



LUND UNIVERSITY
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Keeping up with the Joneses. All around the World.

How globalization and virtualization processes alter the working of the social multiplier in contemporary consumer society.

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FIGURE 1: KEEPING UP WITH THE JONESES. ILLUSTRATED BY A. SANDERS

Abstract

- RESEARCH QUESTION:** How do virtualization and globalization processes in contemporary consumer society alter the working of the social multiplier?
- PURPOSE:** The purpose of this study is to shed light upon the, nowadays, complex social comparison processes by looking at the working and the effects of the social multiplier in contemporary consumer society.
- RELEVANCE:** We believe that the increased use of social network sites alter the working of the social multiplier –for better or worse. This opens up a partly unexplored, yet interesting research opportunity concerning the interplay between globalization, virtualization, social media, cultural capital and the neighbour as a social benchmark for identity and status.
- METHODOLOGY:** We conducted our research based on a qualitative exploratory research design including four semi-structured focus groups each with 4 to 5 participants. To enhance our research we used participant observations and netnography.
- FINDINGS:** It appears that the notion of ‘Keeping up with the Joneses’, also referred to as the social multiplier, has become keeping up with the world through social networking sites. We have found this change in social structure and the expansion of reference frames to lead to a consumer society characterized by many tensions. We have identified six tensions that we elaborate on in this report. The last chapter of this paper will highlight that the concept of the social multiplier has become more intense and more powerful due to the magnitude and the quality of social information causing anxiety in the contemporary consumer society.
- CONTRIBUTION:** We contribute to the literature on contemporary social systems and the influences of globalization and virtualization by highlighting the effects of the social multiplier in terms of tensions. Additionally, this study focuses on consumption practices relating to consuming social network sites and relationships. The practical contribution of this study relates to the need for novel symbols and cultural reinvention for consumers to function as well as marketers.



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GLOSSARY AND ABBREVIATIONS

In this thesis we will touch upon the effects of globalization and virtualization on working of the social multiplier in consumer society. We will mainly focus on the effects of the increased usage of Social Networking Sites (SNS). Throughout the report we may touch upon unfamiliar terms for the reader, therefore, we have stated a clarifying list of glossaries and abbreviations below.

<i>Followers</i>	people that 'follow' someone on SNS, see their information and 'posts'.
<i>FOMO</i>	Fear Of Missing Out
<i>HPD</i>	Histrionic Personality Disorder
<i>Instagram</i>	a social networking site that primarily focuses on editing and uploading and sharing photos with the 'followers', these photos are usually tagged. An 'Instagrammed' picture thus normally means an edited and tagged photo.
<i>Likes</i>	the button that appears next to information on SNS Facebook indicating 'I like this'.
<i>Neknominations</i>	an online drinking game / competition in which a participant finds himself drinking a (strong) alcoholic beverage in one gulp and uploads a video of it to SNS. The participant selects two others to do the same; those others have 24 hours to complete the task.
<i>Newsfeed</i>	a list of updates on your own SNS home page that shows updates about the people you follow, as well as advertisements. It is a collection of events from all your followers walls to give you an overview of what they have been doing.
<i>Posts</i>	the information one puts up on a profile within SNS.
<i>Selfie</i>	a photo that is taken of one self, by one self.
<i>SNS</i>	Social Networking Sites, for instance MySpace.com and Facebook.com.
<i>Tag</i>	to tag a post or photo is to enter keywords paired with a hashtag (#), for instance a photo of a dog would be tagged #dog. This way, one can find all dog photos in the database.
<i>Tweets</i>	micro-blogging updates of a maximum 160 characters on Twitter.com.
<i>Wall</i>	a personal page on SNS that your whole network can see and on which pictures, information etc. is 'posted'.
<i>Zwerfie</i>	a selfie taken with collected street waste, to show that one is 'green'.

“A self does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before.”

J.-F. Lyotard 1984, p.15

1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter will give a brief overview of our thesis topic, our motivation to undertake this research, the research question and will briefly touch upon the paper structure in order to guide the reader into this interesting topic.

During the 50's and 60's, urbanization was a powerful force that had its effect on social life in many developing and developed countries. Therefore, significant interest in social life within urban neighbourhoods emerged (Unger & Wandersman, 1985). Just as in the 50's and 60's, we are in a similar phase of drastic changes in social life; digitalization and globalization processes merge together and create a novel social system. As society is subject to more rapid change due to quicker technological advancements, there is an increasing need for scholars to understand new dynamics and social constructs. This is especially the case among those that have a particular interest in consumption-related behaviour such as marketers, who are also seen as the drivers of these changes (Richins, 1995).

Just as increased interest in urban neighbourhoods emerged over 50 years ago, we have a similar interest in social interactions in society as it is known to us today. Globalization processes and digital social systems prompt a need for studying social concepts that were highly relevant in the urban setting of half a century ago, but may or may not have become completely irrelevant in contemporary consumer society. One such theory is that of Whyte (1954), who noted that, when status-enhancing consumption goods are on display, physical neighbours are likely to 'keep up' with this and copy the consumption behaviour. This concept is called the social multiplier and in more popular terms 'Keeping up with the Joneses'. New forms of social interactions have emerged and therefore we identified a need to analyse social ties and networks in contemporary society whilst reflecting upon this concept. Fundamental to the social multiplier effect is that consumption practices are directly related to relative social status and subjective well-being. The multiplier becomes effective when people attempt to 'keep up' with someone else's consumption standards and perceived social status, triggering increases in consumption and decreases in emotional well-being when these standards are not met.

The internet provides communication methods for people around the globe in such a way that reference frames are not limited to geographical space and time zones anymore (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006). The technological development of social media makes it possible that we are not only in contact or competition for status with our direct environment, like neighbours, friends, church and community, but that we can extend our social network worldwide (Castells, 2010). SNS



therefore have further increased our possible frame of reference to mirror our consumption behaviour, for better or worse (e.g. (Chou & Edge, 2012)). In other words, when Web 2.0 was introduced some years ago, digital social interaction became possible through audio-visuals, social platforms and other developments aided by technology, making the social system more multifaceted. While social worlds are becoming larger and more complex, there is more need than ever for understanding the dynamics of social constructs and social interaction. As Mehdizadeh (2010) states, “[o]nline social networking sites have revealed an entirely new method of self-presentation.”(p. 357)

The enormous amounts of social information are especially found to be problematic when it comes to choices around identity building. When we are born, we carry parts of what makes us who we are: race, gender, religious tradition and economic or social class. Western neoliberal politics of deregulation have created better opportunities for transcending the social and economic status that we were born with. Digitalization and globalization allow us to have multiple identities: we can choose to be who we want to be; inheritance is no longer of much importance. This implies that we now are exposed to plentiful ideas and choices in terms of identity, ideas that can be accessed instantly on the Web. Contrary to several decades ago, choice of identity has now become almost limitless: not only is inherited identity no longer the default option, we are also exposed to an amount of choice that was unimaginable for centuries. Beautiful and liberating, one would say. But we have found that freedom of creating one’s identity in fact is a burden, and an overload of (lifestyle) choices can make us socially anxious.

As we will illustrate later on, digitalization and globalization processes have been linked to a variety of emotional, psychological and mental problems. Additionally, we argue that both digitalization and globalization have influenced consumer society to such an extent that it alters the working of the social multiplier in a way that may or may not be beneficial. Furthermore, we argue that ‘Keeping up with the Joneses’ is perceived differently in contemporary society compared to when Whyte (1954) described it. After reviewing the literature concerning globalization, virtualization, social status and social comparison, as well as the neighbour ties, we connected three topics that we think, constitute this altered working of the social multiplier and undoubtedly need further investigation: **1)** the development of selective self-presentations on SNS, **2)** the fundamental changes in the perception of remoteness and nearness as well as in what is real and fake, and lastly, **3)** the need for social evolution in times of rapid change.

The purpose of this study is to shed light upon the complex social comparison processes of today by looking at the working and the effects of the social multiplier in contemporary society. To do so, we

draw from influential marketing theory concerning the social multiplier (Whyte, 1954) as well as from sociology in regards to social practice (Veblen, 1899) (Bourdieu, 1984) (Douglas & Isherwood, 1979) and social networks (Castells, 2001) (Wellman, 1992) as we follow Bennett and Maton (2010) in their argument that these theories “... are critical to advancing understanding in this area [virtual social interactions]” (p.10). We strongly believe that these theories are important - if not necessary - to use as a theoretical frame in the process of creating understanding of social processes that are deeply embedded in humans and that have remained fundamentally unchanged over centuries, although manifested differently. We recognize the benefits and advancements that are present in today's society. However, we argue with Richins (1995) that through the promotion of goods and services, marketing often stimulates envy and consumer discontent. The empirical data and its analysis as well as references to relevant literature serve as the building blocks of our thesis, in order to shed light upon the following question:

‘How do virtualization and globalization processes in contemporary consumer society alter the working of the social multiplier?’

In order to answer this central question, we broke it down in three sub-questions that relate to the three reasons underlying this project as described above:

- 1) Why do people consume Social Networking Sites?***
- 2) What is the current setting of social comparison that evolves from globalization and virtualization processes?***
- 3) What are the effects of the social multiplier in contemporary consumer society?***

To make a meaningful contribution to the literature, we intend to provide understanding of the working and effects of the social multiplier in contemporary consumer society. We intend to contribute to consumer culture theory by bringing classical economic and sociological theories together, going further than just testing their applicability in society by rather using them as a bridge to make sense of consumer behaviour and social comparison processes that can be observed nowadays. This study also contributes to the growing body of literature concerning social networking, selective self-presentation, neighbouring and the debate around digital natives and digital immigrants (Bennett & Maton, 2010) in which social evolution and adaptability are main themes. It seeks to illustrate the current working of the social multiplier that changes social relations and represents how society itself has changed in the past century.

This document is constructed in a fashion to guide the reader through the concepts that are being discussed while reflecting upon our own viewpoints. First, we review relevant literature and use it to illustrate why there is need for this study. After bringing all the discussed premises together we will

present our research idea and intended contribution more extensively. After carefully reflecting upon and arguing for the methodological approach of this study, we move on to present our findings that are aligned with the three research questions. When making sense of the rich empirical material, we found that social comparison processes in relation to SNS are typically subject to several tensions: tensions around practical uses of SNS, tensions around the current setting of social comparison that evolves from globalization and virtualization processes (virtual/real, global/local), and finally tensions around social comparison practices in contemporary consumer society. These three chapters are directly linked to the three research sub-questions presented earlier. The discussion of the findings follows the same structure, after which we present the reader with a conclusive chapter that summarizes the argument and reflects upon the project.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

“It is the whole thing with technology, it completely changes dynamics of social relationships, and who is really close.”

(Focus Group Participant Susanne, 24).

To illustrate the reader why there is a need for this study and what has been said in regard to this topic, we create a funnel-like description of the premises on which this thesis is build: starting by describing the globalization of contemporary society, we will

continue by describing the development of the modern consumer society and the globalised consumer culture in order to sketch the setting in which we can further narrow down our focus. We then illustrate why social status enhancement is a key driver for consuming, as goods and experiences are highly symbolic in their use as communicators of status, making consumption one of the main practices in the lives of Westerners. Then, we move on to ‘Keeping up in a global consumer society’, where we review social comparison processes and social network anatomy, as these are key aspects of consumption practices and the way in which they function. Then, we describe the concept of ‘Keeping up with the Joneses’ more explicitly, before narrowing our focus even further down towards the digitalization and virtualization of social life of nowadays. This is where we bring the above premises together and arrive at the section that presents the research idea and intended contribution more extensively.

2.1 THE GLOBALIZATION OF CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

The world has become increasingly more globalized and there have been many debates around the consequences of globalization (e.g., (Christopherson et al., 2008) (Ekberg & Lange, 2014) (Thomas & Thompson, 2014) (Nester, 2010) (Kendall et al., 2009)). In relation to our study, one can imagine the strong effects of globalization on social comparison processes that were traditionally bound to geographic localities. However, often questioned is whether globalization is advantageous or not.

Although it is regarded as a merely positive way of spreading affluence and letting the developing world share in the riches of the affluent world (Hirst & Thompson, 1999), there are others that regard to globalization in terms of winners and losers (Stiglitz, 2003). A more extreme way of classifying the effects of globalization is viewing globalizing processes as eroding forces that undermine stable national institutions and accommodate social conflicts (Chossudovsky, 2003). Ritzer (2004) raises critique on globalization by explaining the cultural imperialist idea behind what he calls the 'McDonaldization' of society (Americanization). Ritzer illustrates a common approach to globalization that can be found throughout the literature; one that views globalization as culturally empty. Opposed to this view are those that believe that globalization accommodates cultural enrichment and reinvention (Kendall et al., 2009, p.99)

The roots of globalization have been debated too. Appadurai (1990), for example, states five global cultural flows in a metaphor of landscapes that have intensified globalization: ethno-scapes, techno-scapes, finan-scapes media-scapes and ideo-scapes. Appadurai's techno-scapes deserve additional attention with regards to our study, as it is technological advancements that are generally viewed as driving the structural changes in communication methods and social systems (Castells, 2010).

