CONTEXTUAL IDENTITIES:
NARRATIVES OF SELF-IDENTIFIED SHY ADOLESCENTS’
CLOSE FRIENDSHIP EXPERIENCES IN ONLINE AND OFFLINE SETTINGS

by

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Abstract

As the Internet has evolved over the past decade, adolescents now tend to communicate with existing offline friends instead of strangers. However, a particular profile of shy and introverted users seems to prefer communicating with online-exclusive friends. This qualitative study aimed to explore how self-identified shy adolescents constructed their identities through their narratives of close friendships in online and offline settings. With a focus on “contextual identities”, I examined how the context may influence identity construction and social processes, as well as how continuity and change across the online-offline divide surfaced in the narratives.

Six female adolescents aged 14 to 18 years were recruited, where online interviews were carried out using an adaptation of Arvay’s (2003) reflexive collaborative narrative method. The narratives were analyzed with a holistic-content approach by Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber (1998) to preserve the unique voice of each participant. This was followed by a cross-case analysis (Stake, 2006) that yielded the following six findings: (1) Adolescents constructed a reticent identity through enacting a generalized worldview of an untrustworthy social environment, due to experiences of broken trust or perceived rejection. (2) Adolescents presented a self-concept of diffidence and insecurity through recounting childhood experiences that undermined their development of competence and autonomy. (3) Adolescents constructed a shy self-concept through identifying personal deficits in relation to societal referential standards, and concurrently constructed role identities that put themselves in positions of strength. (4) Trust, as a main factor in overcoming the fear of self-disclosure, was more easily established in online autonomous dyadic interactions than in offline settings where group structures and norms limited the freedom to be themselves. (5) Online affordances built social competence by providing a scaffold for overcoming the fear of self-disclosure and replicating offline social practices which
accelerated intimacy development. (6) Shy identities seemed contextualized to the general offline interactional experience, but these could change over time with new positive experiences in offline settings via increased self-confidence or self-acceptance. These findings, together with educational implications and future research are discussed.
Preface

This thesis is the original, unpublished, and independent work by the author, Joanna E. N. Tan, with the guidance of the research supervisor and inputs from the research committee. The study was granted approval by the University of British Columbia Behavioural Research Ethics Board. It holds an Ethics Certificate from the UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board with the Certificate Number H13-01294.
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To Jesus, my Saviour and Friend for life
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

That the Internet is becoming integral to adolescents’ lives is no secret in many developed countries. As an illustration, 95% of American adolescents aged 12 to 17 are on the Internet, out of which more than 60% connect on a daily basis, and most often for the purpose of online communication and visiting social networking sites (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010; Madden, Lenhart, Duggan, Cortesi, & Gasser, 2013). In the past decade, much research on online communication has explored its impact on psychosocial developmental issues of identity, friendship, and sexuality (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011), as well as related psychosocial consequences, such as social connectedness and psychological well-being (e.g., Gross, Juvonen, & Gable, 2002; Huang, 2010; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007a, 2009).

As the Internet has constantly evolved and advanced its technological features year-on-year, its network of connected users has increased in tandem, particularly among teenagers (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2010). Hence, initial concerns that adolescents would mainly be connecting with strangers in online chat rooms have given way to growing evidence that adolescents use online communication technologies (e.g., social networking) primarily to enhance existing offline friendships with peers, and to a far lesser extent, to interact with strangers (Gross, 2004; Reich, Subrahmanyam, & Espinoza, 2012; Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007b; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). In fact, many of these “strangers” may not be strictly labelled as such, since the connection may have originated from an existing social circle (e.g., introductions on a social networking site through friends or family, Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2002).

In exploring research on adolescent online communication and friendship, the focus of the current literature review was to explore how “shy” or “introverted” Internet users were
portrayed in the literature (with these descriptive terms often being used interchangeably). It has been hypothesized that these users turn to online communication due to loneliness, social anxiety, or difficulties developing friendships in face-to-face interactions (Bonetti, Campbell, & Gilmore, 2010; Gross, Juvonen, & Gable, 2002; McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002). Indeed, shy individuals have commonly been positioned at the centre of inquiry into whether online interaction provides social compensation to overcome shyness and inhibition (Desjarlais & Willouby, 2010; Kraut, Kiesler, Boneva, Cummings, Helgeson, & Crawford, 2002; McKenna, Green & Gleason, 2002; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007b).

Overall, there does seem to be evidence suggesting social compensation for such users, through opportunities for enhanced self-presentation (Valkenburg, Schouten, & Peter, 2005; Zywica & Danowski, 2008) and greater intimacy in self-disclosure (Bonetti, Campbell, & Gilmore, 2010; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). However, a few studies complicate the theorized benefit of the Internet’s social compensation. More specifically, it appears that introverted and socially anxious users prefer and benefit more from communicating with online-exclusive friends or people without close offline affiliation (Gross, Juvonen, & Gable, 2002; Van Zalk, Branje, Denissen, Van Aken, & Meeus, 2011). Implications of these findings may be negatively viewed as evidence suggesting that online social compensation might be achieved at the expense of the quality of existing offline friendships (Blais, Craig, Pepler, & Connolly, 2008; Yang & Brown, 2013). On the other hand, the social connection gained from online communication with strangers could present a shy adolescent with an adaptive means of dealing with social exclusion in other relational contexts (Gross, 2009).

This raises the question of whether there exists a dichotomous divide or an interactional interplay between online and offline social experiences for these shy adolescents. A cursory look
at research does not shed light on whether any psychosocial benefits of communication with online-exclusive friends extend to existing offline friendships. But when the interactions are examined within the same friendships that span both online and offline settings, some studies (for a general “non-shy” population) suggest a positive reciprocal effect of online social experiences on their offline ones (Di Gennaro & Dutton, 2007; Matzat, 2010; Xie, 2008).

Related to this is the debate about whether identity is viewed and desired to be relatively stable or fluid (Vignoles, Schwartz, & Luyckx, 2011). One may wonder how the sense of self as a “shy” individual changes or remains the same when one is continuously moving between contexts or settings (from offline to online and vice versa). In essence, the potential dialectical interplay of the online and offline contexts in influencing identity and social processes for the shy adolescent is an area of interest.

Yet, much of the research analyzing the nature of online and offline friendships still falls within post-positivistic research paradigms of employing instruments to statistically make comparisons between online and offline interactions and predict patterns of behaviour (e.g., Buote, Wood, & Pratt, 2009; Chan & Cheng, 2004). With a dearth in interpretive studies in the field of adolescent development, the voices of adolescents’ experiences are currently poorly represented, and even less so for those of shy individuals (Harris, 1984). Understanding the current experiences of adolescent technology users is an urgent matter, given the rapid advancement of technology in recent years continually shaping lifestyle practices and ways of thinking about relationships and one’s identity (McMillan & Morrison, 2006; Turkle, 2012).

The current study conceptualized close non-romantic friendships as key contexts for adolescent identity construction and explored how self-identified shy adolescents constructed contextual identities through narratives of close friendships in online and offline settings. A
The second purpose was to examine the potential dialectical interplay of the online and offline contexts in influencing identity construction and social processes. The study thus involved the following interconnected research questions: (1) How do self-identified shy adolescents construct identities (personal, role, and social) through narrating experiences of close (non-romantic) friendships in online and offline settings? (2) Do these narratives point to information about their contexts? (a) What information (e.g., social structures, roles, and positions) about the contexts can be inferred? (b) How might continuity and change be described across online and offline contexts?
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

At the heart of the current research is the focus on identity construction through social interactions in different contexts. Although identity research has spawned various theoretical perspectives from diverse bodies of knowledge such as anthropology, linguistics, and political science (Vignoles, Schwartz, & Luyckx, 2011), I mainly draw from psychological and sociological fields for this review. In this review, I first construct the referential frame of contextual identities from a symbolic interactionist approach and consequently relate self-concept to identity construction. I then situate peer relationships (particularly close friendships) as an interactional context for adolescent identity construction. After a brief comment on viewing current post-positivistic research on shy adolescents with an interpretivist lens, I conclude the review with a description of how the online communication of shy adolescents may be influenced by features of the online environment.

Identities and Relationships

Across disparate research niches on the self in various disciplines, there is emerging consensus on the self as structured, dynamic, agentic, and interpersonal. In two meta-analyses, the self has been described to be an “organized dynamic cognitive-affective-action system and an interpersonal self-construction system” (Mischel & Morf, 2003, p. 23), a reflexive “knowledge structure”, an “interpersonal being” and “an agent with an executive function” (Baumeister, 2011, p. 49). Baumeister (2011) offers the self as an umbrella construct under which we may position our understanding of identity and self-concept. While the relationship between identity and self-concept will be fleshed out below, they are united by how their constructions are dependent on the characteristics of the self as a structured self-regulating system and an interactional relational entity.
Identity Construction

Identity theories in the fields of psychology and sociology have had their historical roots in the works of prominent psychologist, William James (1890) and sociologist Herbert Mead (1934). Recent identity research has acknowledged common ground between psychology-based theories (e.g., social identity theory, Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and sociology-based theories (e.g., identity theory, Burke & Stets, 2009), providing points of convergence for a more integrated perspective of the self (Deaux & Burke, 2010). Hence, what follows in this subsection is an outline of some compatible themes of identity construction from both psychology and sociology fields that collectively pay attention to both socio-cognitive processes of individuals as well as the sociocultural context in which individuals are positioned and interact with others (Deux & Burke, 2010).

Identity may be broadly characterized by continuity and differentiation, as Baumeister (2011) describes it as “being the same person across time – different from others” (p.49). The process of differentiation enables the person to construct an individuated self or personal identity, by which one’s distinct idiosyncratic attributes differentiate oneself from others in a social context (Adams & Marshall, 1996; Brewer, 1991). A defining pre-requisite is that one needs to be embedded in a sociocultural system to construct one’s identity (Baumeister, 2011), as elaborated below.

From a symbolic interactionism perspective, identity construction takes place through the processes of attaching meaning to objects, people (including the self) and behaviours in the sociocultural environment. Enabled by shared language and semiotic systems, it is through the interactions with the social and material environment that these meanings are developed, including meaning about one’s behaviour and personal attributes as observed through the
interactions (Howard, 2000; Stets & Burke, 2003). By reflexively perceiving oneself as an object of self-evaluation, one responds to the self by adopting or imagining the perspectives of others toward the self, and so the “meaning of the self becomes a shared meaning” with others (Stets & Burke, 2003, p. 130). These shared meanings and expectations of oneself become the basis for social behaviors that are continually being reshaped through interactions, and so a dialectical relationship is set up between social interactions and negotiated meanings of the self (Stets & Burke, 2003). Consequently, identity exists both in the cognitive structure of the self-system, as well as the enacted embodiment of a social image, typically managed through self-presentation and impression management strategies. In such an enactment, identity is co-constructed with a real “audience” or an internalized reference group (Howard, 2000; Markus & Wurf, 1987).

As an elaboration of the symbolic interactionist perspective, identities that are embedded in a complex sociocultural structure with its constitutional microsystems (ranging from the family to schools and organizations to national levels) are constructed through two main types of processes. First, roles, tasks, and different positions in relation to others in the social structure influence how individuals interact with one another, resulting in the construction of multiple role identities, to which are attributed meanings and expectations relating to the performance of these roles (Stets & Burke, 2003). Each role identity is commonly enacted in reference to a counteridentity in a dyadic relationship (e.g., husband and wife, teacher and student; Stets & Burke, 2003). Second, individuals self-categorize or identify with social categories and social groups (e.g., ethnicity, gender, age) and construct depersonalized social identities in which “I becomes we” (Brewer, 1991, p. 476). Stated more simply, social identities are constructed through identifying with characteristics of social groups and being seen as a representative of
these groups (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). This fosters a collective intergroup distinction that contributes to one’s sense of identity.

Two implications follow from this key point of personal, role, and social identities being embedded and constructed in a sociocultural system. The first implication is that one’s identity is experienced to be continuous over time, not in a specific sense of having unchangeable personal characteristics, but through continued action and engagement in the social system that contributes to one’s continued functioning (Baumeister, 2011). This means that one’s experience of continuity in identity is inextricably tied to the continuity of the social systems one identifies with, be they on a smaller scale of friendship groups or larger global systems. Even as the physical body passes from life to death, the identities of a person may be sustained by the cultural meaning that has been accrued through roles and relationships over one’s lifetime (Baumeister, 2011). A second and related implication is that in tandem with the multiple micro social systems in which one is engaged, multiple identities (e.g., daughter, student, professional actor, etc.) are constructed across different geographical and situational contexts, including virtual spaces (Burke & Stets, 2009; Howard, 2000).

Issues of unity versus multiplicity, as well as continuity versus instability of identities, become interesting points of investigation for researching shy adolescents, as their online and offline experiences may differ or qualitative change across time (Baumeister, 2011; Howard, 2000). Identity instability, which plays out as shifting identities over time or contexts, may signal multiple identity goals that are often contradictory (Howard, 2000). Identity research has traditionally promoted the coherence of actions with values, as well as behavioral consistency as a goal of resolving an identity crisis. This crisis may manifest itself as an identity deficit (a lack of commitment to goals and values, resulting in a diffused identity) or an identity conflict (a
struggle in reconciling incompatible commitments as a result of multiple identities and values; Baumeister, Shapiro, & Tice, 1985). The importance attributed to unity and continuity has also been highlighted in narrative research and in relatively more recent inquiry into the emergence of adolescents’ narrative ability to construct a coherent life story (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Habermas & Paha, 2001; McAdams, 1996).

Despite much traditional value attributed to unity and continuity in identity research, other social scientists including narrative identity researchers have questioned the assumption of a core stable self, and challenged the privileging of singularity over multiplicity of identities (Raggatt, 2006). Multiplicity in identity expression could however be seen as different possible versions of the same constant self, which provides conscious self-regulation and enacts multiple pieces of self-knowledge as a means of managing social demands in different contexts (Baumeister, 2011). These discrete pieces of self-knowledge, self-definitions, or self-representations in different contexts collectively make up one’s overall self-concept (Harter, 1999b, 2008).

Self-Concept

It is generally accepted in the psychological literature that within the self, multiple pieces of self-knowledge are built up into a multifaceted, organized, and hierarchical construct, otherwise known as the self-concept, with these pieces of self-representations and self-evaluations constructed directly from interactional experiences with the social environment (Harter, 1999b, 2008; Hinde, Finkenauer, & Auhagen, 2001; Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton, 1976). As such, similar to identity construction, self-concept construction is dependent on the self as a structured self-regulating system and an interactional relational entity. But more specifically, self-concept in the form of self-descriptions and self-representations are the means
by which one reflexively constructs a sense of one’s (multiple) identit(ies) with self-referenced thoughts and words (Brewer & Gardner, 1996), given that the self-concept is “the totality of the individual’s thoughts and feelings with reference to [the] self as an object” (Rosenberg, 1989, p. 34).

According to Shavelson, Hubner, and Stanton’s (1976) multifaceted and hierarchical model of self-concept, located at the apex of the structure is the “General Self-concept” (also called “Self-worth”; Harter, 1999b), which comprises academic (revised to “Reading/academic” and “Math/academic”; Marsh & Shavelson, 1985) and non-academic self-concepts. These two categories are each further divided into other facets (e.g., social, emotional and physical self-concepts for non-academic self-concept), which in turn consist of more domain-specific self-concepts from situations (at the base of the hierarchy). An implication of this hierarchy is that while there may be stability at the apex for general self-concept, the malleability of self-concept relating to domain-specific facets increases down the structure as behavioral changes may impact self-representations and self-evaluations in specific situations (Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton, 1976; Markus & Kunda, 1986). However, empirical evidence suggests that as adolescents develop, the hierarchy weakens and domain-specific self-concepts become more independent, rendering a general self-concept or global self-esteem less able to represent the self in a holistic manner (Marsh & Shavelson, 1985; Marsh, 1986).

For instance, a study with adolescents in Grade 11 revealed that responses to a general self-concept scale, akin to Rosenberg’s (1965) self-esteem scale, did not correlate with any of the other 12 domain-specific facets of self-concept from the Self-Description Questionnaire III (SDQ III; Marsh & O’Niell, 1984). That is, domain-specific self-concepts (e.g., reading, same sex friends, opposite sex friends, parents, emotional stability, physical appearance, etc.) emerged
as distinct and relatively independent factors as evidenced by the small correlations among these facets in the study, suggesting a breakdown of the hierarchical structure of the self-concept but retention of its multifaceted nature. As a result, these domain-specific self-concepts may have a direct impact in influencing general self-concept or global self-esteem. Consequently, with a greater propensity to be affected directly by situational experiences, one’s general self-concept is more likely to fluctuate across situations and time (Harter & Whitesell, 2004). An individual’s general self-concept or self-esteem may fluctuate based on whether one perceives success in domains that are considered important, and how much preoccupation there is with receiving the feedback and approval of “significant others” (Cooley, 1902; Harter & Whitesell, 2004).

Perceived success in the domain of relationships may significantly contribute to the construction of one’s self-concept.

**Peer Relationships and Identity Construction**

Relationships are generally essential in the construction of self-concepts and identities in three interrelated ways: First, relationships provide a *key context in which interactions and behavior may be observed*. The histories, meanings, expectations, and emotions that characterise the relationship, as well as prior experiences of other relationships, influence behavior and interactions (Hinde & Stevenson-Hinde, 1987). From a symbolic interaction perspective, these interactions are crucial for creating meaning: self-concepts and identities are constructed from (consciously or unconsciously) observing one’s own behavior in these relationships and others’ behavior in response to oneself (Bem 1972; Cooley, 1902; Tice & Wallace, 2003). The self, as an active agent, develops with each formation of relationships and successive interactions in different relationships, such that specific self-concepts may change together with changes in relationships (Hinde, Finkenauer, & Auhagen, 2001).
For adolescents, self-concepts may change in tandem with the multiple identities that they develop as role differentiation increases in their lives (e.g., child, student, employee, athlete), and in relation to a more complex social environment with parents, teachers, other adults, close friends, romantic partners, and other peers (Burke & Stets, 2009; Harter, 1999b, 2008). As a child transitions into adolescence, peers become a more dominant “significant other”, as they are perceived to be more important activity partners than parents (Buhrmester & Furman, 1987). Dyadic peer relationships and larger peer groups become increasingly influential reference points for opinions and evaluations (Harter, 1999b, 2008; Rubin, Bukowski, Parker, & Bowker, 2008). Peer relationships thus play a significant role in influencing adolescents’ identity and well-being (Markus & Kunda, 1986; McCullough, Huebner, & Laughlin, 2000).

Peer relationships become more salient not only because of increased time spent with friends, but such relationships also exert influence as status and acceptance become more important during this developmental phase (Brown & Larson, 2009; Rubin, Bukowski, Parker, & Bowker, 2008). In particular, adolescents in dyadic friendships and friendship groups tend to select peers similar to them and grow in similarity through sustained interactions and mutual socialization (Brown & Larson, 2009). Adolescents’ self-concepts are thus shaped by their behavior in these relational contexts with peers, especially in shared activities and concrete experiences that adolescents use to evaluate their quality of friendships (Berndt, 2004).

A second way that relationships are central to the development of identities and/or self-concepts is that they provide referential standards for the evaluative aspect of one’s self-concept, contributing to the adolescent’s perceptions of popularity and peer acceptance. At the dyadic level, perceived evaluations of peers and significant others provide relative standards to judge one’s behavior against, with the forming of such evaluative self-concepts synonymous with the
developing of self-esteem (Shavelson, Hubner & Stanton, 1976). Further, sociocultural norms and values may also provide referential standards for self-evaluations (Harter, 1999b, 2008). Dyadic relationships are embedded in a social nexus of other relationships, building up into social groups with norms and values that influence interactions and behavior (Hinde & Stevenson-Hinde, 1987).

For adolescents, group norms and values are evident in how perceived popularity (status or prestige) emerges as distinct from sociometric popularity (likeability or preferred activity partners), under the influence of an increasingly complex social landscape of cliques and reputation-based crowds (Brown & Larson, 2009; Rubin, Bukowski, Parker, & Bowker, 2008). Perceived popularity becomes defining characteristics of crowds, and likeability further differentiates "prosocial populars" and "popular studious" (friendly, helpful, social, and academically engaged) from "populists" and "popular disengaged" (arrogant, cocky, aggressive, antisocial) (Brown & Larson, 2009). These social groups also become the means by which an adolescent may self-identify with or choose to join, hence facilitating the construction of social identities. More pertinent for an internet generation, the social norms and self-presentation practices in a media-saturated online environment play a critical role in influencing how an adolescent interprets peer acceptance and popularity and consequently evaluates one’s position among peers (Zywica & Danowsky, 2008). For example, participants in Zywica and Danowsky (2008)’s study agreed that having more pictures tagged by friends on Facebook was a sign of popularity. The activity of tagging photographs could thus evolve into a socially normalized means of evaluating one’s own popularity.

Finally, relationships are important for identity and self-concept development because they provide the context for developing social self-concept, a facet of non-academic self-concept
and a multifaceted construct in itself (Byrne & Shavelson, 1996). General social self-concept refers to the self-perception of one’s social competence or “getting along” with people in general, which is made up of self-concepts in specific relationships (Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton, 1976). Byrne and Shavelson (1996) examined adolescents’ specific relationships with classmates, teachers, siblings, and parents, and proposed a hierarchical self-concept structure that becomes increasingly differentiated and gender specific across the adolescent years. More specifically, stronger correlations were found between general social self-concept and the social self-concept component with same-sex peers, rather than opposite-sex peers, suggesting that self-perceptions of social competence are more heavily influenced by peer relationships with same-sex peers, especially in early adolescence (Byrne & Shavelson, 1996).

As friendship quality increases during childhood with a deepened structure of reciprocity, close (intimate) relationships emerge in early adolescence, evidenced by increased supportiveness and sharing of private thoughts and feelings (Berndt, 2004; Buhrmester, 1990; Hartup & Stevens, 1997). Buhrmester and Furman (1987) propose that same-sex friends are the most frequent sources of intimacy and companionship (as activity partners) in adolescence, although opposite-sex peers become increasingly desirable companions from preadolescence to adolescence. In sum, peer relationships, in particular non-romantic close friendships, provide an interactional and relational context in which adolescents construct their identities and self-concepts. It is of special interest to explore the experiences of shy adolescents, who as reported in the literature, appear to have difficulty with offline friendships, as they tend to prefer developing friendships with strangers on the Internet instead of building existing offline friendships through online settings (Gross, Juvonen, & Gable, 2002; Van Zalk, Branje, Denissen, Van Aken, & Meeus, 2011).
Shy Adolescents

In the literature, shyness is described to be problematic in the sense that individuals exhibit excessive self-preoccupation that presents itself through an approach-avoidance motivational conflict to social interaction (Rubin & Asendorpf, 1993). For example, such an individual is motivated to be engaged in social interaction, but simultaneously inhibited by a tendency to avoid social interaction. The inhibition is usually associated with fear toward social novelty or social evaluation (Asendorpf, 1993), which may be heightened for adolescents who typically go through a period of preoccupation with what others think, projecting their concerns on an “imaginary audience” (Elkind, 1967; Harter, 1999b, 2008).

In the course of the past 20 years, researchers have used a psychometric approach to conceptualize shyness in children and adolescents (see Coplan & Rubin, 2010, for a brief overview of general developments in the research field). Questionnaire-based measures such as the Revised Cheek and Buss Shyness Scale (RCBS; Cheek, 1983, cited in Hopko, Stowell, Jones, Armento, & Cheek, 2005) and the Children’s Shyness Questionnaire (Crozier, 1995) have been developed to facilitate self-reporting by older children and adolescents. More recently in the past decade, questionnaires have been applied in correlational studies exploring relations between shyness and online communication (e.g., Baker & Oswalk, 2010; Saunders & Chester, 2008). The wordings in these questionnaires reify “shyness” as a category, expressed in limited and overtly negative terms (e.g., “I am socially somewhat awkward” in the RCBS; Hopko et. al., 2005). As a result, research practices examining shyness tend to fall within a post-positivistic and essentialist paradigm, in which researchers attempt to quantify an assumed core essence of shyness through psychometric instruments that undergo validation and refinement, which are in turn used to categorize and predict shy behavior (Coplan & Rubin, 2010; Harris, 1984).
In this present study, I employed an alternative interpretivist perspective of examining meaning as dynamically and culturally constructed through shared interpretation, not limited to questionnaire-based measures. Harris (1984) suggests that the perspectives of self-identified shy adolescents (for whom “shyness” holds meaning constructed through their social experiences) should be given sufficient weight in the research literature. In line with this approach, I positioned “shyness” as a term for suggesting a certain kind of inhibited social interactional experience that adolescent participants may identify with, but in no way deterministic of what that experience entails or feels like for each person. In this way, the subjective experience of shyness was designed to be part of the exploration of these adolescents’ constructed identities, and not as an objective, deterministic measure.

*Online Communication of Shy Adolescents*

Despite the lack of interpretive research on the online friendships of “introverted”, “shy”, or “socially anxious” adolescents, a review of some quantitative studies elucidates some potentially relevant insights into shy individuals’ engagement in online communication for social compensation motives. For example, regarding self-presentations, Valkenburg, Schouten, and Peter (2005) found that older adolescents who were introverted tended to present themselves as older and more flirtatious. The authors suggest that this was an attempt to compensate for their difficulty in social interaction and developing offline friendships with the opposite gender. Zywica and Danowski’s (2008) findings corroborate these and provide further support for the notion that the Internet provides introverted adolescents (especially those with low self-esteem) with opportunities for social compensation by providing an alternative means for them to look popular online by presenting exaggerated information with the intention of enhancing self-image. For shy adolescents having difficulty in offline interactions, the compensatory behaviour of
seeking online communication could be evidence for how the social domain could be important to shy adolescents’ general self-concept and identity.

Another form of social compensation is the aspect of improved online self-disclosure for those who approach the use of the Internet with a social goal. Introverted adolescents who use the Internet to meet people are, in fact, able to form online friendships through increased online self-disclosure and frequency of communication (Lee, 2009; Peter, Valkenburg, & Schouten, 2005). Furthermore, online self-disclosure has shown to mediate the relationship between online communication and friendship quality (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007b; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). Adolescents would perceive greater friendship quality when their online communication includes self-disclosure. By extension from this, then, it makes sense that friendship quality could have a positive impact on shaping social self-concept and identity (Buhrmester, 1990).

However, the efficacy of self-disclosure in facilitating positive relationships appears less straightforward than expected. In another study examining the valence of emotions in self-disclosed content, instead of increased self-disclosure strengthening relationships, the contrary was found such that shy adolescents were more prone to disclose negative experiences and feelings online, which seemed to moderate the relationship between shyness and loneliness (Laghi, Schneider, Vitoroulis, Coplan, Baiocco, Amichai-Hamburger, Hudek, Koszycki, Miller, & Flament, 2013). That is to say, it would be important not only to pay attention to the quantifiable aspect of frequency of self-disclosure, but also to the qualitative nature of the online communication that could affect relationship processes, and which ultimately impact identity construction.
Structural Aspects of the Internet

There are certain aspects of the Internet that have been argued to facilitate shy adolescents’ engagement in greater intimate online self-disclosure or enhanced self-presentations (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007b), each of which is described below:

Semi-Anonymity

A perceived sense of audio-visual anonymity may help to reduce audience anxiety for the shy individual, which may evoke a sense of trust in the communication experience (Green, 2007; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). Although it is not common to remain entirely anonymous on social networking sites, the platform, which enables users to “hide” behind a screen, may embolden the adolescent’s self-presentation and self-disclosure of more personal matters (Fr & Chester, 2008; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). This emboldened engagement may also be facilitated by how an online environment may have decreased “gating features” (e.g., physical appearance, McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002, p. 10) toward the formation of close relationships. Additionally, the lack of audio-visual features reduces the need for (socially expected) eye contact in interactions, thus, providing a more comfortable environment for socially anxious individuals to bond over shared activities online, such as computer gaming (Desjarlais & Willouby, 2010). However, whether the reduced audio-visual cues in the online environment will lead to online self-disclosure and friendship development, as noted above, that would depend on the social goals of the individual (Peter, Valkenburg, & Schouten, 2005).

Asynchronicity

Asynchronous chats afford the ability to reflect before responding in an online chat, which may help to alleviate some interaction anxiety for the shy individual (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). For the adolescent who is typically inhibited at expressing contradictory views in a bid for acceptance, this form of asynchronous communication may enable her or him to express
thoughts which may otherwise be restrained in face-to-face conversations (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). With positive experiences of more intimate reciprocal self-disclosure (e.g., over instant messaging), the adolescent may enhance his or her sense of connection to people through online communication.

_Social Networking_

Through various platforms to connect and communicate with people, the shy individual can explore alternative means of communicating and receiving responses from strangers and different online social groups outside her or his limited offline social network (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). The adolescent may receive a variety of responses and views toward her or his online postings that could be beneficial in shaping his or her self-concept and extending his or her social network that would not otherwise exist in a face-to-face setting. In addition, different online communication modes (e.g., public chat rooms or forums, social networking sites, and instant messaging) have distinct interactive characteristics that influence the way an individual may self-disclose or choose interaction partners with different motivations, such as seeking advice, keeping abreast of the latest trending topic or soliciting social and emotional support (Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 2008; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010).

In sum, online communication has the potential to afford the shy adolescent benefits of enhanced autonomy in self-presentation and self-disclosure, in semi-anonymous and asynchronous ways that reduce audience and interaction anxiety, and with extended accessible social networks that can enrich one’s social development. However, the question remains as to whether shy adolescents’ social experiences tend to remain dichotomized as separate online and offline contexts.
Online-Offline Boundaries

Hogan and Quan-Haase (2010) challenge the notion of the Internet as a separate world from the offline world, claiming that “the real distinction is not the ‘online self’ from the ‘offline self’, but the mind-in-the-present that interacts with others compared with the digital traces left behind that can be redistributed to audiences” (p. 313). The online and offline environments may in fact be seen as components of a hybrid world in which one’s “consciousness is to some extent shared between an offline physical and an online virtual self” (Jordan, 2009, p. 181). That is, we may move between the online and offline settings in more seamless ways than consciously determined, with artifacts produced through our online interactions (e.g., chat-logs, comments, or posted videos) traversing time and physical space in digital format, interacting with multiple audiences even after one’s death. This could have bearing on how sociocultural resources (e.g., ideologies about “shyness”) created in an online context might be used for identity construction in the offline context and vice versa.

Online-offline boundaries are increasingly blurred in a hybrid space where cultural and lifestyle practices and ideologies are in a constant process of reshaping one another (Jordan, 2009). Such hybridity is reinforced by the ubiquity of internet-enabled smartphones and handheld mobile devices owned by adolescents (Lenhart, 2012; Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011). As digital communication devices are increasingly mobile and frequently accessed in daily life, they reciprocally shape our social norms and cultural practices in the offline setting. Thus, as online-offline boundaries are blurred, research has taken a step toward viewing online and offline friendship networks in a more inter-related and integrated manner, recognizing the overlap of social networks and the influence that the online and offline contexts have on one another (e.g., Di Gennaro & Dutton, 2007; Jordan, 2009; Reich, Subrahmanyam, & Espinoza, 2012). It was a point of interest in the current study to pay attention to both the online
and offline settings when seeking to understand shy adolescents’ identity construction through friendships, as well as their perspectives on the boundaries of these contexts.

**Framing the Present Study**

The literature review provided a referential frame for the present study, which aimed to give voice to self-identified shy adolescents through an interpretivist approach of meaning-making that is lacking in the literature. Undergirded by a symbolic interactionist perspective, the study explored how participants identified with a socially-constructed category of “shy adolescents” through their narratives of close friendship experiences. Recognising that personal, role and social identities are embedded and continually constructed in multiple micro social systems of the larger sociocultural system, it follows that adolescents may construct contextual identities in multiple online and offline friendship contexts, with structural aspects of the Internet facilitating online communication and providing social compensation for “shy adolescents”.

The study thus examined how relationships, social processes, and sociocultural contexts were means for identity construction. Non-romantic close friendships with peers were a focus of the adolescents’ experiences. In this way, I aimed to explore close friendships that precluded intimate experiences with sexual dynamics. The aspects of unity and continuity in self-concept (e.g., how one’s self-concept of shyness may be considered as stable or changing) across online and offline contexts was also studied, to contribute to the gap in the literature on understanding the offline experiences of shy adolescents who benefit from online communication.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Theoretical Framework

The study is situated in a social constructionist epistemology with a compatible critical realist ontology (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, cited in Pascale, 2011). I assume a position which is “grounded in the belief in an objective social world but holds that meaning is socially/historically constructed” (Pascale, 2011, p. 50). The meaning that we attribute to reality is intersubjectively constructed through shared interpretations that are open to reinterpretation. Yet, these socially constructed claims are treated as real, compared to a radical poststructuralist position of relative ontology which posits that meaning is not carried beyond its situationally-created context. By assuming critical realism, this interpretivist theoretical perspective enables us to explore contextual identity constructions in online and offline settings, concomitantly recognizing that identity is a reality that can exist apart from discursive representations.

Nevertheless, creating discursive and other symbolic representations are processes through which we construct identities and create meaning about who we are (Bruner, 2002; Riessman, 2008). A narrative approach provides a means for investigating the research questions related to contextual identity construction. The research questions for this study do not have a priori hypotheses, as is compatible with the interpretivist perspective, but contain sensitizing concepts (e.g., identity, intimacy, structure, change and continuity) that help us approach the data with sensitivity to the relationships being studied (Pascale, 2011).

Narrative Approach

In a narrative approach, we examine stories that typically contain cues reflecting the nature of the self (e.g., agency, social reference, reflexive, and positional indicators; Bruner, 1997), as well as cultural norms, metaphors, and themes (Gergen, 2011; McAdams, 2011). That
is, constructed narratives point to information about the constructors’ identity, systems of meaning, and also the broader sociocultural and historical context in which the constructors are embedded (Bruner, 2002; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). For example, as participants discursively construct and narrate what it means to self-identify as shy, this reveals prevailing sociocultural meanings of shyness that may have been internalized.

Employing interview methods within a narrative approach introduces another layer of meaning-making through the act of co-constructing narratives in the interviewer-participant interaction (Riessman, 2008). The story that is constructed during an interview hence becomes a specific re-presentation of one’s identity and experiences, influenced by the interactional context with the interviewer in a research study. In fact, the process of narrating stories about the self is a means of discursively producing identities, creating meaning, and internalizing them (Bruner, 2002). Similar to Eriksonian notions of identity, narrative identity construction becomes a developmental task in adolescence and remains a life-long work-in-progress of perceiving the present with a reconstructed past and anticipated future (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Habermas & Paha, 2001; McAdams, 2011).

