy and

convenient way of managing social relationships. Gallant, et al. (2007: 21)

conclude from their content analysis of focus groups of MySpace and

Facebook users that participants access network sites for

" staying in touch with friends, making social plans, communicating with others and finding out about them, and dating."

In other studies, users report the usefulness of social networking sites as a means of establishing contact with old friends and people they do not see regularly (Dwyer, 2007).

Online social interactions are informed by different rules and contexts than offline relationships. Dwyer (2007) explains that computer-mediated communication on social network sites can reduce and delay the transmission and perception of social context cues. Social context cues elicit cognitive interpretations of a given situation which shapes people's communication. Dwyer explains:

" When social context cues are strongly perceived, behavior becomes more otherfocused and carefully managed. Conversely, with communication of these cues is weak and cues are not perceived, feelings of anonymity result in more self-centered and unregulated behavior".

boyd (2007: 8) suggests that online forums (as an example MySpace) provide spaces for teens to " do identity work" online. boyd argues that networking sites such as MySpace facilitate aspects of life central to teen identity formation, including exploration of social and cultural identities, social relations, and performances of the self. boyd (2006c) suggests that the dynamics of identity production online include a considerable emphasis on the construction of " cool." Most of today's teens prefer to demonstrate ' cool' or to be called as so.

Comments on sites such as MySpace serve as validation from peers and, boyd (2006c: para. 18)argues, as " a form of cultural currency." Validation as well as negative feedback online can influence users' self-esteem. Valkenburg, et al. (2006) found in a study of 881 Dutch teenage users of a social network site similar to MySpace that the publicly visible feedback they received on their profiles affected their social self-esteem and well-being. Positive feedback, which nearly 80 percent of the participants received, enhanced their self-esteem, whereas negative feedback, which seven percent of the individuals surveyed received, lowered their self-esteem (Valkenburg, et al. 2006). This shows that the behavior of users possessing themselves online relate to their lives to some degree.

On networking sites, users' social networks may overlap. For instance, users may be linked to close friends, acquaintances, co-workers and family members through the same profile. The identity the user establishes online may be appropriate for friends but not for relatives or co-workers (boyd, 2006a, Snyder, et al., 2006; Bigge, 2006). Due to this, some users change their profile name or display name other than the real one to be limited within their friends' circle.

2. 4Disclosure of user's Information

Users employ text and images in their profiles and blogs to describe who they are, what they like, and what they do. Through their posts, users send greetings, exchange messages, make plans, flirt, and maintain contact. These features of social networking sites allow users to reveal information about themselves and their lives. Stutzman (2006) suggests that while disclosing this information is optional, many users include it in their profiles. Stutzman (2006: 1) attributes the high level of disclosure of personal information online to the " inherent sociality" of social network communities. Though many users share personal information, its validity is unproven.

Some users intentionally mask their offline identities by using pseudonyms or remaining anonymous for fear of consequences related to disclosing sensitive or socially undesirable personal characteristics. Although these strategies may mitigate users' privacy concerns, unintended audiences might still be able to find them through friends' profiles (boyd, 2007). Unintended audiences such as employers, educational institutions, law enforcement officials, and marketing companies can access and use private information that users make public online. Employers can monitor current and potential employees through social networking sites (Bigge, 2006; Snyder, et al., 2006). Some colleges and schools keep track of their students' posts on networking sites and issue offline punishments for socially undesirable or illegal activities disclosed online (Barnes, 2006). Prosecutors and police officers could potentially use online data to investigate interactions between suspects and victims (Schesser, 2006). Bigge (2006) and Barnes (2006: para 3) criticize the fact that social network sites:

" coordinate the interpersonal exchanges between American teens and global brands."

For Snyder, et al. (2006), who analyze the ' terms of use' document of MySpace, these unintended audiences violate the ' social contract' of networking sites because they use the sites for information seeking rather than for networking with others.

Parents and lawmakers are concerned about the behavior of teens and children online. Through legislation such as the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998 (COPPA) and the 2006 Deleting Online Predators Act (DOPA), lawmakers try to protect young teenagers from social network sites by requiring public libraries and schools to install Internet filters (boyd and Jenkins, 2006). Librarians and academics expressed worries in response to these acts, citing concern for the development of a new digital divide in which users who rely on public access would be deprived of socializing online (Miller, 2006; boyd and Jenkins, 2006).