Globalization processes first began over five centuries ago when Europe began to weave to the far corners of the global system. This has continued over time and the nineteenth century is commonly referred to as the 'age of optimism' as there was a spread of scientific advancements, an increase in travel of artists and scientists, European imperialism as well as trade and industrialization (Sherman & Salisbury, 2011) (Nester, 2010, p.160). This age was followed by the 'age of anxiety' with global depression, poverty and war (Nester, 2010, p.160) (Auden, 1948). In general there is a diminishing threat of war between states, though, the international relations have not transcended politics, but proliferated it (Nester, 2010, p.13).

Visible counter-movements of globalization can be detected in the area of consumption practices, which is regarded as one of the main facilitators of globalization processes (Holt, 2002). Often, central to those movements are the increasing tensions between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization (Appadurai, 1990). Nations are pulled in two different directions, globalization and nationalism. Homogenization is often perceived as the endorsement of the "Western" values and capitalism, and often linked to eroding local culture and traditions (Belk & Ger, 1996). The most important facilitators of homogenization are often thought to be marketing and advertising (Belk & Ger, 1996) (Corrigan, 1997, p.67). This homogenization is characterised by a common language, food, fashion and entertainment across nations (Firat & Venkatesh, 1993).

Summarizing, globalization processes are of increasing relevance for understanding the world around us and may not always be beneficial. Important to keep in mind whilst reading this thesis are Appadurai's (1990) techno-scapes, as this study focuses on the global virtualisation processes. We agree with (Nester, 2010) that globalization can be detected in all kind of forms, yet we believe that in no other area globalization has taken such a leap as in the global consumption ethos, also often referred to as the consumer culture (Belk & Ger, 1996). Therefore, we will continue by looking at the relevant literature that is concerned with the consumer culture and illustrate why consumption has become such an important practice around which we construct our lives.

2.2 THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MODERN CONSUMER SOCIETY

There are many sociological theories in the field of consumer culture. Horkheimer and Adorno (1996) present the consumer as a victim of the 'culture industry'. According to them and others, standardized cultural goods are produced to manipulate society into a state of passiveness (Holt, 2002). Baudrillard (1998) sees consumer culture as represented by the 'consumption code', meaning that markets inscribe cultural meanings to commodities. The association of purchases beyond the use-value lies at the base of consumer culture (Corrigan, 1997, p.67) therefore; consumption starts to become a part of a communication system (Douglas & Isherwood, 1979, p.59) in which goods are used as symbols.

Veblen (1899) developed one of the first written critics of consumerism and a major contribution to the literature of consumption (Corrigan, 1997, p.25). Veblen argues that the demonstration of wealth is essential for showing one's good repute. One way of doing this is by 'conspicuous leisure' ('wasting' time) and the other by 'conspicuous consumption' ('wasting' money). Goods are expressive and conspicuous consumption is one way of showing one's pecuniary strength and proclaim one's place within the social structure of society (Veblen, 1899) (Bourdieu, 1984[1979]). In other words, classes are in competition, and goods are the weapons of this competition (Corrigan, 1997, p.26). The ever-greater collection of goods in excess of the basic needs, consumerism, was given a typical negative association by Packard (1960) in his book 'The Waste Makers'.

Many writers such as Hirsch (1976), Schor (1998) and Lichtenberg (1998) recognize that consumers buy more because other consumers buy more. Status can be seen as set of hierarchical relations that indicate accepted social inferiority, equality, or ideally: superiority. This Weberian view notes the importance of viewing class and status as different classifications: a social position that one holds is more important than personal qualities (Weber, 1968). Of course, buying something can signal to others that the goods are recommended to have, that they are useful or practical etcetera, but communicating status is increasingly important in buying behaviour. This way, goods are used as

signals in the efforts to claim group membership, and to create distance from other groups or classes. To understand consumption, social status is highly relevant. In their attempt to gain a higher status people try to consume more or better than others, leading to a consumer race (Dutt, 2001). The shift from utilitarian to symbolic uses of goods over the last centuries has received widespread attention over the years. Below we will present relevant literature that fits to position this paper further and to reflect upon major status-related theories.

Status-seeking and emulation or imitation has always played a big role in the creation of wants (Galbraith, 2001, p.42). In the 16th century this emulation played a big role in the spreading of consumption. Grant McCracken (1988) points out the centralization of queen Elisabeth 1 of England's realm as main factor. The nobleman found himself in a new position within society (in London, outside his periphery) where he now had to travel in order to receive their royal goods and had to stand out in the crowd of other noblemen. The new, the up-to-date and the different was what made them stand out, drawing them "...into a riot of consumption" (McCracken, 1988, p.12) (Corrigan, 1997, p.3) leading to the birth of fashion and the clear distinction of classes (Corrigan, 1997, p.4). This has been a main driver for emulation, as the noblemen looked different from their subordinates now, who in their turn tried to keep up with the noblemen, by trying to equal their style.

During the 18th century, the spread of consumption changed from a political foundation to an economic foundation, from McCracken's (1988) 'elite consumption' to mass consumption after the industrial revolution (Corrigan, 1997, p.8). Consumption was accepted as the driving force of economy and goods became a great index of one's social rank. The possibility to easily shift ranks within society has greatly influenced emulative consumption (McKendrick et al., 1982). The lower classes tried their best to imitate the consumption patterns of the upper-class, who in their turn would then change it to make sure they kept their social distance. The upper-classes demands became increasingly more influenced by marketing and advertising which further increased the change from spending for the use value, to spending for the 'fashion-value' (Corrigan, 1997, p.8 & 9).

Fashion is a great example of consumption rivalry. As stated by Georg Simmel "[f]ashion is a form of imitation and social equalization" (1957, p.541). Simmel sees the individual and society in a dualistic way, social on the one hand and individualistic on the other. We strive for heredity, in the form of generalization, as well as we strive for variation to differentiate ourselves. This explains the constant change of consumption, in Simmel's case fashion, but can be seen in all goods: "[g]oods are neutral, their uses social, they can be used as fences or bridges" (Douglas & Isherwood, 1979, p.12), which suggests a Weberian notion of social status. Consumers buy products and brands to differentiate

from people they do not want to be identified with, but also buy products and brands to imitate the persons they are attracted to. This notion will remain present throughout this research.

Simmel's theory (1957) that the lower class imitates the upper class style and the upper class changes that in turn to differentiate themselves, has later become known as the 'trickle-down theory' (Corrigan, 1997, pp.170-71). We argue however with McCracken (1988, p.94) that fashion or products do not trickle down to a passive group but that the lower group is actively chasing, imitating and therefore forcing the higher group to change, which he termed a 'chase and flight' pattern.

Consumption behaviour and consumer practice continued to develop throughout the late 18th and the 19th century in what Campbell (1983, p.281) calls 'modern consumption'. In the modern consumption society, the consumer is obliged to want 'to want' under all circumstances; it is frowned upon if someone does not want to consume more and more, if someone is not interested in new wants and desires.

As has been described above, emulation has played an essential role in the development of the consumer culture as of the 16th century. In today's globalized society this social rivalry extends from local to global consumption competition and imitation. Global mass media, tourism, immigrants and international marketing activities of transnational firms are examples of developments that fuel consumer expectations and desires (Belk & Ger, 1996). The internet provides communication methods for people around the globe so reference frames are not limited to geographical space and time zones anymore (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006). SNS make it possible to extend our social network worldwide (Castells, 2010). SNS therefore have further increased our possible frame of reference to mirror our consumption behaviour, for better or worse (e.g. (Chou & Edge, 2012)). It is important to note that consumerism is not applicable to the entire globe and all its inhabitants (Schot, 2001). This paper therefore has a particular focus on the developed world of the West, to which the research topic is most applicable.

These global developments, we believe, also influence what is stated by Galbraith as 'relative consumption'. He stresses the importance of relative consumption in explaining the increase in consumption. Galbraith stresses the role of emulation in making consumers keep up with, or get ahead of the consumption of others (Pressman, 2011). The manner in which needs are fulfilled is also the manner in which they are created. Or as stated by Galbraith: "*[t]he more wants are satisfied, the more new ones are born*" (Galbraith, 1975, p.5). This is part of the 'dependence effect' which states that demands are not created by consumers, like the basic needs of food and shelter, but are pushed by marketing and advertising, a common critique towards consumerism (Packard, 1960). Firms create demands for people, which make them consume more without being better off as their demands

were artificially created (Dutt, 2008). Bauman (2013, p.47) argues that we live in the era of 'inbuilt obsolescence', in which people always look to goods for their gratification and in which needs and desires are satisfied only in a way that creates new needs and desires.

Escaping this consumption sphere has seen some brave attempts, but it is bound to be temporal and local and even non-consumption efforts are based on comparative characteristics such as creativity (Kozinets, 2002) and this resistance, according to Holt (2002) "...is actually a form of market-sanctioned cultural experimentation through which the market rejuvenates itself..." (p.89).

Summarizing, we illustrated the development of the modern consumer society; a society in which goods are of significant importance and in which consumption is a vital part of the communication system. We discussed how globalization processes have influenced this consumption ethos by expanding people's reference frames and that marketing and advertising can reach a worldwide audience. We also noted that marketing and advertising actively push the creation of wants, and that the desire to 'keep up' is strongly present in a consumer society. With more and more people to keep up with, social comparison becomes more intense. But how does social comparison work in practice and whom do people compare with? The following section discusses this in more detail and explains the role of other people in social comparison processes, which will logically flow into the discussion of 'Keeping up with the Joneses'.

2.3 SOCIAL COMPARISON IN PRACTICE

Influential human behaviour theorists such as Festinger (1954), Bourdieu (1984) and Veblen (1899) have argued that social influence processes and socially competitive consumption behaviour both are directly linked to the need for self-evaluation based on comparison with other - often similar - persons. According to Festinger, the difference between social comparison of public opinions (such as publicly stated morals and values) and the comparison of displayed abilities (such as financial resources or skills) is distinct. He argues that changing one's abilities in order to keep up is much more challenging than changing one's opinion. Even though Festinger's theory of social comparison has received many extensions and reconceptualization, it is still regarded as one of the most influential theories in regards to this topic (Kruglanski & Mayseless, 1990). The extensions mainly focus on other motives relating to comparison such as self-enhancement and validation but do not disprove the core of Festinger's theory that is described above (Kruglanski & Mayseless, 1990).

In their reflection on classical social comparison literature, Kruglanski & Mayseless (1990, p.195) conclude that there seems to be a general agreement on at least three aspects of it: 1) levels of similarity are crucial for comparison efforts, 2) people have a general and pervasive drive to compare to others, and 3) the process of comparison differs for opinions and abilities. Relevant for this paper

is Festinger's finding that there is a stronger need to compare on the ability level (goods, resources, education etc.) than to compare opinions.

Similar conclusions are drawn by Kendall, Woodward and Skrbis (2009) in their account on cosmopolitanism - being a 'citizen of the world'-, focusing primarily on cultural and political aspects of globalization. We argue with Appadurai (1986, p.27) that cosmopolitanism can be seen as a '*...transcultural phenomenon, where the production and consumption of particular goods across cultures is the major process by which the other is experienced.*' This illustrates the important role of goods for identifying cultural differences and establishing social classes or hierarchy (Douglas & Isherwood, 1979). Consumption goods and consumption behaviour play a vital role in one's efforts for self-evaluation when '*...objective physical bases are unavailable*' (Festinger, 1954, p.119), e.g. a single scale for taste does not exist. Thus, relativity and subjective-ness are key aspects of social comparison and their notions have undergone significant expansion through globalization.

Over time, there have been many forms of socially constructed human interaction and comparison. As described earlier, globalization aided by technological advancements has made our world smaller, and our networks bigger. The desire to expand networks comes forth from the idea that social capital is reflected in "*the resources available to people through their social interactions* (Lin, 2001); (Putnam, 2000))" in (Valenzuela et al., 2009, p.877). The bigger and more diverse one's network is, the more social capital is available to empower one's social status. Social capital is usually the result of standard daily interactions but conscious investments in social interaction are also found to be a possible way of increasing one's social capital (Resnick, 2002). This strongly relates to cosmopolitan theories, often suggested to be a dominant consumer attitude that is both created and sustained by the globalized contemporary marketplace (Thompson & Tambyah, 1999). Holt (1997), as well as Thompson and Tambyah (1999) note that social status or capital can be acquired through adopting cosmopolitan lifestyle attributes that include more exotic and exciting goods and experiences. Think of the consumption of African culture through travel, the consumption of Eastern religions along with yoga and the like, as well as millions of students that consume education abroad. As travel is a typical representation of strangeness and exotic excitement (Belk, 1998), it plays a vital role in being cosmopolitan; whether it is in tourism, living, studying or working abroad. In this sense, having a rich, global and diverse social network would indicate a cosmopolitan stance towards life, one that would enhance cultural capital and social status.