Narratives may, thus be seen as a means of achieving continuity and coherence to experiences of tension and conflict across time and contexts (McAdams, 1996). A person engaged in constructing a narrative identity can achieve a sense of continuity if the narrative conveys a sense of being the same person over time (Baumeister, 2011). Another way a person may attain a sense of coherence is through narratively constructing a unified “I” identity that coheres multiple identities (a flux of changing “Me” representations) by imposing metacognitive structures of symbols, metaphors, or binary oppositions (Bruner, 1997; Baumeister, 2011; Gregg, 2011). For instance, participants could narratively own or reject dispositional traits (such as
shyness) through a process of elaborating on contextual details of experiences (e.g., motivations and responses). In providing different self-representations, participants may convey the dynamism of the “Me” representation that changes across time and contexts (McAdams, 1996). Taken together, the study of the construction, change and continuity of contextual identities is suitably explored through a narrative approach.

For this study, I chose a narrative approach that incorporated a researcher’s involvement in co-constructing the narratives through online interviews, instead of solely depending on written narratives from the participants. The interviews thus provided an interactional context that mirrored self-presentation and self-disclosure processes typical of their online friendship experiences.

As such, I adapted Arvay’s (2003) 7-stage reflexive collaborative narrative method, which emphasizes the element of co-construction between researcher and participant. (1) Preliminary interviews were carried out to “set the stage” before the (2) “performance” of co-constructing the research interview (p. 164). As online interviews were conducted over online instant messaging, the (3) transcription process involved minimal interpretive moves, although I had to make some decisions when converting the interview log into a coherent narrative for each participant. The narratives mostly retained the structure of the main interview and the original text communicated over instant messaging. The stages of (4) “collaborative interpretive readings” and (5) “interpretive interview” were meant to structure a collaborative process with participants as “co-investigators” to interpret the interview and translate that into the writing of narratives. However, for this study, these two stages were collapsed with the (6) writing of the narratives, where the “transcribed” narratives from the interview log were emailed to participants for their feedback and inputs. After receiving the participants’ feedback and concurrence, the
narratives were analyzed with a holistic-content perspective by Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber, (1998) and another contextual analysis method by the same authors, both of which will be described later in the chapter. These case analyses, too, were shared with participants for their comments. The last stage of (7) sharing the story culminates in this thesis’ presentation of the participants’ narratives and case analyses.

Participants

The participants in this study were six female adolescents, aged 14 to 18 years at the time of the interview. Despite the absence of gender restriction, the first six interested adolescents who met the criteria for inclusion were all female. Narratives of six participants were adequate for the research, given that sample representativeness was not a relevant consideration under an interpretivist paradigm, but what was important was the construction of “thickly” described narratives for each case, increasing the contextualizing required to generalize within rather than across cases (Geertz, 1973; Riessman, 1993).

For the purpose of the study, recruited participants were required to:

a. Be between 14 to 18 years old;

b. Describe themselves as shy in general (non-romantic) social situations;

c. Have grown closer to at least one non-romantic friend through online communication (regardless of whether this friendship originated in an online or offline setting);

d. Be then living in Canada or the United States and have lived there for at least one year;

e. Be comfortable with communicating in the English language; and

f. Have Internet access and the technology for online messaging (e.g., Skype, MSN Messenger, Yahoo! Messenger) in a private environment.
Early adolescents, under 14 years of age, were excluded on the basis that pre-adolescents were found to be more interested in online identity experiments than building relationships, with online self-disclosure peaking at around 15 years (Valkenburg, Schouten, & Peter, 2005; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007b). An older age group suited the study as participants were required to have had some initial years developing close friendships in order to provide substantial narratives of their experiences. Older adolescents were also recognized to have better developed cognitive abilities required for meaning-making of possible contradictions in their self-representations upon reflection of their experiences across time and contexts (Harter, 1999b, 2008; McLean, Breen, & Fournier, 2010).

Participants were recruited only from Canada and the United States in order to circumvent the drawback of geographical diversity that online recruitment tended to bring about. Although the qualitative study did not require the criterion of representative sampling, I attempted to decrease the variability of participants’ sociocultural backgrounds to enable some comparisons to be made across the six cases. A further restriction in terms of their language proficiency was added due to the dependence of constructing substantive narratives in the English language and the limitations of facilitating translations in an online interviewing context. Out of the six participants for the study, four were born and raised in Canada or the United States, of whom three were of mixed European ethnicity and one of East Asian (Chinese) ethnicity. Both remaining two participants had migrated to Canada, one of East Asian (Chinese) ethnicity at age 3, while the other of South Asian ethnicity at age 15. This diversity added to the uniqueness of each case yet retained sufficient similarities in their backgrounds to facilitate the cross-case analysis.
Procedure

The participants were recruited through online advertisements on Facebook as it was generally known to be a popular social networking site among adolescents in North America at the time of the study (Common Sense Media, 2012). To supplement the outreach, I emailed five personal contacts, posted short messages on five Experience Project forums related to shyness, and sent short private messages to 29 Tumblr blogs by using a search function to identify individuals who had displayed “#shy” on their posts. I attempted to expand the recruitment outreach through these sites as they typically hosted personal posts and messages by adolescents who self-identified as shy in their online self-presentations. The Facebook advertisement and supplementary messages directed interested individuals to a blog that I had specially created to provide a standard set of information for the study’s recruitment purpose (Appendix A). Over the course of three months, six participants were recruited out of 50 who had expressed initial interest through email but did not follow up with assent forms. Of the final six participants, four had come to know of the study through the Facebook advertisement and two through the Tumblr messages.

The blog presented the inclusion criteria as questions to facilitate the self-selection of participants. In particular, the term “shy” was used as a means for self-identification. In an interpretivist paradigm where meaning and identity are “ontological conventions” rather than factual truths (Pascale, 2011, p.23), such an approach is better suited than administering a shyness measurement scale to determine the eligibility of participants. The different meanings that the participants attached through self-identification with shyness lent to the richness of the data rather than introduced a methodological flaw (Flick, 2009).
Interested participants who responded to my email address on the blog were emailed detailed information sheets together with the parent passive consent and participant assent forms (Appendix B). I requested for a parent’s or guardian’s email contact or mail address in order to directly provide the same information to their caregivers, especially for those below the age of 18. In the information sheet, I appended a list of online chats and toll-free phone lines for youth in Canada and the United States. This was to provide support in the event that participation in the study triggered any emotional distress in the participants. The information sheet also indicated a token of appreciation in the form of an online gift card of the participant’s choice (worth CAD$20.00), that would be presented regardless of whether the participant withdrew before the completion of the study. Upon receiving the participants’ assent forms, online interviews were set up, comprising a short online pre-interview and an online main interview with each participant. At the pre-interview, I addressed questions about the study and reminded participants that they could withdraw at any time, to reinforce the voluntary nature of their participation.

*Online Interview Format*

Both the pre-interview and the main interview (Appendix C) with each participant were carried out through an online instant messaging platform of their choice. Four participants chose Skype Messenger, one opted for Yahoo! Messenger and one selected Facebook Messenger. After each interview, I transferred the online interview logs to a password-protected word processing document, before deleting the logs from the messaging program.

For both interviews, I decided on an instant messaging format without the video function, as the reduced presence of audio-visual cues was expected to increase their confidence and openness toward participation due to perceived anonymity (Hinchcliffe & Gavin, 2009). This was especially important for shy adolescents who tended to be more comfortable with online than face-to-face offline communication (Bonetti, Campbell & Gilmore, 2010; Gross, Juvonen,
& Gable, 2002; McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002). One of the participants corroborated this preference during the first email contact where she declared that she would participate as long as the interview could be typed out. The online affordance of deliberating on responses before typing them out was also congruent with the study’s focus on shy teenagers’ identity construction, where such semi-asynchronous online communication aided online self-presentation.

Pre-Interview

Applying Arvay’s (2003) idea of the preliminary interview as setting the stage for the main interview, the pre-interview was primarily designed as a platform to explain the rationale and process of the study and address questions that may have arisen from reading the emailed information sheets. It provided an opportunity to reiterate the points on privacy, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and informed consent, as well as establish rapport and a relational context before embarking on the main interview.

As part of the rapport building process, I briefly introduced myself as an international graduate student from Singapore and invited participants to ask any questions about myself. One declined to ask, two asked questions related to the culture in Singapore, while three enquired about my major for my undergraduate studies. The originally planned 20 minutes for the pre-interview typically extended to 40 minutes or longer, because of the interaction sparked off by the participants’ questions, which situated a semi-spontaneous sharing within the planned interview protocol. Their choice of questions (or absence of questions) and the interaction arising from them contributed to my initial impressions of the participants, such as their interests and orientation to life. This sharing was followed by a set of demographic questions I posed to gain a better picture of the participants’ social context (e.g., family, living environment, history of physical relocations). Some participants freely self-disclosed more at this early stage about their
unhappiness over family-related problems. I recorded a reflection after each pre-interview as part of the documentation process, which also contributed to my analysis for each participant’s narrative.

In preparation for the main interview, participants were asked to think of a close friend to whom they had grown closer through online communication, as well as select pictures or quotes for a “Show and Tell” section to talk about. Participants were requested to choose one picture or quote to represent their friendship experiences in online settings, and another (similar or different) picture or quote to represent their offline friendship experiences. At the close of the pre-interview, the main interview was scheduled for another day within the week.

**Main Interview**

The main interview comprised three sections, namely, “Introduction”, “Story of a Close Friendship”, and “Show and Tell”. It typically took between one-and-a-half to two hours. The first section comprised semi-structured questions inviting participants to describe themselves, elaborate on what it meant for them to be “shy” and to share what friendships meant to them in general. This was followed by the second section, where a generative question was posed for participants to tell a story about a close non-romantic friendship that developed through online communication from the time they had met until the point of the interview. The closing section with semi-structured questions incorporated a show-and-tell component, requiring participants to share the pictures or words that had been chosen to represent their online and offline friendship experiences. The pictures or words were used to encourage participants to reflect on how they viewed themselves and to compare their experiences of friendships in both online and offline settings. I had designed the three sections to explore the research questions from different angles, collectively bearing in mind sensitizing concepts of identity, intimacy, structure, change and continuity. At the end of each main interview, I recorded a reflexive account of the perceived
dynamics between the participant and myself that could have shaped the interaction, as well as initial impressions of certain themes that could be pertinent.

*Post-Interview Communication*

All communication after the main interview took place over email correspondences, the first of which was the sharing of the narratives, constructed from the online interview text with minimal changes to the actual words in order to represent the participants’ personal voices. I gave pseudonyms to participants and their close friends portrayed in the narratives, except for one participant who elected to choose the pseudonym she used with her online friends. These constructed narratives were emailed to participants to check for accuracy and to invite their comments and any proposed changes before the narratives were analyzed. While most of the participants were satisfied with their narratives, two of them tracked changes in the document, largely to modify some informal language that I had intentionally retained from the online interview to preserve the authenticity. In the second email correspondence, I provided the individual case analysis for their feedback on accuracy and suggestions for improvements.

**Data Analysis**

*Individual Case Analysis: Holistic-Content Perspective*

The narratives were inductively analyzed with a holistic-content perspective (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). This method, usually employed for analyzing life stories, was chosen for its approach of considering the entire context of the narrative when analyzing specific parts, as opposed to a categorical-content analysis, which tends to decontextualize parts of the story in order to make comparisons across different participants’ accounts. In line with the exploratory and descriptive nature of this study, I tried to honour the stories of each participant in its entirety. Nevertheless, a category-centred model approach can be carried out together with a
narrative analysis of individual cases (Riessman, 2008). For a comparison across the narratives, I used Stake’s (2006) cross-case analysis method, which will be elaborated on below.

Following Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber’s (1998) steps, I first read the narrative repeatedly to gain an initial “global impression”. The authors recommend for the researcher to ground the initial impressions in the data by reading the whole story with an open mind, listening carefully and empathically to what is said, in order for a patterns to emerge in the form of foci of the entire account. In so doing, I carried out open coding of phrases in situ at this stage to get an overall feel of the nuances and emphasis of the story. As a second step, I recorded these global impressions as part of the individual case analysis, highlighting unique features, and any contradictions or unfinished descriptions, which were just as instructive as coherent or richly-described ones. Third, I conducted a closer reading from beginning to end and decided on specific content or themes. Repetition, space, and details were signals for the identification of themes. Fourth, I marked out the themes in the narrative separately using selective coding and conducted a closer analysis of the material with repeated and separate readings for each theme, drawing conclusions and findings from the thematic analysis.

The authors highlight that attention should be paid to the start and end of each theme’s appearance, the transitions and context for these themes, and relative meaning to the entire account (including contradictions in terms of mood, content, or evaluative judgments). My analysis from the holistic-content perspective was shaped by the focus of the research question “how do self-identified shy adolescents construct identities through narrating experiences of close friendships in online and offline settings?” As I analyzed the patterns and meanings of each theme in relation to the whole narrative, I formed the identities that I interpreted the participants to be constructing, as well as the intrapersonal and interpersonal processes that I perceived them
to have undertaken to do so. I endeavoured to capture the “how” through these processes that I
had been sensitized to through the literature review. As this approach was a highly interpretive
one, “interjudge reliability” was not a consideration in the analytical process (Lieblich, Tuval-
Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998). However, other independent readers from the thesis committee
helped to provide perspectives on the individual case analysis.

Individual Case Analysis: Contextual Analysis

To complement the holistic-content perspective, I conducted a contextual analysis using
another method by Zilber, Tuval-Mashiach, and Lieblich (2008), which I shall refer to as the
“three-spheres-of-context” model. The authors emphasize the importance of contextual analysis
to be carried out in tandem with content analysis, as the written text and the hidden context are
related and constitute one another. According to them, identity is connected to three levels of
context: the intersubjective context, social field, and meta-narratives of the broader sociocultural
context. The intersubjective context refers to the immediate setting where the story is narrated;
that is, the interview and the interviewer-participant relationship constitute the intersubjective
context. The social field is the socio-historical context that the participant experienced at the time
of the story, which refers to physical or virtual spaces and events in a particular historical time;
and the meta-narratives refer to the broader sociocultural conventions that are embedded in the
story.

While the authors do not provide a specific method of reading the narratives for
analyzing the three contexts, they provide some guidelines for a close and concrete reading of the
narrative. Following these guidelines, I first analyzed the intersubjective context by drawing on
my reflection log that I had written after each interview to identify possible influencing inter-
personal dynamics and how I had played a co-constructing role for the narrative. Based on my
impression of the participant’s self-presentation (e.g., restrained, opinionated, introspective), I
identified and analyzed explicit textual markers in the narrative (e.g., indicating uncertainty, generalizations, or reflexivity) to give further insights into how each participant was telling her story. For the second context of the social field, I looked for explicit content where the participant was recounting personal memories and details of online and offline settings. Offline settings typically included the school and the home, while online settings covered different online communication platforms. As a third context, the sociocultural meta-narratives were analyzed by looking for implicit references to cultural norms, themes, and beliefs. Some of these were embedded in the narrative but subtly influenced the unfolding and details of the story, thus requiring an interpretive move to bring them to the surface. For instance, participants’ use of the term “real life” to refer to the offline context could be interpreted as an allusion to embedded sociocultural norms of referring to the online context as “virtual”, the use of which seemed to suggest a hierarchical ranking of the offline “real” context as being more substantive or consequential than the online “virtual” context.

My contextual analysis was shaped by the second subset of research questions: “Do these narratives point to information about their contexts? What information about the contexts can be inferred? How might continuity and change be described across online and offline contexts?” I used the frames of sensitizing concepts such as social structures, roles, and positions to highlight the flow and disconnect across online and offline settings. Sociocultural norms and beliefs were identified and their effects in online and offline interactional settings on identity construction were explored. As a summary of each individual case analysis, findings from both the holistic-content perspective and the “three-spheres-of-context” methods were taken into consideration to give an overview of the ways in which identity was constructed with elements of continuity and change across contexts.
Cross-Case Analysis

While I analyzed each narrative and presented them as individual case reports, I subsequently made comparisons across the six narratives to find commonalities. Adopting Stake’s (2006) concept of the Quintain, I position the individual cases as sharing common characteristics and bound together by the phenomenon of identity construction through close friendship experiences in online and offline settings. This binding concept of identity construction is the “Quintain” or phenomenon under study.

In a cross-case analysis, we pay attention to the binding concept or the Quintain while keeping the tension of bearing in mind the situational issues presented in each case. We thus use the “particular” to understand the “field”, resulting in a constrained dialectical relationship between the etic and the emic details where both require attention when being analyzed. I maintained this case-Quintain dialectic throughout the three-step cross-case analysis process: first, interpreting patterns within each case to produce individual case findings; second, analyzing cross-case findings; and third, generating “assertions” or findings of the Quintain (Stake, 2006, p. 40). To operationalize the three-step process, Stake provides three cross-case analysis procedures that vary in how much emphasis is placed on generalization versus particularization. I chose the middle track, which focused on merging case findings to create the set of assertions for the Quintain, instead of using either individual case findings or de-contextualized factors as the basis for making assertions. This middle ground enabled me to make assertions without getting overwhelmed by particularities of each case, and yet maintain a sense of how each case contributed to the Quintain.

In line with the chosen cross-case analysis procedure, I first articulated seven a priori themes from the research questions, guided by the literature on identity construction through both psychological and sociological perspectives. These themes were particularly designed with
a view of understanding how identities were contextually constructed and if there was any interplay between the online and offline contexts in influencing these social and identity-construction processes. The seven themes were a) constructing personal identities; b) constructing role identities; c) constructing social identities; d) social and socio-cultural structures or positions; e) affordances of online settings; f) continuity across online and offline contexts; and g) change across online and offline contexts.

I then began with the first cross-case analysis step of analysing patterns and producing individual case findings: examining each of the six individual case analyses reports and re-reading the accompanying narratives, I developed individual case findings that were mapped to the seven themes. The case findings tended to be summarized points, not longer than two sentences long, derived from the case analyses reports. As a second step of merging the individual case findings, I used a word processing programme to aid the clustering of similar case findings together in order to develop a set of nine merged findings across cases (see Appendix K). As a last step of producing assertions for the Quintain, I reviewed these merged findings against the seven themes to refine them into six theme-based assertions that targeted the understanding of the phenomenon of identity construction for this study. The assertions are presented at the end of Chapter 4.

**Trustworthiness of Data**

To establish the trustworthiness of the data and findings for qualitative research, criteria such as credibility, confirmability, transferability, and dependability were considered (Flick, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addressing the credibility of data, I incorporated in the research design multiple angles for data-collection to enhance the richness of contextual details surrounding their friendship narratives. Although the online interview was the main method
used, it was designed to comprise three sections that each played a different role in addressing the research questions, coupled with the use of participant-chosen symbols (pictures or words) to mediate their meaning-making of identity construction in online and offline friendship settings. Each section provided unique data for a holistic interpretation of each case. Additionally, I conducted member checks with participants to gather feedback for both the co-constructed narrative, as well as the individual case findings.

The balanced use of quotations from the narrative data and my own thick descriptions in each case report promoted confirmability, which sought to ensure that the data sufficiently and accurately supported the interpretations that were made. To strengthen the interpretive process, I recorded a memo of details immediately after each online interview, with a view to capturing personal reactions, questions, and hunches on emerging data, as well as perceptions of how identities were being constructed during the interview itself. In addition, I made reflexive notes about how I as a researcher might have influenced the construction of the narrative in less explicit ways. These notes collectively contributed additional data, particularly useful for the analysis of the “intersubjective context”, and thus were reviewed frequently and incorporated into the writing of each case analysis report. Due to time constraints, I emailed the individual case analysis for each participant’s feedback, instead of arranging for follow-up online interviews, which could have strengthened how well the interpretations reflected the participants’ realities (Morrow, 2005).

In terms of ensuring transferability, I took to drawing up a purposive sampling criteria as well as detailing a fuller picture of each participant’s sociocultural context, in order to facilitate the reader’s discernment of whether the findings may be applied to a different context. I endeavoured to improve the dependability of the data by maintaining a research log to document
the processes from the recruitment phase to that of data collection and analysis, which added to the procedural reliability of the study (Flick, 2009). As I developed an analytic framework using broad guidelines by Lieblich et. al. (1998) and Zilber et. al. (2008), the log of the specific steps I had taken enabled me to revisit the earlier cases and evaluate the procedural consistency across the cases. This was particularly important for my study due to my return to Singapore to work full-time after the period of data collection; as a result, the data analysis, interpretation, and writing process subsequently spanned almost a year. At the end of this time, I had to review the first two cases and re-align the analytical steps to ensure that data was being interpreted in a systematic and consistent manner across the six cases.

**Ethical Issues**

The present study was approved by the University of British Columbia Behavioural Research Ethics Board (Certificate Number H13-01294) and undertook to treat all participants in accordance with the ethical guidelines. Voluntary participation and informed assent was secured, with accompanying passive consent from parents or guardians. Although the study had low emotional and psychological risk associated with it, I appended a list of online or phone support to the information forms to pre-empt any potential distress that could arise from recounting past friendship experiences. Participants were reminded of their right to withdraw their participation at any time during the course of the study or to refuse to answer any questions that were posed. There were no repercussions from such non-participation. I also made effort to ensure that participants felt comfortable during the interview and subsequent email correspondence.

To safeguard participants’ privacy, I kept names and identifying information separate from the data for analysis, allocating pseudonyms unless otherwise requested by the participants. Communication through emails and online messaging programs were immediately
transferred into electronic files (e.g., into a .doc or .pdf format) and deleted from the original email or messaging program. I kept all electronic files with identifying information in password-protected folders of secure computers during the course of the study.

**Situating the Researcher**

The practice of reflexivity commonly makes explicit the underlying motivations and preconceptions related to the research questions. In addition, “personal reflexivity also encompasses situating the researcher and his/her knowledge-making practices within relevant contexts, whether interpersonal, institutional or cultural” (Finlay & Gough, 2003, p. 37). A brief reflexive account can thus provide an insight into how the researcher’s personal experiences and situated contexts contributed to the conceptualization of the research, as well as surface subjective investments or any potential biases that may undermine the credibility of the findings.

In the process of clarifying my research focus, I was cognizant of my past childhood and work experiences that shaped my choice of topic and research questions. In my growing up years, I self-identified as a shy and introverted child, recognizing how my own social self-concept had changed through positive friendship experiences during the developmental years of adolescence. Subsequently, in both my professional role as a teacher for three years in a Singapore secondary school and personal capacity as a mentor in a religious church setting, I noticed myself gravitating towards quiet and insecure adolescents in my desire to help them develop self-confidence. Frequently using text-based communication through mobile texting or instant messaging, I endeavoured to build emotionally safe relationships with these adolescents in the hope that they would also feel more comfortable relating in face-to-face settings.

Thus, as I came across literature suggesting that shy and introverted adolescents may prefer online communication with online-exclusive friends rather than with friends originating
from offline settings, I developed an interest in studying this particular subgroup of shy adolescents. The adolescents whom I knew in my school and church settings could relate to this preference and I wondered if the ability to self-disclose over text-based messages could flow into confidence in general face-to-face interactions. It was with these thoughts that I approached the research focus of contextual identities in online and offline settings, bearing in mind the need to be open to findings that may not support the online-offline interplay that I was hoping to discover. In the course of the analysis of the participants’ narratives, I recorded reflexive notes of how I identified with their personal experiences and how their experiences were different from mine. In so doing, I was able to monitor more carefully the ways I might unwittingly overlay my own experiences in the interpretation of their narratives.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

In this chapter, I present individual case analyses for the six participants’ narratives. At the beginning of each case, I first provide demographic information and a brief overview of friendship experiences, before detailing four sub-sections: a) global impressions; b) findings from the holistic-content analysis (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber, 1998); c) findings from a contextual analysis (Zilber, Tuval-Mashiach, and Lieblich, 2008); and d) concluding remarks. As this research has a focus on identity construction, I organize the case findings from the holistic-content analysis around statements that articulate the participants’ constructed identities. Due to the richness and specificity of the data, each case has two unique identity statements. Modes of identity construction (broadly identified from the literature and used as a reference in the analysis) are also expressly indicated, to illustrate the process by which participants construct their identities. These identity statements and modes of construction are presented in boxes. In the subsequent contextual analysis sub-section, I organize the findings according to the intersubjective context, social field, and the socio-cultural context. Finally, I close this chapter with the findings from a cross-case analysis (Stake, 2006).

Participant #1: Alice

Alice was 17 years old at the time of the interview, and had just completed Grade 12. She was of European ethnicity and had been born and raised in Canada. Alice identified herself as shy, associating that with being “nervous around other people, and not really wanting to interact”. She attributed her social inhibition to an incident of sexual assault when she was 14. For the narrative, she described her close friendship development with Terri whom she had met two years ago on Tumblr. She then considered Terri as her best friend, and had a chance after the interview to meet Terri in person by going with her mother to the United States for a visit. In a
post-script update, she indicated that she had an “awesome” time with Terri during their first
time together in an offline context.

Global Impressions

Alice’s social self-concept appeared to be characterized by a negative valence and a
deficit orientation. Her self-introduction was primarily couched in terms of what she did not
enjoy doing in social settings. While her inability to trust people in general seemed to have its
roots in the sexual trauma three years ago, the personal struggles of depression, body image, self-
harm, and eating disorders heightened the difficulty in talking to people. Her sense of isolation
can be inferred, particularly as the meeting with Terri on Tumblr was described to be a first time
that she could talk to someone about all that she was struggling with. She attributed to that
encounter a sense of feeling cared for and having someone share in her struggles.

Through the pictures that Alice requested Terri to draw for the interview, she presented
the notion that “hanging out” with online friends and knowing “they’re there”, even if they could
not be physically touched, developed a similar but different intimacy compared to that developed
through offline settings. The picture of a couple (Figure 1) represented the idea of intimacy
developed through physical touch and proximity, while the picture of someone “just hanging out
with friends” (Figure 2) represented her experience of developing emotional intimacy with Terri
through online communication.

Figure 1. Alice’s chosen picture representing friendship experiences in offline settings

Figure 1 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It shows a hand-drawn picture
illustrating two people facing forward in a cuddle. The man is seen laying his head in the lap of
the woman and the woman resting her head on the man’s side.
In Alice’s narrative, the emphasis on emotional closeness was prominent. Her repeated explanations that it took time for her to warm up to people was juxtaposed with the account of an intense experience of “talking” online or texting every day which facilitated the development of trust in Terri from the first easy connection they had. The significant moment of “Facetiming” for the first time helped to bridge the experience of being emotionally close with the experience of being physically close. This bridging extended to meeting Terri face-to-face in the United States.

Talking in an online setting did not require Alice to “open [her] mouth” but “talking” was frequently used to describe the interactions she had with Terri, suggesting that the online instant messaging and iPhone texting mediated the self-disclosure that talking in face-to-face settings was meant to facilitate. Instant messaging in an online setting with Terri enabled her to break the isolation and self-disclose without the fear of being judged. Her struggles remained and she continued to use Tumblr as a journal to express herself. She drew a distinction between the people she was quiet around and the people to whom she had warmed up. Although she had warmed up to friends in both online and offline settings, it appeared that none of these friends had reached the level of intimacy developed with Terri, her best friend.
Findings from a Holistic-Content Analysis

1. A victim of the social environment trusting someone for the first time

   Modes of identity construction: Enacting self-representation of being a victim of sexual assault; negotiating meanings of self with an internalized reference group; social process of enhancing friendship quality

Near the beginning of the story, Alice self-disclosed that she had been sexually assaulted. This framed the rest of her narrative with the voice of a victim whose trust in people had been broken. As a result of her inability to trust, she was subsequently unable to talk to people:

   I stopped talking a lot around 14 when I was sexually assaulted, and I kind of just shut down from everyone. (Lines 2-3, Appendix D, italics mine)

   I don’t think anything helps me warm up to people. It just takes time for me. It takes time to feel like I can trust the person. I don’t really know how I know I can trust someone. It just takes me time and I don't tell anyone a lot at once. (Lines 50-52, Appendix D, italics mine)

   Trusting someone was measured by both the amount of self-disclosure (“a lot”) and immediacy of it (“at once”). The reference above to “everyone” and “people” in general seemed to point to a generalized social self-concept of being shy or socially inhibited that was present, irrespective of the social context. Her dislike for talking to people thus likely created a reinforcing cycle of isolation that perpetuated the anxiety of talking:

   I would describe myself as nervous around other people, and not really wanting to interact. I tend to distance myself from crowds. I don't really enjoy meeting new people or being introduced, and I don't enjoy talking. This applies to both online and offline experiences, but it's a lot easier for me online as I don't actually have to open my mouth. (Lines 6-9, Appendix D)

   Alice’s reticent behaviour seemed to be dependent on how untrustworthy or how judgmental people were perceived to be. The perception of threat in her social environment and lack of emotional safety can be inferred from the description of her interactions with Terri. By
expressing that this was a first time that she could talk about her personal issues with someone, she implicitly alluded to her distrust of people in general:

… and it was the first time I felt like I could talk to someone about anything who wouldn't judge. I just felt like I could talk to her. She understood me; I understood her. We trusted each other and it felt good. (Lines 38-40, Appendix D, italics mine)

A general untrustworthy “other” could thus have become Alice’s internalized reference group that influenced her default position of reticence. However, her interaction with Terri was presented as an exception, illustrating how this was a milestone experience of being able to “talk” – the very barrier she would usually encounter in face-to-face interactions:

We both connected very quickly. She sent me an "ask" (a private message on Tumblr) asking if I was okay. It felt like someone actually cared about me. It made me feel a lot better with just those simple words. I felt okay for once, like someone was in this with me. And we started to talk about what was going on with the both of us. (Lines 17-20, Appendix D)

Through Terri’s first interaction with Alice, she experienced being cared for and having someone identify with her struggles. This solidarity encouraged a continued interaction pattern of mutual and exclusive self-disclosure over the year, providing the context for Alice to develop a friendship with someone whom she could trust for the first time:

We understood each other and what we were going through. That was a first for me since I have trouble actually talking to people. We could type to each other perfectly fine. Terri was the only person I shared about personal stuff I was struggling with. My mom put me in counselling and stuff, but I had a hard time talking to people. Terri was the first. (Lines 21-25, Appendix D, italics mine)

With Terri, we both connected right away, so I guess it was instant, but our friendship got a lot closer over about a year... We talked about what happened with me and for the first time I actually told someone all of what happened. (Lines 30-33, Appendix D, italics mine)

It was the mutual self-disclosure which facilitated the building of trust with one another. This online communication is explored further in the next finding.
A companion engaged in intense online “talking”

Modes of identity construction: Social processes of selecting similar peers and seeking validation from a significant other; positioning of role in dyadic relationship

Alice made the first positive reference to “talking” when she described her initial communication with Terri on Tumblr (“And we started to talk about what was going on with the both of us”), positioning the physical act of typing as a substitution for the act of talking (“I didn’t have to talk I could just type”). In comparison, “talking” in the offline setting was described as the physical act of opening her mouth which caused emotional anxiety:

I find it really hard to talk to people for the first time, and when it’s typing I don’t physically have to do anything which is the hard part. I don’t have to open my mouth because it makes me nervous as I don’t like people. (Lines 27-29, Appendix D)

Alice’s anxieties were allayed behind the screen, with the opportunity to find out more about Terri through her blog without having to ask her directly. She was thus able to make a tentative evaluation of whether she felt comfortable to respond to Terri, through typing notwithstanding.

The realization that they struggled with “some of the same things” provided the connection upon which they built their friendship:

I went to her blog and saw that she was struggling with some of the same things, so it opened it up a bit. I didn't have to talk I could just type. (Lines 25-27, Appendix D)

We talked a lot about what was going on with the both of us, and we both had never met someone that was suffering from some of the same things. (Lines 31-32, Appendix D)

I would consider Terri my best friend. My friendship with her makes me feel a lot better, that I wasn't alone. (Lines 45-46, Appendix D)

For Alice to have found in Terri a companion who shared similar struggles, this likely validated her emotions and relieved the isolation as she had previously felt alone in her struggles.
Following the first interaction over Tumblr, their communication intensified as evidenced by the volume (“a lot”), frequency (“every day”) and rate at which the communication progressed from online messaging to video chatting (“Facetime”):

About a few days later, we gave each other our iMessage on our iPhones and began to text a lot, every day. (Lines 20-21, Appendix D)

About a month later we "Facetimed" for the first time, we heard each other’s voices and got to put a face to the name. I would say that this was a significant moment in our friendship. (Lines 34-35, Appendix D)

…but a few months later, we could Facetime 24 hours a day … We talked about everything, and anything. We enjoyed each other and understood each other. The Facetiming and constant messaging never stopped and we still talk all the time today. (Lines 42-45, Appendix D)

Such a quick development pointed to the power of constant communication in fostering a close friendship. This constant connection was made possible for Alice in an online setting, which she did not experience in an offline setting, in large part due to her social anxiety in offline settings. The intensity of their communication could also be viewed through the intimate nature of their communication. This was primarily evident in the exclusivity of sharing personal matters with Terri, as surfaced in the previous theme. Alice’s exaggeration in describing the nature of their sharing (“talked about everything, and anything”) also emphasized the trust and closeness in their relationship. Mutuality in the relationship where they “enjoyed each other and understood each other” pointed to a reciprocal companionship. Presumably, given that Terri was identified as her best friend, Terri would fit the following description:

To me, friendship means having someone who is always there, who you can laugh with, who you can cry with, who you can tell anything to. You can be yourself around them. (Lines 10-11, Appendix D)

In stark comparison to the intense friendship with Terri as measured by time and intimacy, Alice said that it took time for her to warm up to other people and that she would be selective in her sharing (“It just takes me time and I don't tell anyone a lot at once”). Being quiet
or not talking was an indication of being among strangers, while her ability to talk constantly and loudly was a sign of being oneself and comfortable with close friends:

A few of my online and offline friends say that I was super quiet when I met them and now years later, I won’t be quiet, which I would agree with. (Lines 3-5, Appendix D)

For my friends that I know offline, I’m still quiet around them when we are with other people, but when I’m alone with them, I've warmed up. (Lines 48-49, Appendix D)

We would talk more easily over Facetime gradually but it didn’t take long. We were both super quiet at first and it took us a few months, but a few months later, we could Facetime 24 hours a day and our parents were asking us to be quiet since we were so loud. (Lines 40-43, Appendix D)

It was really weird at first but then we started talking and we were fine! By the end of it we wouldn’t shut up. I had a great time and so did she. (Lines 66-67, Appendix D)

Hence, Alice presented the evidence of intimacy of a relational bond as the engagement in loud and chatty conversation. This portrayed the nature of her close relationship with Terri.