Many parents express concerns about their children's use of social networking sites. In a survey of 267 pairs of adolescent MySpace users and their parents, Rosen (2006) found that 63 percent of parents think that sexual predators use MySpace; 81 percent of them were concerned about teens meeting online friends in offline locations; and, 88 percent of them were worried about the posting of sexual photos. Despite their expressed concerns, many parents are not involved in their children's use of social networking sites (Rosen, 2006; Rogers, et al., 2007). In Rosen's (2006) study, one third of the parents did not know what kind of personal information their children were disclosing online; 43 percent of them did not know how much time their children spent on social networking websites; and, 62 percent of them had never talked to their children about such sites. Moreover, parents imposed little restrictions on their children's use of these websites. Fifty percent of the teenagers surveyed in Rosen's study were allowed to have computer in their bedroom and less than half of the parents set limits to their children's computer use and the use of online sites. This is consistent with Rogers et al.'s (2007) study in which only 15 percent of the adolescent participants reported having limits on their use of these Web sites.

3. Analysis:

Online intimate friendship relationship is a rare phenomenon and so could be summed up in some cases only in terms of lying and deception, they would not be so common. For many of those who have known someone intimately through the internet, the relationships have proven to be positive, if not life-changing experiences. Lies and misrepresentations have been brought to explain some of these tendencies but they only begin to constitute a fuller theoretical mechanism. Research in this area often address what seems to be a working paradox in online dating sites: the connection between a pragmatic, consumerist tool for meeting others wrapped up in romantic and magical discourses. Individual, social and mediatized conceptions about love, and connecting gave us new sights into an activity whose popularity calls for reference to a broad social context.

When individual engage in online communication/conversation, the spectacle in turn enhance a regime of communication that could be described as spectral, its quality being a confessional transparency. As noticed, users will tend to describe their inner feelings in detail, opening their soul in a manner that is in part imputable to the physical absence of their interlocutors. Imagination will play a crucial role, and conceptions of love, past experiences, stereotypes and phantasms will be used along with the acted information gained from the communication to construct an image of the potential partner and the story of their meeting.

Online daters will tend to shorten this period, in their desire to avoid deception after having imagined someone incorrectly or having faced its own deformed or incomplete projection. Problem is that the interpretation of a person's mediated representation does not always accord with the actual in-real-life presentation of that person. On other occasions, the cause of the mismatch is not misrepresentation, but simply lies. According to Albright, ' perhaps the lowered accountability levels of online interactions and the inability to pinpoint an online personal to a solid offline identity might foster such facades and lower people's inhibitions about lying.

It is more difficult, though, to assert that playing on online places which of course happens a lot in discussion groups, social networks and online dating sites – can lead to long lasting relationships (particularly if they go face to face). Indeed what could be considered as playing in an overtly playful space seems to be related more to lying and concealing in other spaces, such as online dating sites, where false information about physical appearance and occupational status abound. As an example, woman is prepared to meet a six feet tall lawyer could be surprised to be faced with a rather a short programmer or even a child.

Flirting and playing go together, but the lack of physical proximity between dyadic partners opens the door to misrepresentation. But as a matter of fact, playing with one's body, personality and social status can also lead to sexual dysfunctions, cheating and criminal deviance such as harassment, rape or pedophilia. Playing is ok as long as every participant actually knows that he/she is in playing frame, which is not always the case online. There exist online places such as second life where playing with gender, physical characteristics and personality is the norm. Flirting and intimate relationships abound there as well but the rules are clear: this is game and you can play as such.

Whitty et, al (2001: 624) say:

" Even if people are not engaging in cybersex or exchanging photos, we cannot disregard the importance of body or physical attraction. This is because- even in absence of photographs- bodies are reconstructed through user's imaginations. Moreover, imaginations can give fantasized vision of the self and the others".

Whitty et al, (2001) use notions such as play potential space, transitional objects and splitting to construct a probing psychoanalytical lecture about online romance. Psychoanalytic approach that Whitty & Carr (2001: 623) say:

' Play is all about illusion …, such illusion can only be sustained provided play can be kept within a frame work of its own- a frame which seeks to separate it from ordinary life'.

The objective of online dating sites is to change online connection rapidly in the hope of developing intimate relationships (Casual sex or Cybersex). In discussion groups or SNSs, the point is to allow perspective couples to meet online, then may be offline, in the hope of finding people who will understand each other's feelings, share their own and eventually (in some situations) become more intimate.

The very sense of a body attached to personal information could be considered to be more important in dating sites than in discussion groups, since the goals- which may still be the same for some users- are not dealt with in the same way. As a matter of fact, leaving an online profile with no photographs is giving oneself no chance of being contacted. In an online community, people get to know each other based on shared interests, not with perceived physical attractiveness of the participants. In theory, this works, but in fact, online flirting happens everywhere, even where it is not assumed to.