The desire to build a rich network appears to be barely constrained by geographical or economic factors in contemporary society, due to digitalization and globalization processes. Relations can now be obtained and, maintained across borders. The maintenance of social relations seems highly

important for social well-being; Baumeister and Leary have noted there is reason to believe that *"...people strongly and generally resist the dissolution of relationships and social bonds. Moreover, this resistance appears to go well beyond rational considerations of practical or material advantage."* (1995, p.503). Boyd and Ellison (2007) found that sustaining contact with existing friends and acquaintances is a more important reason for being on SNS than making new friends. Not being able to keep in touch with friends is thus experienced as inconvenient. However, this purely social tendency is subject to controversy: regardless the level of intimacy in a relationship, some form of competition or rivalry is always present (Hoffman et al., 1954).

According to Wellman (1981), social networks *"... provide a way of describing social relationships, linkages, or patterns of ties, and the flow of resources between individuals."*(Wellman, 1981). As stated earlier, social networks form the basis and the means for self-evaluation and social comparison. Hoffman, Festinger and Lawrence (1954) have used game theory to analyse the roots of social comparison and relative well-being. They argue that a person's concern about his or her social status relative to other group members is an important motivation in bargaining situations, even more important than getting the maximum amount of symbolic objects of status or ratings (e.g. goods, income). In other words, for a middle-class single mom, the success of her attempts of keeping up with the products or services that her reference group (i.e. moms with a similar living and dwelling situation) can afford is a stronger influence on her relative well-being than her comparison with rich movie stars. We adapt our reference frame to one that is likely to be favourable to our situation to reduce feelings of inferiority: downward comparison rather than upward comparison (Guyen & Sorensen, 2012), and the need to compare to others merely by reflecting on their consumption is so deeply embedded that it seems impossible to escape (Veblen, 1899) (Bourdieu, 1984) (Mussweiler, 2009).

Thus far, in this chapter we have highlighted some fundamental principles of social comparison and illustrated why both people and their goods are vital to position ourselves in society. We have discussed why our reference frame determines for a large part our level of subjective well-being, as well as that social capital is reflected in one's network, which is why there is a desire to build large and diverse networks. Given the illustrated importance of networks, we now take a closer look specifically at networks, reference frames, their anatomy and their comparative uses.

Traditionally, a social network is viewed to consist of different social ties or communities with different relational levels and the identification of one's network is largely dependent on the criteria for inclusion being used. Different scholars have investigated how networks are constituted and which types of ties have what function. As these investigations are sometimes referred to as

'reference frame research' and sometimes as 'network analysis', we will use these terms interchangeably. We will discuss some prominent literature related to reference frames that has emerged over the years.

Litwalk and Szelenyi (1969) argue that technological developments are the drivers behind what can be called 'erosive forces' on the traditional primary group structure, those with whom we can have direct contact. However, they argue, it is also these technological developments that allow easier communication over distance and easier acceptance in groups (Litwalk & Szelenyi, 1969, p.465). They discuss the functions of kin, neighbours, and friends, all being primary groups. The 'nuclear family group' (i.e. husband, wife and young children) fits the primary group attributes best as they offer face-to-face, affective, non-instrumental, permanent and often institutionalized relationships (p.469). The neighbour has frequent face-to-face contact as a distinguishing factor, and is especially useful for services based on territoriality and often is called upon last-minute (p.470). Kinship relationships and neighbours are especially suitable for communalities because of their fairly fixed character (bloodline, legal or geographically bonded) whereas friends are especially suitable for particularities, e.g. leisure. Because friendships are distinguished on the basis of affection and mutual interests, they are likely to have a stronger influence on fluctuating matters such as fashion (p.471).

Ekström (2010) argues that different reference groups are important at different life stages. According to Ekström, the family is generally the most influential reference group, although this depends on levels of closeness and interaction. During teenage years, friends tend to become more important in relation to (consumption) behaviour and Ekström states the general importance of Bourne's (1957) argument that exclusive products and visible commodities are subject to influence from reference groups. Ekström (2010, p.382) presents three different kinds of reference groups: memberships groups (formal, such as clubs, or informal, like families), aspiration groups (certain subcultures such as Hells Angels or various committees) and finally there are dissociative groups that people avoid to be identified with. Problematic with this view we think is the classification of friends, as they are not typified by memberships or by aspiration groups, but are most certainly a reference group. For, friendship can also be singular relationships with people that are not by definition aspired, or are official members of formal or informal groups.

Based on earlier research (Burnkrant & Cousineau, 1975), Assael (1992), in Ekström (2010), created a model in which different types of influence were set out (informational, comparative and normative). As this paper focuses on social comparison efforts, Assael's account on comparative influence is important. According to Assael (1992), the objective of comparison is self-maintenance and enrichment. This comparative behaviour is based on identification, and Ekström (2010) notes that

consumer goods play a major role in this. Additionally, normative influences can be important when certain goods or standards of living need to be displayed before one is being accepted in a group or neighbourhood (Ekström, 2010). All of this relates to grand theories such as Bourdieu's and Veblen's that appear to remain highly applicable in contemporary conceptualizations of social processes.

Having discussed relevant literature of networks and reference frames, we will now narrow our focus down to a specific form of social comparison, namely, the social interaction with neighbours in a consumer society. As a reference point for social comparison, the neighbours - or 'Joneses' - are especially interesting because their role is perhaps most affected by virtualization and globalization processes over the past few decades. Studying the neighbour can therefore serve the overall purpose of this study hence, the next section is devoted to elaborating on the neighbour as a social construct.

2.4 KEEPING UP WITH THE JONESES.

Wellman (1992) states that social networks are largely constructed by friends, neighbours, relatives, and workmates. All of these different ties appear to have systematic different functions (Lin et al., 1986) (House et al., 1988) (Wellman & Wortley, 1990). In terms of social support, kinship seems most supportive whereas the voluntary character of friendships seems to be a significant barrier for giving and receiving social and emotional support (Wellman, 1992). The neighbour (and co-workers) are typically less voluntarily and intimate relationships but because of frequent interaction (Walker, 1977) (Wellman et al., 1988) it can be argued that they do improve social support, raise mutual awareness of needs and resources, and moderate feelings of loneliness (e.g. (Homans, 1961) (Galaskiewicz, 1985)). As an effect, neighbours can provide grounds for identification, self-reflection and feelings of belonging (Weiss, 1974) (1987). This theory is further developed by scholars such as Luttmer (2005) and Guven and Sørensen (2012) that argue the neighbour's income significantly affects individual well-being. For example, a British study published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation showed that parents of low-income households make considerable sacrifices in their own spending so their children can keep up with the consumption of their peers (Middleton et al., 1997). These processes, as argued before, are increasingly based on consumption practices and standards as we have seen earlier on. In the words of John Kenneth Galbraith: "[o]ne man's consumption becomes his neighbors' wish." (1958, p.154).

These comparative and normative influences are especially interesting when it comes to neighbouring. In line with Galbraith (1958) words, Assael (1992) found that "...ownership increases in multiples as a function of group influence and product visibility." (Assael, 1992, p.149), as cited in (Ekström, 2010, p.383). Assael refers to this as 'the social multiplier effect', indicating the copy-cat

behaviour that is being manifested through consumption practices. More commonly, this effect is referred to as 'Keeping up with the Joneses' (Guven & Sorensen, 2012).

Perhaps the most influential paper written on the effect is that of Whyte (1954), (also referred to by Assael (1992)); a study that showed the clustering of consumption as a symbol of status among neighbours, driven both by the visibility as well as the word of mouth, for instance air conditioning in the 50's. Studying the neighbour is therefore an effective way of studying social interactions because imitative behaviour is more or less concentrated and visible which makes it easier to study. Other, more recent studies have shown that the social multiplier effect is still significant, (e.g. (Glaeser et al., 2003)), and the theory is also applied to fields outside of marketing, e.g. finance (Galbiati & Zanella, 2012). A recent example is how utility companies put the social multiplier in practice by sending homeowners assessments of their energy consumption, in comparison to their neighbours. The neighbours have a similar sized home and energy supplies. Whenever the neighbour ranks lower on average on utility usage he gets a 'smiley face' on the bill, when not, a 'frowny face' is portrayed. This system works, as a severe reduction of energy is noticed. This system triggers and challenges homeowners to keep up with their 'smiley face' neighbours (Kukral, 2009), a typical example of 'Keeping up with the Joneses'.

As a common reference group for comparison and an important influence on subjective well-being, the neighbour is an interesting social construct for studying the relation between happiness, belonging, and consumption. We expect the traditional notion of the neighbour to be subject of change due to globalization, urbanization and digitalization. In order to demonstrate this, let us first look at the traditional notion of the neighbour and how it has developed over time in the literature.

Overall, there was an increased interest in social relations in neighbourhoods during the 50's and 60's, triggered by urbanization processes (e.g.(Mann, 1954) (Bell & Boat, 1957) (Gans, 1968) (Keller, 1968)). Increased expansion of social networks outside the boundaries of the neighbourhood created an interest in social ties and communities from a wider perspective in the twenty years thereafter (e.g. (Effrat, 1973) (Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974) (Hunter, 1979) (Wellman, 1979) (Strickland, 1979) (Fischer, 1982).

Sampson, Morenoff and Gannon-Rowley (2002) state on the basis of Park's (1916) notion; the neighbourhood is "...a spatially defined area influenced by ecological, cultural and sometimes political forces". In 1985, Unger and Wandersman wrote the following about the role of neighbours in people's lives: "[n]eighbours are simply defined by proximity: the people who live next door, the people who live on the block. The close spatial location of neighbours makes them particularly unique to perform functions which other network members would find difficult. Neighbours often serve as

support systems for individuals providing emotional and material aid. They may foster a sense of identification and serve as a buffer from the feelings of isolation often associated with today's cities." (Unger & Wandersman, 1985, p.141).

In a study on neighbourhood literature between the mid-1990s and 2001, Sampson et al. (2002) found that by that time, most studies on neighbourhoods still relied on geographic boundaries as defined by administrative agencies. However, most of these studies are American and are not particularly focussed on social comparison processes in regards to consumption, but rather to other collective social capital processes such as trust, social control, violence and depression.

As we have seen, society has been subject to rapid change over the past decades and this trend is likely to continue. Returning to the starting point of this chapter, there is reason to believe that 'Keeping up with the Joneses', is still a relevant notion of the comparative and normative influences exerted by those that are within close proximity of individuals. However, we believe that the notion of proximity has changed as through digitalization the world has become much smaller. For instance, social interaction takes place ever more in virtual environments due to technological advancements and social media, accelerating change in socio-cultural constructs (e.g. (Acar, 2008) (Muis et al., 2009) (Castells, 2010)). The foundations (locality, visible goods, and creating distinction) that lie on the basis of the working and effect of the social multiplier have undergone changes and expansion over the past decades, as we have seen in the previous chapters. New forms of communication and social interaction arise and therefore, the next chapter discusses this increasingly digital and virtual social world before moving on to a more detailed formulation of the reasons that motivated us to undertake this research endeavour.

2.5 THE DIGITALIZATION AND VIRTUALIZATION OF SOCIAL LIFE

The dynamics of social systems are built upon human groups or actors that at the same time re-create the social system with their practices and communications (Giddens, 1984) (Fuchs, 2003). Giddens (1984) has called this 'the duality of structure'; "*the structural properties of social systems are both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organise*" (Giddens, 1984, p.25). In other words, structure is dependent on the knowledge that agents have about what to do in their day-to-day activity (Giddens, 1984, p.26), and social systems are continuously re-creating themselves.

In today's society, collective identities and institutions such as families, churches, unions, clubs, neighbourhoods etc. that were traditionally used for identification and socialization are subject to corrosive forces such as individualization and digitalization. In his book 'The Internet Galaxy' (2001), Castells argued that the disintegration of the traditional nuclear family - as stated before - results in

networked individualism. Authors such as Van Dijk (2006) also stress that more individuals will spend more and more time online, although he notes that this may not necessarily be non-social.

Thomson (1995, p.82) argued that digitalization processes have altered the organization of social life, and that this trend creates new forms of relationships and novel ways of interacting and relating to one another. It is evident that these new forms of communication help the social systems re-create themselves and alter social concepts like identity and community; blurring geographical and cultural boundaries and expanding social networks and communications (Tubella, 2005). Contrary the traditional face-to-face interactions, the internet, expands relationships into space and perhaps even in time (thinking of time zones). Here, the internet in the form of Web 2.0 is especially different because it allows active two-way dialogues (user-generated content and interaction), whereas newspapers, television and radio are one-way forms of mass communication that typically place the consumer of that media in a passive and receptive position. Expanded communication opportunities are perhaps among the most important aids for identity building. Here, there is a difference between individual identity and collective identity, the former relating to the sense of oneself as single unit, and the latter relating to that self as a part of something collective (Tubella, 2005, p.257). Identity building becomes more and more an individual project: *"[i]nternet influences the construction of individual identity, as individuals increasingly rely on their own resources to construct a coherent identity for themselves in an open project of self-formation as a symbolic project through the utilization of symbolic materials available to them."* (Tubella, 2005, p.258).