Findings from a Contextual Analysis

Intersubjective context

Alice appeared to be a little self-restrained, particularly at the beginning of the interview, by taking time to respond, yet providing relatively short responses to questions. I played a co-constructing role through the use of probing questions for her to elaborate on events, as well as her thoughts and feelings regarding her friendship experiences. I had also introduced the term “significant moment” when seeking to clarify how she felt about the Facetime with Terri.

Alice’s slight restraint in fully expressing herself could be picked up through the use of textual markers such as “not really” and “don’t really”. These were primarily used in descriptions of her social inhibition (“I don’t really talk to people much”; “not really wanting to interact”; I don’t really enjoy meeting new people”). With these repetitions, her statements suggested an ambivalence that pointed to a desire to interact with people hidden under her reticence. This desire to connect with people surfaced clearly through her recount of her
friendship with Terri, as well as the descriptions of a friend as someone to whom “you can tell anything” and with whom “you can be yourself”. In addition, the ambivalent statements appeared to contain an implicit self-evaluation that she was not meeting a societal benchmark of being sociable, as she explained that after “warming up to someone”, she was “fine”. Thus, Alice appeared to nuance the extent of her inhibition as a way of mitigating my possible negative judgments toward her in my role as an interviewer or my position as a stranger.

A second repeated textual marker, “actually”, gave the story an evaluative undertone of its unexpected nature. The word “actually” was employed when she was relaying her difficulty in talking to people (“I don’t actually have to open my mouth”, “I have trouble actually talking to people”), the trust in her friendship with Terri (“It felt like someone actually cared about me”, “for the first time I actually told someone all of what happened”), and her chance to meet Terri in real life (“I will actually get to meet Terri”, “we get to actually meet which is pretty cool”). The repeated use of “actually” could imply that the process of narrating the story prompted a realization of how unexpected these revelations were to herself and in extrapolation, how unexpected it could be for me as the audience too. The interview provided an opportunity to concretize her evaluation of meeting Terri as an unexpected event in her life.

**Social field**

The online context featured prominently in Alice’s narrative as she shared about specific online platforms of interaction such as Tumblr and Facetime. The Tumblr site labelled the function of private messaging as sending an “ask”, and iPhone named the online video-chatting application as “Facetime”. On the whole, such use of language may suggest that people replicated forms and structures of offline communication in an online environment. It was interesting to note that in Alice’s narrative, there was no explicit or specific reference to any
offline setting such as her school or home, suggesting that her orientation to the social field predominantly took reference from her online social experiences. The online environment was thus a salient context for peer socialization by providing a virtual space or structure to “hang out”, and an online connectivity that enabled Alice to know that her new online friends she had made were “always there”:

To me, hanging out with friends online, is like you're close to that person, like you can't touch them but you know they're there. It’s close in a different way from being close to someone in real life where you can physically touch them. (Lines 54-56, Appendix D)

This online availability seemed to be the substitution for physical proximity, and which contributed to the emotional closeness that one developed with friends.

It was apparent that Alice experienced a dichotomy between her online and offline communication experiences due to her fear of talking to people in face-to-face situations. While she continued to identify herself as being quiet around new people in an offline environment, she expressed that “talking” online or typing was easier for her (“In general, I feel a lot better communicating online compared to offline; honestly, it’s easier and I feel better”). Even with Terri, she required the scaffold of concurrent texting with the video function before she could physically open her mouth to communicate with Terri:

Our first Facetime was super weird! We stared at each other while texting for a long time because we didn’t want to talk, and then we started talking about something really dumb (I don't remember what that was) but we both started laughing (Lines 35-38, Appendix D)

Thus, the online context with its affordances lowered the emotional barrier towards participating in the social currency exchange of being garrulous or sociable.

Socio-cultural context

As previously suggested, Alice’s negative personal evaluation of being shy pointed to a predominant socio-cultural context where the norm was to be sociable, particularly for teenagers. Her self-descriptions of being loud and chatty with Terri further illustrated how this norm had
inadvertently imbued her with standards and expectations of how best friends were supposed to interact in her culture.

Another prevailing cultural norm was to distrust strangers online. This was evident not only through her mother’s warning, “not to trust people online”, but also by attributing the warning to a factually-phrased reason: “because I know there are a lot of creeps and you’re not to share personal details”. The distrust may be related to a fear of being deceived by people creating false online identities, just as Alice commented that Terri “could have been anyone”, if not for the opportunity to see one another’s physical features through Facetime.

**Concluding Remarks**

Alice’s narrative provided a perspective of how the mediation of an online environment could enable her to enact a sociable persona with Terri. However, while the mutual online self-disclosure served to build trust in the friendship with Terri, this experience did not influence her overall social self-concept of being shy with strangers, as her identity as a victim of an untrustworthy social environment remained stable. Additionally, Alice’s ability to freely share her struggles on Tumblr as an open journal, juxtaposed with her continued inability to speak with strangers in a face-to-face setting, further suggest that it was the reduced audio-visual cues of the online audience which emboldened online self-disclosure. This courage failed to be translated to an offline context because the audience was no longer “faceless” in a face-to-face social setting. Alice’s shyness was hence contextually influenced by the visual presence of the audience, and the perception of their untrustworthiness.

**Participant #2: Bernice**

Bernice was 15 years old at the time of the interview, and was about to enter Grade 10. She specified having mixed ancestry of primarily European heritage (German, English, Irish,
Russian, Cherokee Indian and French). Having been born in Canada and raised in the United States, she had dual Canadian-American citizenship. Bernice described her shyness as being “very shy about walking up to someone, even someone [she] may know fairly well, and starting a conversation”. She directly associated her social awkwardness with being homeschooled, which to her had “majorly affected [her] social behavior”. In the narrative, she mentioned five different close friends (Krystal, Sarah, Miss H, Saliha and Mr. W). However, she mostly shared about Miss H, her best friend in her late 50s whom she had known in the offline setting for around four to five years, and Saliha, a Muslim Algerian, whom she had met through a French language website two months before. She found the experience to be “like having a sister over there”.

*Global Impressions*

Bernice began her introduction with reference to her physical appearance (“I’m kind of short, a bit chunky, but lots of it is from muscles and bones, not being overweight”), followed by descriptions of being self-reliant and passionate about her interests, such as animals, the ocean and the French culture. Her narrative had a juxtaposition of contradictory characteristics. On one hand, she expressed insecurity about herself, describing herself as shy in “one-to-one contact” and who was “not the most confident”. She also identified with the physical anomaly of Miss H, (“She too has her special needs; she’s got a deformed chin. Perhaps that’s why we feel together”). On the other hand, she stated her enjoyment of stage performances and presented a strong-willed and stubborn persona who would argue with those who showed discrimination against people, cultures, and religion.

Throughout the interview, Bernice appeared to prefer spontaneous sharing over following interview cues. While she had been asked to choose one picture or quote each to represent online
and offline friendship experiences, she chose instead to share five quotes about what friendships meant to her in general: a quote from her friend (Mr. W), a quote from the Bible, and three online quotes (see Figure 3). These quotes conveyed her values and beliefs about friendships.

| Before you judge my life, my past or my character… Walk in my shoes, walk the path I have traveled, live my sorrow, my doubts, my fear, my pain and my laughter! Remember, “Judge not lest ye be judged.” Everyone has their own story! When you’ve lived my life, then you can judge me! If you agree, post this on your wall. (How many have the courage to do so?) | Apologizing does not always mean you are wrong, it just means that you value your relationships more than your ego. | The best kind of friend is the kind you can sit on a porch swing with, never say a word, and walk away feeling like it was the best conversation you’ve ever had. |

*Figure 3. Bernice’s chosen quotes representing her beliefs about friendships in general*

*Figure 3 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It consists of images of anonymous quotes that have been reproduced and transmitted on various social networking platforms, without referencing the original creator. The quotes have been reproduced in the boxes above.*

During the interview, she voluntarily shared a Facebook-posted picture (see Figure 4) which had been modified with textual additions: “Never EVER EVER EVER GIVE UP” and “Stop Discrimination Against Special Needs”. Stating that this represented a vision for her life, her strong will was likely linked to the physical liability posed by Juvenile Rheumatoid Arthritis (JRA), with which she was diagnosed only a year ago after years of having the problem. It potentially sensitized her to discrimination and fuelled her convictions to speak up against it.

*Figure 4. Bernice’s shared picture that represented a vision for her life*  
(© 2013 Daily Herald, used with permission)
Besides the impact of JRA on her confidence, Bernice’s childhood experiences likely contributed to her shyness. She explicitly expressed frustration at being homeschooled, and referred to being parented in ways where she learnt to be silent and to “remain hidden”. While Miss H was a constant and critical emotional support, Bernice’s online friendships seemed to provide a different impact of differentiating and strengthening her cultural identity. Bernice associated her argumentative nature (albeit moderated by her fear of offending people) with her German and Irish heritage and recounted interactions with her UK friend on the topic of racism. She also expressed delight in how her correspondence with Saliha offered mutual learning about one another’s lifestyle, language and religion. In choosing to share these vignettes, she positioned herself as one who espoused open-mindedness and embraced culture.

*Findings from a Holistic-Content Analysis*

1. An advocate against discrimination expressing strength despite insecurity

   **Modes of identity construction:** Self-presentation and impression management; negotiating meanings of self with an internalized reference group; identifying with social group having special needs

Bernice presented self-reliant and strong-willed characteristics of herself at the introduction and in the anti-discrimination motif throughout the narrative. Her need to depend on herself appeared to stem from a refusal to place herself in an assumed weaker position:

> I have the feeling that I need to be strong and provide for myself. It is hard to bring myself to ask for something I want, because to me, it looks like I'm begging like a dog. I will try to go as long as I can without help in school or with anything. (Lines 3-6, Appendix E)

The rejection of weakness was also seen in how she would assume an advocacy role to speak up for her passions (French or the oceans) that were seen to be unfairly represented. This tough persona was integral to her self-concept as a stubborn person:
I am very stubborn, and have a hard time listening when I should be. If something comes up about the things I love, like French or the oceans, I'm not afraid to speak out. I've gotten myself into plenty of arguments over those two subjects… So when I hear someone say something about the French that I don't like or feel is unfair, I take offence and begin to argue. This probably doesn't win me many friends, but I have my own rights to say what I think and stand alone. I've done it many years and probably will still be primarily an island. One gets used to the feeling of being alone (Lines 11-19, Appendix E)

Bernice seemed to feel justified in her arguments and nonchalant about its socially isolating effects. However, despite this presentation of strength and independence, there was a more indirect display of a desire for social connection, for instance in how she shared about five different close friends. Her claim that she hid her emotions well was not commensurate with how forthcoming she had been through the interview. Instead, her stoicism was likely an enacted façade that belied frustrations from being homeschooled and parented in ways that were perceived to have undermined her confidence to socialize, particularly with peers of her age:

But as I grew older, I got so many lectures about not monopolizing conversation, or eating most of the food on the table, etc, that I began to not be sure just what I could talk about or do. Simply the best way to do things was to be silent, and kind of remain hidden. (Lines 26-29, Appendix E)

I've always been homeschooled, which to me had majorly affected my social behavior. I've always been frustrated with it, because I've been stuck at home, and can't make many friends, though I travel lots across the US and do have friends all over. But most of them are much older, because I simply cannot fit in with those my age. It is highly frustrating. I feel like beating my head up against the wall. (Lines 63-67, Appendix E)

Bernice explicitly expressed insecurity in social interactions that required her to start a conversation, even over the phone (“I’m so awkward about it, insecure I guess”). Yet, she shared about her confidence and sense of control in an online interaction context, supporting the sociable and spontaneous impression that she gave through the online interview. Bernice stated how the online setting gave her security by reducing judgments of how “beautiful” or “normal” she was expected to be:

In real life, I feel very shy. I don't have the protection of my computer screen. In real life, I feel more shy, even when I’m talking on the phone; but online, I tend to feel a little
more secure. I'm on my own ground, people can't see whether I'm ugly or beautiful, whether I'm normal or not. I can just be myself most of the time, not worrying about lectures from parents. I can control what I do when I do and who I write. (Lines 175-179, Appendix E)

She was implicitly conveying insecurity related to her appearance, particularly as she volunteered physical descriptions of being “a bit chunky” that tended to carry negative connotations. In addition, the JRA diagnosis may have concretized her social identity as one with special needs as suggested by her identification with Figure 4. “Lectures from parents” may have become an internalized reference group conveying standards of normality and reinforcing a sense of abnormality in her self-concept. On the contrary, she found the online setting to be a place where she developed confidence as it provided a refuge to find some security in being herself and greater control over how or who she communicated with:

Online, I have more control over what I do. I can seem to be more at ease; it is more relaxed I like it better. I can detach myself from what I deal with in real life, and forget for a few moments, those precious moments. Offline, I feel I have less control. I feel like I'm standing on a very wobbly piece of ground, or that I may be backed into a corner in a conversation. (Lines 180-183, Appendix E)

Although the online environment helped to mitigate insecurity over her appearance, her underlying social insecurity manifested as a dislike of offending people and a desire to be liked:

I don't like to offend people. In this way I'm very sensitive. I hate things that slam a person, their culture or religion. I tend to be very sensitive to things other people may see in me, so the less I say the better. (Lines 33-35, Appendix E)

I try to be as accommodating to my friends as possible, so that they will like me. I like to help them in any way I can. Online, I am a much more polite person I think, and eager to please, but offline, it varies to my mood. (Lines 167-169, Appendix E)

I find if I ignore rules, often I get into worse trouble. Besides if I'm good, then maybe people will like me better. (Lines 129-130, Appendix E)

With the presentation of a sensitive, accommodating, and compliant nature, Bernice seemed to contradict an earlier statement that she was “not afraid to speak out”. One could resolve the apparent contradictions by identifying the processes of self-presentation and
impression management. When speaking up about the French, Bernice was intentionally constructing and presenting her identity as one who was an advocate against discrimination. Conversely, she would be more reticent when she might be perceived to be discriminating against another person, culture or religion. The common thread was that she was sensitized to matters of discrimination and positions of strength and weakness possibly because of her own experiences of social insecurity. As she elaborated on one of her chosen quotes in the context of her relationship with Miss H, she demonstrated a personal resolve to avoid perpetuating judgment which caused social discrimination:

We should never judge a person outwardly, we should make friends with them, and find out why they might act a certain way. In the beginning with Miss H, we all kind of thought her odd and her chin certainly made her look very just simply different. (Lines 160-163, Appendix E)

Consequently, as Bernice advocated against discrimination based on appearance, culture, and religion, she found herself bridging cultures and developing connections with people, as will be elaborated on in the next finding.

2. An explorer of online connections broadening her cultural and social perspectives

Modes of identity construction: Enacting self-representation of being non-judgmental and cultured; social processes of mutual socialization and seeking validation from a significant other

When asked to think about a friend with whom she grew closer through online experiences, Bernice chose an Algerian girl, Saliha, whom she had met two months ago on a French website. This platform had an internal messaging system that facilitated communication among people who were mutually learning French, English, and other languages from one another. The highlight of this friendship seemed to be their cross-cultural learning. In particular,
the online connection helped to broaden Bernice’s perspectives through first-hand interactions with culturally dissimilar people who tended to be misunderstood:

She also teaches me some Arabic, and I learn new things from a cultural viewpoint. It has been fun getting to know a few Arabic speaking people, as you probably know what the majority of opinion is about the whole lot of Arabs. Not all Arabs are wicked. (Lines 143-145, Appendix E)

We exchange thoughts and feelings, and our opinions on world view. I tell her about things I do in America and about my religion, and she tells me about being a Muslim. We've just kind of drawn closer, because we write often, and think similarly. In the first few letters she asked me what colour I thought people in Algeria were. I answered brown. She says that's what many people think, but they are white she says. I've learned much from her, way more than any history or culture studies book I've ever read or had to read. (Lines 133-138, Appendix E)

Bernice attributed the closeness between them to frequent regular communication (“we write often, several times a day”), similarity in thinking and being able to “talk just about everything”, which resulted in enjoyment and anticipation of receiving one another’s messages. In describing her enjoyment of befriending Arabic-speaking people and having misconceptions about Algerians corrected, she was enacting her self-representation of being non-judgmental and open towards different cultures.

While Bernice’s online friendship with Saliha was very recent, she had begun venturing into developing online friendships around two years back (when she was 13 years old). One of the main platforms was an online interactive game Ovi-pets with users from “all over the world”. By expressing that “surprisingly, there were many people who had problems too”, Bernice pointed to how her online peer socialization experiences served to broaden her perspectives which had been previously limited in her face-to-face interactions with adults, such as Miss H and Mr. W. The relationships with these significant adults, however, had provided an emotional anchor for Bernice during her turbulent times in the aftermath of the JRA diagnosis when she was “simply devastated”:
If I had not had Miss H to talk with, and live for, I would have killed myself. Time to end the frustration and anger. My grades went almost to zero. She kept me from committing suicide through this time. (Lines 77-79, Appendix E)

Miss H has been just about the only one I have felt comfortable sharing and opening my heart to and I talk with her often. She is one of the very few I have dared to open myself and to really love. I cannot always say this about my family especially my mother. (Lines 67-69, Appendix E)

My friend Mr. W (a certified counselor who has his own roofing business) says, "If you can look back on life, 50-60 years from now, and have had at least 3 friends through the good and bad times, you have lived a fulfilled life". I’ve had at least three good friends at the worst times in life, he being one of the more recent. (Lines 149-153, Appendix E)

Interacting with adults rather than peers likely reinforced a more one-sided pattern of personal disclosure rather than reciprocal sharing of problems, thus limiting her perspectives on the extent of problems that others might face.

Chronologically, it appeared that she first met Miss H at least two years before her online friendships (“I had known her at least three years prior to this diagnosis”; “I was diagnosed with JRA… It was about the beginning of last year”). The years of shared experiences (e.g., spending Sabbath afternoons, riding on bikes on weekends, attending Christmas concerts), as well as the critical emotional support Miss H provided Bernice, fostered a certain secure base which she had not developed with her own parents. To Bernice, Miss H was her best friend, setting an ideal standard of being able to communicate what was on her heart and to feel understood without having to say much:

Because I have had few friends, I treasure the real friendships where I can actually say the heart communicated equally or more than the mouth. (Lines 96-97, Appendix E)

A quote I found on the Internet says “The best kind of friend is the kind you can sit on a porch swing with, never say a word, and walk away feeling like it was the best conversation you’ve ever had.” This is true of Miss H. (Lines 154-157, Appendix E)

We’ve just simply been able to talk, even silently, just sit next to each other. I don’t feel that I have to work to keep my end of the conversation going. (Lines 184-186, Appendix E)
Having had such secure experiences with Miss H and a sense of being validated in offline settings, this likely helped Bernice to gain sufficient confidence to explore online friendships and offer non-judgmental support to them, similar to what she had received from Miss H and Mr. W:

If they want something, I am usually going to try my best to help them, and make their day better. If they feel sad, I try to say something nice, because on my other Facebook account, I have several friends who deal with severe depression. I offer them a ear who listens. (Lines 169-172, Appendix E)

Through narrating the different friendship vignettes, Bernice conveyed how her perspectives were broadened not just through online connections with culturally dissimilar people, like Saliha, but also with these online friends who shared a commonality of emotional distress.

**Findings from a Contextual Analysis**

**Intersubjective context**

My interview with Bernice took longer than expected, extending from a single session estimated to take two hours to two sessions totalling around three hours and thirty minutes. She was self-aware in that she cautioned me on how she "tend[ed] to talk forever" and stated that she "will try not to deviate from the topic”. However, she still readily engaged in informal and spontaneous self-disclosure that was superfluous to the interview process (e.g., sharing pictures of her artwork on her personal Facebook page as I was giving a preamble of the interview purpose; describing what her family members were doing when I sought to clarify if she was in a private space for the interview). The impression that Bernice presented right from the start was that of desiring familiarity and to be known more intimately, the interview serving as a context through which she could freely self-disclose rather than be confined to responding to questions. Thus she had chosen to share five quotes that were meaningful to her views on friendship, disregarding the interview expectations of choosing pictures or quotes to represent online and offline friendship experiences.
At the pre-interview, Bernice spontaneously expressed unhappiness over her homeschooling experience, commenting that “homeschooling seem[ed] to cloister one away” when asked about her current level of schooling, and that she “want[ed] to get out of the country and far away from [her] family”. She also preferred connecting with adults over her peers:

I enjoy having intelligent adultish conversations, because sometimes when I am talking with kids my age, it is so difficult, esp. with one word answers, or nonsensical things. (raw interview data)

Hence, Bernice was subtly positioning her online friendships as a means of exercising autonomy by escaping home restrictions that were perceived to have been imposed on her (“I got Facebook when I was 13, so that was when I really branched out”), and seeking to find similar-minded individuals who had the capacity for “intelligent adultish (sic) conversations”. In this intersubjective interview setting, a desire to be seen as mature could have influenced the content of her narrative. For instance, she chose to refer to older professional people as her friends (such as Mr. W, a “certified counsellor”) rather than adult mentors. In addition, in choosing to describe how a friendship with someone from a distinctly different culture had helped her to broaden her perspectives, she seemed desire to be seen as knowledgeable and cultured, as one may view adults to be.

**Social field**

Bernice mainly spoke about the offline context in terms of two settings: one was her homeschooling experiences; the other was that of public spaces where she had developed shared memories with Miss H. Peers of her age were starkly absent from her narratives of offline experiences, but apparent in the online settings of Ovi-pets, Facebook, and the French language website. This corroborated her lament that she had difficulties connecting with peers her age in the offline setting.
Although Bernice’s online and offline friendships did not overlap (“My friendship with Miss H was totally separate from my online friendships”), there was some commonality between her friendship experiences with Miss H and Saliha: Bernice often employed “we” to represent actions as a dyadic unit with Miss H or with Saliha. This suggested that their shared activities shaped her role identity of being the other half of a dyadic pair. In fact, having only met Saliha two months ago, the online setting could be seen to have facilitated the deepening of friendship with Saliha in the following two ways. First, the asynchronous messaging enabled Bernice and Saliha to keep up frequent communication across time and space, in ways that could not be maintained with Miss H in face-to-face settings, after she had moved out from her rental space with Bernice’s family. This frequent online communication also enabled cross-cultural learning that had been limited in the homeschooling context. Second, the online setting, with its affordances for control over who to speak with and how to communicate with reduced audio-visual cues, also seemingly mirrored the emotionally safe environment she had with Miss H, where she could “just be [herself] most of the time”. Thus, the online setting appeared to provide compensation for the inadequacies of offline peer socialization experiences as well as a replication of the emotional security she had experienced with Miss H.

**Socio-cultural context**

Bernice used the term “real life” repeatedly to contrast how she behaved in online and offline settings, indirectly referring to the online experiences as distinct from her offline “real life” experiences. Although she might be using this term mainly for categorical purposes, there was an implied association of the online setting to the term “virtual”, which could point to an embedded societal perspective that the online setting was an inconsequential aspect of one’s life. Another negative societal perspective toward the online setting was that of trusting strangers
as suggested by Bernice’s factually-phrased statement “because there are many people online who are out to hurt children”. This societal perspective may have been assimilated as her own; she had expressly stated that she chose to follow the cultural norm of respecting rules in order to have greater acceptance, particularly among significant adults who had taught her that rules were in place for her protection.

Besides the cultural norm of following rules, another cultural norm that was embedded in Bernice’s narrative was that of valuing beauty and of associating physical appearances with standards of normality (“people can’t see whether I’m ugly or beautiful, whether I’m normal or not”). These values of embracing both rules and beauty potentially served to shape her behaviour and self-concept. By viewing herself as having a garrulous nature that was repressed by rules, as well as having a physical insecurity with her JRA diagnosis, these perceptions may have added to her sense of insecurity about herself.

Concluding Remarks

Bernice’s shyness was primarily associated with her family experience of having a limited voice and inadequate positive peer socialization experiences. Her insecurity, somewhat linked to her identity as having special physical needs, manifested in situations of having to start and maintain conversations in an offline setting. However, the online setting enabled her to overcome her insecurity through giving her a sense of autonomy, which she lacked in the homeschooling and family experiences. The Internet also enabled her to construct a cultured and mature identity of being able to take perspectives and explore relationships with people from other backgrounds. Bernice’s offline and online experiences might have ultimately interplayed in ways where the limitations of the offline environment fuelled a quest for fulfilment in the online environment, and positive experiences of emotional security in the online setting replicated those in the offline setting with Miss H. Her shyness was thus contextually influenced by the extent to
which she felt insecure about her physical condition and mitigated when given the opportunity to 
enact a non-judgmental and cultured self-representation.

Participant #3: Cherise

Cherise was 14 years old at the time of the interview, and was about to enter high school 
as a freshman. She was of European (French-American) ethnicity and had been born and raised 
in the United States. Cherise identified her shyness as being “pretty much Switzerland” and that 
“you often remain neutral and hide opinions or views that you may have due to fear of some 
sort”. She associated her social inhibition with the period when she entered junior high at 6th 
grade. For the narrative, she shared about Nelly whom she had known for 10 years, and Ray 
whom she had met at an online public forum (Ask.com) about one-and-a-half years ago. She 
viewed Nelly as her best friend and sister, but also considered Ray as someone whom she could 
trust as much as Nelly.

Global Impressions

Cherise began by describing herself as someone hiding her true emotions behind a quiet 
emotionless façade, out of fear of being judged and rejected. The aspect of hiding surfaced again 
as she explained what it meant to be shy: that she would “often remain neutral and hide opinions 
or views” due to fear. This fear was prevalent in situations where she would potentially need to 
interact with another person. However, there appeared to be ambivalence in her desire to be 
noticed. On one hand, she remarked that it was “funny” or strange that her classmates had not 
noticed her wearing glasses for many years, indicating a sense of expectation to be noticed; yet, 
she expressed fear of getting noticed by other people, and being “somewhat happy” that she did 
not have people talking about her.

When asked to describe what “shyness”, “friendships” and “online and offline friendship 
experiences” meant to her, Cherise chose to present her thoughts through the use of metaphors.
Being shy was related to being neutral like Switzerland and friendships were compared to a garden in which certain plants stood out. She chose an analogy of a piano (see Figure 5) versus an orchestra (see Figure 6) to compare friendship experiences in online and offline settings.

![Figure 5](Untitled photograph of piano keys by Thomas, available under a Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal licence)

*Figure 5. Cherise’s chosen picture representing friendship experiences in online settings (Untitled photograph of piano keys by Thomas, available under a Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal licence)*

![Figure 6](Dohnányi Ernő Symphony Orchestra Budafok by Ritter Alexa, available under a Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal licence)

*Figure 6. Cherise’s chosen picture representing friendship experiences in offline settings (Dohnányi Ernő Symphony Orchestra Budafok by Ritter Alexa, available under a Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal licence)*

By doing so, she compared a piano soloist’s freedom with a pianist’s sense of feeling constrained and “drowned out” by other instruments when playing in an orchestra; this represented her
relative feelings in the online and offline settings respectively. With Cherise’s frequent use of metaphors as a linguistic device, her competence in conceptual thinking was likely a prominent aspect of her self-concept, as she related how her best friend Nelly was familiar with her ways of abstract and deep thinking because of their long and deep friendship since kindergarten. She highlighted the importance of trust and the absence of shyness or fear as key indicators of a friendship, identifying only three whom she could trust readily – God, Nelly, and Ray.

A repeated theme through her narrative of her online friendship with Ray was that of finding the freedom from fear of judgment or rejection. This was corroborated by her statement that in online relationships, “it’s a safe haven from offline drama”, where “it’s okay to be yourself, and you’re accepted for who you are”. Ray had been someone with whom she was able to talk about her parents’ separation, as was Nelly. However, offline relationships were viewed to be relationships in which she could be “secretly ridiculed” and judged.

Findings from a Holistic-Content Analysis

1. An “emotion-fugitive” protecting herself from judgment and rejection

   Modes of identity construction: Individuating one’s attributes; reflexive self-evaluation; negotiating meanings of self with an internalized reference group

The themes of hiding and being unnoticed ran parallel to one another in Cherise’s narrative as she described her shyness in social situations. She expressed a conscious decision to hide her thoughts and emotions from people due to fear:

   I am quiet and emotionless. I hardly ever show my true emotions; I always have a straight face. (Line 1, Appendix F)

   Being shy means that you’re pretty much Switzerland, you often remain neutral and hide opinions or views that you may have due to fear of some sort. (Lines 13-14, Appendix F)
Her self-descriptions did not include other physical or social aspects of her self-concept, but focused exclusively on her shy behaviour that had been generalized to personal attributes, independent of the social setting (“quiet”, “emotionless”). This processes of forming an individuated self-concept seemed facilitated by her capacity to think reflexively about her behaviour and emotional state, and to make meaning out of it. An example of such meaning-making was evident in an analogy she gave of a pianist in an orchestra, representing her friendship experiences in offline settings:

Offline relationships are like the orchestra, where there are so many things going on around you that you sometimes just get caught up in all of it, to still have that bit of shyness, because most of the time the piano gets drowned out by the other instruments. I feel like just another person trying to get through life. (Lines 52-55, Appendix F)

The description had an overall negative connotation, indicating a sense of feeling overwhelmed and lost in the crowd in offline social situations (“drowned”, “just another person trying to get through life”). As a result, she was aware that her decision to remain hidden invariably contributed to a state of being unnoticed or unknown by people (“because I talk so little people hardly have anything to say about me”).

Cherise attributed this behaviour of hiding her true emotions and thoughts to a fear that developed around 6th grade as she entered junior high – a fear of rejection for being different or for failing to meet expectations (“afraid that I wouldn’t be good enough and afraid about being different as well”; “afraid of the rejection I might get”). Consequently, she extended this fear to a generalized fear of being noticed by and having to talk with strangers and acquaintances alike:

I’m afraid I’ll get noticed by other people; I bite my lip often. This goes for both the times when I’m alone and with people. Or I’m afraid that someone else will want to talk to me. Talking to people scares me a bit, because I don’t really know who they are, or what they want from me. Even for people I know, I’m a bit scared, because people tend to change, from when they were in 6th grade to when they were in 8th grade. (Lines 15-20, Appendix F)
While no specific event was shared, her mention of people changing from 6th to 8th grade suggested that there could have been specific events of perceived rejection during that period of time where her distrust in people began to grow. This possibility is supported by her comment that shyness “develops over time or through an event”, which she could have based on personal experience. Over time, an enduring impression that “people” were untrustworthy could have developed, resulting in an internalized reference group that shaped her generalized response of fear and instinctual position of reticence.

Cherise further explained that this fear of talking to people was a fear of being hurt by their judgments, both spoken and unspoken:

In offline relationships, you can always tell when the other person is holding back something hurtful towards you, like the person is judging you but not telling you what they really think. (Lines 57-59, Appendix F)

She viewed their withholding of thoughts as a judgment of her and ultimately a rejection of her. Hence, it was difficult for her to speak freely to a person without knowing how the person really felt about her. Conversely, she established that she would freely disclose her true emotions and thoughts to a person whom she perceived to be a trustworthy friend:

I think that if I have you as a friend you mean so much to me. A friend is someone I can trust with anything; I can tell them anything. I can actually talk to a friend and not be shy. (Lines 22-24, Appendix F)

Nelly and Ray were the only friends whom she considered she could trust. Thus, the experience of constantly hiding herself from people was in stark comparison to her experience of being noticed and understood by Nelly and Ray, as elaborated in the next finding.

2. A noticed “shrinking violet” finding freedom to be herself in a trusting relationship

   Modes of identity construction: Social processes of seeking validation from a significant other and enhancing friendship quality
Cherise’s narrative took a distinct change of direction when she began to talk about her views on friendship, as well as her experiences with Nelly (in an offline setting) and Ray (in an online setting). By mentioning Nelly, Ray, and God in the same statement, she appeared to position these two as very significant and trustworthy friends, as she had indicated that God was most important to her. Nelly was a long-time childhood friend, and Ray a more recent online friend whom she trusted readily. The ideas of being noticed and understood surfaced more in these parts of the narrative, with the process of receiving attention from these two friends as a form of validation from significant others.

Beginning with a garden analogy to describe how some friends stood out more than others, and by relating Nelly and herself as best friends, she positioned herself as being specially noticed by Nelly and vice versa. In this friendship, Cherise shared her emotions and thoughts as they went through difficult times together, such that Nelly would know Cherise’s ways of thinking, and ultimately understand her:

I’ve known Nelly for 10 years. We’ve always been friends through thick and thin. She’s like a sister. I’m not shy with her because she’s been with me for so long, she knows how abstract I can be sometimes and how deeply I think about things. I see her pretty much every day, and we hangout all the time at her place. (Lines 27-30, Appendix F)

Similarly for Cherise’s friendship with Ray, he first noticed her question on Ask.com related to her shyness:

I met Ray on Ask.com (not Ask.fm) around March last year. He answered a question of mine about shyness, and we started talking in the comment section. He was nice and open-minded. He was my age. I had asked why it was hard to overcome shyness. He said it wasn’t a matter of overcoming it, it was just finding the people that best accept it. (Lines 32-35, Appendix F)

His response that it was a matter of finding people that best accepted shyness communicated his acceptance and validation of who she was. This provided a foundation from which their online communication developed with increasing mutual self-disclosure, moving from the Ask.com
platform to Skype that provided more privacy. As they began communicating regularly, Cherise found that she was able to trust Ray enough to share something as personal as her parents’ separation and how it affected her. By expressing that she was “able to” talk to Ray who was “supportive”, this suggested the sensitive nature of the matter that required courage to share:

I first got to know him 3-4 months before my parents’ separation. When my parents got a separation, I was able to talk to him about it and what I felt. He was supportive and kind and caring about the matter and not pressing at all. (Lines 35-38, Appendix F)

Cherise’s progressive friendship with Ray demonstrated how her trust in him was first established by being noticed and validated for who she was without a fear of rejection. The freedom from fear facilitated her freedom to be herself around Ray:

I didn’t feel shy in any way. It was one of the best things ever. I felt for once like I didn’t have to worry about rejection because he always seemed to be willing to help and to talk. (Lines 42-44, Appendix F)

Online relationships are like playing the piano. When it’s just the piano, you don’t have to worry about any other factors bothering you, and you can just play freely, carefree. It makes me feel happy. (Lines 49-51, Appendix F)

When looking back at all my conversations with Ray, it has always been just the piano analogy. I feel like I can be myself, without the secret ridicule of offline relationships. (Lines 56-57, Appendix F)

The freedom to be herself was attributed to online relationships in general, described as “a safe haven” and juxtaposed with the offline experience of being “trapped”:

[In offline relationships] You are trapped somewhat, you are still shy because there is still a small sense of rejection if you don’t say the right thing or listen to the right group. But in online relationships, it’s a safe haven from offline drama, somewhere where it’s okay to be yourself, and you’re accepted for who you are. (Lines 59-62, Appendix F)

Cherise seemed to generalize that online relationships gave her a sense of being accepted, possibly based on her positive experience with Ray, although it was not clear if she had made any other online friendships. (The reference to offline drama likely revolved around other social settings such as her school or home, rather than her close friendship with Nelly.) In essence, she
pointed to how her friendship with Ray (and by extrapolation, Nelly) was ultimately a fulfillment of her desire for the freedom to be herself without fear of rejection.