How users who experience online romance define romance and love at large prior to and during their online explorations – has not been thoroughly discussed by internet researchers as such.

Before reading profiles on an online dating sites or being interested in the person behind certain online discussion posting on a community sites, a user hold wealth of personal conception about what he/she is/isn't, likes/dislikes, loves/hates and so on. This conception may change in the course of one's online intimate experience that could provide critical insight into the individual & social integration of online connection.

However, according to Anderson (2005), people who experience online romance do it in various online places but one thing they share is that they can conceive of finding love by using the internet's online connection.

In terms of finding love online, for many of us, it is not an easy thing. Working long hours, some of them alone, others at remote places, feeling caught in an improper relationship, being tired of a series of dreams with no tomorrows, lacking the confidence to face interesting prospects or just wanting to try something that supposedly works well, millions of people have been drawn to the internet over last few years, looking for individuals with whom to communicate and to bond.

That is probably why many online researchers have observed that online intimacy is constituted and maintained mainly by trust, commitment and high level of self disclosure. It is difficult to theoretical framework that fully describes what is going on and when (two or) more people are flirting on the web or not.

If individuals are to successfully develop a romantic relationship from an online dating site, they need to present a balance between an attractive and a real self on their profiles. Observing that online daters tend to meet each other fece to face more quickly than do participation in other kinds of online based relationships, Whitty(2001) suggests, in doing so, they can and want to avoid the frequent lies and embellishments associated with personal profiles. Also she holds that it shuts up the potential presence of a ' true self' (referring to what someone would like to be, but is not yet able to be), which, in theory, emerges slowly, coupled with high self-disclosure, trust and commitment. On another side, as she observed in her research, at the same time a seeking out authentic and genuine profiles, individuals were also looking for the more attractive and appealing profiles.

Engaging on an online conversation, knowing friend's friends on any SNSs, or putting a profile on an online dating agency is easy and banal in itself. But it can lead to profound changes in one's life. Over recent years, many researchers have addressed romantic relationships initiated on the internet.

4. Overview on Hypothesis:

The hypothesis set out in this paper includes the change in the perception due to shift of online relations to offline relation and vice-versa, advantages and disadvantages of doing it with regards to the use of SNSs through the internet. To establish and get into the hypothesis set out in here, individual interviews have been employed in order to fully get into the subject. Except the individual short interviews, content analysis of the papers related to the use of SNSs as well as the survey questionnaires were also designed and disseminated to 55 international students of the two universities in Cyprus; University of Nicosia & The European University Cyprus.

As we are facing the world of fast-changing pace, it is hard to generalize the finding from the study of such a small group of people. However, the results obtained so far will give genuine insights to further research in the same area. Bringing offline relations to online seems very easy provided that the user's real life friends or relatives are facilitated through the use of the internet or else they have not been regarded as the victims caused by the so called digital divide. On the other hand, bringing online relations to offline may result to both advantages and disadvantages. The term ' trust' has more to play the role in it. Because some people show their trust to the people met online that the information provided by them online are factual and true, whereas some do not find any trust in those information. It requires a sort of experience or say, the psychological knowledge to understand the motive of the strangers met online to decide whether or not he/she should meet him/her offline. In this regard, a genuine person who always flows true and factual information through the internet and holds decent desire of friending through online process may be the victim of some who do not trust online friends any more. The current fears of internet fraud, identity theft and the fakesters have constantly loosened in the extent of trust among the moderate internet users. Spam, junk mail and many other unknown mails coming everyday into the inbox are also the cause in declining the trust in the internet.

Bringing offline relations to online seems the everyday routine of most of the internet users. The use of internet and its know-how is growing rapidly throughout the world. Today, many rely on the internet and cannot even think of their lives without being into it. Internet users even tend to see their offline friends online with the motive of being able to contact at any time, and also know how they are up to though they are physically very far. With regards to strangers online meeting them in real life situations seem unpredictable for everyone. For some, it is like a game as well as an interesting part of their life. Doing so, many get engaged for long time relationships, some as business partners and so on.

5. Methods:

To accomplish the objective of the paper, three methodologies have been incorporated:

- **Interviews**

- **Survey**

- **Content Analysis**

5. 1Interviews:

Interviews conducted is the semi-structured consisting of 12 individuals who have their profiles on social networking sites; many of them being on facebook and Hi5. Interview questions (see Apendix) ranges from their demographics information, perceptions and understanding of online communications, involvement in SNSs, chatting preferences, time spent on the internet as well as the views on friends online/offline. Only the information obtain from individual semi-structured interviews were insufficient to come answer the proposal question raised in the paper. Hence other methods of research have also been carried out. Interview took place in different physical locations in Cyprus and around 6 individuals were interviewed online through facebook.