The tendency to rely on individual resources for identity construction with the help of myriad symbolic materials can be assigned to various factors (Fuchs & Gasse, 2006). For example, it can be assigned to the Western economic system, i.e. global capitalism and its knowledge-intensive labour: *"...it is less homogenous than industrial labour which has resulted in less homogenous ways of work and life that allow less points and situations of common identification."* (Fuchs & Gasse, 2006, p.33). Then there are political roots, such as the neo-liberal deregulations that create the idea that not so much the state, but individuals themselves are responsible for, and more or less free in the creation of their own well-being through freedom of choice. As noted earlier, traditional social forms of collective identity start to fade and a social environment arises in which individuals view colleagues, friends, neighbours, classmates, etc. primarily as competitors (e.g. (Fuchs & Gasse, 2006) (Van Dijk, 2006) (Muisse et al., 2009)). In these competitive and comparative efforts, people use an ever increasing load of commodities that are the result of a global capitalism that promotes on-going growth and diversity in consumer products. *"...[i]ndividuals [that] are special and have specific needs and desires that commodity consumption promises to fulfil."* (Fuchs & Gasse, 2006, p.33). Other scholars such as Giddens (1991) link the individualization of society to the plurality of choices that

individuals are faced with (also (Schwartz, 2004)), the global media, the different experts that should or should not be trusted, and the changing levels of intimacy.

Despite the individualization processes that alter traditional collective identity structures, people may not be as ego-centred as suggested above. An extensive body of literature exists that discusses virtual communities, although definitions are divergent. The reason for this is that there is interest in virtual communities from many different fields, ranging from sociology to medicine and business practice, with varying intentions and approaches (Li, 2004). Here, the classic theory on community of Ferdinand Tönnies (1912), who identifies *Gemeinschaft* or 'community', (the intimate, nearby) and *Gesellschaft* or 'society', (the distant, public life) is important (Tönnies, 1967). Lin (2004) argues that virtual communities can be related to what Tönnies refers to as 'communities of mind', rather than communities of kinship or locality, the other two '*Gemeinschafts*' he identifies (Tönnies, 1967). Some business scholars define the virtual community as "*mediated social spaces in the digital environment that allow groups to form and be sustained primarily through on-going communication processes.*" (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002, p.3) or as "*a virtual community is similar to a community of mind described by Tönnies (1967), except that it forms through an electronic communication medium and is not bound by space and time.*" (Rothaermel & Siguiyama, 2001, p.299). Li (2004) refers to sociologists Etzioni and Etzioni (1999) who define a virtual community as one that has two essential elements; bonding, and the evolving of a shared culture (2004, p.2710). We view communities and networks as dynamic phenomena that are under various pressures that stem from individualization, virtualization, and other changes in contemporary social systems. We take a social concept that applied social comparison psychology to traditional communities (i.e. the traditional neighbourhood) and attempt to capture some of the whirling dynamics of social constructs and interaction that take place in what Etzioni and Etzioni call the 'hybrid' communication system that combines face-to-face interaction and computer-mediated communication (1999, pp.246-47).

Summarizing, we find that intensified social comparison processes can be credited to various factors, including political neoliberalism, technological advancements and individualized identity projects.

3. RESEARCH IDEA AND INTENDED CONTRIBUTION

In order to investigate the complex social dynamics in times of globalization and virtualization of society, we give a comprehensive and compact overview of the additional literature that has been reviewed for this research endeavour, simultaneously illustrating the reasons for undertaking this project that arise from the literature.

When thinking about ‘Keeping up with the Joneses’, we realized that ‘the neighbour’, as a social construct has changed significantly during the emergence of digital friendships and SNS, as these have caused important changes in the notion of ‘proximity’ or ‘nearness’, as well as in perceptions of what is real as opposed to virtual. To shed light upon the complexity of social comparison processes in contemporary society, we attempt to answer the following question: **‘How do virtualization and globalization processes in contemporary consumer society alter the working of the social multiplier’?** From this questions, several sub-questions arise that relate to the three literature findings below and break the main question down in manageable pieces that structure the paper:

- 1) **Why do people consume Social Networking Sites?**
- 2) **What is the current setting of social comparison that evolves from globalization and virtualization processes?**
- 3) **What are the effects of the social multiplier in contemporary consumer society?**

We believe that the altered working of the social multiplier opens a partly unexplored, yet interesting research opportunity concerning the interplay between globalization, virtualization, social media, cultural capital and the neighbour as a social benchmark for identity and status. Examining the literature on these topics, there are three specific findings that we connect and to which we credit the intensification of social comparison process. We conclude that the following three factors are all partly unexplored: the development of selective self-presentation on SNS, the fundamental changes in the perception of nearness and remoteness, the need for social evolution in times of rapid change.

1. The development of selective self-presentations on SNS. As we have seen, the traditional social multiplier theory is built upon that what is visible to direct neighbours, tangible, and to a large extent hard to hide, think for example of the car people possess. However, as relationships are increasingly created and maintained in virtual environments, people get to choose what others see; there is selective self-presentation, allowing for people to create and access countless idealized selves (Dominick, 1999) (Ellison et al., 2006) (Walther, 2007) (Muisse et al., 2009) (Haferkamp & Krämer, 2011) (Chou & Edge, 2012). If the social multiplier still is in function, it would mean that the level on which people compare has been raised tremendously during the rise of virtual networking platforms that have altered the traditional network anatomies (Salimkhan et al., 2010). Some scholars have noted the negative relation between self-selected identities and individual well-being (e.g. (Valkenburg et al., 2006) (Acar, 2008)). Additionally, with technologies becoming more accessible for almost all income and age levels, technical skills become less of an issue: more important is how people let technology serve in their creative and innovative efforts; how they put them to use (Bennett, 2012). With social networking becoming a skill in itself (Forest & Wood, 2012), going as far

as personal branding strategies, there surely is a need for qualitative endeavours to create a deeper understanding of the dynamics around self-presentation and social comparison in contemporary society.

2. The fundamental changes in the perception of nearness and remoteness. We have seen that major developments in technology, communication, transportation, and globalized lifestyles impose significant changes in the structure and perception of neighbouring (Wellman, 1979). Already in the 60's, Keller stated: "[t]here may be a shift from a neighboring of place to neighboring of taste". (Keller, 1968, p.61), referring to the increased utilitarian attitude of people seeking better jobs, better space, and better facilities. Therefore the sentimental character of a locally constructed community seemed to diminish during urbanisation and globalization processes and social and work environments were and are still increasingly being created outside of the neighbourhood boundaries (Keller, 1968, p.123) (Wellman, 1979). Later, Fischer (1982) also wrote about how urbanization provides us with opportunities for social endeavours that would have effects on potential ties with direct neighbours. However, findings such as those of Middleton et al. (1997), Luttmer (2005), and Guven and Sørensen's (2012) suggest that neighbours still play a significant role in people's lives in contemporary society, an argument that is similar to that of Unger and Wandersman (1985) who set out the social, cognitive and affective components of neighbouring. As it seems that neighbour tie functions are subject to dramatic changes over the past decades, we identified a need for deeper understanding of the perception of neighbours, their function and their role as 'the Joneses'.

3. The need for social evolution in times of rapid change. As we have seen in our reflection of the changing dynamics around networks and social comparison, there is always a need for adaption to new social structures and ways of communicating. During the last decade, many scholars have raised awareness around the ways in which people are able to cope with emerging communication technologies and information systems. Marc Prensky (2001) is perhaps the most influential writer of the 21st century on this topic so far that has raised awareness for the term 'digital native'; referring to the generation that grows up within a society largely dependent on internet-related facilities and is literate and engaged with these technologies. This group consists of young people born after the widespread immersion of the internet in Western societies and is also labelled 'the Net Generation' (Tapscott, 1999), 'generation I' (Microsoft, 1999), or 'millennials' (Howe & Strauss, 2000) and recently has also been labelled the 'Google Generation' (Nielsen, 2009). However, the term 'digital native' has often been (unjustly) used to address the entire youth generation whereas there is supportive evidence that personal traits rather than age influence one's familiarity with technology (Dede, 2005). Even though youths and grownups may not differ so much in their adaptation, there is very obvious evidence that society as a whole has changed significantly, affecting both those that are new to it, and those that were already part of it (Nielsen, 2009). We have noticed a rise of a post-

internet generation that indicates overall discontent with social structures and identity construction that primarily take place in the World Wide Web (Kross et al., 2013). Some psychological issues have been discussed by a growing amount of social scientists (Bessiere et al., 2008) (Burke et al., 2010). Even though there is some evidence towards social network use and increased life satisfaction (Valenzuela et al., 2009), these problems are especially emergent in recent years and are primarily being addressed in various journals in the field of (cyber) psychology, digital communications, and other behavioural sciences (Kim et al., 2009) (Haferkamp & Kramer, 2011) (Chou & Edge, 2012) (Manago et al., 2012) (Bindley, 2013). We find, like e.g. Bennett (2012) noted, that these issues have primarily been subject to survey-based research and that in-depth qualitative research is necessary to *“truly account for the rich array of activities and practices with technology”* (Bennett, 2012, p.10).

Theoretical frame

To address these concerns, we draw upon the theories that were described throughout this chapter - from influential marketing theory (Whyte, 1954) as well as from sociologists in regards to social practice (Veblen, 1899) (Bourdieu, 1984) (Douglas & Isherwood, 1979) and social networks (Castells, 2001) (Wellman, 1992) that *“... are critical to advancing understanding in this area.”* (Bennett & Maton, 2010, p.10). However, we are also partly inspired by the work of John Urry (2001), who argues that sociology as being the study of society is passé in the globalized world. He argues that in order to understand the ‘post-societal’ era we must forget social structures from before the global world order and focus on the movements of people, objects, ideas, imagery etcetera. across borders and the effect of this mobilization on the perception of time, space, and citizenship. As we believe that Urry raises important awareness for the magnitude of the changes in social structure over the past few decades, we seek to collect and analyse our data in an open-minded fashion. However, we are still taking into account established social theories and testing them to our data as we believe that these theories are fundamental enough to stand the test of time. We strongly believe that these grand theories are important, if not necessary, in the process of creation understanding of social processes that are deeply embedded in humans and that have remained unchanged over centuries, though manifested differently.

Summarizing, there are three specific findings that we connect and to which we credit the intensification of social comparison processes. We have created the setting for our research question and introduced the topics of investigation, as well as the theoretical frame. We will continue by elaborating on the strategic approach for this investigation.

4. METHODOLOGY

This chapter aims to demonstrate the reader our research process. We will explain and motivate our choice of methodological framework most suitable to our research problem and purpose. Subsequently, our research strategy and the most suitable method to answer our research question will be discussed. We will motivate the choice of sample group and describe the recruiting process of participants. We will show how we have analysed the data that resulted in the empirical findings of this research, after which we discuss the limitations of the design.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

People use social constructions to understand the world around them (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012, pp.23,24). According to Jost and Kruglanski (2002), this is suitable view when trying to understand complex structures and human behaviour. We believe in the distinctiveness of people and therefore want to focus our research on the understanding of consumer behaviour (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.16). This approach is referred to by Max Weber as the '*Verstehen approach*' in which he describes sociology as: "*A science which attempts the interpretive understanding of social action in order to arrive at a causal explanation of its course and effects*" (Weber, 1947, p.88). We want to draw attention to the notion of *interpretive understanding*. Our social constructionist stance will help us to gain knowledge, yet that is not enough to find an satisfying answer to our research question. We therefore take an interpretive epistemological stance as well in which we can use the knowledge gained to interpret the socially constructed reality. By taking this interpretative stance, we can take into account the subjective meaning of social action (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.17).

4.2 RESEARCH STRATEGY

In line with our research philosophy of interpretative social constructionism, we have chosen for a qualitative approach of our study. We are interested in personal perceptions that are based on beliefs, understandings and feelings. To get a thorough understanding and capture the richness of those feelings and experiences an approach based on language is needed. Social constructionism focuses on the ways in which people make sense of the world through sharing experiences with others via the medium of language (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012, p.23). Through the use of language individual meanings and stories can become 'tangible' for others. Therefore, we strongly believe a research design concerned with words rather than numbers (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.386) is most suitable for our research.

Qualitative research has become mainstream in the research area and is an attractive and fruitful way of doing research. It will allow us to represent the views and perspectives of the participants and will help us to create insight into their experiences (Yin, 2011, p.8). Our qualitative approach will

minimize intrusion by artificial research and encourage the representation of the different views and perspectives of the participants (Yin, 2011, p.8). Commonly, an inductive strategy is associated in order to link data with theory in a qualitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.13). Our research will take this approach as well.

Qualitative research has some elements that can unease other researchers. Bryman and Bell (2011, p.389) state two main reasons. Firstly, the inclusion of language as a form of qualitative research implies a great variability on the methods that can be used. Secondly, the connection between theory and research is somewhat more ambiguous than in quantitative research. As stated by Silverman (1993, p.24), qualitative research concerns greater issues with validity and reliability. By means of this chapter we will create transparency by describing as detailed as possible the way the participants were selected, how we used the qualitative methods and how we analysed the data. This will build trustworthiness and reduce the issues concerning validity and reliability (Yin, 2011, pp.19-20). Generalizability of qualitative research and the accomplishing methods is often discussed (Bryman & Bell, 2011, pp.61,66,409,505). We understand that our research does not represent the whole population, as the population of our research, now only taking into account Facebook as social media platform of digitalization, already contains 1.23 billion people (Smith, 2014) . Even with a substantial larger sample representativeness criteria would be hard to meet. Our aim therefore, is not to generalize our theory on this entire population but on the quality of the theoretical inferences made out of our data, the effect that our new learnings will have on what is already known and assumed to be true.