The emphasis on “being myself” reinforced the individualistic tone in Cherise’s self-presentation, as the narrative had more use of the pronouns “me” and “my”, compared to “we” and “our”. She focused more on communicating her individual thoughts than describing the shared experience with her friends. Additionally, when she used the analogy of the orchestra to represent her offline friendship experiences, the focus was on how the individual pianist might feel constrained in an orchestral setting in comparison to a soloist performance, thus highlighting the individualistic perspective.

Findings from a Contextual Analysis

Intersubjective context

I acknowledge a significant role I played as a co-constructor of Cherise’s narrative, particularly as I had regularly probed for elaboration and clarification throughout the interview (e.g., “what do you mean by emotionless?”, “tell me more about the video chat experience”). The “question-and-answer” nature of our interaction shaped the narrative through her frequent use of the word “because” and her accompanying explanations. While I had probed with some “why” questions, she also voluntarily provided more information to elucidate her thoughts, possibly in keeping with her self-concept as a deep thinker. In response to a comment she had made that she could write an entire book about a blank sheet of paper, I gave her an opportunity to email me after the interview any additional thoughts she had on “shyness”, “friendships”, and “online and offline experiences”, which were included in the narrative.

To provide some insights into her self-presentation, I identified a set of textual markers characteristic of generalizations. These markers comprised words such as “people”, “everyone”,
and “always”, which she used predominantly in the sections of the narrative describing her prevalent fear of talking with people (“I always have a straight face”; “because I talk so little people hardly have anything to say about me”). She would also often use the third person “you” to describe the feelings of being shy, somewhat generalizing it as a phenomenon (“You are trapped somewhat. You are still shy”). Additionally, she used generalizations when describing how consistently trustworthy Nelly and Ray were (“we’ve always been friends through thick and thin”; “he just always seemed to be willing to help and to talk”; “when looking back at all my conversations with Ray, it has always been just the piano analogy”). She appeared to be conveying to me the certainty and reality of both the generalized self-concept of being a shy person, as well as these contrasting positive personal experiences with her friends.

In so doing, she could have been constructing her identity through generalizations in an attempt to convincingly present her personal experiences and thoughts. The question-and-answer interaction could have heightened her awareness of formality of an interview. Yet, my interaction with her might have served to corroborate her point that an online setting served her well for personal disclosure of her true thoughts and emotions.

**Social field**

The online context comprised Ask.com and Skype; the offline context comprised the school, Nelly’s home and general social interactional settings. Descriptions of the school setting pointed to social structures of groups that imposed peer pressure and a need to conform in order to be accepted:

… because I was entering junior high… That was a time when girls started caring about what they looked like and how they dressed. I was afraid of looking and acting different, because I was afraid of the rejection I might get. (Lines 2-6, Appendix F)

You are trapped somewhat, you are still shy because there is a still a small sense of rejection if you don’t say the right thing or listen to the right group. (Lines 59-61, Appendix F)
This group structure was absent in her descriptions of the online setting, but the structure of dyads was evident in both the offline setting of Nelly’s home, and the online setting of interacting with Ray through Ask.com and Skype. There appeared to be similarities in the way she described her comfort level and high frequency of interacting with the both of them:

I see her pretty much every day, and we hang out all the time at her place. (Lines 29-30, Appendix F)

Now we communicate over Skype almost every day except for next week because he’ll be away. (Lines 44-45, Appendix F)

An interesting point of comparison between Cherise’s friendship with Nelly and that with Ray was how long it took to build each friendship. While the friendship with Nelly was built up over 10 years through various experiences through “thick and thin”, the friendship with Ray was built up over a year of online communication, still resulting in a connection which Cherise prized seemingly as much as that with Nelly. The online interaction seemed to facilitate connections and intimacy at a faster rate than face-to-face interaction. The comment section of Ask.com was a public forum platform, which was unsuitable for the continued interaction between Cherise and Ray. The high frequency of communication warranted a private space that they subsequently found through mobile texting on Skype (“we later had to move to Skype because we were talking constantly”; “we don’t video chat as it is easier just to text using my mobile on Skype”). This Skype communication with Ray paralleled the experience of hanging out at Nelly’s house, facilitating the process of coming out from hiding behind a semi-anonymous position on a public forum, to begin freely self-disclosing personal experiences in a private dyadic setting.

The structure of the public forum on Ask.com also supported Cherise’s and Ray’s initial interactions in how it provided a safe semi-anonymous platform from which Cherise could take time to evaluate the responses of people to ascertain how judging or accepting they were. The
comment section enabled tentative communication with someone, which could then progress to another private platform for more regular communication, as was experienced with Ray.

**Socio-cultural context**

Cherise’s reference to “offline drama” and how she felt like “just another person trying to get through life” pointed to adolescent stress. The pressure of fitting in at junior high school aligned with the social norm for adolescents to seek a sense of belonging with peers and place high importance on friendships, as suggested by the way she ranked her relationships: “in terms of importance, God is first then it’s a tie between friends and family in second”. There also appeared to be a socio-cultural practice of mobile texting by adolescents as a means of escaping pressures in the offline environment (“by texting you don’t have to worry about people bothering you, or trying to steal your mobile”).

**Concluding Remarks**

Despite positive friendship experiences with Ray and Nelly, there still remained for Cherise a strong shy self-concept with people in general. Her barrier to self-disclosure was the fear of being judged and rejected. Her perception of being accepted for herself in an online setting, however, seemed to be mainly based on her friendship experience with Ray, with no reference to any other online friends. On one hand, Cherise’s shyness did not seem to be contextually dependent on the offline or online setting, but rather friendship-dependent as she described how she found the freedom to be herself in both friendships with Ray and Nelly. On the other hand, the online setting, with its multiple modes of communication, did seem to facilitate the development of trust and an ease of crossing the barrier of fear more easily than in offline settings. Thus, Cherise’s shy identity was ultimately contextually influenced by the extent
to which the social environment enabled her to overcome her fear of being judged and rejected by giving her opportunities to feel noticed and accepted for who she was.

**Participant #4: Sakoori**

Sakoori was 15 years old at the time of the interview, and was about to enter Grade 10. She was of East Asian (Chinese) ethnicity and was born and raised in Canada. Sakoori described her shyness as being nervous and that she “can't really talk or be around people a lot”. Sakoori related her social awkwardness to having “trust issues” that developed due to a previous incident concerning a betrayal of a secret. In the narrative, she described her close friendship with Queenie, whom she had met about three years ago on a Facebook page that Sakoori had been administrating. She had related to Queenie like her twin sister, although after about one-and-a-half years of close interactions, they had drifted apart.

**Global Impressions**

Sakoori disclosed upfront that she “literally live[d] two lives”. While she was shy and nervous around people in offline situations, she was the “complete opposite when…behind a screen”. She attributed her offline shy behaviour to a fear of being judged for liking Japanese animation (anime) and having “trust issues” with people. To hide herself from judgmental people, she adopted an alias in online settings, “Kobayashi Sakoori”, which she requested to be used in this research. A strong self-concept of having an individuated personality was conveyed as she showed her disdain for school mates who disliked her for not following “trends” and “fads” as they did. When choosing a picture to represent her friendship experiences in offline settings (see Figure 7), Sakoori emphasised the aspect of not fitting in with her group of friends. The sense of being neglected by the group was intensified through her perception that her friends did not notice or understand her hidden emotions of feeling a lack of belonging.
Sakoori described her venture into developing online friendships as being motivated to find people with similar interests, congruent with her definition of friendship as having some sort of common interests or a commonly-liked personality. The picture chosen for her online friendship experiences (see Figure 8) illustrated appreciation for “Internet friends” and “fandom friends” who shared similar interests, and how significant it was to be able to be “sharing words like precious things” over the Internet. As Sakoori elaborated, words through online interaction had the power to start a friendship and change people for the better, as was narrated in her own friendship experiences with Queenie and other online friends.

A dominant characteristic in Sakoori’s narrative of her online friendship with Queenie, the “first of many on the Internet”, was that of change and growth. Having met her three years ago, this friendship appeared to be a catalyst for Sakoori’s “second life” behind the keyboard.
Sakoori’s initial inability to relax seemed to be contributed in part by her inclination toward
diligence and high standards (“I think I might be harsher on my art skills now than myself in
general”), as well as the responsibility that her Grade 7 and 8 teachers had given her for class
administrative tasks. Sakoori seemed to envy Queenie’s diametrically-opposite personality of
being laid-back. In the process of “let[ting] it all out” to Queenie, she learnt to trust people again,
both in online and, to a lesser degree, offline relationships. Despite having drifted apart from one
another since the second year of friendship, Sakoori maintained her desire to “repair the
friendship” with Queenie at the right time.

*Findings from a Holistic-Content Analysis*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. A judged misfit finding an online connection she could trust</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Modes of identity construction:</strong> Individuating one’s distinct attributes from others;</td>
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<tr>
<td>social process of selecting similar peers</td>
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</table>

Sakoori framed her narrative with an opening statement that she was living two lives: an
online and an offline life. Her choice to hide this online “second life” arose from a desire to
escape judgment from people in her offline social environment:

Living two lives isn't honestly that hard. The only thing I was more concerned about
would be other people I know in real life finding out about my second life. That made me
come up with a name for my second life. I came up with an alias to hide myself from
judgemental people. (Lines 17-20, Appendix G)

This fear of judgment stemmed from her distrust in people which developed from a prior
incident of a betrayal of trust, in which someone she had considered to be a friend had exposed
an unimportant secret of hers to the whole class. The deep-seated distrust and fear of being
judged underpinned her shy behaviour in general social situations:

Shy to me, means I get nervous and I can't really talk or be around people a lot. I'm
usually shy during social situations and academic ones too. I don't like to talk with others
because I'm scared of being judged for what I like or be backstabbed by someone who I
think is my "friend". (Lines 9-12, Appendix G)
Sakoori had a strong individuated identity that was seen to be a source of others’ judgments. Her individuated identity came across implicitly through her introductory self-descriptions (“I never wear makeup or do things with my hair”), and explicitly as she indicated that she deviated from teenage trends:

   At school, I'm judged for liking anime (Japanese animation) and I find that unreasonably stupid. Most of the people I attend classes with are more concerned about their looks or grades or getting a boyfriend/girlfriend at this age. I'm one of the few that just steps out of the trends and I go somewhere else. (Lines 24-27, Appendix G)

Although the judgments that Sakoori faced arose from her being different from others, she seemed to embrace her individuated sense of a unique self with strong opinions, portraying the school mates who followed trends as being less mature and ignorant, thus fuelling her sense of being justified to pursue her own interests that may be different from the norm:

   I rebel against many ideas that they have because I honestly do not care whatsoever about these trends. I do want to make friends, but they think that because I don't like to follow fads like they do, they can just automatically dislike me because of it. I find it very childish and stupid, but go figure. Society has changed and many people just go with the flow. I don't. (Lines 27-31, Appendix G)

While Sakoori implicitly expressed pride in her ability to buck the trend, she conversely described negative views over feeling like a misfit in her group of friends in offline contexts, expressly using an analogy of a piece of a puzzle that did not fit in. Despite any explicit or direct rejections from these friends, she felt excluded because they did not appear to understand that the lack of connection or belonging bothered her deeply:

   With my offline friendships, I feel like I don't belong, but my friends don't seem to notice that fact and continue on like it's no big deal. I just can't help but feel neglected from the whole group. I'm like that puzzle piece that just doesn't fit in with the rest of the puzzle. I feel a bit self-conscious and really shy about it. I feel like my friends online don't honestly see that there's something wrong and I'm hiding it from them. (Lines 99-103, Appendix G)

Hence, what Sakoori emphasized in her definition of friendship was a sense of connection which she valued – a connection based on commonality (“common interest or a personality that both of
us like”; “similar political ideology”) and attributed with a sacred quality which expressed the miraculous nature of such rare experiences in her life:

I don't normally make friends with people, so it kind of feels like some sort of holy ritual to me (like there's some mysterious force that helps me connect with someone and it's rare when that happens)... (Lines 43-45, Appendix G)

Sakoori introduced Queenie as her close friend, implying that the friendship had this sacred quality of connection that she prized in friendship. There was no specific mention of the common interests, apart from the fact that they had met at an online Facebook page which Sakoori had been administrating. However, we may infer common interests, which likely originally stimulated their communication and closeness, through the descriptions of events surrounding their drifting apart:

Our interests changed, so we didn't have much to talk about anymore. I still try to communicate with her, but she has all these new friends that I don't know, so I decided to leave them alone and I focused on other friends that I had (which was about a good 100 people or so). (Lines 78-81, Appendix G)

Despite the changes to their friendship, the narrative revealed how significant this friendship was for Sakoori’s own personal growth, which is elaborated on in the next finding.

2. A second online identity catalyzing personal growth

Modes of identity construction: Enacting a different self-representation in an online context; social processes of mutual socialization and seeking validation from a significant other; reflexive self-evaluation

Sakoori’s opening statement of living two lives underscored the significance of this second online life in her self-concept. She described the surprising self-discovery of her capacity to enact a persona that was different from her shy offline identity:

I guess you could say I am the complete opposite when I'm behind a screen. When I first went online to find people that have the same interests as me, I thought my shyness would transfer over into the words I typed, but I found out that I felt more confident when I was typing than when I was speaking. I became someone I never actually knew. You
could say the keyboard was the birth of a second personality or identity. It was about 3 years ago that I began discovering this about myself. (Lines 12-17, Appendix G)

By referring to her online experiences as a “life”, Sakoori conveyed how distinct and significant the online experiences were for the formation of this second identity:

I became less self-conscious about myself and started to love myself a little more than when I didn’t have this other life. This "life" also inspired me to take up visual arts and improve in it day by day, though I think I might be harsher on my art skills now than myself in general. (Lines 20-23, Appendix G)

The online identity formation may be seen as a continued process of “becoming” a new person with new changes over time. For instance, Sakoori shared how it was only after two years that she began feeling comfortable communicating in a voice chat with two other friends, raising her comfort level from typing behind a screen to audio communication. In addition, as she observed changes in her general behaviour in her offline life, such as learning to love herself, she could point to the online life and identity as the inspiration or catalyst for such changes.

Sakoori’s friendship with Queenie was integral to the growth of her second identity and subsequent offline changes that she experienced. A key feature in Sakoori’s friendship narrative with Queenie was how different they were, and more importantly, how Queenie represented an ideal personality she desired, starkly different from herself in managing stress and relationships:

I was going through another psychological phase in which I didn't feel comfortable telling anyone about anything. I didn't trust anyone; not my parents, not my teachers. No one. I just wanted the whole world to "shut up" for once, so I went on the Internet to try and calm myself. It was there I met her. She was someone completely out of the ordinary. She was funny and someone who didn't care much about anything. She was laidback and very understanding. I was envious of a person like that because I couldn't really relax a lot. (Lines 55-61, Appendix G)

She allowed me to relax more and she eased the pressure off of my shoulders. I knew we could be friends from that moment on. And that was when I knew I could trust her. Some sort of instinct in me let me ease my mind and let it all out. I also learned that she had a lot to let out as well. We soon grew to the point where we just told each other everything. (Lines 63-67, Appendix G, italics mine)
The use of the phrase “allowed me to relax more” seemed to suggest an external locus of control with regard to Sakoori’s ability to regulate stress. In describing Queenie to be someone laidback and carefree, Sakoori was identifying with the opposite of being high-strung and weighed down by concerns, as corroborated by descriptions of teachers’ expectations and personal high standards of achievement. The phrase “allowed me” surfaced for a second time in the context of Queenie introducing Sakoori to her online friends, again suggesting an external locus of control with regard to her ability to connect with people:

She was the first person I met that later helped me gain my trust in people again and she was also the person that allowed me to meet other people… After 2 weeks or so, she introduced me to more of her friends and we grew closer and closer. We opened up to each other a lot just after a month. We both thought we could trust each other 100% with everything; our secrets for starter. (Lines 49-55, Appendix G italics mine)

In essence, Sakoori’s difficulty in managing the stress of expectations, as well as her lack of social connection with friends, had been both exacerbated by her manner of bottling up her emotions due to her shy and silent personality, which in turn had been shaped by her distrust of people. Hence, the key turning point was in overcoming this distrust as she conveyed in her own words: “you just got to trust them enough in order to open up”. As Sakoori began to “let it all out” to Queenie and experienced being understood by another person, that first step underscored the development of her online identity and grew her online friendship circle to over a hundred people. It somewhat mirrored the process of forming attachments with a significant person, as a secure base from which she began to develop confidence to explore other relationships.

While the friendship had changed after the initial year and a half of close interactions and identifying with one another like sisters, Sakoori continued making friends online without the help of Queenie as a common friend. Through her second life, she had developed an ability to trust people again and to accept herself in spite of others’ judgments:
I learned to trust people again because of her. I learned to trust people more online, but I learned to trust a little offline as well. (Lines 67-68, Appendix G)

This picture and words [in Figure 8] make me sad in a sense, but they're also very heartwarming. They made me realize that I should care less about how I look or how I act in front of other people. What matters is that I am ‘me’ and someone out there likes ‘me’. (Lines 116-119, Appendix G)

Sakoori’s growth of her online identity thus had an impact, albeit to a small measure, on the offline context in terms of the way she viewed herself and related to people. Nevertheless, she had begun to accept herself and trust people as a result of these positive online experiences.

Findings from a Contextual Analysis

Intersubjective context

While I undoubtedly had a role in co-constructing Sakoori’s narrative through questions and answers, I found her particularly forthcoming in volunteering her own self-reflections and perceptions of self and others. She seemed comfortable to share her thoughts and the conversation was free-flowing, corroborating her self-presentation of being confident behind the screen. She tended to take a while to respond to my questions, but would do so by typing out a substantial amount of text at a time, giving herself the flexibility to think and edit before disclosing the information to me. This pattern of communication, rather than a quick volley between us, seemed to support her self-portrayal through the narrative as someone who exercised self-restraint but who also seemed to have a rich inner thought life with strong personal opinions.

Using the textual markers “because” and “but”, I identified areas in the interview where Sakoori elaborated on her personal opinions. Most of these occurred when she was rationalizing her shyness, describing interactions or justifying her sense of individualism (e.g., “I was pretty nervous to meet her other friends because I was afraid they wouldn’t like me, but then I told myself ‘It’s just the Internet’”; I don’t like to seek help from others most of the time because I believe that I should solve my own problems, which is pretty dumb of me but I guess it’s force of
habit). It appeared that Sakoori had a desire to be understood for who she was, directed at me as an interviewer, and implicitly at the audience who would read her narrative. Her individualistic self-presentation in the narrative could have been influenced by this intersubjective dynamic.

Social field

In Sakoori’s narrative, she largely referred to the school setting as the main offline context, and Facebook or Skype as the online contexts of interaction. A key difference between the online and offline contexts was in her ability to choose people with similar interests in online settings. With the lack of like-minded friends in offline settings and her distrust of people fuelling her shy reticent behaviour, she took to individuating from the collective identity of peers in school. This strong persona could perhaps be a coping mechanism for judgment, as she disclosed how her second online life was teaching her to be less self-conscious of others’ judgments. Thus, the need for acceptance could essentially be seen to flow from the offline to the online contexts, the lack of belonging in the former providing an impetus to seek the acceptance of similar-minded peers in the latter context.

Sakoori made allusions to social group structures in the offline context, such as her friendship group that she did not fit into and “people in school” who likely formed crowds and cliques around their interests in looks, grades or romantic relationships. Such group structures were not as strongly portrayed in the online setting, as she narrated how her dyadic relationship with Queenie seemed to organically help her develop new friendships. There was an oppressive quality about the multiple voices in the offline social context as Sakoori described how she sought out the online environment to “calm” herself, wanting the “whole world to ‘shut up’”. On the other hand, her online social context was described to be more congruent to her needs as a
“silent type” as she saw herself to be, for instance where she could enjoy a Skype voice chat without having the pressure to speak.

**Socio-cultural context**

Referring to her chosen picture to represent online friendship experiences (see Figure 8), Sakoori explicitly challenged a perceived societal norm of distrusting people online:

Not only does it describe how I feel about all my online friends, but it also shows how most people are ignorant to the fact that people can be friends through online interactions without being stalked or killed or something of that nature. It has a powerful message that shows people that they can make friends with others without having to meet face-to-face. It motivates me to get adults in society today to realize that there are other ways to make friends. You just got to trust them enough in order to open up. (Lines 105-111, Appendix G)

This motivation to convince people that online interactions could bear meaningful friendships may have been an incentive for Sakoori’s participation in this research. As she made reference to the term “real life” in the narrative when describing her “second life”, she was employing a commonly-used term that privileged the offline setting over the “virtual” setting. Hence, as she narrated her story and explained her thoughts through the interview, she was positioning herself as someone misunderstood, not just by her peers in school for her individuated identity, but also by society at large for embracing her online life.

**Concluding Remarks**

Sakoori’s narrative seemed to highlight herself as a misfit among her peers. Her shyness may have been contributed by a self-concept of being a “silent type”, her reticence strengthened by her distrust in people and fear of others’ judgments. This shyness was transformed into confidence in online settings where she found a sense of belonging through the autonomy to choose friends with similar interests. With Sakoori’s decision to hide her online “life” from her offline peers out of fear of being judged, the online and offline world remained dichotomized. However, as she began to demonstrate greater self-love and less self-consciousness, this could
implicitly influence her offline interactions, the impact of which may only be seen in later years. Sakoori’s shyness was thus contextually influenced by the distrust in people’s judgmental response towards her individuality, but mitigated by self-love and acceptance.

Participant #5: Deepti

Deepti was 18 years old at the time of the interview, and had just begun her second year at University. She was a Canadian of South Asian ethnicity, having been born in India. She moved to the Middle East at age 4, and then to Canada three years ago at age 15. Deepti related her shyness to being in school settings where there were few South Asians like her, a feeling which was exacerbated during her migration to Canada. For the narrative, she shared about Pasha, an online friend living in South Asia whom she had met through a mutual online friend 5 to 6 years ago on “Orkut”, a social networking site. She related to Pasha like a brother.

Global Impressions

Deepti’s narrative had an overall negative undertone of diffidence and self-rejection toward her social self-concept. Her introductory self-statement was indicative of how she viewed her shyness as a personal liability: “I’m terribly shy and have always had trouble making friends”. Her self-descriptions tended to convey self-criticisms (“I feel like I’m bothering people when I speak”) or insecurities (“I am just afraid I’ll say something stupid or bore them”). She self-disclosed that she began to be depressed, “somewhat suicidal” and reclusive three years ago, corresponding with her move from the Middle East to Canada in Grade 10. Thus, her physical relocation reinforced her sense of social dislocation, particularly when she found herself in an unfamiliar environment with few South Asian students like her.

In choosing a picture to represent her offline friendship experiences (see Figure 9), Deepti used it to once again illustrate her shyness as a liability: a barrier in initiating
conversations with another person. This problem was likely salient to her as she had to make new friends when handling a transition between schools when she was in the Middle East, and subsequently across countries and cultures when she arrived in Canada three years ago.

She selected another picture for the online friendship experiences (see Figure 10) to describe how online conversations were enabled through shared likes and common topics of interest, rather than attempting a connection upon the basis of sharing the same geographical location.

*I wish my friends in real life loved Harry Potter as much as my friends online do.*

*Figure 10. Deepti’s chosen picture representing friendship experiences in online settings*  

*Figure 10 has been removed due to copyright restrictions. It is an image of an online meme with accompanying text that has been reproduced and transmitted on Tumblr and various social networking platforms. The text in the meme has been reproduced in the box above.*

Deepti’s narrative of her friendship with Pasha depicted how she was able to connect with him through finding commonalities between them (such as having Pasha’s cousin as a
mutual friend, who had first introduced them to one another) and having a shared interest in conversational topics (such as life in the Middle East). Deepthi emphasised how Pasha was critical in alleviating her loneliness during her time of transition to Canada and providing therapeutic support as she went through emotional ups and downs. He seemed to meet her criteria of friends who “behave the way they do out of mutual love and respect and shared interests”, and who “are like the family you choose yourself”. Upon self-reflection at the end of the interview, she recognised that her time online had helped her learn to relax and be confident in handling online conversations, which she realised might translate to a sense of efficacy in her offline social context as well.

Findings from a Holistic-Content Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. A diffident immigrant wanting to feel at home with friends of similar background</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Modes of identity construction:</strong> Identifying with social ethnic group; enacting a self-representation of social ineptness; social processes of selecting similar peers and seeking validation from a significant other</td>
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Deepti began her narrative by associating her shyness with difficulties in making friends in school. She shared about two major moves between schools: the first move from a British school in the Middle East to another school which had predominantly South Asian students; and the second, a migration from the Middle East to Canada. By presenting these two key events and relating how they affected her socially, she alluded to how much her sense of comfort was dependent on having friends with a similar ethnic background (“like me”):

I used to attend a British school when I lived in the Middle East…There were barely any South Asian kids there like me, so I felt pretty shy most of the time. As the South Asian population grew at school, I began feeling more comfortable. My parents then switched my school, had me attend a predominantly South Asian school, and I began feeling much more at home. For some years I was a normal kid, had a good group of friends and loved school. (Lines 18-23, Appendix H, italics mine)
I’m terribly shy and have always had trouble making friends. I sort of overcame that in middle school, but then reverted back sometime around Grade 9. When I moved from the Middle East to Canada three years ago, I became even further antisocial. I began feeling depressed and somewhat suicidal. I never start conversations. I always wait for the other person to initiate the conversation. (Lines 1-5, Appendix H)

For Deepti, being a part of a group of friends of similar ethnicity established her sense of security of feeling “at home” in school. She acknowledged that she had been able to overcome her shyness in making friends in that period of time. However, her ensuing unsociability was tied to emotional and destabilising events such as financial difficulties, and moving to a foreign country.

While Deepti had to make friends in the new Canadian school environment to feel at home again, the barriers were two-fold. One was the immediate sense of dislocation (“I felt extremely out of place”) due to the unfamiliarity of the environment (“The size of the place overwhelmed me”; “The neighbourhoods were far too quiet than what I was accustomed to”). But perhaps a more critical barrier was Deepti’s inherent self-consciousness and insecurity about her appearance or any behaviour which would highlight her immigrant status in Canada:

I feel like I'm trapped inside me. I feel uncomfortable in my own skin most of the time. It doesn't help that I'm overweight and somewhat ashamed of that. (Lines 7-9, Appendix H)

I stay cooped up at home most of the time. I just feel afraid to go outside sometimes, perhaps because I don't consider Canada my home. Also, I am insecure about my appearance and my accent and the way I dress etc., and these things really hold me back. (Lines 14-17, Appendix H)

Throughout the narrative, Deepti shared negative self-evaluations of her shyness and perceived social incompetence, commonly using the word “just” which perceptibly emphasized how entrenched her shy self-concept was (“I just feel afraid to go outside sometimes”; “sometimes I’m just afraid I’ll say something stupid or bore them”; “I'm just not the kind of person comfortable with just getting out there”). Her shyness exacerbated her difficulty in initiating conversations as a first step in forming friendships:
I tend to be too cynical or just plain shy. By cynical, I mean I don't trust the other person to be understanding or nice. I always fear judgment. I feel inept because I feel like I'm too scared to start or carry out even a simple conversation, and then feel useless because I wonder how I will ever get ahead in life like this. (Lines 88-92, Appendix H)

The lack of self-efficacy reinforced her general social self-concept that she was not competent at “introducing [herself] or steering a conversation or sharing something with anyone”. Thus in Canada, she enacted this self-representation of social ineptness despite expressing her desire for friendships and conversations.

Deepti viewed friendships as a source of emotional validation and affirmation from knowing that someone had specially chosen her as a friend, expressing love and respect through that relational commitment:

I suppose friends are like the family you choose yourself. Your parents, you’re stuck with; ditto for siblings. Friends are something you pick yourself. Your family is nice to you in many cases mostly because there’s no other choice for them; friends behave the way they do out of mutual love and respect and shared interests. I feel there's more of a psychological bond between friends than between family. (Lines 35-39, Appendix H)

She emphasized the element of effort, in how an emotional bond was forged out of an intentional choice to connect rather than a default situation of being found at the same geographical location, as one might expect with family members, school friends or colleagues:

You connect with people based on your interests and likes and dislikes, rather than just geographical location or school or work or stuff of that sort that isn't necessarily something you choose or can affect or change that easily. (Lines 97-100, Appendix H)

In particular, she named Pasha as a close online friend living in South Asia, mutually identifying with one another as siblings (“bro” and “sis”), which signified a psychological bond between them. Pasha was a significant other who provided the affirmation she sought and the strong emotional support she received through therapeutic online conversations during her migration to Canada, as will be explored in the next finding.
2. An online conversationalist growing in social confidence

**Modes of identity construction**: Social process of enhancing friendship quality; positioning of role in therapeutic dyadic relationship; reflexive self-evaluation of social competence

Given her lack of confidence in initiating conversations in offline settings, Deepti was surprised to see how “easy flowing” her online conversations were with Pasha. It had helped that Pasha (“nowhere as shy as me”) had initiated the first conversations by relaying online messages to Deepti on behalf of his cousin, who was one of her online friends. They began with common topics to build their conversations around:

We found a lot in common in between us, and eventually became great friends. His older brother lived in the same Middle Eastern country that I was living in at the time, and he was sort of interested in understanding how life in the Middle East was like. That and his aforementioned cousin were our initial topics of conversation. (Lines 53-56, Appendix H)

Commonality in ethnic background extended to shared interests, such as Bollywood movies and music. Their online communication moved across various social networking platforms, from Orkut to Yahoo Messenger and finally Facebook, considered to be more convenient and interactive, with opportunities to “like” one another’s pictures and statuses.

Their conversations soon took a more personal turn of self-disclosing problems that further enhanced the quality and intimacy of the friendship. The reciprocal emotional support demonstrated the mutual love and respect that Deepti prized in friendships, as she concretized her role identity in this therapeutic relationship:

He would talk about problems with his girlfriend; I'd talk about these immigration-related issues. We were kind of like therapists to each other. (Lines 68-70, Appendix H)

When I started school here I would talk to him about how much I hated it here, and he'd console me and try to be as helpful as he could. One would expect a guy to be sick of my constant whining about how much I hate things, but he's been very supportive. He actually listens and comments thoughtfully on what I say. He helps me talk problems through when I'm feeling dejected and/or lonely. We don't talk on a weekly or even
monthly basis. There are spurts of time when we have conversations, essay-size paragraphs moving back and forth. But even so he's been a tremendous help in relieving my loneliness. (Lines 76-82, Appendix H)

For Deepti, it was not so much the consistency of her communication with Pasha that mattered, but that he was a friend who lent greater depth to their conversations through his thoughtful comments, thus providing the insights and security to help her through the depression and loneliness in transition to Canada:

And when we had our first chat from here we spent quite a while talking about things I'd observed here [in Canada]. We are both the observant kind, I've noticed. He's nowhere near as shy as me, but he's pretty thoughtful and deep. (Lines 73-76, Appendix H)

Deepti recognized how she had developed social confidence in these online conversational contexts. The online platform afforded her a greater sense of control over choosing common topics of interest with friends and handling the conversations without much social inhibition:

When I have conversations online I feel much more confident and at ease than I would feel otherwise, because these conversations are almost always about something I actually would want to talk about. The Internet lets you be more open, hide or forget your inhibitions, which proves quite relieving and comforting. (Lines 100-104, Appendix H)

After my positive online experiences, these feelings [of being inept and useless] have reduced, come to think of it. In online settings I often see myself steering and/or handling the conversation pretty well, with hardly any inhibitions, and that at times makes me feel more confident when I'm faced with a situation in real life where I have to talk to someone who seems daunting. (Lines 92-95, Appendix H)

Hence, the positive and easy online conversations with Pasha had given Deepti concrete experiences of success in terms of engaging and holding conversations, and at the same time a sense of validation by virtue of having a role in the mutually therapeutic friendship with Pasha, in which they were attentive to one another’s problems. Toward the end of the interview, Deepti reflected on possible changes in the way she perceived her social competence in offline settings. While she had learnt to be more relaxed online, she also expressed cognisance that this confidence transferred to offline settings to some extent.
Findings from a Contextual Analysis

Intersubjective context

I found Deepti to be someone quite expressive with her emotions. In the course of the interview, I had provided either some broad prompting questions for elaboration on what she had been sharing, or targeted questions directed at eliciting her feelings toward situations. My contribution to the co-construction was thus not to be overlooked. Yet, for the most part of the interview, she readily shared her feelings, which were largely in response to perceived challenges in the environment. For instance, looking at the text below, the repeated collocation of textual markers such as “began” and “feeling” revealed Deepti’s perspective of how much her emotions were driven by the unfolding events in her life:

Then when the process for our immigration to Canada began to take a longer time than anticipated, and began to affect our finances, and the environment around the house, I began feeling depressed and began falling back into reclusiveness. I began feeling more lively and hopeful when the immigration process ended and we were in the process of moving here, but when I arrived, it didn't take long for those feelings to vanish again. (Lines 23-28, Appendix H, italics mine)

By embedding her feelings in the narrative of events, she was explaining more clearly the larger context of her emotions. This could have been partly shaped by the intersubjective context of the interview, in which she might have needed to make an effort to explain herself and perhaps lend credence to the sharing of her negative emotions.

My role as a co-constructor was especially pertinent to the statement in the narrative: “After my positive online experiences, these feelings [of being inept and useless] have reduced, come to think of it.” This had come about from an interaction in the interview, in which I had asked, “Have these thoughts and feelings [of being inept and useless] stayed the same after your positive online experiences?” While there was the potential dynamic of social desirability at play here, on the flip side, the interview could have conversely provided Deepti an opportunity for
thoughtful and reflexive self-evaluation, to challenge her long-held belief of her social incompetence.