5. 2Survey:

A set of questionnaire was designed and disseminated to 55 international students of the two universities (University of Nicosia & European University Cyprus) in Cyprus. The set of questionnaire consists of questionnaire that consists of 33 questions splitting them in three sections (see Appendix). The first section (section A) consists of 6 questions and collects the participant's demographic information such as A/S/L, marital status, occupation, country of origin & parental education. Inclusion of parental education in the demographic information is aimed to find whether participants' parental education level is linked with their online offline perceptions or behaviors. 21 questions on the next section (Section B) address on the participants' involvement with the internet, its use. More use or the less use of the internet and the time spent on any social network sites by any individual can be the basis to reveal the participants' behaviors and perceptions regarding online/offline friends and connections. Last section of the questionnaire (Section C) is an attempt to explore the users' online and offline behaviors, expectations, language used and the priority among online or offline friends. This section includes 6 questions all of which address how users intend to establish connections to their online friends (strangers and not strangers) and offline friends in their real life situations.

5. 3Content Analysis:

Many studies have been carried out on the issues of social network sites and their use. Distinguishing the users and non-users of social networks sites has also been studied. Stutzman's.(2006) " An evaluation of identity-sharing behavior in social network communities" has addressed a bit of online and offline behaviours of the internet users being focused on social network sites. Danah m boyd has been continually contributing to the social network sites and their use through her study. More and more sequential research made by boyd regarding the use of internet especially focusing teenagers have given more insights for accomplishing this paper. These two researchers are the basis to ground the theoretical aspects ranging from the meaning of SNSs to their use, internet persona as well as identity construction online. Hence, this paper also uses the content analysis approach of the study carried out by these two researchers in the field of social network sites and their use, but in a brief.

6. Results & Discussion on Findings:

Demographics:

The study sample of international students taken from the two universities in Cyprus is skewed towards more male around 71. 7%, female users being only 28. 3% of total 55 students, 55. 7% were Nepalese whereas the rest (36. 3%) were Indian background. Regarding the parental education of the participants, fathers of 30% participants were postgraduates and none of the participants' father were illiterate. 15 % of the participants reported that their mothers are illiterate. The age of the sample size of this study ranges from 18-30 years. With reference to the marital status, 54. 5% were single and 45. 5% were married. None of the participants were reported to be in a relationship or divorced. Results obtained from 12 individual semi-structure interviews are more consistent with the results obtained from the survey and hence the following results and discussion does not fully mention the interviews due to the space problem in this paper. However, the interviews have been the basis to carry out the study and bring it to the final readable form.

Internet's Use

Regarding the average use of internet per week (see table 2), no female participants use internet for more than 15 hours a week. Majority of male (30. 9%) were reported to use internet up to 15 hours a week whereas only 16. 3% female do so, the study shows. The first task of the users while connecting to the internet, 27% said they check mails (46% female and 20% male), 18% open messenger (26 % female & 15% male), 18% browse for news (25 % male) and around 37% open social network sites (26% female & 40% male). The term ' Social network Sites' was not known to any of the participants in the sample. When it first appeared in the questionnaire, participants raised the question to the real indication of SNS. Participants were then asked whether they have known or heard of SNSs. 100 % participants said that it is a complete unknown term for them. When they are clarified with the term SNSs, 100% reported that they have their profiles in at least one or more SNSs. Of many SNSs around the world available to everyone in the internet, sample said that they know only 7 SNSs of 16 SNSs mentioned in the questionnaire. Facebook, Hi5 and Bebo are the three social network sites that all participants have heard of and also have their profiles. The table 1 below is the illustration of knowing of SNSs reported by the sample of the study.

Social networking sites & respondents' profile

SNSs	Respondents		
	Total	Male	Female
Orkut	52%	38%	53%
Windows Live Space	36%	26.6%	29%
LinkedIn	14.5%	15%	13.3%
Bebo	100%	100%	100%
MySpace	34%	37.	26.

5%   6%

Facebook   100% 100% 100%

Hi5   100% 100% 100%

Table 1

As the sample recorded that the participants have their profile at least in one or more SNSs. It is now vital to get the data on how real are the information placed on their profiles taking into serious considerations on names, gender, age, location etc. 80% said