Even though qualitative data has critiques we believe this strategy is most suited to our research topic and offers the best way to answer our research question. Furthermore, qualitative research has as unique benefits to engage participants more actively and offers us the opportunity to probe and therefore this approach can reach beyond initial responses (Burns & Bush, 2010, p.234).

4.3 RESEARCH APPROACH

Burns and Bush (2010, p.57) identify three types of research approaches. exploratory research, descriptive research and causal research. For our research we choose to implement an exploratory approach as the effect of globalization on the social multiplier has not been researched in this fashion yet, and the exploratory approach is considered most suitable to identify topics where little is known about. Exploratory research is concerned with the unstructured and informal manner of collecting information (Burns & Bush, 2010, p.57). The choice of a flexible research design can strengthen a study's validity (Yin, 2011, p.10) and is very well in line and closely related with our qualitative research strategy (Burns & Bush, 2010, p.57).

Data Collection Aim

We aim to collect linguistically rich data. This offers a solid basis for an interpretive and inductive analysis (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012) (Alevesson, 2003). Ideally, this approach will lead to new insights to better understand the cultural phenomena concerning social competition. Given the scope of this project, we include a relatively small sample in our research. Our research will therefore likely result in a rather local theory. We will be very satisfied with identifying local understanding as well, as many scholars have argued, that local knowledge can be more important in for example explaining social behaviour. Generalized statements about the social world are likely to contain assumptions masking relations of power between those who formulate the theories and those to whom they are implied (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012, p.66). However, we believe that this local theory is representative for European countries as our participants have various European nationalities.

4.4 RESEARCH METHOD

Qualitative research can take many empirical research forms that can differ from each other considerably (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.387). We have considered many available methods, in particular we have strongly considered using a diary method for this research.

Diaries would have been a good way to involve many participants as there is a great amount of freedom and the researcher can move from the one to the other participant (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012, p.134). This has been regarded as very beneficial to gather substantially rich data in the limited amount of time available for this project. However, we have discovered several disadvantages that withheld us from using this method. For example, a diary approach includes a process of attrition. This could affect our participants in such a way that the diarist would become less diligent and would fail to record details quickly so that memory problems set in (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.244). As we recognize the importance of body language and intonation we find it not only important what people say but also how they say it, which diaries do not allow (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.506). Lastly, and for us the main reason not to use this method, is that diaries do not take subconscious information processing into account (Bowers et al., 1990). SNS have already been deeply embedded in our culture and therefore, many people use it automatically. As we want to discover the underlying thoughts, sometimes even subconscious thoughts, diaries were not deemed the most suitable method for this analysis as we need to trigger the participants to actively reflect on their behaviour.

Focus Groups

We discovered our need for a method that allowed us to time-efficiently gather rich data, in a manner that allowed us to probe, take into account body language and nuances of the participants' language, and help us to generate a deeper understanding to serve our research purpose. We

conclude that given the research question, the strategy, and the need for rich narrative data focus groups are most suitable to conduct this research.

The focus group is defined by Yin (2011, p.309) as *“A form of data collection whereby the researcher convenes a small group of people having similar attributes, experiences, or “focus” and leads the group in a nondirective manner. The objective is to surface the perspectives of the people in the group with as minimal influence by the researcher as possible.”*. The idea of our focus group method is that the group process will help people to explore and clarify their views.

Through the focus group the participants can work alongside us, which can take us in new and often unexpected directions (Kitzinger, 1995). This makes it interesting for us as the influence of digitalization on social structure and specifically on the neighbour has not been deeply researched yet. Additionally, we chose for a focus group approach as it has been successfully used in marketing research but is also increasingly used in social sciences (Morgan & Krueger, 1993, pp.3-19) as our research project touches upon both fields. Focus groups are an economical way of tapping into the views of a number of people (Morgan & Krueger, 1993, p.5). Conducting focus group interviews would therefore allow us to gather rich data, and more data than could be achieved by one-to-one interviews; thus creating synergy. Furthermore, they encourage a greater degree of spontaneity. The group can provide a ‘safe’ forum as participants do not have to sit one-on-one with the researcher (Fern, 1983), additionally, they can make participants feel supported by group membership and cohesiveness (Goldman, 1962). When we, as moderators, create a good group ambiance the participants would not or less experience self-presentational concerns (Wilson, 1994) than by using diaries, for example. The focus group is also a great way to uncover more subconscious thoughts, when one participant says something it might have a recall effect on other participants.

Limitations of focus groups

Focus groups have several limitations, as stated earlier, the spontaneity of focus groups can be very beneficial however it also becomes harder for us as we would have less control over the proceedings (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.515). To prevent the focus group from ‘taking over’ too much, we will make sure as moderators to make a set of prompts and questions beforehand that we want to discuss. This list can be found in Appendix 1. To ensure this, it is important for us to keep a good track of time. When taking this precautions we believe that this limitation can be significantly reduced and that we will be able to create a good balance between spontaneity and directing the group into a desired conversation.

One of the reasons we have chosen this method is to produce a rich amount of data, time-efficiently. Yet, a limitation of rich data is that it can become very hard to analyse, and time-consuming to

transcribe (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.516). To reduce this limitation we need a clear strategy for the data transcription and analysis. This strategy we will elaborate on in subchapter 4.5.

Focus groups may be hard to organize as there are more participants needed in one interview (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.516). We will therefore make sure to contact our participants well in advance and induce them to participate by providing non-monetary incentives like coffee, cookies and chips. Also, we will take this into account by choosing our sample group.

Another potential limitation is the risk that can occur that during the focus group, one of the participants takes the overhand or is too prominent. This can have an influence on whether or not all participants will express their own views (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.516) (Gibbs, 1997). We will be highly aware of this during the focus groups and make sure to moderate successfully as to make everyone's voice heard. We also will take this into account when composing the groups.

Research Enhancing Methods

As stated by (Elliott & Jankel-Elliott, 2003), *"people do not always do what they say and say what they do"*. We therefore decided to back our research up by online ethnographic participant observation. We will continue to be active social media users, looking into specific activity on SNS with regards to the social multiplier. We additionally observed the activity of our focus group participants in order to see whether their claimed activity corresponded with their actual activity. The limitations of participant observation include the requirement of intense researcher involvement in the day-to-day activities of participants (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.425) which is the reason we have chosen this method as an enrichment of our material and not as main method. Furthermore, we need a language based approach, the data that we need are therefore spoken words, rich spoken narratives which could be best achieved by focus groups.

In our research we also used what Kozinets (2011), refers to as netnography. This form of study entails ethnography of online communities. We explored particular online communities regarding the current relationship with neighbours. Several of those communities are found on SNS like Facebook. We immersed ourselves in Facebook neighbourhood communities like: Klostergarden 2013/2014 (Klostergarden, 2014) and Tenants at Pålsjöäng-Palsjoang (Palsjoang, 2014). Both are neighbourhood communities in Lund, Sweden. The first community counts 192 members and the latter 189. We also used netnography in another internet community: Social Anxiety Support (2013). This platform we used to get a better understanding of social anxiety issues in relation to physical neighbours.

After critically considering the benefits, limitations and alternatives, we are convinced that focus groups offer many benefits for our particular research topic and our time frame. We believe, when carefully planning to limit the disadvantages, this is the most suitable main method for our research to collect rich data. Furthermore, we are convinced that online participant observation and netnography offer great opportunities to enhance our research.

Sample

A requirement for our participants to participate was that they needed to be social media users. In addition we decided to focus our research on two different groups. The first group would be students between 17-19 years old and accounts one focus group interview. This group was chosen as they have grown up with social media and the digitalized world. Furthermore this group is still very much in the process of forming their identity and have not so much established their place in society yet. This is an interesting given when looking into social comparison. The second group was chosen as international students between 22-28 years old, and accounted for three focus group interviews. This group was chosen as these participants have a lot of experience with globalization, living abroad and travelling and are considered more reflexive on what they use social media for and how that has affected / how it affects their life.

As stated, this research will collect data through direct engagement with participants and will therefore take the form of Gibbons et al.'s (1994) mode 2 research, that focuses on producing knowledge (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012, p.11) and which includes taking a more reflexive stance (Gibbons et al., 1994, p.3). Focus groups require relatively little time to gather the data, though the transcription, codification and analysis require a great amount of time as many voices are included. The number of participants per focus group therefore must be limited (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.188) as well as the amount of focus groups conducted.

Focus group participants

There are many different accounts on how many participants a focus group should have. For example, one assumption is that focus groups ideally should have between eight and twelve members and that the more members, the ideas per persons decrease (Fern, 1983). According to Payne (1976), no group discussion should have more than eight participants and six to seven would be the perfect group size. We argue however with Sampson (1972) that there is not one correct group size. We agree that the value of a group is independent of its size and that instead, the value of the group depends on how articulated the members are and what the personal style of us as moderators is.

We felt most comfortable with a group which is not too big, to make the discussion more manageable and to allow a more in depth discussion. We therefore choose for a focus group size of four to five people. This size is referred to by Krueger and Casey (2009, pp.67-68) as a mini-focus group. The disadvantage of a mini-focus group is the limited amount of total experiences because the group is smaller. Yet, for our research this size is ideal as we want to gain understanding, in-depth insights and our research contains a topic, digitalization, with which participants have intense and lengthy experiences (Krueger & Casey, 2009, p.68).

To make it more manageable for us to organize this groups and reduce the risk of people not showing up, we decided to approach friends and acquaintances of ours to participate. Selecting participants on basis of easiest accessibility is also referred to as ‘convenience sampling’ (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012, p.228). We created groups in which everyone knows each other already and feels comfortable expressing opinions.

We decided as suggested by Krueger and Casey (2009) to continue conducting focus groups until we experienced a point of saturation. For us this point was after having conducted four focus groups. Even though we still gained new insights of this group, we started to hear increasingly more things that had been said already in other groups. Therefore, after the fourth focus group we decided that our topic was covered as satisfactory, taking into account the scope of this project. Table 1 shows the composition of the different focus groups and its participants.

Focus Group	Participant	Age	Gender	Nationality
1	Willyant	17	F	Dutch
	Sjoukje	16	F	Dutch
	Jacob	17	M	Dutch
	Jannieck	16	F	Dutch
	Rixt	16	F	Dutch
2	Jenno	26	M	Dutch
	Arjan	27	M	Dutch
	Joggi	24	M	Dutch
	Martijn	21	M	Dutch
3	Niklas	25	M	French/Swedish
	Aleksandra	24	F	Serbian
	Cecilia	24	F	Swedish
	Aris	23	M	Swedish
	Susanne	24	F	German

4	Simon	25	M	Norwegian
	Elisabeth	26	F	Norwegian
	Alex	27	M	German
	Rita	27	F	German
	Julia	27	F	German

TABLE 1. FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

Data Collection

Each focus group session lasted between 1 and 2 hours. Our general strategy during the focus group was to conduct them in a semi-structured way, with only an aide memoir to keep us on track and to make sure all our points of interest would be discussed (see Appendix 1). We were inspired by Kvale's (1996, pp.4-5) metaphor of the *'interviewer as a traveller'*. This meant for us to *"wander together"* with the participants to freely explore the unknown territory by asking them questions leading the subjects to tell their own stories.

To enhance the relationship and trust between the participants and us, we would start with asking easy-to-answer questions to make the participants feel comfortable like: 'what social media platforms are you using?' After the questions regarding social media usage we continued with touching upon topics like globalization and consumption, (online) behaviour, buying behaviour and social comparison, digital life and happiness. By good time management and planning we made sure that we had enough time and to be flexible and follow up on interesting lines of conversations and keep the earlier mentioned balance between spontaneity and group direction. We made sure as moderators to ask open questions and challenge participants with different statements. Furthermore, we tried to subtly show the participants that we listened, did not judge and were adaptable. These qualities generally promote trust as well as it increases the likelihood of open, interactive dialogue (Gibbs, 1997).

Ethical Concerns

Bryman and Bell (2011, pp.128-44) state several ethical principles to protect the interests of the research. We have very well considered the ethical issues regarding this project. We therefore made sure to not harm the participants in any way by providing a comfortable environment and carefully select our manner of interaction. Furthermore, we made sure informed consent was clearly given and we provided the participants with all information needed to make an informed decision to participate, for example that this project will be shared. As can be seen in Table 1, for privacy reasons we have not mentioned the last name of the participants.

4.5 DATA ANALYSIS

A clear strategy for our data analysis is needed to comprehend the rich material collected. Data transcription and coding is very time-consuming, we therefore, as grounded theory suggests (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.585), have started this process as early as possible. To increase the time-efficiency of transcribing we have used a software program called 'Express Scribe'. This program allowed us to increase and decrease the speed of talking and to easily rewind and forward conversations. This reduced the disadvantage of focus groups as stated by Gibbs (1997) that transcribing focus group interviews might be hard due to more voices in one interview which can make transcribing a tough process.