**Social field**

Deepti’s narrative made reference to the offline contexts of the school and home, as well as online social networking platforms such as Orkut, Yahoo Messenger and Facebook. The social field could also include a larger scale setting of the Middle East and Canada as locations of interactions. Her school context mainly pointed to the influence of ethnic groups which could potentially form cliques, although this was not explicitly mentioned. Her comments of not feeling “at home” in the British school and feeling “out of place” in Canada could be attributed to her strong shy self-concept, but it could additionally be due to the felt experience of being part of a minority group in these social settings.

This experience of feeling out of place was apparently not as prominent for Deepti in an online setting. First, her online interactions seemed to revolve around dyadic relationships (with Pasha and other friends whom she knew in the offline setting and with whom she grew closer through online communication), not larger groups in which in-groups and out-groups could be formed. Second, the online context did not play up Deepti’s insecurities over how she might appear different from others, in contrast to how a walk around the neighbourhood in Canada might elicit a self-conscious reaction. The online setting created a sense of psychological safety “to be relaxed and be [her]self”, with a “screen protecting [her] face”. In essence, the online context reduced visibility of social cliques and the salience of her ethnic minority status.

**Socio-cultural context**

Deepti’s self-rejecting statements could imply prevailing societal norms of beauty and success in the world which may be contingent on social competence (“It doesn’t help that I’m
overweight and somewhat ashamed of that”; “It doesn’t always work because I have barely any real world experience.”). She had found that focusing on her good qualities (“I’m a good person at heart”; “I read good fiction and like to learn about new things”) did not seem to help her address her insecurities over her appearance and shyness. Thus, these societal norms of beauty and success were unseen forces that deeply shaped Deepti’s self-evaluation by providing referential standards.

Another norm that could be interpreted from Deepti’s narrative was that of referring to the offline context as a “real life”, bearing an implicit reference to the online context as a “virtual life”. In the narrative, there was no positioning of the offline context as being more real to Deepti than the online context, but in employing such terminology from society, she could have been reifying in her mind the dichotomy and separation of these two contexts.

Concluding Remarks

Deepti’s strong shy self-concept was largely rooted in her insecurities over her physical and ethnic appearance, as well as her inability to handle conversations. These fears were diminished through the online context with reduced audio-visual cues and opportunities to connect with people of similar ethnic backgrounds. With the invisibility of social cliques in online contexts, Deepti could be more at ease in social interactions. Her therapeutic friendship with Pasha had been rewarding, thereby building her confidence in handling conversations in the online and to some extent the offline setting, with a spillover effect of this newfound social confidence through her increased sense of competence. Deepti’s shyness was thus contextually influenced by how prominent her appearance and ethnic minority status were in an interactional context, mitigated by past successful experiences of handling conversations.
Participant #6: Emily

Emily had recently turned 18 years old at the time of the interview, and was just about to begin her freshman year at University. She was a Canadian of East Asian (Chinese) ethnicity, having migrated with her family from China to Canada at age 3. Emily related her shyness to being “unwilling to be free around people, especially unfamiliar people”. She attributed her shyness to a “multitude of small” events but gave an example of the manner in which she was raised by her parents where she “was treated as if [she] couldn’t do anything without them watching over [her]”. For the narrative, she shared about Olive, a junior in her high school whom she had met a year ago during Chemistry class. They first began talking in the library, before communicating more frequently through Facebook, although the disclosure was one-sided, with Olive mainly sharing her problems.

Global Impressions

Emily began her introduction with the statement “I know that I’m a reserved type of person”, conveying a desire to be seen as one who was self-aware of her shy self-concept. She attributed her shyness to a worry of revealing parts of herself to people, as well as a tendency to “overthink”, which was related to her internal drive towards perfection and high standards of achievement (“I’m a bit self-exacting and perfectionistic”; “even in art, I have high standards I try to achieve”; “That’s my drive”). Emily’s fear of appearing vulnerable and her sense of inadequacy developed over a period of time since her childhood, possibly shaped by the over-involvement of her parents which instilled in her a feeling of incompetence.

Emily’s need to control her social interactions surfaced through the selection of pictures to represent her online and offline friendship experiences. She took it upon herself to direct her offline interactions, as illustrated by an analogy of a mirror room (see Figure 11) where she assumed the primary responsibility to ensure that all face-to-face social interactions went well
(“how much they like being with me is all influenced by myself”; “if something goes wrong, I tend to blame myself”).

Figure 11. Emily’s chosen picture representing friendship experiences in offline settings (Větruše Hill, a Mirror Labyrinth by ŠJů, Wikimedia Commons, available under a Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported licence)

Online communication, on the other hand, was described to be like a “relaxing” and “straightforward” night drive (see Figure 12). She felt a better sense of control in online conversations, where she mainly focused on conveying her message through words, without having to concurrently read the other’s mood or respond immediately to negative reactions.

Figure 12. Emily’s chosen picture representing friendship experiences in online settings (© 2007 tofu_minx [pseudonym], used with permission)
The desire to be in control paralleled the need to mitigate feelings of inadequacy as apparent in Emily’s choice of close friends who were more reticent than her. This placed her in a position of security given the strength of her social skills relative to her friends. Her friendship with Olive did not embody her ideals of reciprocal care and respect, remaining one-sided as Emily preferred to provide emotional support than to engage in mutual self-disclosure. However, there were hints of Emily’s yearning to be open with another person in order to develop an intimacy that allowed “another person to see [her] vulnerability and [her] whole self without hiding”. She acknowledged that her self-reliance on solving her problems and being too “closed in to confide in others” revealed a part of her which was “a work in progress”.

*Findings from a Holistic-Content Analysis*

1. A self-critic engineering experiences of competence

**Modes of identity construction**: Social comparison (using peers as referential standards for self-evaluation); self-presentation and impression management

Emily described shyness, which she identified with, as an unwillingness to reveal things about oneself that one was not ready to show to unfamiliar people. Her internal processes of self-scrutiny and measuring herself against others appeared to determine the amount of self-disclosure that she engaged in. A guarded one-directional sharing thus tended to characterize her interaction with people, similar to how a one-way mirror kept one side hidden from the other:

I think the basic shy definition applies to a person who's unwilling to be free around people, especially unfamiliar people. They don't necessarily dislike letting go, but might be afraid to. They don't disclose much about themselves, similar to a one-way mirror in a sense. By being free and letting go, I mean letting go of inhibitions like self-scrutiny or criticism when you’re around others, as well as not paying attention or having thoughts about how you might measure up to others and if you're worth to be talked to. It’s being free of little insecurities like that. (Lines 19-24, Appendix I)
Emily’s description of these insecurities reflected a self-critical internal voice that seemed to be a result of constant mental social comparisons made during her social interactions. These self-criticisms reinforced a sense of inadequacy of not measuring up with others:

It’s hard to describe the areas in which I felt inadequate. It's the vague feeling of being lacking in experience in some area that might define the other person. So I've always measured myself in terms of others, which has set me back as much as it has pushed me forward. But even now, I feel like I don't know myself well. Too often and for too long I’ve thought “I could be this type of person if I wanted to”. It's become a habit now and it totally messes with my self-perception. But I don't particularly want to be a certain type of person anymore. I'd be ok with myself if I just had more confidence. (Lines 12-18, Appendix I)

As well, these social comparisons motivated Emily toward enacting an idealized “type”. In fact, it was likely that she habitually analyzed her own and others’ behaviour in order to categorize people, as evidenced by the repetition of the word “type” throughout the narrative (e.g., “reserved type”; “certain type”; “type that assesses a situation and adapts to compensate”; “shy type”). As she used the process of social comparison as a means for identity exploration, she came to a point of acknowledging a desire to let go of her persistent striving to be like others.

Emily’s self-critical focus on inadequacies could be seen as a manifestation of the need to feel competent. Her strong self-reliance on solving her problems was possibly a compensatory reaction to the helicopter parenting which “instilled in [her] the belief that [she] was incapable”. To her, confiding in another person signalled incompetence in dealing with problems and relegated her to a lower position along the social comparison ladder, as she anticipated receiving pity more instinctively than receiving comfort and sympathy:

Not only that but I’m too closed in to confide in others. I deal with my own problems myself. This part of me is a work in progress. I guess mutual openness is necessary for trusting relationships, but it's not easy. I just can't find the words, and when I think that now might be a good time to say something, I don't because it would just make me feel worse. I hate pity more than anything, though I try to tell myself that sympathy and comfort aren’t the same as pity. (Lines 67-72, Appendix I)
Besides limiting her disclosure of personal problems, another means of engineering experiences of competence was by exercising control over the types of friends she made. Emily predominantly chose friends who were less competent than her in different ways. This helped to maintain her position of relative strength among her friends, and concomitantly enabled her to avoid being self-critical or insecure when talking to them:

My close friends so far have been more shy than me. But I’m the type that assesses a situation and adapts to compensate for something that we might lack as a group – in this case social skills. (Lines 25-26, Appendix I)

Usually, people that make me comfortable are ones who aren't better than me in a lot of ways. This lets me talk to them more easily. But I also am drawn to people who I think are superior to me (it’s weird now that I think about it.) I'm uncomfortable around people who I think are very different from me. (Lines 33-36, Appendix I)

Upon reflection, Emily’s surprise at being attracted to more capable people indicated that she was used to a default position of choosing interactions that gave her a sense of competence.

Thus, in describing her pictures representing online and offline friendship experiences, she emphasized the element of competence and control over her social situations in both settings:

I chose a picture of the mirror room to represent face-to-face socializing for myself. I feel that how much I enjoy being around other people or how much they like being with me is all influenced by myself. I try hard to control social situations (but this doesn’t work out all the time). If something is not to my liking, I wonder if I could have done something to change that and come up with a solution to address it the next time. (Lines 81-85, Appendix I, italics mine)

The picture of a night drive represents online communication… Driving at night is relaxing, and so is talking online to someone relative to talking to them up front… Even when your partner might be upset, you have a longer time to respond properly and don't have to nuance your voice and move your face around. Talking on line generally makes me feel better because I can orchestrate how things go to some extent. When I can see and hear the other person my attention has to divide itself. (Lines 88-96, Appendix I)

She sought to be in control over the positive outcomes of social interactions, finding it easier to do so in an online environment where non-verbal communication did not need to be taken into consideration. This engineering of experience to reinforce a sense of competence could be an expression of her perfectionistic tendency, as will be explored in the next finding.
2. A perfectionist seeking freeing reciprocal relationships

Modes of identity construction: Negotiating meanings of self with an internalized reference group; reflexive self-evaluation of one’s role in a one-sided dyadic relationship

Emily acknowledged her perfectionism with a drive toward achieving high standards. The pursuit for excellence extended beyond academic areas of art and writing, and was apparent in her longing for her friendships to attain a deeper quality of connection by breaking out of its superficial nature of revolving around leisure activities or a functional nature of focusing on school work:

But so far, it’s been nothing but a convenience or casual hobby of sorts. It’s not that I haven't found the right people. It's that we haven't been through serious experiences together. Me and my friends don't seem to take friendship too seriously. Maybe it’s because we live most our lives in our schoolwork or the Internet. (Lines 39-42, Appendix I)

I would want friendships to mean close relationships with people whom I care about and respect, and they would also reciprocate these feelings for me. We are free with each other and understand each other well. (Lines 37-39, Appendix I)

Describing that she “would want” close friendships to be characterized by such freedom and reciprocity, Emily indicated that it was an expressed hope, and not a current reality. Her friends became an internalized reference group of people who did not meet her expectation of what close friends should be like. Through their interactions, she had constructed a shared meaning with them of what friendship meant, but which fell short of her own expectations. This was also evident in her friendship with Olive.

Emily chose Olive as an example of a close friend mainly because she identified with her struggles of perfectionism and an eating disorder, as well as a deeper connection that was forged through being Olive’s confidante and support through her difficulties:
Basically, things were overwhelming for her and so she and I would talk every day on Facebook. She hadn't told anyone besides her parents and teachers about these things, so other than them I was the only one who knew. I think we share a connection deeper than friendship because of this. (Lines 49-52, Appendix I)

However, hearing her stories reminds me a bit of myself. I had a stint with an eating disorder years ago, and I also am really perfectionistic, definitely not to her extent though. But anyways, this is probably the stuff that holds us together. This is part of the connection I mentioned. As a crude example, wouldn't you feel closer to a person if you'd shared a bed with them? That kind of intimacy, as in allowing another person to see your vulnerability and your whole self without hiding or you being the one to see them brings the two of you closer in a way that doesn't really equate to friendliness (Lines 57-63, Appendix I)

Yet, despite certain bonds of intimacy Emily experienced with Olive, she recognized the imbalance of roles in the dyadic relationship, being the stronger emotional support of the two.

The one-sided dynamic in their sharing precluded the reciprocal vulnerability and mutual openness she desired in a close friendship:

Is this kind of relationship really a friendship? I feel almost like her confessor. Like I said before, a friendship would have to have some more components and synchronicity between two people in order to be considered authentic by me. (Lines 55-57, Appendix I)

She's the one asking for advice and I'm the one giving it. She has pain and I try to alleviate it somewhat. This sort of relation is not equal. For me to confide in her doesn't suit the context because she's the one in a lot more need. So, I would never drop my own crap on someone already dealing with so much crap in their life. (Lines 63-67, Appendix I)

For Emily, having “cycled through a few sets of close friends” as she moved through different schools in different cities, authentically close relationships that were freeing and reciprocal appeared to be elusive. Her choice of friends typically put her in a position of strength and seldom in places of weakness. She nevertheless had come to an awareness of a need to let go of insecurities, such as her self-critical social comparisons, which undermined her willingness to confide in others who seemed to be more competent than her. This impeded the freedom and reciprocity in friendships that she longed for.
Findings from a Contextual Analysis

Intersubjective context

A salient aspect of the intersubjective context was the fact that Emily chose to participate in the research with a purpose of testing out how it felt like to disclose her personal thoughts and feelings online, which she had never attempted before with either friends or strangers:

I haven’t really self-disclosed online either. I signed up for this experiment because I wanted to try telling someone about myself, like this, just to get a feel of what it's like to spill things. It's not bad, but it would be different if I knew you or we were face-to-face – I wouldn’t even do it if I had to face you and speak. (Lines 77-80, Appendix I)

In reality, she did not have a story of an authentically close friendship to share with me, but she had a desire to experience how it could be like to disclose personal details as she might attempt to do with a close friend. It was intriguing that a parallel process had played out, where she was recounting her experience of being the confidante in a one-sided disclosing relationship with Olive, but was doing so as the one disclosing to me, albeit playing a different role as a research participant compared to a close friend. In our interview, I was actively co-constructing the narrative by offering questions for her elaboration, although she was also forthcoming with her thoughts and feelings without much prompting.

Emily appeared to be introspective throughout the interview, frequently positioning herself (“myself”) as an object of reflection by the subjective “I”-self (e.g., “but even now, I feel like I don’t know myself well”; “I’d be ok with myself if I just had more confidence”; “I try to tell myself that sympathy and comfort aren’t the same as pity”). This introspective reflection could have been encouraged by the interview context, and particularly because she had her personal agenda to experiment with online disclosure. In addition, she likely had the capacity for abstraction and metacognitive thought, as alluded to by her pictures which had been thoughtfully selected to serve an analogical illustrative purpose. The intersubjective context thus strongly
influenced how Emily’s narrative focused more on her thoughts and feelings, rather than
describing details of her friendship experiences with Olive.

**Social field**

Emily referred to the offline social context of school and home, as well as the online
social context of the Internet. In all these contexts, she seemed to position herself consistently as
an individual situated in relationships, instead of closely identifying with the social groups or
dyads in which she spent time.

The transient experience of moving from middle school in one city to a high school in
another could have potentially shaped this almost nomadic quality in her descriptions of relating
to different groups of friends. In middle school, Emily “was in that group because [they] had
similar personalities…and had shared interests”, while at the start of high school, she “was with
those people partly because [she] didn’t care enough to find people who [she] clicked better
with.” Emily did not convey a sense of belonging to these groups, expressly describing those at
high school as being “a little dumb”, and having fewer references to “we” in the entire narrative.
She began to move to another friendship group in her honours year, which shared her interest in
studying. This corroborated her lament that she had formed her friendships more out
convenience rather than based on deeper bonding experiences.

While there was continuity across the offline and online contexts in this respect of the
individualistic tone in Emily’s narrative, there was a slight difference with regard to which type
of relational structures were more commonly cited across the contexts. She tended to describe
friendship experiences in the offline context in the setting of social groups, while the online
context mainly focused on the dyadic relationship with Olive. Her vague reference to her friends
“living their lives…[on the] Internet” did not clearly point to how the social group structure
continued or changed across online and offline settings. Nevertheless, the online setting clearly supported the frequency of dyadic interactions as Olive confided in Emily “every day”.

**Socio-cultural context**

Emily made reference to culturally employed parallels between physical intimacy and emotional intimacy. She drew the analogy between physical intimacy that was derived from vulnerably baring all in bed and emotional intimacy as a result of full disclosure of one’s thoughts and feelings. However, she highlighted that one-sided disclosure could bring about a connection that still fell short of an intimacy that was derived from mutual disclosure. This emphasis on reciprocity could be seen as an implicit societal value imposed on relationships.

Another socio-cultural perspective that Emily raised was that of one’s shyness being a liability and associated with deficits in social skills:

*My close friends so far have been more shy than me. But I’m the type that assesses a situation and adapts to compensate for something that we might lack as a group – in this case social skills.* (Lines 25-26, Appendix I)

Having this perspective that shyness was an area of weakness, it was all the more expected for her to feel inadequate when making social comparisons with those who appeared to be more sociable; and hence she chose to be in the company of those more reticent than she was.

**Concluding Remarks**

Emily’s shy self-concept was linked to a fear of revealing vulnerabilities and weaknesses. It was likely constructed through childhood experiences which undermined her sense of competence and concurrently developed a perfectionistic tendency that reinforced her inadequacies when social comparisons were made. She implicitly expressed a desire to let go of her instinctual self-critical voice and to overcome her resistance toward vulnerable self-disclosure in order to achieve her friendship ideals of reciprocity and freedom to be herself.

Having taken the first step to experience self-disclosure in our interview context, Emily could
potentially continue doing so. Online settings essentially provided her with a greater sense of control over the positive outcomes of social interactions. Emily’s shyness was thus contextually influenced by her perception of how little control she had and how much incompetence she might portray in the social setting.

Cross-Case Analysis

The binding concept of the Quintain (or phenomenon) under analysis is the identity construction of self-identified shy adolescents through their close friendship experiences in online and offline settings. In the preceding sections of this chapter, I analyzed each of the six cases separately to retain the situationality and uniqueness of each case as much as possible (see Appendix J for an overview of the individual case findings). In this section, for understanding the Quintain as a whole, I undertook a cross-case analysis to first develop a set of merged findings across the cases (see Appendix K for details). I then reviewed the merged findings against themes based on the research questions in order to refine the merged findings into a set of six assertions. These assertions present the collective findings of the Quintain as a whole.

Assertions of the Quintain

1. Adolescents constructed a reticent identity through enacting a generalized worldview of an untrustworthy social environment, due to experiences of broken trust or perceived rejection.

Alice, Cherise, and Sakoori’s narratives provided the common thread of how one may enact a shy identity as a social withdrawal mechanism to protect oneself, in reaction to hurtful events from the past. For Alice, it was the broken trust from being sexually assaulted at age 14; for Cherise, it was her experiences of perceived rejection in junior high school where people
seemed to change from 6\textsuperscript{th} to 8\textsuperscript{th} grade; and for Sakoori, it was an act of betrayal by someone whom she had considered to be a friend.

These experiences seemed to shape a generalized perspective of the social environment as being untrustworthy, as evident from how some participants depicted the general “other” to be judgmental when expressing their fear of talking. In addition, the participants described an involuntary distrust or personal difficulties in trusting people. Hence, the perception of the untrustworthy social environment influenced their patterns of disengagement from social interactions, these patterns reciprocally shaping an internalized self-concept of being shy and reticent.

2. Adolescents presented a self-concept of diffidence and insecurity through recounting childhood experiences that undermined their development of competence and autonomy.

A second way in which the social environment shaped one’s shy identity was in terms of childhood experiences that had inadvertently weakened one’s confidence. Bernice, Deepti, and Emily’s narratives referenced various childhood experiences and alluded to them as causes of their shyness. For instance, Bernice’s homeschooling and Deepti’s migrant experiences had affected their ability to make stable friendships with peers. Bernice externalized the problem to a lack of opportunity due to being “stuck at home”, while Deepti internalized it to a difficulty in making friends with people of a different ethnic background. Without sufficient positive peer socialization experiences, they did not develop a sense of social competence and self-confidence. As well, Emily’s descriptions of her friendship experiences in middle and high school had an individualistic quality about it, signalling a lack of belonging to the groups that she had circled through.
In Bernice’s and Emily’s situations, the general lack of self-confidence was also in part contributed by experiences of being parented in ways that diminished a sense of control or autonomy. For Bernice, it was the autonomy to speak or behave at meals as she wished without being lectured; and for Emily, it was the autonomy to try her hand at activities without being monitored closely. Collectively, these parental expectations and childhood experiences influenced an internalized self-concept of being shy and diffident about their competencies.

3. Adolescents constructed a shy self-concept through identifying personal deficits in relation to societal referential standards, and concurrently constructed role identities that put themselves in positions of strength.

In addition to the impact of childhood experiences, Bernice’s, Deepti’s, and Emily’s insecurities were shaped by self-evaluation that depended on social comparisons or societal referential standards of beauty and appearance. Bernice identified with having a physical disability based on her diagnosis of Juvenile Rheumatoid Arthritis while Deepti and Emily were self-critically sensitized to how others might view them through social comparisons. These comparisons with societal and cultural standards served to reinforce one’s self-evaluation of weaknesses and perception of deficits.

On the other hand, all three participants appeared to construct positive role identities: Bernice portrayed her role of advocating against discrimination; together with Deepti and Emily, all three presented similar roles of providing emotional support to their close online friends. These constructed identities seemed to place them in positions of strength. Particularly for Emily, her one-sided “confessor” role may be an engineered means to avoid being in a position of weakness, as she was cognizant that intimate self-disclosure would require her to bare her vulnerabilities to another.
4. Trust, as a main factor in overcoming the fear of self-disclosure, was more easily established in online autonomous dyadic interactions than in offline settings where group structures and norms limited the freedom to be themselves.

Alice’s, Cherise’s, and Sakoori’s narratives largely contributed to this finding that trust was built up through quality interactions that represented acceptance and understanding. For Alice, her first online connection with Terri gave her a sense of feeling cared for; for Cherise, it was being noticed and receiving attention from Ray that validated her shy self-concept; and for Sakoori, likewise it was feeling accepted for her individuality and her “silent type”.

All three participants conveyed a sense of freedom to be themselves in an online setting, primarily because of the autonomy they exercised to develop friendships with those of similar interests, or who had experienced related struggles. Such a connection seemed to provide a foundation for building trust with someone whom they felt could understand them. It appeared that the lack of visible group structures (e.g., cliques and crowds) in their online dyadic interactions facilitated this process of building trust, given that Cherise’s and Sakoori’s descriptions of school experiences presented a contrasting picture of “offline drama” and peer pressure to “fit in”. Thus, it was likely that a lowered visibility of group structures in the online setting promoted the freedom to be themselves without the fear of being judged, as well as focused their attention on the content of their mutual dyadic self-disclosure, thus reinforcing the initial connection that had been first made.

5. Online affordances built social competence by providing a scaffold for overcoming the fear of self-disclosure and replicating offline social practices which accelerated intimacy development.
The online setting not only facilitated the building of trust but also the building of social competence. One way in which the online setting fostered social competence was through online affordances that provided a scaffold for overcoming the fear of self-disclosure. This was evident in Alice’s case where Facetime’s concurrent typing and video functions enabled her to move beyond her initial fear of physically “opening her mouth” to talk to Terri for the first time. In Cherise’s narrative, the scaffold took the form of message exchanges in a semi-anonymous public forum, which enabled her to evaluate Ray’s responses before progressing to a private interaction platform of mobile texting (as was also apparent in Alice’s Tumblr interaction that progressed to Facetime). While such scaffolds empowered participants to overcome their initial fear of self-disclosure, the continued mutual self-disclosure likely built their social competence as they began to experience sustained positive social interactions.

This mutual self-disclosure appeared to be promoted by the way real-time interactive technology replicated social practices of “hanging out”. That is, online availability was a parallel for physical proximity, and the high frequency of mobile texting (“talking constantly”) paralleled the experience of physically hanging out at a friend’s house, as illustrated through Alice’s and Cherise’s narratives. The online setting did not merely replicate such social practices, however, but also transformed them, such that the online environment accelerated the development of intimacy in dimensions of the amount, frequency and private nature of self-disclosure. This resulted in perceived emotional intimacy being developed at a faster rate than what was expected in offline friendships, many of these online friends being labelled as “best friends” or identified to be like sisters or brothers.

Additionally, as illustrated through Bernice’s case, the online affordance of control over interaction partners and communication modes seemed to create a similar emotional security that
she received in her offline dyadic relationship with Miss H. This psychologically safe online environment could also be attributed to a reduced emphasis on physical appearances or evaluative audio-visual cues where societal norms of beauty had less visible power, as was evident in Bernice’s and Deepti’s narratives. In sum, these online structures and affordances fostered social competence through reducing barriers to talking and promoting intimate sharing.

6. Shy identities seemed contextualized to the general offline interactional experience, but these could change over time with new positive experiences in offline settings via increased self-confidence or self-acceptance.

In all six narratives, a repeated refrain was of how the participants felt less self-conscious talking in an online setting compared to the offline. This suggested that they contextualized their shy identities to offline interactional experiences due to differences in the quality of friendship experiences. Yet, for some of these narratives, there was initial evidence that these shy identities could change with the interplay between participants’ online and offline interactional settings.

One form of interplay was how one’s growing online social competence translated to positive experiences in offline settings. For instance, Deepti reflected that her confidence in handling conversations in an online setting could have had some spillover effect on her confidence in manoeuvring offline conversations. As another form of interplay, increased online intimacy could also provide an impetus to meet one another in person when an opportunity presented itself, as it did in Alice’s situation. This would add to the collection of positive offline interactional experiences, albeit with limited generalizable impact as such positive interactions would be mainly confined to friendships originating from an online context. As in Alice’s example, it is unclear if other offline-exclusive friendships would improve in quality as a result of this.
Nevertheless, an accumulation of positive offline interactions could potentially support a shift in one’s social self-concept that is constructed from direct interactional experiences. A question remains however as to whether an “online social self-concept” remained dichotomized from an “offline social self-concept”, or whether as an extrapolation using Sakoori’s case, her online interactions could catalyze personal growth of self-love and acceptance, which could in turn influence offline interactions and ultimately her “offline social self-concept”. As such, it is plausible that shy identities constructed in an offline context could shift over time as one’s social self-concept changed with cumulative positive experiences from both online and offline settings.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This study’s main aim was to explore the identity construction of self-identified shy adolescents in online and offline settings. The particular focus on “contextual identities” underscored my interest to examine how online and offline contexts may influence identity construction and social processes, and to observe any potential interplay across online and offline settings. By presenting findings from each of the individual six cases and the collective Quintain in the previous chapter, I have offered emic and etic perspectives of the psychosocial processes and contextual influences of shy adolescents’ identity construction.

In this chapter, I situate the findings in the wider body of literature and present limitations of the current study with suggestions for future research. Expanding on the findings, I discuss its educational implications for teachers and professionals working with adolescents who may perceive their shyness as a personal liability.

Contributions to the Literature

The current study contributes to the field of adolescent developmental psychology with regard to the formative role of peers and psychosocial developmental changes that affect self-concept and identity. By focusing on a profile of self-identified shy adolescents who experienced close friendships in online settings, the findings of the study also provide potential research trajectories for this profile of adolescents. In this sub-section, I will discuss the findings in relation to the following broad areas: a) social self-concept; b) adolescent development through relationships; and c) online affordances of communication.

Social Self-Concept

Literature on self-concept converges on claims of its multi-dimensional and hierarchical structure. Byrne and Shavelson (1996) elaborated on the social self-concept structure, illustrating
how an adolescent’s general social self-concept could be constructed and built up from experiences and self-perceptions of social competence in discrete interactions. According to the model, these interactions (with peers, teachers, siblings, and parents) take place within two major facets, namely the school and the family domains. In this current study, participants described their online social interactions to be qualitatively different from interactions with peers in their school setting. Recent research has also found that online connectedness presents a separate construct from offline social connectedness (Grieve, Indian, Witteveen, Tolan, & Marrington, 2013). This suggests a need to examine how the online social domain could feature more explicitly and distinctly in the self-concept structure, as well as in related self-report tools like Marsh’s Self-Description Questionnaire (SDQ).

All participants in the study positioned their shyness as a social liability in terms of having difficulties in initiating conversations, making friends, or self-disclosing personal thoughts and feelings in face-to-face social settings. Yet, many presented a positive portrayal of social competence when describing experiences with their close online-exclusive friends. This aligns with findings that lonely and socially anxious adolescents lack clarity and consistency in their self-concepts across online and offline settings (Valkenburg & Peter, 2008). The sixth assertion of the Quintain captures this “online versus offline” contextual characteristic of shyness and its hypothesized mechanism of change over time: “Shy identities seemed contextualized to the general offline interactional experience, but these could change over time with new positive experiences in offline settings via increased self-confidence or self-acceptance”.

In other words, the study offers a possibility that shy identities may remain exclusive to offline settings without any spillover effects of social competence from the online setting, unless there is a positive shift in affective and evaluative components of the self-concept, such as self-
confidence and self-acceptance. With the “need to examine the dynamic relationship between experiences in social relationships and the development of internal representations of self” (Hymel & Moretti, 1999, p. 540), the element of time is a key consideration for investigating these bidirectional influences of online and offline relationships on self-concept.

A closer look at Deepti’s and Sakoori’s examples may provide some insights into how time could play into the mechanism of changing one’s social self-concept through the formation of positive online relationships. Deepti’s online friendship with Pasha was the longest at five years compared to the other participants, given that she was one of the older participants, aged 18 years. The other participants’ close friendships tended to be below two years in duration. Despite Deepti’s predominantly diffident self-presentation, her reflection at the end of the interview indicated growing confidence in offline social interactions as she attributed it to her experience of handling online conversations well. Thus, the development of her online social competence over the period of five years could have contributed to an initial affective element of self-confidence in offline settings. Sakoori’s narrative, on the other hand, presents another possible mechanism of change that focuses more on the extent of her online network of relationships. At 15 years of age, Sakoori’s foray into online friendships had spanned about two years. However, what was unique among the participants about her experience was the building of relationships with around 100 other online-exclusive friends. None of the other participants had shared about such an extensive network of friends, but had kept their narratives predominantly on their close dyadic online relationships. Thus, as indicated by Sakoori, the wide-ranging nature of this “second life” had a positive impact on self-acceptance and being less self-conscious.

The influence of Sakoori’s extended network of friends aligns with Cooley’s (1902) and Mead’s (1934) symbolic interactionist perspectives of how reflected appraisals of general peers
shape one’s self-perception and evaluation of self-worth (Harter, 1999a). Such a phenomenon of reflected appraisals is evident in recent empirical research that studied how feedback in online interactions influenced one’s self-perception of introversion or extroversion (Walther, Liang, Deandrea, Tong, Carr, Spottswood, & Amichai-hamburger, 2011). In Cooley’s “looking-glass-self” idea or Mead’s concept of the “generalized other”, general peers become the “social mirrors” whose perceived opinions about the self become internalized as personal opinions about the self. Sakoori’s reference group of general peers had significantly broadened from the existing peers in school to include a large group of online-exclusive friends. The feedback from the online peer group in terms of comments and responses to Sakoori’s more sociable online self-presentation could have reinforced the sense of having a “second life” that was qualitatively different from her reticent offline behaviour. Harter (1999a) also suggested that it was the support of general peers that influenced self-esteem more so than that of close friends, as the approval of these general peers was perceived to be more objective. Thus, this network of online friendships could have stimulated Sakoori’s growth in self-acceptance as friendships have been recognized as contexts for developmental outcomes such as positive self-regard (Hartup, 1992).

Although Deepti and Sakoori are only two examples of shy adolescents, their narratives point to the potential positive spillover effects of online social interactions on offline relationships through impacting self-confidence and self-acceptance. Their experiences may also support the Internet-induced social skills hypothesis presented in a study investigating how online communication may influence offline social competence (Koutamanis, Vossen, Peter, & Valkenburg, 2013). The authors’ one-year study suggests that the frequency of instant messaging has a positive longitudinal effect on adolescents’ ability to initiate offline friendships via increased online opportunities to communicate with a variety of people and opportunities for
intimate self-disclosure. In Deepti’s case, self-disclosure appears to be more relevant, while for Sakoori, her networking with a variety of online friends may be more critical. In fact, in Koutamanis’ and colleagues’ (2013) study, their findings support the hypothesis that having a variety of communication online partners for experimentation and social skill practice is the critical ingredient to growing offline social competence.

Another angle that we may take to view the self-concept dichotomy between online and offline settings is that of “unity versus multiplicity” of identities. Participants constructed strong role online identities, but associated with shyness in their offline settings as a perceived weakness. This contrast is presented in the third assertion of the Quintain: “Adolescents constructed a shy self-concept through identifying personal deficits in relation to societal referential standards, and concurrently constructed role identities that put themselves in positions of strength.” To explain the multiplicity of identities, Raggatt (2006) offers a Bakhtinian notion of dialogical identities constructed through attachments: people, objects or events are constructed in narratives as landmarks when an individual interacts with and appropriates meaning from the host culture, thus developing attachments to these landmarks that become increasingly reflexive.

Participants’ narratives had such conflicting landmarks or attachments, for instance, attachments to events that internalized their cultural perceptions of shyness on one hand and attachments to their close online friends on the other hand. The attachments to these friends surfaced as they narrated their positive role identities (e.g., Bernice’s non-judgmental advocacy against discrimination, Emily’s role as an emotional support for Olive). While this contrast could be seen as a means of using a meta-structure to cohere positions of strength and weakness within their overall self-concept (Bruner, 1997), the construction of strong role identities could also be interpreted as a dialogical response to adopting the culturally-produced position of a “shy
adolescent” that had been reflexively internalized as a societal position of inferiority. With these multiple views of the self, narrative identity could be “more like a cacophony of competing interests or warring historians than it is like a nucleus with a single voice” (Raggatt, 2006, p. 32). Participants thus seem to have constructed conflicting self-presentations rather than a single integrated identity.