After transcribing the four interviews we decided to code and theme our data. Coding is widely accepted in the research community (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.589). To make this process as effective and efficient as possible we used the programme Nvivo 10. Coding our quotes and exporting this from the program, resulted in a clear list with: 79 different codes, the focus group, participants name and the corresponding quotes. By aiding this list and several white boards we did two days of brainstorming session about how to best theme the codes. These themes subsequently led to the classification of our findings.

Whilst using this method of coding we have been very aware that the context of what is said and the narrative flow did not get lost as is commonly the case. We therefore used a grounded analysis which is more holistic than a content analysis, as the data can speak for itself and observations will be carefully placed into context (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012, p.163).

Furthermore, we embraced a narrative research approach for the interpretation of the data. This analysis method enabled us to examine ideas, values and beliefs hidden in the stories and language that our participants used (Alevesson, 2003, p.30).

4.6 PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

We believe in the importance of reflecting and adapting strategies in order to reach optimal results. As this was the first time for both of us to implement this method of research we could detect a steep learning curve throughout our project. Below we will briefly describe some of the most important learning points during the focus groups and how it influenced our approach for the following focus groups.

Focus Group Number 1

This group was the younger generation 16-17 years old. The answers they gave to the questions were short which decreased the ability of collecting rich data. During the transcription of this interview we

noticed that we could have increased conversation by probing, on a few points we could have gone deeper in detail. Additionally, we could have challenged them with statements. Even though we know it is best to use open questions, we noticed when listening back to the interview, that we asked a few closed questions. Therefore, we agreed to be more aware of probing next time, using open questions and include some challenging statements.

Focus Group Number 2

For this focus group we implemented and practiced the learning points of group 1. During this interview the data gained was rich and there was a more natural flow of the interview. The main learning points during this focus group was that we played a big role in the conversations whilst we actually needed to stay in the role of moderator and not participant. Furthermore, to make the atmosphere comfortable we had decided to conduct this interview at home. However, we noticed this setting was too relaxed as the group often went off- topic and therefore there was more need for direction from our side.

Focus Group Number 3

In this Focus group we took the learned moderator skills into account. We conducted the focus group in a meeting room at the university and made sure there were drinks and snacks to create a good balance of a relaxed atmosphere and focus. This focus group went very well, the participants were very conversational which enhanced the process of collecting rich material.

Focus Group Number 4

This focus group has been conducted with our neighbours. Therefore, it was more convenient to conduct this interview at home. We however did take into account to create the right atmosphere. For example, we sat at the table instead of on the couch as we learned from focus group 2.

Overall we are very satisfied about all focus groups conducted. Each and every focus group resulted in abundant new insights and data to analyse and interpret.

4.7 LIMITATIONS

This study has, as any other, a set of limitations. The limitations of the different methods that we have used are clarified throughout this chapter. We have discussed the inability of qualitative research to generalize this research to a larger population. We explained that this limitation is not an issue for us as this research is not aimed to generalize but to explore the concept of the social multiplier in the contemporary digital society and explain its effects on a more local level.

We experienced the limitation of people's willingness to participate. We reduced this limitation as much as possible by convenience sampling. Despite our sampling method, we experienced one no-show. However, we do not believe this has significantly influenced our research results.

We should take into account that people do not always tell the truth (Elliott & Jankel-Elliott, 2003). By participant observation we have reduced this limitation, however, this limitation should still be acknowledged.

We believe in people's distinctiveness and that there are many different truths, therefore our role as researchers has a significant influence on the construction of knowledge. We have extracted knowledge from conversations with others and interpreted what we believe to be the deeper meaning of the interviews. This knowledge we transmitted to this report. Consequently, this study is based on our interpretations. To illustrate our interpretations to the reader and reduce this limitation we used direct quotes from our material throughout the report.

Furthermore, we experienced the limited scope for this research, we were constrained by time and budget. We therefore, even though we believe to have captured the essence of this research by answering the research question, are convinced that future research can complement the research results. Suggestions for future research can be found in chapter 7.5.

5. ANALYSIS OF EMPIRICAL DATA

This chapter will provide a deeper understanding about how virtualization processes have been deeply embedded in our contemporary society and the effects of this. During our analysis it became apparent that our current consumer society is characterised by tensions. This chapter will highlight how there are tensions around the use of SNS, how the setting of social comparison has changed in regard to what is global and local and how the digitalization influences our perception of reality. The chapter will continue with highlighting the main tension that we have found to be most apparent; Social Comparison vs. Solipsism. We will end this chapter by showing how all these tensions have transformed our society to one that is characterized by the need to adapt more quickly and keep up and how this results in a society characterised by anxiety.

5.1 TENSIONS AROUND THE CONSUMPTION OF SNS

We have found that the usage of SNS is deeply embedded in our culture. In this chapter we will highlight the possibilities that they brings us, as well as we will touch upon the downside of SNS consumption. We furthermore will express the reasons that we have found that incentivise people to post in spite of the concerns and barriers that are considered in SNS consumption.

5.1.1 POSSIBILITIES VERSUS CONCERNS



During our research we aimed to uncover the reasons why and how people use SNS in the first place to see how this use characterizes us as individuals and what the accompanied influences are on the social structure of our society. This subchapter will highlight the possibilities of SNS nowadays but also the participants' concerns that we could interpret from the data collected.

In our focus groups one of the reasons named was that the participants use SNS to maintain relations. Many of our participants have studied abroad and travelled the world and Facebook is the main network to stay in touch with old classmates and friends. This relationship can however, be extended to other influence groups. As stated by Simon (25): *"My newsfeed gets disrupted because I have some politicians that I have on my interests so for example I like Barack Obama, now I get spammed by someone working for Barack Obama with information that he wants to communicate. I never look at the newsfeed anymore because it is full with spam."* In this particular case, we can see that the network of influencers can reach from friends to global leaders like Barack Obama. However, it appears as well that Simon currently is not satisfied with this relationship, as he uses words like 'disrupted' and 'spammed'. We argue that, even though Simon has the chance every single day to click one button and un-follow Obama, he is resistant to do so. He lets himself get irritated by not ending this relationship. It appears that just as in 'real life', virtual relations have a barrier to be ended for good.

There are many positive initiatives that social media can be used for. An interesting example we discovered during our research is the so-called 'Zwerfie': *"People pick up street waste and take a 'selfie' with the garbage they collected by cleaning out their street. On the other hand, the fact that they want others to see it, is sort of being like 'oh look at me I'm so good'"* (Jenno, 26). This example clearly illustrates the positive use of SNS, in this case getting rid of waste, but also demonstrates the awareness of people, like Jenno, that things shared online can be shown out of selfish reasons. The 'Zwerfie' is a great example of how SNS expands the possibility of 'conspicuous compassion'. Social media gives the opportunity to raise awareness and take action for good causes but we argue, it especially gives us the opportunity to actually *show* other people how involved we are with good causes, in order to enhance the image that the world – our online network – has of us.

In our high school focus group it became apparent that SNS brought a possibility that is not very desired by this group namely, SNS as a control mechanism: *"I rather do not have my mom on Facebook, she will react and control everything."* (Willyant, 17). For parents SNS can be great and offer the possibility to keep up to date with their kids to control their behaviour. For the kids on the other hand, this restricts their disclosure. Aleksandra (24) states that due to social control and the

diversity of her Facebook network, she eventually stopped posting: *“So this is when I was like; okay, I’m not posting, because of my parents”*.

In our data analysis we have found an interesting neighbour concept that social media has brought us that we would like to introduce as the ‘expert neighbour’. This notion is characterized by the openness that social media has created, in the sense that you exactly know who in your network knows something about a particular topic. Social networking sites provide the opportunity to make use of this neighbour’s knowledge: *“[y]ou place people in a box on Facebook, you know this guy is into food, this guy into travel and this and this person into that. So I know if I need something about that, I can trust him.”* (Niklas, 25). This expert neighbour is easily approachable through the social network sites like the original neighbour would be through proximity. The expert neighbour has a main influence on consumption behaviour and decision-making in contemporary society and we have found him to be a unique driver in the race to keep up.

The expert neighbour is a good example of the practical use that the digitalization has brought us. As Martijn (21) states the practical use is increasingly valued: *“[I]f life without internet would be pretty hard”* and *“Firstly I posted that I did not have a phone anymore as mine broke, so I needed to let people know that they could not reach me, and then when I had a phone again I had to let people know that they could reach me again”* (Sjoukje, 16). The latter example shows the practical use of SNS and also shows us the need for constant connectivity. Moreover, it can be interpreted that there is a need to let others know that you are connected and when you are not. It seems that the participant has to apologize for breaking her phone and that she is therefore not able to be connected all the time. She also has to make sure that people know when she is reachable again as to not miss out on news and updates that she would not receive if people still might think she is unreachable.

The practical possibilities of SNS are increasingly embedded in education: *“I use it a lot as well for the university to work in groups now, that is for me a new aspect of Facebook”* (Julia, 27). As practical as it may be, we discovered a direct tension between practical and forced usage of SNS: *“[w]ork or school often forces you to enter social media sites for communication purposes”* (Martijn, 21). The word ‘forces’ here directly indicates that Martijn is feeling that he is, against his will, exerted upon to use SNS. In our research it has become apparent that many participants are aware of the downsides, that we will elaborate further on throughout our report, but feel pressure from the workforce and educational institute to continue using, and even increase the usage of this network. It is not an option to decrease or stop using SNS as today they are not only used for social reasons but are concerned with information needed to succeed professionally.

This need for connectivity that has become apparent, as well as the pressure to increasingly use SNS to function in occupational spheres, drives us to a state that we become ever more dependent on SNS. As expressed by Arjan (27): *"[L]ife without internet is nearly impossible, you'll have to live in some underdeveloped country. The choice is: convenient life with social networking sites, or leaving friends and family behind. It is different if you grow up in New Delhi."* We interpret this as that in our developed world, people perceive SNS as something they cannot be deprived of. If you want to be able to live life in this western society than you will live a life that includes SNS.

In our research, another concern has been identified related to the false or half true posts of people on SNS. This means you only see the little best pieces of life which creates the possibility to establish a surreal virtual reality. There is however an awareness of this among participants, in the university student focus groups: *"[e]veryone posts the best stuff of their life, not that you're having a bad day. So it is not a true reflection of life."* (Arjan, 27). As well as in the high school focus group: *"I think a lot of people lie on Facebook, they really over exaggerate. And those selfies are so fake, one of the sudden their hair needs to look perfect and they need to show a bit of cleavage, while you know how they look like in real life!"* (Willyant, 17).

From the data collected we can conclude that there are many possibilities that SNS offer: maintaining relations, the positive use of SNS, approaching your expert neighbours, instant social support, a new control mechanism and practical use opportunities. However, despite the possibilities, the western society becomes increasingly more aware of the subjectivity, dependency and negative influences of SNS. This awareness results in definite concerns about the influences on the social structure as stated by Jenno (26): *"I worry about what this [social structure] is going to look like in 20 years"*. Furthermore, despite that in our research the younger generation was surprisingly aware of the downsides and dangers of SNS, we discovered specific concerns for the generation to follow: *"[i]t is like they take it from reality, from school and from the schoolyard, and putting it online instead"* (Cecilla, 24). With 'it', Cecilla points out the face-to-face interaction and play that the 'older' generation has, but that the younger generation now increasingly more finds online. Aleksandra (24) confirms this concern: *"[y]ou see that we have some kind of opposition, in the sense that we're aware of how it was and how it is now. But I don't know how it's going to be with them [the next generation] because for them it's like this is how they grew up"*. Furthermore, we can interpret that Aleksandra fears that the awareness that is now growing in our society will diminish as the younger generation has no benchmark to compare to a life without SNS. They are born into a society where they see others living like robots, more engaged with social networks than with direct social contact and they believe this is the norm.

Building on our findings of the possibilities and concerns that are inherent to SNS, and the influence of them on the social structure and social relations, the next chapter points out the deep needs for sharing our life with so many people and the few barriers that still exist for doing so.

5.1.2 INCENTIVES VERSUS BARRIERS

Through our data analysis we could identify several incentives but also barriers to share on SNS from which we will discuss a few.

During our research boredom and procrastination were often found as main trigger for using SNS. Another reason that we identified is commonly known as Fear Of Missing Out (FoMo): *“[p]eople are in school like, have you seen that picture on Facebook? And then you haven’t.”* (Sjoukje, 16). In the focus groups FoMo could be clearly identified. From Sjoukje’s quote we can understand that there is a pressure to be constantly up to date with your online environment in order to keep up in the offline environment. It would be a true shame, if not a blunder if you have not seen that one picture or movie that everyone is talking about as it excludes you. This pressure is already much embedded in the focus groups as Willyant (17) continues: *“Facebook is part of my rituals I never miss out a day on Facebook, I always automatically check it.”*

We identified an incentive to post as the need for attention. Willyant (17) states: *“[y]ou have so many pretty people that say they are ugly they really trying to get attention.”* These status updates are often perceived as *“annoying”* (Rixt, 16). ‘Attention status updates’ can take different forms, many of them concern personal problems as stated by Willyant. Through netnography and observation we have seen that sometimes they go even more into the extremes like *“I want to kill myself”*. These updates are sometimes referred to by participants as the *“FML status update”*, the *“Fuck My Life status update”*.

A closely related finding that we could interpret is the need for compassion. Aris (23) explains the effect of someone’s post about losing a family member: *“[i]f people post it, it means you really want my attention, you want me to say: oh he, I am sorry for your lost. Come on, you make me feel bad if I don’t react to that.”* From this quote we can interpret that Aris feels pressure to comment and show compassion as that is what the people that post expect from him. Something similar affects another participant as well: *“[y]esterday a friend her grandma died and she wrote, an obituary and it was so long about how she had been such a great grandma, and it is like it is such a personal part of themselves.”* (Susanne, 24). The girl who has posted this brings her followers or friends in an uncomfortable situation by giving away too much information. Susanne feels it as too *“personal”* even though she indicates the girl from her network as her *“friend”*.

'Too much information' is also noticed in another focus group stating: *"[s]omeone posted that she had a really nice night at her boyfriend's house, that is so weird I don't want to know that..."*(Jannieck, 16). Further data analysis showed many other exasperations like too many animal pictures and the annoying 'selfies'. Despite the frustrations, all participants confessed to use SNS every day, some every hour and most were non-stop connected.

Another interesting incentive to post is what we call the want to inflate. Many people will post to make them seem more interesting. However, what they actually do might not be very interesting. By posting a nice 'instagrammed' picture, and when people start to like it, they seem much more interesting. Also for this type of post, some people are aware of the superficiality: *"[s]ome people need to tell every single thing that is happening in their life because they think that people think that they are cool and stuff. But it is usually people that have quite a boring life and doing quite boring stuff. And they think it looks cool"* (Niklas, 25).

Another incentive is to post when you are doing something that is perceived as 'cool'. What we noticed during our focus group is that for a lot of people this is traveling: *"I don't usually post on Facebook but I do when I go travelling, I think it's also to show that my life is exciting"* (Arjan, 27) and: *"[t]he main incentive to travel is always to see new places, but when you've decided that it is your second thought is to share this."* (Jenno, 26). So these are the people that do not post for the posting, but only post if they actually believe they are doing something extraordinary.

The frequency of your posts also influences how great your post must be. As Elisabeth (26) states: *"[w]hen you don't post anything in ages it has to be something really spectacular as well. I post something almost every day so then it doesn't need to be something big."* This indicates that she expects a lot from the people in her network that do not post often. On the other hand it shows as well how low the barrier is for her to share even the small details of her life. The need for a big statement is confirmed by Simon (25): *"I haven't posted anything since 2012 so it is not that much, but it [his next post] probably would be something like 'Graduated, from Lund University, now I have my Masters', or 'I will become a father in February'."*

Another interesting finding in the analysis is what we would like to call the 'cake pressure'. This is an example of the social pressure that young women might experience leading up to Christmas. That time of year, many women bake cake and instantly share the picture of the cake online. Elisabeth (26) says to share that kind of pictures because *"[t]hey are pretty"*. But during the discussion we could discover several downsides of this type of pictures. As Simon (25) puts it: *"[n]o one says this year I didn't have time to bake any cakes, but your friends that actually did bake a cake brag about it. And it feels therefore that everyone does it."* This feeling - that everyone does it - makes some of the

women in our focus group feel that they should bake too. In order to fit in, or because of offline pressure from friends and family. Alex (27) states: *"I ask my girlfriend: why do you never bake? All the other girls do it"*. The word 'all' here indicates that some perceive it like everyone bakes and therefore they expect it from all the women too. This concept reminds us of what is known as the 'socialization effect'; the process by which consumption behaviour may be influenced by affiliation with other peers (Prinstein & Dodge, 2010, p.4). This indicates a form of peer pressure online, but it also shows us how surreal expectations are created which we argue, strengthen the creation of a personal 'reality', in which people believe they know how it works but that may be in fact a far cry from how it really is.

What formed a barrier to share for our participants was the fear of consequences. We noticed this mainly by the high school participants. The fear that unintended people might see their post refrained them from posting. As Jannieck (16) states: *"I think it is not handy if you post that kind of movies on your Facebook because when you want to start applying for a job they will start to check your Facebook."* It became apparent that there was some kind of fear that unwanted people would enter their page and would be able to observe their whole profile. This younger periphery generation is not aware of the special settings you can use to close your profiles for others then your friends. Also the fear of internet and its consequences were touched upon by Willyant (17): *"I did not put it on Facebook as I don't like it, because that will stay forever on internet and then everyone can see it."* The 'forever' here indicates a certain fear of the unknown, it will be there forever and who knows what might happen by that time. We believe this fear is fed by the fact that it is so intangible. We cannot directly see, smell or touch the effect that our posts on the SNS have or will have in the future.

The part in which Willyant states she refrains from posting as *"everyone can see it"*, demonstrates a concept we would like to call 'fence management'. It demonstrates the difficulty of where to draw your relationship boundaries. Who do you include in sharing certain things with and who cannot have a look over the hypothetical fence? These issues are also demonstrated by Aleksandra (24): *"I thought it's not really polite to ignore people that I actually know or that, you know, are in class. We're maybe not the best friends but it would be rude if you don't accept them [as friends on Facebook]. But I do not want them to see everything, so I just decided not to post stuff anymore"* and: *"[w]hen you start applying they will start to check your Facebook"* (Jannieck, 16). The latter mainly indicates an issue that SNS brings in the area of personal and professional boundaries, which can be related to the control function that was mentioned earlier as well.

Summarizing, there are several opportunities and incentives to use SNS. It allows to have contacts with friends and family abroad, network expansion for primarily selfish reasons, displaying conspicuousness, exerting control functions and it has practical benefits. Furthermore, it can reduce the fear of missing out on what others are doing and satisfy the need for attention and compassion. The reasons not to use SNS and the concerns include: privacy concerns when people are looking over the hypothetical fence, the social control that is present on SNS, and being exposed to an information overload.

5.2 TENSIONS AROUND THE CONTEMPORARY SETTING FOR SOCIAL COMPARISON.

This chapter will highlight the tensions that characterize the setting of our contemporary consumer society and which have significant influence on interaction and social comparison. We will illustrate how SNS have influenced this setting.

5.2.1 GLOBAL VERSUS LOCAL

As described and suggested in earlier chapters, the concepts and understanding of the ‘global’ and the ‘local’ are subject to complexity and different interpretations. Our data suggests that among youngsters and young adults up to 30 years old, virtual social networks are used to “[s]ee what your friends (abroad) are doing”(Willyant, 17) and to “[s]tay in touch with distant family” (Sjoukje, 16).

Interesting here is that virtual networks such as Facebook seem to provide an useful platform to communicate to those that are difficult to communicate with in a more direct and/or physical sense. A word that is used by the respondent is ‘distant’, pointing out the geographical and spatial constraints to establish communication with contacts from afar. The use of phrases like “[s]tay in touch with distant family” (Sjoukje, 16) points out the effect of social networking sites on communication through time and space, as well as the particularly global and instant character of social networks in contemporary society by using the wording ‘stay’ rather than ‘get’ in touch.

While this need for communication across borders seems a common incentive to engage in virtual networking efforts, the need for SNS may be much weaker when abroad ties are non-existent: *“I just didn’t feel the need for I guess, whilst living in Norway close to my friends. But when I lived abroad, I found it very useful to keep in touch with people”* (Elizabeth, 26).

The strong global character of virtual social networks appears to be the result of an increased sense of cosmopolitan identities, the moving around the world, across borders, across cultures and across languages. Inspired by cosmopolitan research (e.g. Thompson & Tambyah, 1999), we see that trying to be cosmopolitan is not without struggle: *“I follow some friends from Germany that I met on a school trip, though I never understand what they post”* (Sjoukje, 16). Here, it appears that efforts to gain or maintain a cosmopolitan kind of status, one has to undertake rather serious efforts (such as

learning to speak a variety of languages) to overcome the barriers that divide the local and the global citizen. Also, a review of the participants' Facebook profiles shows that most of the status updates are done in English, indicating the universality of the activity and a form of communication that goes beyond locality and is meant to reach a global audience. The use of language appears to be an insightful source of studying the presence of global awareness in people lives and our data indicates a conscious awareness of what participants often call 'the world'.

Another finding indicates the same kind of cosmopolitan-like efforts. When talking about their village in the Netherlands Willyant, (17) stated: "*[t]he world is going a bit too fast for Earnewald.*", after which Jacob (17) responds: "*[y]es, or Earnewald is going to slow for the world to keep up*". The choice of words reveals some interesting thoughts behind this phrase; firstly the use of 'the world', as being something that is superior in pace, and secondly the use of 'to keep up', as if the periphery or locality finds itself in some sort of compulsory race to adapt to the greater whole. Cosmopolitanism or being a worthy citizen of the world is therefore not strictly limited to individual efforts, but is also perceived on a local community level. It appears that Jacob feels that the slow village constraints him in his efforts to be cosmopolitan. For instance, the physical neighbour also becomes subject to criticism; Jannieck (16) states: "*I do not hang out or have that much contact with my neighbours. I know who they are but they are not my age, almost our whole village is of grandma age. Everything goes so slow here*". Again, participants talking about the global and the local in terms of fast and slow, indicate that there is a tension connected to the comparison between the global and the local, a friction of two different objects that are connected but moving at different paces.

On the other hand, the participants indicate a sense of closeness that still remains: "*[i]n Tengen, we actually have very cool contact with our neighbours, but that is because they all have kids of our age, so we got to know them, got to know their parents, and now, when I go back they still... I like to talk to them, still!*" (Alex, 27). Furthermore, the participants indicate an interesting awareness on what we call the closeness and remoteness divide: "*It is the whole thing with technology, it completely changes dynamics of social relationships, and who is really close.*" (Susanne, 24). Technology has given people the opportunity to communicate and to enjoy social relationships across borders, no longer being restricted to geographical boundaries, and some are aware of this change in dynamics.

An important aspect of this contemporary sense of proximity is having instant access to social relations across time and space. What used to define social contacts in a local setting, instant access and close proximity, is no longer a distinct feature of local communication. As one of the participants indicates: "*[y]ou talk to them so quickly, and you don't have to wait. (...) It's like they are here*" (Cecilia, 24). Here, the global seems to be overtaking those features that traditionally defined a local

community such as a neighbourhood, namely, offering instant access to social support and other social functions. In this sense, the global takes a bit of what traditionally divided local contacts and contacts abroad, and so the periphery becomes less and less peripheral. Among the participants, the traditional notion of closeness, instant access and physical neighbours links closely to geographical proximity: *“Pedros lives 500 meters away, he is not a neighbour anymore.”*(Simon, 25), and: *“[m]y neighbours lived down the road, up the road, three houses behind, that’s just the neighbours”*(Alex, 27).

However, the influence of technology on local ties such as neighbours is evident: *“I chat with my neighbour on Facebook, because I don’t feel like going to his house all the time”* (Joggli, 24). As presented earlier, this change in social interaction and dynamics is mostly assigned to technologies such as SNS. However, most of the participants are fully aware of this: *“[m]y neighbour becomes my friend through adding him on Facebook, nothing changes, but his title.”* (Jenno, 26).

One of the most interesting findings here is that, because people are no longer dependent on direct neighbours for social support, they are more selective on who they include in their description of neighbours: *“I just accidentally got to know them, but you don’t really have contact with them, it is more people from your faculty or study program that live in the same building.”*(Rita, 27), and *“[t]he thing is, we know the neighbours, that are also in our class, or that we can connect with. (...) the right next door [neighbour], I have no clue.”*(Alex, 27). Apparently, to become part of a truly local tie, one must go through a more strict selection that goes beyond geographical proximity or age; one is acquainted or befriended, before he can become a useful neighbour.

Summarizing, in some cases physical neighbours have become more distant, and in some cases these local ties are being replaced by global ties. The afar now becomes proximate and familiar, and the proximate becomes the unknown, the stranger next door. The global therefore, enters the local sphere more and more, forcing the local to give up the distinct features that make it the local, and offering the instant access and levels of closeness that before the rise of virtual networks was deemed impossible. However, as technology appears to be the driving force here, it is suggested that there is a certain sense of superficiality to the new social interactions, as they are maintained through non-physical means. The following chapter will cover the findings on this tension.

5.2.2 VIRTUAL VERSUS REAL

Continuing the finding that reflects the impact of virtual relationships on social structures and interactions, we find that these altered ways of interacting and communicating are perceived as influential forces in relation to realness.

On the one hand, that what is perceived as ‘real’ is still assigned a lot of authority when it comes to social interactions: “[o]ffline friends influence me most” (Martijn, 21) and “[b]ut I still think you feel more pressure in personal contact, because you can’t really avoid it, but on Facebook for example you can just ignore something or click it away” (Susanne, 24). The option to ignore something is a distinct feature that contrasts the offline environment, in the sense that in the offline environment, one cannot just ignore other human beings. Being able to choose what to see, and when to engage, shows how Facebook is ‘consumed’; there is the option ‘to buy’ or ‘not to buy’ the information that is offered, leaving the user with a wide array of choices that are related to our social interactions. Friendships become consumer goods, and can, just like tangible products, be used for identity creation or personal gratification.