Adolescent Development through Relationships

Broadening the focus from individual narratives to examine the whole set of six narratives, we may find certain developmental patterns on the growing importance of an adolescent’s ability to form close intimate friendships. Friendship intimacy may be important across various ages; however, it appears to be particularly important for the socio-emotional adjustment of older adolescents in more mature forms of close relationships (Buhrmester, 1990). Hence, the need for close intimate friendships at an older age has been found to influence the patterns of online interaction. For instance, Koutamanis and colleagues (2013) found that younger adolescents communicated online more often with a diverse range of people from various cultural backgrounds, while older adolescents more often engaged in intimate self-disclosure through instant messaging. This communication pattern of younger adolescents interacting online with a variety of people has been hypothesised to be a means of identity experimentation and social skills development (Valkenburg, Schouten & Peter, 2005; Valkenburg & Peter, 2008).

Such a pattern also seems to emerge from the present study. At the time of this study, three participants were middle adolescents aged 14 to 15 (Bernice, Cherise, and Sakoori), while the other three were late adolescents aged 17 to 18 (Alice, Deepti, and Emily). Bernice and Sakoori mentioned making many other online friends besides the main close friend featured in
the narrative; Bernice highlighted the cross-cultural nature of her online friendships and Sakoori alluded to identity exploration through referencing it as her “second life”. Alice, Deepti, and Cherise, on the other hand, focused more on the intensity or regularity of their reciprocal self-disclosure with one online friend, which contributed to the development of friendship intimacy (Reis & Shaver, 1988). Emily, too, expressed a desire for an intimate reciprocal friendship.

Another inter-related developmental pattern regarding the aspect of affiliation may provide further support for these differences in interaction patterns: early and middle adolescents (compared to late adolescents) tend to place more importance on conformity, social status, and affiliation to popular groups (Gavin & Furman, 1989). It has been theorized that the importance of group membership decreases for late adolescents as they find their needs in dyadic relationships. In addition, as adolescents mature, their desire for conformity decreases as they are better able to balance closeness and individuality as a sign of adaptation and development (Shulman, Laursen, Kalman, & Karpovsky, 1997).

In this present study, it was apparent that the younger participants (Bernice and Sakoori) took the initiative to seek out many online friends, most likely in response to a lack of a belonging in offline peer groups (e.g., Bernice’s lack of peers in her home-schooling situation; Sakoori’s feeling like a misfit). The other participants, on the other hand, were not active initiators of relationships, but were typically “found” by their online partners (e.g., Alice receiving an “ask” from Terri on Tumblr; Cherise posting a question on Ask.com and receiving a response from Ray; Deepti receiving her first message from Pasha). Although, age-wise, Cherise belongs to the younger group, her metaphorical self-presentation suggests cognitive maturation, which is required for a developed form of intimacy that balances one’s intimacy needs with autonomy and individuality (Selman, 1990, as cited in Shulman, et. al., 1997). This may explain
why her intimacy needs appear more similar to that of the older adolescents, in that she had less concern with making multiple online friends than with deepening one online friendship.

Despite varying intimacy and affiliation needs across the six participants, all of them were consistent in their need for homophily or the selection of similar peers (Brown & Larson, 2009). Participants cited their appreciation of connecting with online peers of similar interests (e.g., Sakoori’s anime passion), similar background (e.g., Deepti’s South Asian cultural background), or similar past experiences (e.g., Alice’s experience of depression and self-harm). The narratives also describe how participants felt validated and accepted by their online friends, as their values aligned or they had comparable perspectives on life. This connection set the foundation for more frequent communication and mutual socialization through sustained interaction (Brown & Larson, 2009). Their stories thus collectively illustrate how trust, intimacy, affiliation or commonality, and reciprocity in supportiveness are some of the key ingredients to friendship quality and psychosocial well-being (Bukowski, Newcomb, & Hoza, 1987; Hartup, 1992; Hartup & Steven, 1997).

Trust was a theme that stood out across the friendship narratives, and as such, appears in two of the Quintain assertions: “Adolescents constructed a reticent identity through enacting a generalized worldview of an untrustworthy social environment, due to experiences of broken trust or perceived rejection” (assertion one); “Trust, as a main factor in overcoming the fear of self-disclosure, was more easily established in online autonomous dyadic interactions than in offline settings where group structures and norms limited the freedom to be themselves” (assertion four). These two assertions jointly highlight the significance of the perceived trustworthiness of the other in enabling a shy person to overcome their fear in social interactions and relationships. In Cherise’s and Sakoori’s narratives, their sense of broken trust and betrayal
were in the context of past friendships or peer relationships. As friendships are connected to one’s sense of self, in that one comes to know oneself through interactions with friends, difficult friendships have been proposed to produce ontological insecurity (Smart, Davies, Heaphy, & Mason, 2012).

In a similar vein, Buote, Wood, and Pratt (2009) point out the influence of insecure attachment styles on online and offline friendship patterns, bringing to the forefront the predictive nature of initial parental attachment on subsequent friendship attachment. This insecure attachment style relates to the second assertion of the Quintain: “Adolescents presented a self-concept of diffidence and insecurity through recounting childhood experiences that undermined their development of competence and autonomy”. Implicit in a fearful insecure attachment style is the internal working model that others are untrustworthy or rejecting and that the self is unworthy of love and support. Such twin motifs of fear of others and a lack of self-worth were replete in the narratives.

*Online Affordances of Communication*

As much as fear and insecurity were consistent in the narratives, themes of freedom and trust were apparent too. One aspect of this “freedom” could be attributed to how the online setting facilitated dyadic interactions, as highlighted in assertion four of the Quintain: “Trust, as a main factor in overcoming the fear of self-disclosure, was more easily established in online autonomous dyadic interactions than in offline settings where group structures and norms limited the freedom to be themselves”. That is, the presence of cliques and societal standards of beauty or sociability were less palpable through online interaction platforms such as mobile texting and instant messaging, thereby reducing the barriers to talking by limiting its audio-visual features. This likely helped to focus the attention on the content of the dyadic interaction instead. For the
participants with greater intimacy needs, they chose to interact on these private messaging platforms that are generally preferred for relationship-building purposes compared to the more public aspects of social networking platforms that inadvertently promote social comparisons of appearance and activities (Haferkamp & Kramer, 2011; Quan-haase & Young, 2010). As online opportunities for peer affiliation and self-expression seem especially important for ethnic, racial, and sexual minority adolescents (Shapiro & Margolin, 2014), it is not surprising that these online psychosocial benefits extend to those who experience marginalization from being shy.

Another related aspect of the “freedom” to be oneself is possibly linked to the nature of self-disclosure when interacting on a private platform. As seen in Cherise’s interaction with Ray, the migration from a public forum page to instant messaging on Skype facilitated the sharing of personal details about her parents’ separation. According to Reis and Shaver’s (1988) interpersonal process model of intimacy, this self-disclosure of personal information and feelings (rather than factual content) promotes a sense of connectedness over a course of interactions. Equally important in the model is the perception of the partner’s responsiveness to the sharing, which helps one feel understood or validated. This perception of being understood and accepted was a common theme among the narratives that focused on dyadic interactions. Thus, the attention and response that someone provides in an on-going instant messaging interaction could particularly enable one to feel validated and to overcome the fear of personal self-disclosure.

The fifth assertion of the Quintain elaborates on the process by which one overcomes this fear: “Online affordances built social competence by providing a scaffold for overcoming the fear of self-disclosure and replicating offline social practices which accelerated intimacy development.” In Alice’s and Cherise’s examples, the process of building trust with their online partner began with being noticed by Terri and Ray, respectively. The first contacts were made in
the context of audio-visual semi-anonymity (on Tumblr or Ask.com) that gave a sense of trust and safety (Green, 2007; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). Subsequently, it was the scaffold of concurrent texting with the webcam that provided a bridge between the psychological safety of text-based interaction to cross over to the daunting task of verbal sharing through the webcam. This scaffold helped them overcome the fear of vocalizing their thoughts, which more closely resembled an offline face-to-face interaction.

Brunet and Schmidt (2004) had found a similar context-specific shyness that was linked to the presence of evaluative audio-visual cues (e.g., being seen or heard) through a live webcam interaction. Their study was carried out in a lab setting where timed interaction with a stranger was limited to a ten-minute free chat, in which the presence of the live webcam moderated the negative correlation between self-reported shyness and frequency of personal self-disclosure. The present study corroborates this with narrative evidence, but further suggests that shy adolescents can overcome their initial fear and inhibition in online interactions that employ audio-visual cues (e.g., webcam), as trust is built up over longer periods of interaction.

The fifth Quintain assertion also proposes that online affordances replicate offline social practices and accelerate intimacy development. Sheldon’s (2013) study highlights an aspect of how online interactions resemble face-to-face interactions: shyness remains a predictor of self-disclosure in close friendships for both online and offline settings. In other words, there is a similar pattern in both types of settings, where shy adolescents self-disclose less (in breadth and depth) to their close friends as compared to their peers who are not as shy. The current study verifies the anxieties that shy adolescents face, even in the initial phases of online texting, and captures a snapshot of the kinds of online interactional processes that they may need to go through in order to build self-confidence. The online environment does not immediately
eradicate the fear of self-disclosure, but the online setting can provide scaffolds for online communication as previously mentioned. Thus, a compensatory model of online communication may still hold when examine how the online setting promotes intimacy development more readily than the offline setting for these shy individuals.

To understand this comparison, we may explore Walther’s (1996) idea of “hyperpersonal communication”, defined to be online communication that “surpassed the level of affection and emotion of parallel face-to-face communication” (p 17). Henderson and Gilding (2004) studied hyperpersonal communication in online friendships, proposing the following sources of online trust: reputation of the person; performance of online communication; pre-commitment through self-disclosure (which encourages subsequent reciprocal self-disclosure); and situational factors such as social-cultural importance placed on personal networks.

These features shed some light on why intimacy development may seem to be accelerated in an online environment. Alice’s narrative provides a case-in-point. When Terri first initiated contact, Alice was able to visit Terri’s Tumblr page for a preliminary evaluation of her online reputation and to ascertain how much Terri might empathise with her struggles. Alice was then able to tentatively test the interactions that were initiated by Terri, with Terri’s initial self-disclosure encouraging Alice to increase her commitment to self-disclose intimate details. This example highlights both aspects of performance and pre-commitment in Henderson and Gilding’s (2004) model. Such a progression would not have been as accessible or quick in the offline setting for Alice. As self-disclosure is mutually reinforced by the closeness of the online friendship, Alice’s experience is an archetype of how once trust is established, the increased frequency and depth of online interaction may accelerate the development of intimacy.
Limitations and Future Research

One of the main limitations of this study was the self-selection bias of the sample. Although the 50 individuals who had emailed interest through the recruitment process comprised both males and females, my limit of choosing the first six participants who met the criteria resulted in an all-female sample. The resulting gender bias could be circumstantial evidence that corroborates the view that females tend to seek intimate disclosure in friendships at earlier ages compared to males (Buhrmester & Furman, 1987; Valkenburg, Sumter, & Peter, 2011). In fact, this gender-based self-selection bias could have been reinforced by the research design on two counts. First, participation in this research required the self-disclosure of thoughts and feelings about friendship experiences; females, compared to males, might have been more willing to engage in that level of personal self-disclosure for the study. Second, more females than males might have had close friendships developed online over a longer period of time as they sought to do so at an earlier age, making them more suitable to be participants for my research.

Alternatively, the gender bias could have been influenced by how the study had inadvertently skewed the focus of close friendship development through the use of the term “online communication” in one of the recruitment advertisement questions (“Have you grown closer to at least one non-romantic friend through online communication?”). For males who had only associated “online communication” with self-disclosure, but may have had experienced close friendships through other means, such as companionship through online gaming, they may have interpreted the study to be less relevant to their personal experiences. It would thus be interesting to conduct further research on male adolescents’ perspectives of how online interactions in varied forms have contributed to their close friendship development and their identity construction.
In terms of methodology, the narrative approach may have some inherent limitations in that participants chose what to present in the co-construction of knowledge with the interviewer. The reality of the co-construction is valid, and subjectivity in itself is not a limitation, as it squares with the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of social constructionism. However, the constructed reality may be limiting in that participants may have chosen not to reveal certain thoughts and feelings, as they could have been inhibited in the interview context due to a social desirability bias or a perception of certain expectations surrounding the topic of close online relationships. Thus, participants could have nuanced their stories in ways that may not have reflected certain aspects of their experiences that held true for them.

My contributions and interpretations as a researcher could also present certain partiality, surfacing from my past experiences of interacting with shy adolescents and even previously identifying as a shy adolescent myself. Although I had recorded reflexive memos of how I might personally identify with certain participants, other biases may have unknowingly influenced the analysis. Despite efforts to improve the trustworthiness of the data and findings through a process of member checks, participants could have had a tendency to defer to my interpretations, due to a possible unspoken assumption of a knowledge or expertise hierarchy between an adolescent participant and an adult researcher. In addition, due to concurrent work demands as I returned to Singapore to resume full-time work after the period of data-collection, the process of analyzing the six narratives spanned over almost a year. Due to time constraints, member checks were carried out via email instead of an online interview. This presented a potential limitation, as participants seemed to be less interested in scrutinizing the analysis sent to them for member checks, given the substantial span of time that had lapsed.
Nevertheless, the narratives in this study have collectively provided some insights into participants’ close friendship experiences in online and offline settings. The findings surfaced how self-identified shy adolescents kept their online role identities distinct from their offline relationships, with two participants alluding to some possible change in their self-acceptance and self-confidence. A possible thread of investigation for future research includes a longitudinal study examining the mediating role of the self-concept in how online social competence may impact subsequent offline relationships. The different configurations of building online social competence through one main interaction partner versus that through a large social network could have differential impact on self-concept and this would be an interesting addition to investigate. However, a timeframe that goes beyond a year may be required, which should take into consideration the U-shaped developmental pattern of self-concept change from early to late adolescence (Shapka & Keating, 2005). As participants in this study presented shy identities that were mainly contextualized to the offline setting, further studies could also be carried out to determine how much one’s well-being is contingent on the need for self-concept unity across online and offline settings, or contingent on self-acceptance of one’s shyness in offline settings.

A final proposed line of research follows from the finding that the online setting may provide scaffolds for building online social competence and accelerate intimacy development. Larger scale research could expand on the social compensation theory by investigating, in more fine-tuned details, the difficulties that shy adolescents have in offline friendships, as well as specific mechanisms by which the online setting provides scaffolds that enable shy adolescents to overcome their difficulties. For instance, this study pointed out that the online mode of communication did not immediately eradicate the fear of self-disclosure, but the initial element of experiencing another person initiate contact helped to break the ice. Thus, an investigation
into the finer details of online interaction could contribute to a model of how shy adolescents could build online social competence and improve the quality of friendship experiences.

**Educational Implications and Recommendations**

The Quintain assertions may be categorized into two main clusters of ideas depicting the dichotomy of online and offline identities. First, adolescents’ offline shy identities were constructed through past experiences of rejection and insecurity, which perpetuated a distrusting worldview. The shy identities and were reinforced by prevailing societal referential standards of beauty and normality. Second, adolescents’ strong online role identities were constructed through online scaffolds of self-disclosure in dyadic interactions, which facilitated the overcoming of fear and the building of trust and intimacy. In this subsection, I frame and present some educational implications and recommendations around these two clusters, extending the educational aspect to include any professional work on adolescents’ psychosocial development.

*Adolescents’ Offline Shy Identities and Past Experiences*

For all participants in the study, without exception, there was the repeated refrain of past negative childhood experiences that had shaped an instinctive distrust or fear of others, and thereby positioned them in a guarded mode of reticence in offline settings. Shy adolescents may need to be engaged (through online means, which will be elaborated on under the next header) to share about their past experiences with peers and family, in order to surface potential traumatic antecedents to their shy self-concept. Therapeutic interventions may be required to address any post-trauma for more serious cases of betrayal, such as Alice’s sexual assault, particularly as depression and self-harm may be comorbid expressions of psychological distress.

Given cultural influences on parenting styles, certain ethnic profiles of adolescents may be more at risk of perfectionism and high expectations as well as low self-worth and self-
efficacy, such as in Sakoori’s and Emily’s case. Their parental upbringing contributed to a growing sense of incompetence, which was reinforced when they made social comparisons with their peers. To employ a more upstream approach, early intervention measures could be considered at elementary school, which could incorporate a parental education component on how parents can build their children’s competence and autonomy. Ryan and Deci (2000) established that three psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness, form the basis of growth, social development, and personal well-being. In the instance that the family environment undermines such growth, the school could have a compensatory role of intentionally fostering relatedness and stable childhood friendships, promoting competence through instructional modalities that scaffold experiences of success, and encouraging autonomy and a student voice in decisions.

The period of early adolescence appears to be a vulnerable period as Cherise highlighted the insecurities she experienced during the transition from elementary to junior high school. Greater emphasis should be paid to strengthening peer relationships and social skills. This is particularly important for the transitional age group as there is a sharp increase for girls to seek out more intimate self-disclosure friendships during pre-adolescence and early adolescence (aged 10-13 years) before stabilizing in middle and late adolescence (Valkenburg, Sumter, & Peter, 2011). Equipping adolescents who lack the social competence with communication skills and providing real-life opportunities to practise in a safe and structured classroom environment could go a long way in mitigating the insecurities that shy adolescents may feel. Like Deepti and Bernice, adolescents who did not have sufficient or stable childhood socialization experiences would benefit from such intentional efforts in school.
**Adolescents' Strong Online Role Identities and Scaffolds of Self-Disclosure**

While schools may carry out upstream approaches of building social competence through social skills, this study points out a key consideration of concurrently tapping on online affordances to complement face-to-face intervention efforts to reach out to shy adolescents. One possible concurrent use of online communication is in the context of scaffolding clinical counselling efforts for shy adolescents through online means, by first building trust through instant messaging without any evaluative face-voice cues and allowing gradual exposure to these cues that are common in face-to-face interactions (Brunet & Schmidt, 2007). The social skills that are developed through the scaffold can potentially be generalized to face-to-face offline interactions. A blended approach could also be employed for the peer support of shy pre-adolescents and adolescents who are at risk of social isolation or social disconnectedness (Grieve et. al., 2013). From examples like Alice’s case, it was apparent that the close online interaction encouraged subsequent close offline interaction with the same friend. Hence, a strategy of first using online platforms to establish and develop friendships can be blended with structured offline face-to-face relationship-building activities. This also provides a context for adolescents to rehearse online self-disclosure before engaging in greater offline self-disclosure (Valkenburg, Sumter, & Peter, 2011).

Intentional and structured peer support may again be especially important for the transition from elementary to junior high school as they broaden their connectedness to other general peers in class and the larger school body. As Berndt (2004) noted, “having supportive friendships may help students make positive contacts with other classmates. Those positive contacts may lead to positive relationships that are not as close as best friendships but that still enhance the students’ social adjustment in the world of peers” (p. 216). These high quality and
stable friendships have been found to help psychosocial adjustments during school transitions. To build a community of positive relationships in the school setting, we could also distill success elements of positive online friendship development experiences and explore applying them in the offline setting: for instance, encouraging students to notice and make friends with shy adolescents, valuing each person beyond the appearance, and seeking commonalities in spite of differences in views. These could collectively contribute to an establishment of an inclusive and respectful school culture of care that is important for the psychosocial adjustment and well-being of students who may perceive their shyness as a liability.

**Conclusion**

In this narrative study, I have endeavoured to retain the authenticity of each participant’s voice, while collectively gleaning insights across the Quintain (the phenomenon of self-identified shy adolescents’ identity construction through close friendships in online and offline settings). As participants have constructed their identities in relation to their environment, their shy identities appear to be contextualized mainly to the offline setting, yet strong role identities have been built around their positive online dyadic interactions. This dichotomy appears to arise from a distrust of the offline social environment, and contrasting positive experiences of harnessing online scaffolds that enabled them to overcome their fears of self-disclosure, thereby facilitating intimacy development. The study has also shown some preliminary hints of how there could be an interplay of online social competence influencing subsequent offline social interactions via affective components of self-confidence and self-acceptance. It is my hope that this study will help to stimulate and broaden our thinking about shy adolescents’ experiences and development, in ways that bear testimony to the complexities surrounding identity construction in relation to their past experiences and their present contexts that span online and offline settings.
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Appendix A. Online Recruitment Advertisements

Advertisements with limited space (e.g., Facebook, Google)

Are you a shy teen?
http://www.shyteenfriendshipstudy.blogspot.ca

Looking for participants:
online research study on
shy adolescents’ close
friendship experiences.
Share your stories!

Created blog (http://www.shyteenfriendshipstudy.blogspot.ca) providing more information

A research study on shy adolescents’ close friendship experiences in online and offline settings. We would like to know your unique stories of friendship what it means to identify as shy. Calling interested participants!

Recruitment/Advertisement for the Study

a. Are you 14 to 18 years old?
b. Would you describe yourself as shy in general (non-romantic) social situations?
c. Have you grown closer to at least one non-romantic friend through online communication (it does not matter if you first met this person online or offline, as long as the Internet helped you develop a close friendship)?
d. Are you currently living in Canada or the US and have lived there for at least one year?
e. Are you comfortable with communicating in the English language?
f. Do you have Internet access and the technology for online messaging (e.g., Skype, MSN Messenger, Yahoo! Messenger) in a private environment?

If you are responding yes, yes, yes, yes, yes to these questions, come be a participant in an online study on shy adolescents’ friendship experiences!

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and confidential. The total time commitment we are anticipating is between 2 to 3 hours, spread out over two online interviews and email correspondences.

Email jaetan@mail.ubc.ca for more information 😊

Joanna Tan
Graduate student
University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada
A research study on shy adolescents’ close friendship experiences in online and offline settings. We would like to know your unique stories of friendship and what it means to identify as shy. Calling interested participants!

If you are responding yes, yes, yes, yes to these questions, come be a participant in an online study on shy adolescents’ friendship experiences.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and confidential. The total time commitment we are anticipating is between 2 to 3 hours, spread out over two online interviews (through online messaging, no videos) and email correspondences.

Email jaetae@mail.ubc.ca for more information :)

Joanna Tan
Graduate student
University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada
Appendix B. Participant’s Assent and Parent/ Guardian’s Consent Forms

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education
The University of British Columbia
Faculty of Education
2125 Main Mall
Vancouver BC Canada V6T 1Z4
Tel 604-822-0242 Fax 604-822-3302
www.ecps.educ.ubc.ca

RE: RECRUITMENT/ADVERTISEMENT FOR STUDY ON SHY ADOLESCENTS’ FRIENDSHIP EXPERIENCES (EMAIL)

My name is Joanna Tan and I am a Master of Arts student at the University of British Columbia. Thank you for replying to the advertisement on http://www.shyteenfriendshipstudy.blogspot.ca regarding the study, titled “Contextual Identities: Narratives of Self-identified Shy Adolescents’ Close Friendship Experiences in Online and Offline Settings”.

The purpose of the study is to ask you to help us, as people who work with teenagers, to better understand how your friendship experiences in both online and offline environments impact the way you think and feel about yourselves. We are interested in hearing your story of at least one close friendship that has developed through online communication, and any other friendship experiences in online and offline environments.

To be suitable for the study, you must meet the following requirements:

a) You are 14 to 18 years old;

b) You describe yourself as shy in general (non-romantic) social situations;

c) You have at least one non-romantic friendship which grew through online communication (it does not matter if you first met this person online or offline, as long as the Internet helped you develop a close friendship);

d) You are currently living in Canada or the United States and have lived there for at least one year;

e) You are comfortable with communicating in the English language; and

f) You have Internet access and the technology for online messaging (e.g., Skype, MSN Messenger, Yahoo! Messenger) in a private environment.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and confidential. The total expected time commitment is between 2 to 3 hours, spread out over two online interviews and email correspondences. If you meet the above criteria and are interested in participating, please read the attached information for participants; provide your parent’s/guardian’s contact (email or mailing address) as soon as possible, so I may send the parent/guardian’s consent form to him/her (I have also attached it in this email, for you to view); and return the participant’s assent form within 3 weeks of receiving this information.

Please email me your parent’s/guardian’s contact, as well as the assent form at jaetea@mail.ubc.ca. Do contact me with any questions you may have. If you know others who
might be interested in participating, please send this email and the attached files to them. Thank you for your interest in this study!

Sincerely,
Joanna Tan
PARTICIPANT INFORMATION AND ASSENT FORM

Title of Study – Contextual Identities: Narratives of Self-identified Shy Adolescents’ Close Friendship Experiences in Online and Offline Settings

Principal Investigator: Dr. Jennifer Shapka, Associate Professor, University of British Columbia, Department of Education and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education

Co-Investigator: Joanna Tan, Master of Arts Graduate Student, University of British Columbia, Department of Education and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education

Invitation to Participate
You are invited to participate in this study because you have identified yourself as a shy adolescent and have met the requirements listed in the accompanying email. The study is a project of Joanna Tan, a graduate student at UBC. She will be supervised by Dr. Jennifer Shapka at UBC. If you have any questions regarding this study, you can email us at jennifer.shapka@ubc.ca or jaetea@mail.ubc.ca, or call us at 604-822-5253.

Why is this study being done?
More and more adolescents are connected to the Internet on a daily basis. However, little is known about the friendship experiences of adolescents across both online and offline settings and how these may impact thoughts and feelings about the self. The study is especially interested in the experiences of adolescents who identify as shy.

What am I being asked to do?
Your participation in this study will take place entirely through online communication: via email and an agreed online messaging program which is freely accessible to both Joanna and yourself (e.g., Skype, MSN Messenger, Yahoo! Messenger). You will need to have access to the Internet in a private and comfortable environment. A web camera is not required as communication will be carried out via the messaging system rather than a video conference. The following forms of online communication will be involved for the study:

Pre-interview. An initial online conversation, lasting approximately 20 minutes, will be carried out for introductions between Joanna and yourself, and to address any questions you may have. The main interview will be scheduled for another day, at most a week from this pre-interview.
Main interview. The main interview will last approximately 80 minutes in total. You will be required to share your thoughts and feelings about yourself, friendships in online and offline settings, as well as a story of your close non-romantic friendship that developed through online communication.

Follow-up email communication. After the main interview, Joanna will email an interview summary in the form of a narrative (story) for your feedback. If required, a post-interview may need to be carried out to clarify specific points that were shared during the main interview. An analysis of themes from your narrative will also be emailed to you for any feedback. This may take 30 to 60 minutes of your time.

Are there any risks?
There are no known physical or social risks associated with being involved in this study. Depending on your own friendship experiences, there may be an emotional risk of revisiting unpleasant memories, although the focus of the research is on close friendships. You will be asked questions regarding your thoughts and feelings about yourself and experiences of friendships. You will have the right to refuse to answer any questions and to withdraw any information you do not wish to be included in the study. If you feel uncomfortable or upset as a result of the interview, you may talk to someone you trust or refer to the last page for a list of possible online and phone support for youth in Canada or the United States.

Are there any benefits?
There is no direct benefit to participating in this study, although having the opportunity to reflect on your experiences and tell your story may be helpful for understanding yourself better. By helping us understand your perspectives, the information that comes from this study will benefit teachers and adults who are working with shy adolescents in online and offline settings.

Will I be paid to participate?
You will not be paid to participate in this study. If you choose to participate, you will be offered an online gift card of your choice, worth $20.00 in Canadian dollars as a token of appreciation. You will still receive this gift card if you decide to withdraw before completing the study.

Will there be any costs to me in this study?
You will need access to the Internet and a computer with an installed online messaging program (e.g., Skype, MSN Messenger). There are no other costs involved.

What will happen to my personal information?
All information you provide will be kept confidential unless you specify through email that you want to be identified in the study report. The only time that Joanna may be legally required to break confidentiality is if you share any information of being abused, neglected or in physical danger. All identifying information (that is, information that can identify who you are, such as name, location, etc., from the pre-interview and the consent forms) will be kept separate from the main interview data in different password-protected electronic folders. The only person who will have access to both your identifying information and main interview data will be Joanna. The thesis supervisor and committee for Joanna will read your story but will not know who you are. Pseudonyms (false names) and modified information from the pre-interview will be used during
the study and when reporting the completed study in Joanna’s thesis and future journals or conference presentations. Communication through emails and online messaging programs will be immediately transferred into electronic files (e.g., in .doc or .pdf format) and deleted from the original email or messaging program. All electronic files will be stored in password-protected folders in secure computers or a USB portable drive that is kept in locked filing cabinets at the University of British Columbia. These files will be permanently deleted after five years.

**Can I end my participation early?**
You are free to withdraw from this study at any point in time by emailing your decision to Joanna. You may stop an interview at any time or you may choose to answer only certain questions. If you do withdraw, you will be asked whether or not you give permission to use the information and interviews collected to that point in time.

**If I have questions or concerns, who should I contact?**
If you have any questions or desire further information regarding this study, you may contact Dr. Jennifer Shapka at jennifer.shapka@ubc.ca or 604-822-5253. You may also contact Joanna Tan at jaetea@mail.ubc.ca. Furthermore, if you have any concerns about treatment or rights as a research subject, you may contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at 604-822-8598 or RSIL@ors.ubc.ca.

**Please return the next page within 3 weeks of receiving this information if you wish to participate in this study.**

You may email a scanned/ digitally photographed signed copy OR reply with an email text copying all the words in the assent form to jaetea@mail.ubc.ca. **
PARTICIPANT ASSENT FORM

Title of Study: Contextual Identities: Narratives of Self-identified Shy Adolescents’ Close Friendship Experiences in Online and Offline Settings

Principal Investigator: Dr. Jennifer Shapka, Associate Professor, University of British Columbia, Department of Education and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education (Email: jennifer.shapka@ubc.ca; phone: 604-822-5253)

Co-Investigator: Joanna Tan, Master of Arts Graduate Student, University of British Columbia, Department of Education and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education (Email: jaetea@mail.ubc.ca)

Participant’s Assent: I have read the information letter. I understand that my assent to participation in this study is entirely voluntary, meaning that I have a choice. I may choose not to participate or may withdraw from the study at any time by emailing my decision to do so without any negative consequences. By participating in this study, I do not give up any legal rights.

My signature below indicates that (1) I agree to participate in this study, and (2) I have received a copy of this assent form for my own records.

Name (please print in block letters): ________________________________________________

Preferred email address: __________________________________________________________

Preferred online messaging program (e.g. Skype, MSN Messenger): ____________________

_________________________________________  ______________________________
Signature                                      Date
Possible online and phone support for youth

In Canada
Kids Help Phone (www.kidshelpphone.ca/Teens/Home.aspx) provides online forums for various topics, live chat, and phone support at 1.800.668.6868 (toll-free).
Youth in BC (www.youthinbc.com) provides online live chat and phone support at 604.872.3311 (for the Lower Mainland of British Columbia) or 1.866.661.3311 (toll-free).

In the United States
Teen Line (www.teenlineonline.org) provides online forums for various topics, texting, and phone support at 1.310.855.4673 or 1.800.852.8336 (toll-free for California).
Lifeline Crisis Chat (www.crisischat.org/chat) provides online live chat for various topics regardless of urgency. A toll-free crisis hotline at 1.800.273.8255 may be more suitable for urgent support.

More resources and contact numbers may be found at the following sites:
http://mindyourmind.ca/help/where-to-call
RE: RECRUITMENT OF CHILD/WARD FOR STUDY ON SHY ADOLESCENTS’ FRIENDSHIP EXPERIENCES (EMAIL)

Dear Parent/Guardian,

My name is Joanna Tan and I am a Master of Arts student at the University of British Columbia at the Department of Education and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education.

Your child has been invited to participate in a research study about his or her friendship experiences in online and offline settings. He or she may have responded to an advertisement on http://www.shyteenfriendshipstudy.blogspot.ca.

Please take some time to read the information attached about the study, titled “Contextual Identities: Narratives of Self-identified Shy Adolescents’ Close Friendship Experiences in Online and Offline Settings”. This study is being conducted to fulfil the thesis requirement for a Master of Arts degree under the direction of Dr. Jennifer Shapka, Associate Professor in Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education.

Kindly return the consent form at the end of the information file within 3 weeks of receiving this information if you DO NOT wish your child to participate in this study. You may email a scanned/digitally photographed signed copy OR reply with an email text replicating the words in the consent form to jaetea@mail.ubc.ca. If we do not receive it, we will assume your child has permission to participate in this study.

If you have any questions, you can email us at jennifer.shapka@ubc.ca or jaetea@mail.ubc.ca, or call us at 604-822-5253.

Sincerely,
Joanna Tan
Title of Study – Contextual Identities: Narratives of Self-identified Shy Adolescents’ Close Friendship Experiences in Online and Offline Settings

Principal Investigator: Dr. Jennifer Shapka, Associate Professor, University of British Columbia, Department of Education and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education

Co-Investigator: Joanna Tan, Master of Arts Graduate Student, University of British Columbia, Department of Education and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education

Purpose of this work: Adolescents are increasingly connected to the Internet on a daily basis. However, little is known about the friendship experiences of adolescents across both online and offline settings and how these may impact identity construction. In particular, the study aims to explore how adolescents who self-identify as shy may view themselves through these friendship experiences. This study is being conducted to fulfil the thesis requirement for a Master of Arts degree under the direction of Dr. Jennifer Shapka, Associate Professor in Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education. If you have any questions, you can email us at jennifer.shapka@ubc.ca or jaetea@mail.ubc.ca, or call us at 604-822-5253.

Research Procedures: The study will take place entirely through online communication, via email and through an agreed online messaging program which is freely accessible to both Joanna and your child (e.g., Skype, MSN Messenger, Yahoo! Messenger). A web camera is not required as communication will be carried out via the messaging system rather than a video conference. Online communication for the study will take place in the following ways:

Pre-interview. An initial online conversation, lasting approximately 20 minutes, will be carried out for introductions. Joanna will explain the purpose and procedures of the study as well as address any questions your child may have. She will also ask a few questions to obtain demographic data. The main interview will be scheduled for another day, at most a week from this pre-interview.

Main interview. The main interview will last approximately 80 minutes in total. It will consist of semi-structured questions relating to your child’s self-descriptions and views on friendships in online and offline settings, as well as a story of her or his close non-romantic friendship that developed through online communication.
Follow-up email communication. After the main interview, Joanna will email an interview summary in the form of a narrative (story) to your child for his or her feedback. If required, a post-interview may need to be carried out to clarify specific points that were shared during the main interview. An analysis of themes from the narrative will also be emailed to your child for any feedback. This may take 30 to 60 minutes of his or her time.

Confidentiality: We want to make sure your child feels safe to respond as honestly and freely as possible. To ensure this, all information your child provides will be kept confidential unless your child specifies otherwise in email. All identifying information (e.g., demographic data from the pre-interview and the consent forms) will be kept separate from the main interview data in different password-protected electronic folders. The only person who will have access to both your child’s identifying information and interview data will be Joanna. The thesis supervisor and committee for Joanna will read transcripts but will not know who your child is. Pseudonyms and modified information will be used to reference your child during the study and when reporting the completed study in Joanna’s thesis and future journals or conference presentations.

Communication through emails and online messaging programs will be immediately transferred into electronic files (.doc or .pdf format) and deleted from the original program. All electronic files will be stored in password-protected folders in secure computers or a USB portable drive that is kept in locked filing cabinets at the University of British Columbia. These files will be permanently deleted after five years.

Risks and benefits: There are no known physical or social risks associated with being involved in this study. Depending on your child’s friendship experiences, there may be an emotional risk of revisiting unpleasant memories, although the focus of the research is on close friendships. Having the opportunity to reflect on his or her experiences could be beneficial for enhanced self-understanding, in addition to contributing to research that benefits teachers and adults who are working with shy adolescents in online and offline settings.

Remuneration: To express our appreciation for participation in this study, each participant will be offered an online gift card of choice worth CAD$20.00. Your child will receive the gift card independent of them completing or withdrawing from the study.

Questions or concerns: If you have any questions or desire further information with respect to this study, you may contact Dr. Jennifer Shapka at jennifer.shapka@ubc.ca or 604-822-5253. You may also contact Joanna Tan at jaetea@mail.ubc.ca. Furthermore, if you have any concerns about treatment or rights as a research subject, you may contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at 604-822-8598 or RSIL@ors.ubc.ca.

** Please return the next page within 3 weeks of receiving this information if you DO NOT wish your child to participate in this study. You may email a scanned/ digitally photographed signed copy OR reply with an email text replicating the words in the consent form to jaetea@mail.ubc.ca. If we do not receive it, we will assume your child has permission to participate in this study.**
THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education
The University of British Columbia
Faculty of Education
2125 Main Mall
Vancouver BC Canada V6T 1Z4
Tel 604-822-0242 Fax 604-822-3302
www.ecps.educ.ubc.ca

PARENT/GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM

Title of Study – Contextual Identities: Narratives of Self-identified Shy Adolescents’ Close Friendship Experiences in Online and Offline Settings

Principal Investigator: Dr. Jennifer Shapka, Associate Professor, University of British Columbia, Department of Education and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education (Email: jennifer.shapka@ubc.ca; Phone: 604-822-5253)

Co-Investigator: Joanna Tan, Master of Arts Graduate Student, University of British Columbia, Department of Education and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education (Email: jaetea@mail.ubc.ca)

Consent:
Your child’s participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may refuse to have him or her participate in this study by returning this form, or have him or her withdraw from the study at any point by emailing the decision to do so.

Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records and that you DO NOT consent to your child’s participation in the study.

☑ I DO NOT consent to my child’s participation.

Name of Child (please print): ______________________________________________________

Your Name (please print): ______________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________________  __________
Your Signature Date
Appendix C. Interview Guidelines

Pre-interview Script

- Hi! Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study “Contextual Identities: Narratives of Self-identified Shy Adolescents’ Close Friendship Experiences in Online and Offline Settings”. This pre-interview is an opportunity for us to briefly introduce ourselves, for me to explain the study to you, and for you to ask any questions and prepare for the main interview. We should take around 20 minutes for this session.

- Have you read the information provided with the assent form? Do you have any questions regarding that? Remember that you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time by emailing me that you want to do so.

- As we begin communicating over this chat, it will be good for us to respect one another. It is appreciated if we could be open and honest with one another. However, at any point in our interaction, we will type it out if we feel uncomfortable about answering any question. You have the right to refuse to answer any question. And if we need to clarify anything, we will ask one another. Is that alright with you?

- Anything that is shared here will be kept confidential unless you share information about being abused, neglected or in physical danger. In this case, I will need to inform someone about the situation.

- The main interview will make up most of our interaction. It will be broken into 3 sections, but will last a total of around 80 minutes. At that interview I will be asking you to share your thoughts and feelings about yourself and friendships. I will also specifically ask you to share a story about a friendship that has grown through online communication. Do you have someone in mind? Are there any other questions you have regarding the main interview?

- Let me briefly introduce myself. As you know I am Joanna, a student at the University of British Columbia, in Vancouver, Canada. This study is part of my Master’s program, and I hope your participation in it will be meaningful for you. I am 32 years old, and have been in Vancouver for the past 1.5 years, but will be returning to Singapore (where I grew up) after my studies. Do you have anything else you would like to know about me?

- At this beginning stage, I would like to ask you some questions to help me know your background. This information will not be used in my study report to identify you, but it helps me get a general sense of who the participants are. As you know, this is an online study, and I could be getting participants from many different backgrounds.
o How old are you (what month and year were you born in) and what grade level are you in?

o How would you describe your gender?

o What is your racial/ethnic background (e.g. Aboriginal, African, Asian, South Asian, Caucasian, Latin American, Middle Eastern)?

o Which country, state/province and city/town do you live in?

o What country were you born in?

o How would you describe the neighbourhood that you live in (e.g. busy, quiet, etc)?

o Who do you live with most of the time?

o What language(s) are spoken at home?

• Is there anything else you would like to share about your background in terms of your current living environment and history of where you have lived?

• Before we end, there is something I would like you to prepare before we meet the next time for the main interview.

  o Think about your friendship experiences in online settings and in offline settings.

  o You will need to choose any picture or quotes/words to represent 1) friendship experiences in online settings; and 2) friendship experiences in offline settings. The pictures or words you choose could be similar or different.

  o The pictures or words could be from the Internet (e.g., http://www.tumblr.com/tagged/friendship%20quotes), a favourite post on Facebook, or any personal picture/ phrases you are willing to share.

• I would like you to share the pictures or words with me when we next meet. If you can share these in a digital format (e.g. .jpg) with me, that will be great.

• Do you have questions about this?

• [If the main interview has not been scheduled yet] When is a suitable date and time next week for us to meet for the main interview? We will need about 80 minutes.

• Until we next meet, please feel free to email me to clarify anything.
Main Interview Script

(A) Initial prompts

- I appreciate your time for this interview. As I previously shared, there are 3 sections in total, lasting approximately 80 minutes.

- The previous time we met online, I requested for you to prepare pictures or words to represent your online and offline friendship experiences. Do you have them with you? We will refer to them in the last section of the interview.

- Before we begin, I have three points that I share with all the people I am interviewing. Ideally these points will help us in our communication, especially because we are doing this online, rather than face-to-face:

  1. **Silence is ok!**
     
     Please take as much time as you need to respond, and share anything that comes to your mind. If there are long periods of silence, I may ask some additional questions to prompt you. But you can tell me that you need some time to think, or you prefer to talk about something else.

  2. **Details please!**
     
     Since people tend to provide shorter responses through typing rather than speaking. I may ask questions for you to clarify or elaborate on what you shared, but where possible, share as many details as you feel comfortable.

  3. **Type it out!**
     
     If you begin to feel uncomfortable about anything in our communication, please let me know right away. Since I won’t be able to see your facial expression, it is important for you to type it out and let me know! You have the right to refuse to answer any question.

     Also, please let me know if you are confused, do not understand the questions, or need more clarification.

- Everything that you share will be kept confidential for the purpose of the research. In the end, I hope this interview will be a positive and meaningful experience for you.

- Do you have any questions before we begin?
(B) Section 1: Introduction

- So we will spend the first part of the interview talking about thoughts about yourself and friendships in general.

Questions (and follow-up questions):

- How would you describe yourself? Tell me anything about yourself.
  - Can you describe characteristics of yourself related to different areas (e.g., social, emotional, physical characteristics)
  - What makes you say that?
  - Have you always described yourself to be this way?
  - Are there things which people say about you that you agree with? What are they?
  - Are there things which people say about you that you disagree with? What are they?

- You identified yourself as a “shy teen” when you responded to the advertisement for this interview. What does being “shy” mean to you?
  - Why do you identify as a shy adolescent?
  - How does it look like to be shy? What is your behaviour like? What do you say or do?
  - In what situations are you shy?
  - What thoughts do you normally have?
  - How does it feel like?

- What does friendship mean to you?
  - How important are friendships to you?
  - How has friendship changed or stayed the same in general for you over the years?
(C) Section 2: Story of a close friendship

- Now for the next section, we will focus on your story about a close friendship.

- First, think of a close friend (any gender, but preferably someone whom you don’t have any romantic relationship with). This person you choose to talk about should be someone whom you grew closer to through online communication. You may have first met this person online (on the Internet) or offline (off the Internet) – it does not matter.

- Can you give your friend a pseudonym (a false name) to make it easier for us to refer to him or her?

- Now, please tell me a story about your friendship with friend’s name from the time you first met this friend until now.

Further prompts for details:

- What happened?

- And then what happened?

- Were there other people involved?

- What do you mean by ____?

- Can you say more about _____?

- What did you do?

- What did you think about that?

- What was the situation like?

- What was the environment like?

- How did you feel?

- How did that happen?

- How did people around you respond to this?
(D) Section 3: Show-and-Tell

- For the last section, we will turn our attention to the pictures or words that you have prepared. If you have digital files, can you send them to me now?

Questions (and follow-up questions):

- Tell me more about these pictures or words. Why did you choose them to represent your online and offline friendship experiences?
  - How do these make you think about yourself?
  - How do these make you feel about yourself (e.g., happy, proud, sad, disappointed)?
  - Tell me more. Why do you say that?

- Do feel you are the same or different when communicating with friends online compared to offline?
  - Tell me more. Why do you say that?

- Have you learnt anything new about yourself from participating in this study?

- Is there anything else you would like to share that is on your mind?

(E) Ending

- Thank you for your time. It has helped me to understand your thoughts and perspectives through this interaction. To show my appreciation, I would like to offer an online gift card worth $20.00 in Canadian dollars. What type of gift certificate would you like? (e.g., iTunes, Amazon)

- I will be summarizing the interview and putting it into a story or a “narrative”. I will send this narrative to you for your feedback to check that I have captured what you have said adequately. I will compile an overview of the themes I analyze from your story and send this to you for your feedback. So we will communicate via email after this for at least another two more times until the end of my project (which I am targeting to complete by October 2013). But if you have anything to share in between, please feel free to email me. At the end of the study, I will send you the final presentation of my findings for you to keep.
Appendix D. Alice’s Narrative

Alice, a female from Canada, was 17 years old at the time of the interview.

I really like sports and I love animals. I don’t really talk to people much but once I warm up to someone (it usually takes a while) I’m usually fine. I stopped talking a lot around 14 when I was sexually assaulted, and I kind of just shut down from everyone. A few of my online and offline friends say that I was super quiet when I met them and now years later, I won’t be quiet, which I would agree with.

I would describe myself as nervous around other people, and not really wanting to interact. I tend to distance myself from crowds. I don’t really enjoy meeting new people or being introduced, and I don’t enjoy talking. This applies to both online and offline experiences, but it’s a lot easier for me online as I don’t actually have to open my mouth.

To me, friendship means having someone who is always there, who you can laugh with, who you can cry with, who you can tell anything to. You can be yourself around them. Over the past few years I’ve met a few new friends online, and they are always there. We can talk about anything and for the most part we enjoy the same things.

I met Terri, over 2 years ago, on this website called Tumblr. At the time I was struggling with a lot of personal stuff like body image, self-harm and eating disorder and I was very depressed. Terri also had an eating disorder and was depressed, although Terri was not assaulted (Thank goodness). We both connected very quickly. She sent me an "ask" (a private message on Tumblr) asking if I was okay. It felt like someone actually cared about me. It made me feel a lot better with just those simple words. I felt okay for once, like someone was in this with me. And we started to talk about what was going on with the both of us. About a few days later, we gave each other our iMessage on our iPhones and began to text a lot, every day. We understood each other and what we were going through. That was a first for me since I have trouble actually talking to people. We could type to each other perfectly fine.

Terri was the only person I shared about personal stuff I was struggling with. My mom put me in counselling and stuff, but I had a hard time talking to people. Terri was the first. I went to her blog and saw that she was struggling with some of the same things, so it opened it up a bit. I didn't have to talk I could just type. I find it really hard to talk to people for the first time, and when it's typing I don't physically have to do anything which is the hard part. I don't have to open my mouth because it makes me nervous as I don't like people.

With Terri, we both connected right away, so I guess it was instant, but our friendship got a lot closer over about a year. We talked a lot about what was going on with the both of us, and we both had never met someone that was suffering from some of the same things. We talked about what happened with me and for the first time I actually told someone all of what happened.

About a month later we "Facetimed" for the first time, we heard each other’s voices and got to put a face to the name. I would say that this was a significant moment in our friendship. Our first Facetime was super weird! We stared at each other while texting for a long time because we
didn't want to talk, and then we started talking about something really dumb (I don't remember what that was) but we both started laughing and it was the first time I felt like I could talk to someone about anything who wouldn't judge. I just felt like I could talk to her. She understood me; I understood her. We trusted each other and it felt good. We would talk more easily over Facetime gradually but it didn’t take long. We were both super quiet at first and it took us a few months, but a few months later, we could Facetime 24 hours a day and our parents were asking us to be quiet since we were so loud. We talked about everything, and anything. We enjoyed each other and understood each other. The Facetiming and constant messaging never stopped and we still talk all the time today. I would consider Terri my best friend. My friendship with her makes me feel a lot better, that I wasn't alone. I still post on my Tumblr page. My Tumblr is still pretty not okay, but I just almost use it as a journal. The struggles are still there.

For my friends that I know offline, I'm still quiet around them when we are with other people, but when I'm alone with them, I've warmed up. I also have a few friends online that I just text but I'm not as close to anyone as Terri. I don’t think anything helps me warm up to people. It just takes time for me. It takes time to feel like I can trust the person. I don’t really know how I know I can trust someone. It just takes me time and I don't tell anyone a lot at once. In general, I feel a lot better communicating online compared to offline; honestly, it's easier and I feel better.

To me, hanging out with friends online, is like you're close to that person, like you can't touch them but you know they're there. It’s close in a different way from being close to someone in real life where you can physically touch them. Hanging out with friends online makes me feel pretty good, although you're told not to trust people online. And I did, and we get to actually meet which is pretty cool. Having offline friendships is also pretty good because you have the sense that someone is right beside you. My mom told me not to trust people online because I know there are a lot of creeps, and you're not to share personal details. But Terri and I became close and my mom is ok with it. I was Facetiming with her and my mom was like “hi”! It probably helped that my mom could see her, because it could have been anyone. I will actually get to meet Terri. She lives in the US, but my mom is going to visit a friend next month where Terri lives so I get to go and stay with her. As I will be meeting Terri for the first time offline, I'm not sure how I will feel. It's going to be weird.

Postscript from the meeting with Terri:

It went great! It was really weird at first but then we started talking and we were fine! By the end of it we wouldn't shut up. I had a great time and so did she.

It was very different than meeting a friend in person. It was like we waited so long to see each other. However, we had never seen each other before, and we were perfectly comfortable with each other. We enjoy a lot of the same things, so we went swimming a few times, seen a few movies and had a just a few sleepless nights!

Overall it was super awesome, and I don't regret it at all!
Appendix E. Bernice’s Narrative

Bernice, a female from the United States with Canadian-American dual citizenship, was 15 years old at the time of the interview.

I'm kind of short, a bit chunky, but lots of it is from muscles and bones, not being overweight. I am shy to ask things for myself or my family, unless it comes between the safety of something I love, or animals. For animals, if I can ask something to make their lives better, then I will do it. I have the feeling that I need to be strong and provide for myself. It is hard to bring myself to ask for something I want, because to me, it looks like I'm begging like a dog. I will try to go as long as I can without help in school or with anything.

I have learned to hide emotions well. I have said more than once, these two things to myself, the second more recently: 1) why should one love something deeply, the things one loves are snatched away in the blink of an eye, leaving only anger, hurt and scars; 2) no need to be sad, no need to cry, we're just wrung dry. In real life, I can be quite argumentative, and pick an issue to defend, probably because of being German and Irish. I am very stubborn, and have a hard time listening when I should be. If something comes up about the things I love, like French or the oceans, I'm not afraid to speak out. I've gotten myself into plenty of arguments over those two subjects. I love the French language a great deal, and the people are nice. I want to live there. I've always had a love for the language and the people. It is something that is close to my heart for whatever reason. So when I hear someone say something about the French that I don't like or feel is unfair, I take offence and begin to argue. This probably doesn't win me many friends, but I have my own rights to say what I think and stand alone. I've done it many years and probably will still be primarily an island. One gets used to the feeling of being alone.

I am very shy about walking up to someone, even someone I may know fairly well, and starting a conversation. If I must make a phone call and mom or dad won't do it for me, I hem and haw because I feel so shy and it takes a long time to get up the courage to do something like that, unless it is something that is very, very, very, very important. It's kind of hard to describe in words. It feels like being pulled back in your mind. I know people won't bite me most of the time, but still... I'm so awkward about it, insecure I guess. When I was much younger, I was way less awkwardly shy. But as I grew older, I got so many lectures about not monopolizing conversation, or eating most of the food on the table, etc, that I began to not be sure just what I could talk about or do. Simply the best way to do things was to be silent, and kind of remain hidden. I've never had much stage fright though. I love being in front of people. It is mostly one-to-one contact that is difficult. I often wonder what people think of me. I wish I could see myself from someone else’s view. I had a whole graduation for 8th grade that I put together, but after cramming practice into two weeks, I was so exhausted and about ready to collapse that I think I did a poor job, though everyone else thinks I did great. I don't like to offend people. In this way I'm very sensitive. I hate things that slam a person, their culture or religion. I tend to be very sensitive to things other people may see in me, so the less I say the better.

I've had few friends throughout life, and each has been jerked from me – more or less suddenly and never seen or contacted again. When I was in preschool, I had a friend Krystal, but we moved when I was 4, and I haven't seen her since, even though I still go back every summer. I
miss her a lot and wish I could see her again, but we'd probably be so different that we could
never have the same level of friendship. I have so many memories of her. The second friend I
had was Sarah, and I had her through at least 5th grade, but then she moved suddenly, and we
would write some, but we kind of fell off that, and haven't written in at least 2 years. Up until
about the time I was 4, nothing was very stable in my life. From the age of 4, I settled where I
currently am. I was still a very happy child. I really don't think this was too much harshness on
me, until Sarah moved away. It really is kind of a nebulous thing where I changed from being
happy to now. I was more depressed about a year back. The cause was not friendship, but it was
when I was diagnosed with JRA (Juvenile Rheumatoid Arthritis) that I really went through a
change. It was about the beginning of last year. I was starting to have a few issues with
depression and anger, but it was about to get way worse. I was simply devastated with the
diagnosis.

I've never had many friends, but through this time, my best friend in real life, Miss H, helped me
through it all. She's in her late 50's, and she's a teacher for grades 7-10 at the school that is run by
my church. She used to rent a house from us on the other end of our driveway up until last year. I
had known her at least three years prior to this diagnosis, though I had had this problem for much
longer than that. I'm definitely kind of shy, but there are certain people who seem to have a key
to me. Right from the beginning, Miss H was one of those that without too much trouble I could
talk with; but it did take a little while to warm up to her. I'm not the most confident person, but
neither am I very, very quiet all the time. We do things together often. She would often come to
our house for lunch, or we'd spend Sabbath afternoons together, go hiking, play music. (I have a
violin, she a cello.) We often rode our bikes together on weekends when she had the time. Every
Christmas we would go to a concert together. When I need a ride somewhere, and my parents
can't go, I ask her, because she is my first choice.

I've always been homeschooled, which to me had majorly affected my social behavior. I've
always been frustrated with it, because I've been stuck at home, and can't make many friends,
though I travel lots across the US and do have friends all over. But most of them are much older,
because I simply cannot fit in with those my age. It is highly frustrating. I feel like beating my
head up against the wall. Miss H has been just about the only one I have felt comfortable sharing
and opening my heart to and I talk with her often. She is one of the very few I have dared to open
myself and to really love. I cannot always say this about my family especially my mother. Now
that she's even got a Facebook account, I can't type what I feel like typing. I do that on my other
Facebook account. She's not mean, nor abusive. I just don't trust her not to blab to others, or to
lecture me, when that's not what I need. I can't really even discuss boyfriends. I don't have much
of one, but I still call him one. My family loves Miss H lots too. Mom likes to talk with her about
school, my brother about Legos, because she has lots of Legos. We just kind of got to know her
really well. And then before last school year, she decided to find a place to rent closer to town.
So she moved out, and because she's farther away, we don't see her as much.

If I had not had Miss H to talk with, and live for, I would have killed myself. Time to end the
frustration and anger. My grades went almost to zero. She kept me from committing suicide
through this time. Because mom didn't want me to take the medicine that the regular doctor
offered, she took me to a naturopath MD. This was the start of the worst time ever. I'm known to
be allergic to several types of foods, because if I eat them, they will come back up again, most of
the time. One thing you should know is that I love to eat! They tested me for allergies and a bazillion other worthless things. So for three months I had to subtract from my diet things like soy, all gluten, peanuts, oranges, night shades, corn, yeast, and apples. Eating is the biggest activity in my life, next to sleeping. I live for the moments in my life when I can have the pleasure of eating. I was very depressed, and angry. The food I could eat was tasteless, and so limited. Miss H would buy sometimes special treats to celebrate. But the thing I remember most, was when I was nearly done my diet, we went to a garden fair, and she bought a package of gluten free pasta from one of the nearby stores, and gave it to me. It was the awesomest thing I ever ate. When I told her that I was off my diet, we celebrated. I've never seen her get so excited. I sure was excited!!!

Also through this time, I was playing an online game called Ovi-pets. It is an interactive game, with users from all over the world. I would talk with them, and surprisingly, there were many people who had problems too. I quit it this last January, because I got too busy with school. I still correspond with some of my close friends from there. My friendship with Miss H was totally separate from my online friendships. Because I have had few friends, I treasure the real friendships where I can actually say the heart communicated equally or more than the mouth. I didn't have a computer until I was about 10, and the one I had was very old, so I didn't use it much. I got Facebook when I was 13, so that was when I really branched out. By this time I had a nice laptop.

There was one friend on Ovi-pets that I was quite close with, but when I quit the game and moved to Facebook, we were that way for a while, then kind of drifted off. I have a feeling she's a little miffed at one of my other friends. She's one of the special few I invited to my personal Facebook account. I quit the game, because I needed to concentrate on school, so that I can go away to a regular school. The drifting apart had to do with a post. I was just making an observation. She strongly is an evolutionary atheist, and I'm kind of neutral with leanings toward creationism, because that was what I was brought up with, and only knew until I was old enough to explore for myself. I had just watched a program on TV about how evolution and racism were together, so I had made an observation on this. She commented and then another friend of mine commented, and somehow she kind of felt attacked by this other friend. I think it was just a miscommunication error, because what he said could have been taken two ways. It sure would help if one had body language and voice tone on the Internet. She's from the UK. I did not feel like he was attacking her or her statement. However, from that point we kind of drifted apart, though we still chat some. If I think about a friend often, and if we chat a lot then I say we are close together. If we talk about sensitive issues we are close. If I don't think of them often, we don't chat much, or I have the feeling that something is between us, we are drifting apart. If I think of quitting something or leaving them, then I get sad, and can't do it. I would miss them, in real life.

I have a friend from Algeria on a French website. Her name is Saliha. I probably met her maybe two months ago. This online French website has its own in site message system and is a place for those learning French and English, and other languages, and to correspond with people who speak these languages. I do not remember who first messaged whom. I can do instant messaging on the site, but Saliha does not feel comfortable with the private chat room. I respect her wish, but I do this with other friends there. The messages in the letters are filtered, and some are read
my moderators, because it is supposed to be a safe website for kids. Sometimes I get a message that says, “!!o!! waiting for approval- moderator must first read”. This message frustrates me, but I’ve been taught (by my parents, and the older people in my life and at church) to respect rules and guidelines that are in place for my protection, because there are many people online who are out to hurt children. I find if I ignore rules, often I get into worse trouble. Besides if I’m good, then maybe people will like me better.

Saliha speaks reasonable English, and we communicate in this language for the most part, unless she’s teaching me some Arabic. Right now it is Ramadan. She’s 17, so she’s keeping this holiday. She says it is hard. We exchange thoughts and feelings, and our opinions on world view. I tell her about things I do in America and about my religion, and she tells me about being a Muslim. We’ve just kind of drawn closer, because we write often, and think similarly. In the first few letters she asked me what colour I thought people in Algeria were. I answered brown. She says that’s what many people think, but they are white she says. I’ve learned much from her, way more than any history or culture studies book I’ve ever read or had to read. Then a while later, something brought up the topic of racism in my life, and I asked her what her opinion was on the subject. She said what I have long thought, in better words than I could have said, but I kind of had to help her rephrase it in better English, because she wasn’t sure of the exact words. I know metaphors are hard, even for me. She said, "I believe that all people are equal like teeth in a comb". She also teaches me some Arabic, and I learn new things from a cultural view point. It has been fun getting to know a few Arabic speaking people, as you probably know what the majority of opinion is about the whole lot of Arabs. Not all Arabs are wicked. I have really enjoyed her. It is like having a sister over there. We talk just about everything and if I forget to message her or I’m busy, she says, “Oh Hanna, I miss you.” I don’t remind her that she spells my name funny. I just accept that as part of the quirks. We write often, several times a day.

I have 5 quotes that describe what I think about friendships in general. My friend Mr. W (a certified counselor who has his own roofing business) says, “If you can look back on life, 50-60 years from now, and have had at least 3 friends through the good and bad times, you have lived a fulfilled life". I’ve had at least three good friends at the worst times in life, he being one of the more recent. The Bible says, "a person who wants to have friends, must show himself friendly". I believe that if one does not seem approachable, then he will always be alone. A quote I found on the Internet says “The best kind of friend is the kind you can sit on a porch swing with, never say a word, and walk away feeling like it was the best conversation you’ve ever had.” This is true of Miss H. Another Internet quote says “Before you judge my life, my past or my character... walk in my shoes, walk the path I have traveled, live my sorrow, my doubts, my fear, my pain and my laughter! Remember, ‘Judge not lest ye be judged.’ Everyone has their own story! When you’ve lived my life, then you can judge me!” We should never judge a person outwardly, we should make friends with them, and find out why they might act a certain way. In the beginning with Miss H, we all kind of thought her odd and her chin certainly made her look very just simply different. The last Internet quote says “Apologizing does not always mean you are wrong, it just means that you value your relationships more than your ego.” When I feel a blot has come between me and a friend, I try to do everything possible to find out how I can fix the problem, so that I can keep him or her.
I try to be as accommodating to my friends as possible, so that they will like me. I like to help them in any way I can. Online, I am a much more polite person I think, and eager to please, but offline, it varies to my mood. If they want something, I am usually going to try my best to help them, and make their day better. If they feel sad, I try to say something nice, because on my other Facebook account, I have several friends who deal with severe depression. I offer them a ear who listens. Online, I am more so this way. In real life, not quite so much. Online, I will say to my friends, "if you need someone to listen to you, I'm here and available. If I have anything good to say, I will advise you." I've never felt shy about my online friendships. I can say what I want because I probably never will meet these people. In real life, I feel very shy. I don't have the protection of my computer screen. In real life, I feel more shy, even when I'm talking on the phone; but online, I tend to feel a little more secure. I'm on my own ground, people can't see whether I'm ugly or beautiful, whether I'm normal or not. I can just be myself most of the time, not worrying about lectures from parents. I can control what I do when I do and who I write. Online, I have more control over what I do. I can seem to be more at ease; it is more relaxed I like it better. I can detach myself from what I deal with in real life, and forget for a few moments, those precious moments. Offline, I feel I have less control. I feel like I'm standing on a very wobbly piece of ground, or that I may be backed into a corner in a conversation. For Miss H, I’ve never thought so much about the issue of control. We've just simply been able to talk, even silently, just sit next to each other. I don't feel that I have to work to keep my end of the conversation going. She too has her special needs; she's got a deformed chin. Perhaps this is why we feel together.
Appendix F. Cherise’s Narrative

Cherise, a female from the United States, was 14 years old at the time of the interview.

I am quiet and emotionless. I hardly ever show my true emotions; I always have a straight face. I have been like this for a couple of years, starting around 6th grade because I was entering junior high. I think I was scared to be starting something new; like I was afraid I wouldn't be good enough and afraid about being different as well. That was the time when girls started caring about what they looked like and how they dressed. I was afraid of looking and acting different, because I was afraid of the rejection I might get.

I am soft in volume when speaking. Because I talk so little people hardly have anything to say about me. I am somewhat happy about this, because that way I don't have to be nervous about people talking about me. It was so funny earlier in the year, when I came into class with contacts, and they all thought that I never had glasses. And I've been with my class for several years and had glasses.

I think that everyone has some form of shyness and that it develops over time or through an event. Being shy means that you're pretty much Switzerland, you often remain neutral and hide opinions or views that you may have due to fear of some sort. This happens during the school year, at new places, even just going out for a walk. I'm afraid I'll get noticed by other people; I bite my lip often. This goes for both the times when I’m alone and with people. Or I’m afraid that someone else will want to talk to me. Talking to people scares me a bit, because I don't really know who they are, or what they want from me. Even for people I know, I’m a bit scared, because people tend to change, from when they were in 6th grade to when they were in 8th grade.

Friendships are like a garden – there are only a few plants that stand out, while the rest of them are just there, or are of the same plant species. I think that if I have you as a friend you mean so much to me. A friend is someone I can trust with anything; I can tell them anything. I can actually talk to a friend and not be shy. In terms of importance in my life, God is first then it's a tie between friends and family in second. I've known my best friend Nelly since kindergarten and the friendship has stayed the same. I wouldn't really count others as friendships because there is still some part of shyness involved. I’ve known Nelly for 10 years. We’ve always been friends through thick and thin. She's like a sister. I’m not shy with her because she's been with me for so long, she knows how abstract I can be sometimes and how deeply I think about things. I see her pretty much every day, and we hangout all the time at her place. There’s no one else besides God, Nelly and Ray, and I think I have very little trust for others.

I met Ray on ask.com (not ask.fm) around March last year. He answered a question of mine about shyness, and we started talking in the comment section. He was nice and open-minded. He was my age. I had asked why it was so hard to overcome shyness. He said it wasn't a matter of overcoming it, it was just finding the people that best accept it. I first got to know him 3-4 months before my parents’ separation. When my parents got a separation, I was able to talk to him about it and what I felt. He was supportive and kind and caring about the matter, not pressing at all. I told my parents I was talking to someone via ask.com.
We later had to move to Skype because we were talking constantly. We've only video chatted once, we usually just text each other through Skype. He wanted to show me his room, because he lives in another part of the States, and I wanted to show my town. It was fun. His room was a bit messy, he had a lot of cool things, and I could understand him perfectly. I didn’t feel shy in any way. It was one of the best things ever. I felt for once like I didn’t have to worry about rejection because he just always seemed to be willing to help and to talk. Now we communicate over Skype almost every day except for next week because he’ll be away. We don’t video chat as it is easier just to text using my mobile on Skype. We usually talk later in the day, when it's darker out. By texting, you don't have to worry about people bothering you, or trying to steal your mobile.

Online relationships are like playing the piano. When it's just the piano, you don’t have to worry about any other factors bothering you, and you can just play freely, carefree. It makes me feel happy. When I play, it doesn't matter what's going on, it's just me and the piano. I don’t feel shy. I don’t have to worry about anything else. Offline relationships are like the orchestra, where are so many things going on around you that you sometimes just get caught up in all of it, to still have that bit of shyness, because most of the time the piano gets drowned out by the other instruments. I feel like just another person trying to get through life.

When looking back at all my conversations with Ray, it has always been just the piano analogy. I feel like I can be myself, without the secret ridicule of offline relationships. In offline relationships, you can always tell when the other person is holding back something hurtful towards you, like the person is judging you but not telling you what they really think. You are trapped somewhat, you are still shy because there is still a small sense of rejection if you don’t say the right thing or listen to the right group. But in online relationships, it’s a safe haven from offline drama, somewhere where it’s okay to be yourself, and you’re accepted for who you are.
Appendix G. Sakoori’s Narrative

*Sakoori, a female from Canada, was 15 years old at the time of the interview.*

Describing myself is difficult for me because I literally live two lives: an online and offline life. Physically, I guess I have an average body type. I'm pretty tall for someone my age and I never wear makeup or do things with my hair. Offline, I'm a pretty shy person. I get nervous a lot when it comes to oral presentations in school. I don't like to socialize with people in school mainly because our interests are completely different and many are not fond of me being the silent type.

I only have a few close friends in real life because I have trust issues with other people. I think I got this problem when I was younger and I told someone an unimportant secret and the next thing I knew, that person told basically the whole class (the secret was about not having some sort of toy that was popular back then). Shy to me, means I get nervous and I can't really talk or be around people a lot. I'm usually shy during social situations and academic ones too. I don't like to talk with others because I'm scared of being judged for what I like or be backstabbed by someone who I think is my "friend". I guess you could say I am the complete opposite when I'm behind a screen. When I first went online to find people that have the same interests as me, I thought my shyness would transfer over into the words I typed, but I found out that I felt more confident when I was typing than when I was speaking. I became someone I never actually knew. You could say the keyboard was the birth of a second personality or identity. It was about 3 years ago that I began discovering this about myself. Living two lives isn't honestly that hard. The only thing I was more concerned about would be other people I know in real life finding out about my second life. That made me come up with a name for my second life. I came up with an alias to hide myself from judgemental people. I became less self-conscious about myself and started to love myself a little more than when I didn't have this other life. This "life" also inspired me to take up visual arts and improve in it day by day, though I think I might be harsher on my art skills now than myself in general.

At school, I'm judged for liking anime (Japanese animation) and I find that unreasonably stupid. Most of the people I attend classes with are more concerned about their looks or grades or getting a boyfriend/girlfriend at this age. I'm one of the few that just steps out of the trends and I go somewhere else. I rebel against many ideas that they have because I honestly do not care whatsoever about these trends. I do want to make friends, but they think that because I don't like to follow fads like they do, they can just automatically dislike me because of it. I find it very childish and stupid, but go figure. Society has changed and many people just go with the flow. I don't. Usually, it's this one annoying kid that keeps bothering me at school. He keeps making stupid sexual innuendos about me and this one guy (which I'm not on good terms with) and it's honestly annoying. I'm a silent, but aggressive type of person, so sometimes, I might resort to violence (but it's never happened). I don't like to seek help from others most of the time because I believe that I should solve my own problems, which is pretty dumb of me but I guess it's force of habit.

To me, friendship is something I believe is sacred. To be friends, we have to have some sort of common interest or a personality that both of us like. Also in my friendships, I always look for people that are completely trustworthy, so I can trust them with my secrets or possessions if
they're borrowing it and giving it back to me later. Plus, we both have to have some sort of
similar political ideology or else we might end up killing each other over who is right and who is
wrong about whatever. I've opened up a lot more online than I do offline. My friendships online
are completely different from my friendships offline in terms of trust. I don't normally make
friends with people, so it kind of feels like some sort of holy ritual to me (like there's some
mysterious force that helps me connect with someone and it's rare when that happens), but I
question my thinking because I'm also an atheist.

I have a close friend, Queenie. Her friendship was my first of many on the Internet. We met in
December almost three years ago. We met on this one Facebook page that I was an administrator
on. She was the first person I met that later helped me gain my trust in people again and she was
also the person that allowed me to meet other people. Queenie and I were really close back then
and she came up with this crazy idea that we should be twins. First, I was pretty analytical about
the whole thing, seeing as there's a 4-month age difference between us, but I eventually agreed.
After 2 weeks or so, she introduced me to more of her friends and we grew closer and closer. We
opened up to each other a lot just after a month. We both thought we could trust each other 100%
with everything; our secrets for starter. I was going through another psychological phase in
which I didn't feel comfortable telling anyone about anything. I didn't trust anyone; not my
parents, not my teachers. No one. I just wanted the whole world to "shut up" for once, so I went
on the Internet to try and calm myself. It was there, I met her. She was someone completely out
of the ordinary. She was funny and someone who didn't care much about anything. She was laid-
back and very understanding. I was envious of a person like that because I couldn't really relax a
lot. Most of my teachers in Grade 7 and 8 relied on me a lot to do complicated tasks like
counting money for field trips and organizing events, so adding that to the schoolwork I had to
do (which wasn't much), I couldn't relax properly. She allowed me to relax more and she eased
the pressure off of my shoulders. I knew we could be friends from that moment on. And that was
when I knew I could trust her. Some sort of instinct in me let me ease my mind and let it all out. I
also learned that she had a lot to let out as well. We soon grew to the point where we just told
each other everything. I learned to trust people again because of her. I learned to trust people
more online, but I learned to trust a little offline as well.

We had some sort of weird sibling relationship. We never actually fought. She was more of the
lazy type and I was more of the diligent type, so the fact that we were friends didn't honestly
make a whole lot of sense to other people. After a year and a half of meeting each other, it was
the summer before high school for both of us. We were still very close to each other at this point,
but I could feel that the close friendship; almost family relationship, was going to end soon. Our
friendship never ended, but we began to drift apart. Since she lived in the US, her classes started
before mine. After a month of us starting high school, we began to lose a little communication
with each other. She wasn't online as much and I began to focus more on my English
assignments because I'm a weak English student. It was almost our second year anniversary of us
meeting, but she became more distant. Our interests changed, so we didn't have much to talk
about anymore. I still try to communicate with her, but she has all these new friends that I don't
know, so I decided to leave them alone and I focused on other friends that I had (which was
about a good 100 people or so). This December is going to the third year since we met, but I
doubt she'll remember and I'll probably be busy with my courses. I know I want to repair the
friendship, but I'm still waiting for the right time.
Initially, I was pretty nervous to meet her other friends because I was afraid they wouldn't like me, but then I told myself "It's just the Internet. Whether they like me or not, I honestly shouldn't care." She introduced me to an 18 year-old woman in Germany. I felt a little nervous, but I found out that she was actually nervous to meet me because she feared that her looks, her English proficiency and the fact that she suffered from depression would scare me away. She was like an older sister to me because she always referred to me as "the teenager I wish I was". I'm still confused as to what she meant, but I believe it has something to do with her personal life that she never told us about. There was this one time the three of us went on Skype to finally talk, but it got really awkward and all we did was play music instead of actually talking to each other. We kept trying, but we were still too nervous to talk to each other, so we just enjoyed the fact that there was someone on the other side of the screen that was willing to listen to us, but didn't talk. It was after almost 2 years that I began to actually talk with others in a voice chat and felt comfortable with it. When we voice chat, we hear one another's voices, but we don't see one another's faces. We do it on Skype and the problem is if you don't have Skype Premium, you can't do video chat with a group.

With my offline friendships, I feel like I don't belong, but my friends don't seem to notice that fact and continue on like it's no big deal. I just can't help but feel neglected from the whole group. I'm like that puzzle piece that just doesn't fit in with the rest of the puzzle. I feel a bit self-conscious and really shy about it. I feel like my friends offline don't honestly see that there's something wrong and I'm hiding it from them. I'm always able to see through people's lies and physical emotions, but no one can tell anything about me. Like I'm a blank book or a book written in another language. This other picture speaks out to me a lot. Not only does it describe how I feel about all my online friends, but it also shows how most people are ignorant to the fact that people can be friends through online interactions without being stalked or killed or something of that nature. It has a powerful message that shows people that they can make friends with others without having to meet face-to-face. It motivates me to get adults in society today to realize that there are other ways to make friends. You just got to trust them enough in order to open up. I like the following words from the picture: "But I don't mind waiting. Because, for now, we can sit side-by-side in the electric light sharing words like precious things." Sharing words, to me, is far easier to share than speaking. It's like the quote "The pen is mightier than the sword." Words have more impact. They can start a friendship or end a life. Words are often focused on negatively by the media, but words can be good. They can change people for the better. It doesn't always have to be for the worse. This picture and words make me sad in a sense, but they're also very heartwarming. They made me realize that I should care less about how I look or how I act in front of other people. What matters is that I am 'me' and someone out there likes 'me'. 

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Appendix H. Deepti’s Narrative

Deepti, a female from Canada, was 18 years old at the time of the interview.

I'm terribly shy and have always had trouble making friends. I sort of overcame that in middle school, but then reverted back sometime around Grade 9. When I moved from the Middle East to Canada three years ago, I became even further antisocial. I began feeling depressed and somewhat suicidal. I never start conversations. I always wait for the other person to initiate the conversation. Most of the time I feel like I'm bothering people when I speak. I find myself avoiding my classmates and friends around campus at times – sometimes I just don't feel like talking, sometimes I am just afraid I'll say something stupid or bore them. I feel like I'm trapped inside me. I feel uncomfortable in my own skin most of the time. It doesn't help that I'm overweight and somewhat ashamed of that.

I've tried to see the positive side, but it doesn't work always. I try to concentrate on my good qualities, like the fact that I'm a good person at heart, and unlike many teens I know I have never done drugs or anything stupid of that sort that teenagers often do; also that I'm not really that boring of a person inside. I read good fiction and like to learn about new things. It doesn't always work because I have barely any real world experience. I stay cooped up at home most of the time. I just feel afraid to go outside sometimes, perhaps because I don't consider Canada my home. Also, I am insecure about my appearance and my accent and the way I dress etc., and these things really hold me back.

I used to attend a British school when I lived in the Middle East. It was much closer to home than any other school so my parents chose to send me there at first. There were barely any South Asian kids there like me, so I felt pretty shy most of the time. As the South Asian population grew at school, I began feeling more comfortable. My parents then switched my school, had me attend a predominantly South Asian school, and I began feeling much more at home. For some years I was a normal kid, had a good group of friends and loved school. Then when the process for our immigration to Canada began to take a longer time than anticipated, and began to affect our finances, and the environment around the house, I began feeling depressed and began falling back into reclusiveness. I began feeling more lively and hopeful when the immigration process ended and we were in the process of moving here, but when I arrived, it didn't take long for those feelings to vanish again. I've never actually been to a psychologist/therapist and had myself diagnosed, and so I won't say I was in “depression”, but I felt numb and hopeless in general. I was not sure as to what I really expected Canada to be like, but I just felt kind of hopeless and somewhat disappointed. I moved here in the summer, so I couldn’t blame it on SAD (Seasonal Affective Disorder), but it was what it was. I felt extremely out of place. The size of the place overwhelmed me. The people seemed distant and cold. Things were expensive. The neighbourhoods were far too quiet than what I was accustomed to.

This is going to sound cliché, but I suppose friends are like the family you choose yourself. Your parents, you're stuck with; ditto for siblings. Friends are something you pick yourself. Your family is nice to you in many cases mostly because there's no other choice for them; friends behave the way they do out of mutual love and respect and shared interests. I feel there's more of a psychological bond between friends than between family. I hope I don't sound paradoxical, but
I'm lucky enough to have a younger brother who's very understanding and one of my bestest friends, and I sometimes feel he's enough, but I don't think I'd even be alive today if it weren't for the friends that helped me get through the most depressing stages of my life thus far.

There were one or two people that I knew in real life, at school or through mutual friends, that I didn't really speak to much in real life but grew close to over the Internet. But I think one friend I've only met online would be better to talk about. His name's Pasha, and he lives in South Asia. We've never met in real life. We met online, about 5 to 6 years ago, on 'Orkut', a social networking site we no longer use, through a mutual friend, a cousin of his. I have never met this cousin of his in real life either. I was closer to this cousin of his at first, but then she started having some issues with her Internet availability. Her parents were somewhat strict, orthodox Muslim parents that didn't find it acceptable for her to be spending so much time online. So she asked Pasha to relay a few hi's and how are you?'s for a while between us, and that's how we began talking.

We found a lot in common in between us, and eventually became great friends. His older brother lived in the same Middle Eastern country that I was living in at the time, and he was sort of interested in understanding how life in the Middle East was like. That and his aforementioned cousin were our initial topics of conversation. We started to get to know each other, began talking about all sorts of random things like Bollywood movies and music and so forth. We used Yahoo Messenger for a while, but Facebook's more convenient now. With Facebook, we've been more interactive to be honest, constantly liking each other's pictures and statuses and such. There's this Hindu festival called “Raksha Bandhan”, a celebration of the bond between brothers and sisters. I once randomly sent him “Happy Raksha Bandhan” once and he seemed very touched, and from that day on we always address each other as “bro” and “sis”. Also, my mom knows about him, and if he can remember he sends her a happy birthday through email on her birthday.

Conversation was surprisingly easy flowing between us, and he somewhat helped me with the shyness and the state of despair that I had fallen in towards the end of the immigration process. I never told him what exactly was bothering me, that we were planning to move to Canada and the kind of toil that was taking on us, but he never pushed me for the reason. He would talk about problems with his girlfriend; I'd talk about these immigration-related issues. We were kind of like therapists to each other. Then when I finally told him about Canada he was real happy and would regularly talk to me about Canada-related things, before and after my arrival. When I first arrived here, I didn't have Internet for the first 4 days, and when I logged on to Facebook after that, he'd left me a long letter in my inbox wishing me luck and hoping to talk to me soon. And when we had our first chat from here we spent quite a while talking about things I'd observed here. We are both the observant kind, I've noticed. He's nowhere near as shy as me, but he's pretty thoughtful and deep. When I started school here I would talk to him about how much I hated it here, and he'd console me and try to be as helpful as he could. One would expect a guy to be sick of my constant whining about how much I hate things, but he's been very supportive. He actually listens and comments thoughtfully on what I say. He helps me talk problems through when I'm feeling dejected and/or lonely. We don't talk on a weekly or even monthly basis. There are spurts of time when we have conversations, essay-size paragraphs moving back and forth. But even so he's been a tremendous help in relieving my loneliness.
This picture is the closest thing I could find to my experience in offline settings. I often find that I want to interact with someone, and the other person wants to initiate conversation as well, but we stare at each other but hardly ever get talking unless a mediator is present. Real life situations like these are just awkward. It's much easier when you've got a screen protecting your face. As much as I want to be, I'm just not the kind of person comfortable with just getting out there and introducing myself or steering a conversation or sharing something with anyone. I tend to be too cynical or just plain shy. By cynical, I mean I don't trust the other person to be understanding or nice. I always fear judgment. I feel inept because I feel like I'm too scared to start or carry out even a simple conversation, and then feel useless because I wonder how I will ever get ahead in life like this. After my positive online experiences, these feelings have reduced, come to think of it. In online settings I often see myself steering and/or handling the conversation pretty well, with hardly any inhibitions, and that at times makes me feel more confident when I'm faced with a situation in real life where I have to talk to someone who seems daunting.

I chose the other picture for online settings because when one has conversations online, it's easier to be relaxed and be yourself than it is in-person or in real life. You connect with people based on your interests and likes and dislikes, rather than just geographical location or school or work or stuff of that sort that isn't necessarily something you choose or can affect or change that easily. At times I feel somewhat happy about my tastes and likes. When I have conversations online I feel much more confident and at ease than I would feel otherwise, because these conversations are almost always about something I actually would want to talk about. The Internet lets you be more open, hide or forget your inhibitions, which proves quite relieving and comforting. From participating in this study, having everything out like that, I've realized I shouldn't really chastise myself for spending so much time online, but it would be better for me if I could be that at ease in real life too.
Appendix I. Emily’s Narrative

Emily, a female from Canada, was 18 years old at the time of the interview.

I know that I'm a reserved type of person. This is because I worry about letting things about myself show that I'm not ready to show people. Secondly, I tend to overthink. I'm a bit self-exacting and perfectionistic. I also love writing and drawing, but not in the sense that they give me freedom of expression. Even in art, I have high standards I try to achieve, or a vision or mood I need to create. That's my drive. I'm generally smart, but sometimes feel like I don't know a lot of everyday things. For example, I'm not familiar with social conduct rules, or maybe this is just because I think about things too much. I think that I'm a person that cares more about herself than other people, mostly. I don't think I really started developing empathy until a couple years ago.

When I was young, under 12 years, I didn't think about who I was. I just did what I liked. Sometimes I had feelings of being inadequate in some areas, but these didn't translate into helping me define an outline of my personality until years later. It's hard to describe the areas in which I felt inadequate. It's the vague feeling of being lacking in experience in some area that might define the other person. So I've always measured myself in terms of others, which has set me back as much as it has pushed me forward. But even now, I feel like I don't know myself well. Too often and for too long I’ve thought “I could be this type of person if I wanted to”. It's become a habit now and it totally messes with my self-perception. But I don't particularly want to be a certain type of person anymore. I'd be ok with myself if I just had more confidence.

I think the basic shy definition applies to a person who's unwilling to be free around people, especially unfamiliar people. They don't necessarily dislike letting go, but might be afraid to. They don't disclose much about themselves, similar to a one-way mirror in a sense. By being free and letting go, I mean letting go of inhibitions like self-scrutiny or criticism when you’re around others, as well as not paying attention or having thoughts about how you might measure up to others and if you're worth to be talked to. It’s being free of little insecurities like that.

My close friends so far have been more shy than me. But I’m the type that assesses a situation and adapts to compensate for something that we might lack as a group – in this case social skills. I can fake it all right, but it's a strain. I'm a little shy, I don't like socializing with people I'm not comfortable with. I've cycled through a few sets of close friends. In middle school, I was in that group because we had similar personalities/got along well and had shared interests. Then I moved to a different city. At the start of high school, I was with those people partly because I didn't care enough to find people who I clicked better with. Later as I got into honours and IB, I changed friends who I had more in common with--studying--because my previous friends were a little dumb, to be blunt. Usually, people that make me comfortable are ones who aren't better than me in a lot of ways. This lets me talk to them more easily. But I also am drawn to people who I think are superior to me (it’s weird now that I think about it.) I'm uncomfortable around people who I think are very different from me.

I would want friendships to mean close relationships with people whom I care about and respect, and they would also reciprocate these feelings for me. We are free with each other and
understand each other well. But so far, it’s been nothing but a convenience or casual hobby of sorts. It’s not that I haven't found the right people. It's that we haven't been through serious experiences together. Me and my friends don't seem to take friendship too seriously. Maybe it’s because we live most of our lives in our schoolwork or the Internet.

Olive, a friend of mine, is the shy type. We first met in Chemistry 11 last September, when she was in tenth grade and I was a senior. We didn't talk much until the year was beginning to end and I had free blocks all week. We would talk in the library where she would confide in me about herself and some worries of hers. I'd always suspected she had OCD, and a few months later after I returned from China, she messaged me on Facebook looking for advice and someone to lean on—she'd told her parents about her problems (which she didn't specify before to me; it turns out she had OCD and anorexia) and there was upheaval going on in her family. Basically, things were overwhelming for her and so she and I would talk every day on Facebook. She hadn't told anyone besides her parents and teachers about these things, so other than them I was the only one who knew. I think we share a connection deeper than friendship because of this. Previously, we wouldn't talk unless to exchange answers for homework. She might have been intimidated by me because I was two years older than her.

Is this kind of relationship really a friendship? I feel almost like her confessor. Like I said before, a friendship would have to have some more components and synchronicity between two people in order to be considered authentic by me. However, hearing her stories reminds me a bit of myself. I had a stint with an eating disorder years ago, and I also am really perfectionistic, definitely not to her extent though. But anyways, this is probably the stuff that holds us together. This is part of the connection I mentioned. As a crude example, wouldn't you feel closer to a person if you'd shared a bed with them? That kind of intimacy, as in allowing another person to see your vulnerability and your whole self without hiding or you being the one to see them brings the two of you closer in a way that doesn't really equate to friendliness. She's the one asking for advice and I'm the one giving it. She has pain and I try to alleviate it somewhat. This sort of relation is not equal.

For me to confide in her doesn't suit the context because she's the one in a lot more need. So, I would never drop my own crap on someone already dealing with so much crap in their life. Not only that but I'm too closed in to confide in others. I deal with my own problems myself. This part of me is a work in progress. I guess mutual openness is necessary for trusting relationships, but it's not easy. I just can't find the words, and when I think that now might be a good time to say something, I don't because it would just make me feel worse. I hate pity more than anything, though I try to tell myself that sympathy and comfort aren’t the same as pity.

There wasn't just any one significant event but a multitude of small ones from the past that have affected the way I am today. For example, being raised by my parents, I was treated as if I couldn't do anything without them watching over me. This instilled in me the belief that I was incapable, and screwed up my self-esteem. So I refrained from new experiences most of the time.

I haven’t really self-disclosed online either. I signed up for this experiment because I wanted to try telling someone about myself, like this, just to get a feel of what it's like to spill things. It's not bad, but it would be different if I knew you or we were face-to-face – I wouldn’t even do it if I had to face you and speak.
I chose a picture of the mirror room to represent face-to-face socializing for myself. I feel that how much I enjoy being around other people or how much they like being with me is all influenced by myself. I try hard to control social situations (but this doesn't work out all the time). If something is not to my liking, I wonder if I could have done something to change that and come up with a solution to address it the next time. If something goes wrong, I tend to blame myself, which makes being around people difficult. So if things go well I applaud myself. If things don't go well, I don't feel so good.

The picture of a night drive represents online communication. Driving is very straightforward; words are straightforward. Words are all I need to think about when I’m writing to someone. Driving at night is relaxing, and so is talking online to someone relative to talking to them up front. There's a lot of interference with a message you're trying to convey when you have to watch the other person's mood. So, words are much better and easier to handle. Even when your partner might be upset, you have a longer time to respond properly and don't have to nuance your voice and move your face around. Talking on line generally makes me feel better because I can orchestrate how things go to some extent. When I can see and hear the other person my attention has to divide itself.
## Appendix J. Overview of Individual Case Findings

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<th>Participants</th>
<th>Identities</th>
<th>Modes of construction</th>
<th>Themes within each case</th>
<th>Contextual analysis</th>
<th>Concluding Remarks</th>
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</table>
| **1. Alice** | Identified close friend: Terri (best friend) | A victim of the social environment trusting someone for the first time | • enacting self-representation of being a victim of sexual assault  
• negotiating meanings of self with an internalized reference group  
• **Talk** (intimacy/ **closeness**, negative affect, online, **openness**/ vulnerability)  
• **Time** (“always there”, “first”, “still/little change, change over time quick/ short)  
• **Trust** (broken, developing, exclusive, friendship, **online**, takes time) | • Intersubjective: ambivalence - desiring to interact hidden under reticence; self-evaluation of not meeting up to societal benchmark of being sociable; narrating the story concretised evaluation of meeting Terri as unexpected event  
• Social field: absence of offline setting; language (“ask”, “Facetime”) showed forms/ structures of offline communication replicated in online environment; online availability substitute for physical proximity → emotional closeness; dichotomy in online-offline comm due to fear of talking; online scaffold and lowered barrier for talking to new people  
• Socio-cultural context: norm to be sociable; | • Shyness: **contextually influenced** by visual presence of audience, and perception of untrustworthiness  
• Mediation of online environment enabled enactment of sociable persona (online self-disclosure, reduced audio-visual cues)  
• Trusting friendship with Terri did not influence her overall social self-concept of being shy/ distrusting of social environment |
| | Perceived problems: sexual assault, depression, eating disorder | A companion engaged in intense online “talking” | • social processes of selecting similar peers and seeking validation from a significant other;  
• positioning of role in dyadic relationship | | |
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| 2. Bernice   | An advocate against discrimination expressing strength despite insecurity | • self-presentation and impression management  
• negotiating meanings of self with an internalized reference group  
• identifying with social group having special needs | • **Toughness** (being strong for others, **self-reliant**/alone/ **control**/ **hidden**, arguing/speaking out, emotional difficulties)  
• **Culture** (racism/discrimination, learning, cross-culture, open-minded/non-judging/non-offensive, passion/interest/enjoyment)  
• **Physicality** (unusual/different, **insecurity**/difficulties, discrimination)  
• **Connection** (commonality/shared basis, bridging dissimilarity, fear of offending/**insecurity**, love/special/inner circle) | • Intersubjective: desire for familiarity and to be known more intimately; desire to be seen as mature (knowledgeable and cultured)  
• Social field: absence of peers in offline setting; dyadic role identity shaped by activities; online setting provided compensation for offline peer socialization inadequacies and replicated emotional security (e.g., sense of control, able to be herself)  
• Sociocultural: “real”, “many people online who are out to hurt children”; societal/cultural values of embracing rules and beauty likely shaped her insecurity | • Shyness: limited voice in childhood, inadequate peer socialization, **contextually influenced** by insecurity over special physical needs and mitigated when enacting non-judgmental/cultured self  
• Online setting: increased autonomy viz homeschooling environment, construct of cultured and mature identity  
• Limitations of offline fuelled quest for fulfilment in online setting; positive social experiences in online setting replicated those in offline setting. |

*Identified close friends: Miss H (best friend); Saliha (like a sister)  
Perceived problems: Homeschooling; JRA
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| 3. Cherise   | Identified close friends: Nelly (best friend & like a sister); Ray Perceived problems: rejection; parents’ separation | An “emotion-fugitive” protecting herself from judgment and rejection | • individuating one’s attributes  
• reflexive self-evaluation  
• negotiating meanings of self with an internalized reference group | • **Freedom** (being **myself**, not being shy, not worrying, **trust**)  
• **Hiding** (emotions, not hiding in friendships, reasons, thoughts)  
• **Unnoticed** (ambivalence/ desire to be noticed, **fear**, noticed in friendships, **talk**) | • Intersubjective: Q&A; generalizations (e.g. “people”, “everyone”) - certainty of shy self-concept and positive experiences  
• Social field: offline group structures imposed pressure – absent online. Dyad structure (with Nelly and Ray) showed high comfort level and frequency. Online facilitated intimacy at faster rate; public forum structure enables tentative comm  
• Sociocultural: “offline drama” – adolescent stress, seek sense of belonging; mobile texting as means of escaping pressure | • Shyness: **contextually influenced** by the extent of social setting enabled overcoming fear (judged/rejected) by being noticed and accepted  
• Shyness seemed to be friendship-dependent rather than contextually dependent on online/offline settings  
• Online setting, with multiple modes of communication, seemed to facilitate devt of trust and ease of crossing barrier of fear more easily. |
| 4. Sakoori   | Identified close friend: Queenie (like a sister) Perceived problems: | A judged misfit finding an online connection she could trust | • individuating one’s distinct attributes from others  
• social process of selecting similar peers | • **Change** (growth, identity, self-discovery, socializing, society, **trust**)  
• **Fitting in** (close, commonality/ connection, different | • Intersubjective: individualistic self-presentation, desire to be understood for who she was (e.g., rationalizing shyness, justifying individualism)  
• Social field: ability to | • Shyness: **contextually influenced** by distrust in people’s judgmental response towards her individuality, mitigated by self-love |
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<tr>
<td>betrayed trust; discrimination, not fitting in</td>
<td>A second online identity catalyzing personal growth</td>
<td>• enacting a different self-representation in an online context&lt;br&gt;• social processes of mutual socialization and seeking validation from a significant other&lt;br&gt;• reflexive self-evaluation</td>
<td>from others, fear, hiding, individuation, interests, judged, neglected, opening up, resentment, sacred, self-conscious, socializing, trust, unnoticed&lt;br&gt;<strong>Two lives</strong> (different, difficulty, hiding, new/ change)</td>
<td>choose people with similar interests in online settings (need for acceptance in offline provided impetus to seek similar peers in online setting); group structure more evident in offline, with oppressive quality&lt;br&gt;• Sociocultural: challenged societal norm of distrusting people online – positioned as someone misunderstood by society and acceptance&lt;br&gt;• Online and offline world remained dichotomized with decision to hide online “life” from offline peers.</td>
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5. **Deepti**<br> Identified close friend: Pasha (like a brother)<br> Perceived problems: immigration, not feeling at home, depression | An diffident migrant wanting to feel at home with friends of similar background | • identifying with social ethnic group<br>• enacting self-representation of social ineptness<br>• social processes of selecting similar peers and seeking validation from a significant other | • Conversations (common topics, getting to know one another, online setting, positive/ easy/ free, problem/ inability, therapeutic)<br>• Feeling at home (being oneself/ relaxed/ confident, country/ race, family, friends, insecure/ out of place)<br>• Moving (began a change, emotional impact, physical, social impact) | Intersubjective: embedding feelings in narrative of events to explain herself; co-constructing reflection on improved social competence<br>• Social field: feeling out of place in offline context (ethnic groups forming cliques and being a minority group) but not in online context (dyadic relationships, appearance did not matter)<br>• Sociocultural: norms of Shyness: contextually influenced by how salient appearance and ethnic minority status were, mitigated by success in handling conversations<br>• Online context: deduced audio-visual cues, opportunity to connect with similar ethnicity, and invisibility of social cliques Some spill-over effect of new |
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<td>6. Emily</td>
<td>Identified close friend: Olive</td>
<td>dyadic relationship • reflexive self-evaluation of social competence</td>
<td>beauty and success contingent on social competence; real life dichotomized from virtual life</td>
<td>confidence into offline context through sense of competence</td>
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**Identified close friend: Olive**

**Perceived problems:** no actual close friends, not willing to self-disclose

**A self-critic engineering experiences of competence**

- social comparison (using peers as referential standards for self-evaluation)
- self-presentation and impression management

- **Letting go** (disclosure, fear/worry/discomfort, relaxed/free/easy, thinking too much)
- **Quality (close)** friendships, connection, perfection/standards, reciprocity/equality/synchronicity, superficial/functional friendships
- **Self-reliance** (comparison, control/cautious, strength, vulnerability, weakness/self-criticism/inadequacy)

**A perfectionist seeking freeing reciprocal relationships**

- negotiating meanings of self with an internalized reference group
- reflexive self-evaluation of one’s role in a one-sided dyadic relationship

- Intersubjective: desire to try disclosing online; introspective reflection with more focus on thoughts and feelings than describing friendship experiences
- Social field: individualistic tone with lack of belonging to groups across different contexts; offline focused more on social groups, online on dyads
- Sociocultural: physical intimacy parallels emotional intimacy; shyness associated with social skills deficit

**Shyness:** fear of weakness, childhood undermined competence, perfectionism reinforced inadequacies through social comparisons; **contextually influenced** by how little control and how much incompetence is portrayed

**Online setting gives sense of control over positive outcomes**
Appendix K. Merged Findings Across the Cases

(I) Shyness was influenced by past negative experiences where trust or confidence was broken, resulting in generalized perspectives of self or others

As a victim of sexual assault, shyness was influenced by how untrustworthy or judgmental the “generalized other” was perceived to be.

Alice

Shyness was influenced by family experiences of having a limited voice (“be silent”, “remain hidden”) and inadequate positive socialization experiences with peers of the same age.

Bernice

Shyness was expressed as an internalized neutral position of hiding one’s true thoughts or emotions to protect oneself from the perceived judgment and rejection of the “generalized other”, as a result of past negative experiences in junior high school.

Cherise

Shyness was expressed as an enactment of an individuated identity from peers (having different interests and not following teenage trends) which could be a coping mechanism in response to past experiences of having trust betrayed or being judged.

Sakoori

Shyness was influenced by past experiences of difficulty in handling conversations and making friends outside of one’s ethnic group, resulting in a generalized self-concept of social ineptness.

Deepti

Shyness was influenced by childhood experiences which undermined a sense of competence and concurrently developed a self-critical perfectionism that reinforced inadequacies when social comparisons were made.

Emily
(II) Shyness was influenced by a perception of not meeting societal referential standards

Shyness was influenced by the insecurity surrounding a perceived physical liability of having Juvenile Rheumatoid Arthritis (JRA). Identification with “special needs” could have been shaped by socio-cultural standards of normality and beauty. Bernice

Shyness was influenced by self-consciousness about one’s appearance as an immigrant of an ethnic minority group and not feeling “at home” in an unfamiliar social environment. Deepi

(III) Self-presentation of strength was a means of coping with one’s weaknesses

The self-presentation of a self-reliant and strong-willed persona extended to playing a role as a non-judgmental advocate against discrimination, having been sensitized to positions of strength and weakness in one’s own experience. Bernice

Shyness was influenced by a perception of how little control one had and how much incompetence might be portrayed in the social setting. Emily

Limiting self-disclosure of personal problems and choosing friends that put oneself in positions of relative strength and control were ways of engineering experiences of competence. Emily
(IV) **Trust was built through quality interactions that communicated acceptance and understanding**

Trust was first established by being noticed and receiving attention. This communicated acceptance and validation, enabling freedom to be oneself in the relationship without a fear of rejection.

*Cherise*

---

Trusting someone was measured by amount of self-disclosure and immediacy of it. Intimacy or emotional closeness in a dyadic relationship was characterized by loud chatty conversation.

*Alice*

---

A first time experience of feeling cared for and having a mutual companion to identify with struggles helped in overcoming the emotional barrier of trusting and talking.

*Alice*

---

Finding an online friend with similar interests and an ideal laid-back and sociable personality helped in overcoming the fear of being judged and in learning to trust enough to self-disclose.

*Sakoori*

(V) **Multiple modes of online communication provided a scaffold for overcoming the fear of talking**

The online setting intensified the volume, frequency and intimate nature of communication through real-time interactive technology (Facetime, iPhone texting) and required the scaffold of concurrent texting with video function to overcome the fear of talking.

*Alice*

---

Semi-anonymous journaling (on Tumblr) enabled online self-disclosure to a faceless audience, potentially encouraged by being part of an online community (formed through re-blogging and likes) with similarly emotionally-vulnerable people.

*Alice*

---

Trust was also built through a scaffold of first evaluating responses on a semi-anonymous public forum (Ask.com) before progressing to intimate self-disclosure on a private dyadic interaction platform (Skype mobile texting).

*Cherise*
(VI) The online setting created a psychologically safe environment by reducing the salience of one’s appearance viz societal norms of beauty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The online setting helped in overcoming insecurity through a reduced emphasis on physical appearances and giving a sense of autonomy which was lacking in the homeschooling and family experiences.</th>
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<td>Bernice</td>
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<th>The online setting reduced salience of one’s appearance, creating a psychologically safe environment to be relaxed, and where societal norms of beauty had less visible power.</th>
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(VII) The online setting provided autonomy to choose dyadic interaction partners without the limitations or pressures of offline structures

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<th>&quot;Offline drama&quot; and peer pressure to conform and find belonging in junior high school added to adolescent stress (&quot;just another person trying to get through life&quot;), which appeared to be absent in an online setting.</th>
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<td>Cherise</td>
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<th>The online setting enabled a construction of a cultured and mature identity of being able to take perspectives and explore cross-cultural relationships that was limited in the offline setting.</th>
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<td>Bernice</td>
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<th>The online setting provided autonomy to choose peers of similar interests for those who did not “fit in” with social groups in school, which tended to be formed around interests in looks, grades or romantic relationships.</th>
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<td>Sakoori</td>
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<th>The online setting facilitated the formation of dyadic relationships without the visibility of social cliques as one may expect in a school setting.</th>
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<th>There was an oppressive quality about the multiple “voices” in the offline social context, while the online social context was more congruent to the needs of the “silent type”, without having the pressure to speak.</th>
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<td>Sakoori</td>
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(VIII) The online setting replicated or adapted social practices from the offline setting that promoted intimacy (but may ultimately be a substitute for actual face-to-face interactions in person)

While online availability ("hanging out") was a parallel for physical proximity, the intimacy developed in an online setting encouraged a face-to-face meet up in person when an opportunity arose.

Alice

High frequency of online interaction through mobile texting ("talking constantly") accelerated the development of trust and ease of overcoming fear. This paralleled the experience of physically hanging out at a friend’s house.

Cherise

The online affordances of control (over how and who to communicate with) seemed to replicate the emotional security in offline dyadic relationships where one could feel relaxed and be oneself.

Bernice

Upon reflection, greater willingness to have reciprocal self-disclosure was required for developing real emotional intimacy, as a parallel to physical intimacy. A one-sided disclosure resulted in a "confessor" role rather than an authentic friendship.

Emily

(IX) Positive online social interactions could impact other offline social interactions via self-acceptance and self-confidence

Upon reflection, a second online identity (being able to trust and make friends, being comfortable in a voice chat) was recognized to have catalyzed personal growth (being able to love and accept self, and be less self-conscious).

Sakoori

A decision to hide the online "life" from offline peers may keep the online and offline experiences dichotomized, while development of self-love and acceptance developed through online interactions could potentially impact offline interactions.

Sakoori

In an online setting, having greater control over topics and playing a role of mutual "therapists" with a friend built confidence in handling conversations. This confidence was seen to have transferred to the offline setting to some extent, upon reflection.

Deepti