Also, a finding that repeats itself in our data is that our participants consistently use the word ‘reality’ or ‘the real world’ as an opposition to what is being called ‘the internet’ or ‘online’. The choice of words here indicates that the virtual world is perceived as something superficial or ‘fake’, the opposite of what is truly real, reality. The participants repeatedly use wording such as ‘whereas in real life’ and ‘but the reality is that...’, making a very clear and conscious distinction between that what takes place in the virtual realm and that what takes place outside of it. Aleksandra (24) states when talking about online and offline interactions in primary school: “[b]ut they do it online, and I don’t know but I guess they’ll grow up with it, you see that we have some kind of opposition, in the sense that we’re aware of how it was and how it is now.” Here, Aleksandra refers to the influence of the virtual world as something that belongs to the present, whereas the past is merely defined by ‘reality’, when people constructed their lives in a social world that was purely physical and tangible. It appears that the current generation of young adults has lived in both worlds; it has experienced the traditional social interactions in the pre-internet era, at the same time witnessing the internet causing a shift and perhaps, erosion, of relationships and interaction in their lives as young adults. Disoriented as they seem, they are the product of radical changes in communication, driven by technology. This generation faces new communication patterns that are multimodal as they cover both the real and the virtual. Therefore, this confirms what has earlier been suggested as ‘a generational divide’ between those that grew up digital and those who did not (Castells, 2010).

It seems that this generation, that represented 3 out of the 4 focus groups, has a preference towards the ‘good old days’ as most of them indicate a desire to delete their online profiles. For instance, Cecilia (24) states: “[w]hen I start working I think I’ll delete my account because I’m really sick of it”, and Jenno (26) states: “[t]his Western internet world is fucked up”, both indicating a particular discontent with SNS and their effects on individual well-being.

Despite the perceived dubious effects of digital social networks, what is perceived as the 'virtual' is still assigned surprisingly much value: "*[w]hen I'm on my PC, Facebook is always open*" (Alex, 27). But the increased importance of the virtual is not only reflected in terms of how SNS occupy us, but also their effect of what is real and what is not: "*[y]ou'd always have to tell everybody, you can't just be enjoying the moment; like.. okay now I'm having ice cream in the sun with my family. Then you have to take a picture and show everybody that you're doing it, because if you don't that it's like it didn't happen*" (Cecilia, 24). It appears that, even though there is an awareness of the divide between real events and events that are communicated online, the virtual is an actual part of lived reality, for better or worse.

It seems that a need for connectivity takes over actual conversations, actual moments, taking bits of lived reality and putting them into the virtual world, thereby reducing some of the quality of the moment. If not shared with everyone, certain events did not happen at all, making the experience only real when shared. A very striking example of this can be found in the following story: Susanne (24): "*[a] couple of days ago, a friend of mine from school got engaged, and she wrote a real long message with 'thank you so much, I love you so much' and she had 10,000 likes and comments and one girl is like: 'What? Really? I just saw you this morning, when did it happen?'* And the girl [that got engaged] reacts with: "*just half an hour ago*". The point is, this girl gets engaged and instead of celebrating that with her loved one she writes this long of a message, -if she hadn't prepared it already and saved it for this day to post-. So she doesn't celebrate with her love?" Susanne holds a particularly pessimistic tone about the 'realness' of certain status updates, and especially how sharing experiences and feelings take off their value. This question is raised by many of our participants, as they doubt the meaningfulness of shared experiences; referring to the virtual realm as a place of reversed meanings.

The quotation below further illustrates this concern: "*[b]ut isn't it also with the social networks that it make seem everything very superficial? Look at relationships. Some people that love each other and write it on the (Facebook) wall, it becomes so cheesy. Even though it might be certainly true that they do love each other but when they put it on the wall it becomes like 'ughh'. And you think, why do you have to show it? Do you love each other really? I am not saying that means those people do not have a good relationship but at the same time you start thinking in that way just because they put it on Facebook. While actually it should be the opposite because it is a very public statement, it should mean they extra love them, it should be that because it is more extreme it is more affectionate, but it becomes less in a way. The social network puts it up, which kind of reverses the meaning of that.*" (Aris, 23). As Aris notes, it seems that the more public something becomes, the more of its value it loses. Disclosing affection to a loved one in real life might be worth much more than publicly stating

one's affectionate feelings. The line between what is public and what is private seems to blur through the use of virtual networks in which personal information easily and instantly reaches large audiences of people that may not even be interested in it: *"[w]e can see that and that means when you post it, means you WANT me to see it, it means you WANT me to react to it and that is why I don't like it, it means that they want to show it and they want me to take part in this and I am really not interested."* (Aris, 23).

Besides the fact that virtual interactions may reverse meanings and increase the amount of useless information that people receive, it may even lead to more serious feelings of discomfort like guilt: *"[c]ome on, you make me feel bad if I don't react to that. I think what kind of person am I if I see that and I don't respond to it."* (Aris, 23).

It becomes evident that offline relationships should be reflected in the virtual world: *"[o]h yeah, I think I liked your picture [on Facebook] too, it was really pretty. I should like it because I am your friend."* (Sjoukje, 16). If offline friends are not also online friends, or do not provide the same kinds of social support that belong to friendships, the relationship seems to be perceived as incomplete. If so, the virtual constitutes a vital part of what makes relationships existent and real, making the virtual an important component of lived reality that is just as real as other perceptions of lived reality. In the same manner, a form of peer pressure to share certain things seems to exist. When talking about so-called 'neknominations' (see glossary). Willyant (17) recalls that she was nominated by a close friend and did create a video but did not share it online because of fear of consequences and social control: *"[m]y friend found it really a shame and was disappointed but she was there when I made it [the drinking video] and later she forgave me."* Here, a competition exists of both physical (the drinking) and virtual acts (the sharing online) that are needed to create a complete act of participation, and if one part is missing, some acts are not perceived valid or 'real'. This, and the fact that people died whilst participating in the neknomination, illustrates the power of peer pressure which is expanded to SNS.

Another example of the complex relation between the offline and the virtual is that offline acquaintances seem to create some kind of moral struggle as has been demonstrated in our concept fence management and for instance by Cecilia (24): *"[b]ut if they add you [on SNS] and you see them every day in the gym, you can't not accept them, even though you don't want to add them"*. It can be concluded that online friendships are not always offline friendships. In the same fashion a 'like' does not necessarily mean fondness but can also be the result of certain pressures like offline peer pressure or for strategic reasons. We further develop our concept of fence management to the 'unwanted neighbour'; representing a constant struggle and active judging on who should be

included in the network and whom should not. The key problem is that nowadays, there is a choice whether to include someone or not, a choice that was non-existent a few generations ago when one was placed in a locality, within a community, and with neighbours on which one was to some extent dependent for social support and interaction. Cecilia's quote as well as the stories of Susanne and Aris on the previous page are examples of the pressures exerted by 'unwanted neighbours'; offline social ties that in the offline world have a specific label, such as parents, or acquaintances, that have a specific function, such as control or a professional relation, and that certainly cannot be categorized as friends. In some cases, the decision is easy, e.g. in the case of Willyant (17): *"I sometimes get added by weird Moroccans that I don't know. I find that so nasty, I directly delete them"*. However, in most cases the decision is not so easy: Willyant and Rixt (16) talk about a neighbour: *"[a]lways when we want to go somewhere he wants to come with us as well, it is really annoying"*. They do not want to exclude him from their networks, because that would be rude. However, they also want to expose their plans on Facebook, the platform they use for planning their activities with other friends, risking that their 'unwanted neighbour' looks over the hypothetical fence and wants to join in. The little privacy that a physical fence used to offer is no longer in effect; SNS let people see what we do, and we let them.

Another deep, problematic aspect of virtual networking drifts to the surface here: the limited ability to classify or categorize network members. Aris (23) illustrated this nicely during one of the focus groups by saying: *"[t]here's a certain context to every social contact, you want to be able to place relationships into context. Facebook doesn't allow you to do this. Facebook is like, everyone either on that line or on that line. But it takes more."*

As mentioned earlier on, social interaction and communication is now multimodal and that results in a more complex social system that requires more cognitive effort but which at the same time is made easier through technology, for instance the powerful drive of companies to design and invent devices, technologies and applications that aim to make sharing and connecting easier than ever before.

As online profiles are artificial representations of someone's personality, they may not be a true reflection of one's offline self. Surprisingly enough, most of the participants seem fully aware of this: *"[a]ll of the public info is so 'thought out', people aren't spontaneous on Facebook, you can see that people post stuff that really goes well together with their identity, or what they want to portray"* (Aris, 23). However, it can be argued that in some way, online representations do reveal one's personality: as the avatar is the creation of someone, and how this person decides to act online is to a certain extent a reflection of his or her true person. However, - and here the problem of context

comes in again- if members of a personal network do not or not sufficiently know a person to place his or her posts into the bigger context of their total offline identity, the only thing the members will see is what this person discloses on SNS. Simon (25) refers to this as a 'polished surface', as if online profiles just reveal the tip of the iceberg, whereas the reality is much more comprehensive.

We argue that online self-representations are just as real as real-life identities, as it is the same person that acts upon both types of identity, however, virtual identities are incomplete and result in a severe bias when it comes to interpersonal comparisons. The next chapter will investigate this tense relationship between real and idealized identities more closely.

5.3 TENSIONS AROUND SOCIAL COMPARISON IN CONTEMPORARY CONSUMER SOCIETY AND ITS EFFECTS

As we have seen, there appears to be a difference between virtual and actual selves, on a perceptual level. Now that we have identified certain important aspects of SNS, we can continue with analysing the data in regards to our main theme: social comparison. In short, we find that SNS are not always 'social' forms of media, and this chapter sets out the analysis of rich data that relates to both the social as the non-social uses of digital networks. Our definition of social is that it refers to a way of thinking that includes others, whereas non-social refers to a way of thinking that excludes others to a large extent and has a primarily ego-centric viewpoint. In the second subchapter, we find that the current form of social comparison results in a need for social evolution and we find significant problems in attempting to adapt to this.

5.3.1 SOCIAL COMPARISON VERSUS SOLIPSISM

In this chapter we illustrate the expansion of reference frames, the functions of SNS in terms of social comparison, the role of the local, hybridized communication systems in relation to the social multiplier followed by the discussion of online neighbourhoods and their two main functions. Returning to reference frames, we discuss the quantity of social information that is being communicated, after which the nature of this social information is discussed, as well as 'how' it is communicated by computer-mediated means. We continue with an account of commodification of identities and relationships, touching upon the tension between real and virtual fake identities and the awareness that exists around superficial characters. This is followed by the finding that many virtual relations have a strong utilitarian character and eventually we introduce the 'glocal' neighbour. As a transition to the following chapter, we reflect upon the effects of all of the presented dynamics on emotional well-being.

Expanded Reference Frames

As has been established in existing literature described earlier in this paper, reference frames are important structures that accommodate social comparison processes. We find that reference frames have expanded through SNS, arguing that those network ties are also included in our participants' frames of reference. Network members, including even those that are perceived a weak contacts, are still included in frames of reference and have an effect on behaviour, needs and wants: *"[i]f my not really good friends post a travel report of a really good surfing spot, I still feel like I should go there even though I barely know them"* (Joggli, 24). With an increased access to vague contacts, weak ties, as well as easy access to style icons, the frames of reference thus expand, resulting in a growing amount of people that SNS users compare their lives to. This was also noted, a bit more consciously, by Arjan (27): *"[t]hrough digitalization you can see what is possible which makes you feel incomplete and discontent"* As we have noted earlier on, digitalization has strong effects on perceptions on locality and the global, and this of course, is closely related to the expansion of reference frames. This results in feelings of missing out; 'the grass is greener on the other side'. We connect and compare to people around the world, comparing ourselves more and more to 'outsiders': *"[a]ctually, I think it has a pretty large influence though, because you consider so many different alternatives, see all these other people... Where I come from for example, the mentality is just so different, everyone just stays where they are, and they feel comfortable with the environment. I'm basically the only one that is going abroad and that is just like my parents say: "how can you live abroad?!" I think the reason that I actually considered going abroad was due to contacts and maybe even social networks I'd say. You consider so many different alternatives because you see them, you have the access to it."* (Rita, 27). It can be argued with Kjeldgaard and Askegaard (2006) that people living in the locally constrained periphery like Rita, are especially globally oriented since her aspired lifestyle is not present locally.

Even though reference frames have undoubtedly expanded this does not necessarily mean that traditional and local frames of reference have become irrelevant; they rather have been complemented: *"[w]hen I go to my parents' house, you always compare to each other but you also compare online so I think it has expanded, the one has not shut of the other."*(Cecilia, 24). In other words, 'Keeping up with the Joneses' appears to be still a relevant phenomenon, but it functions multimodal. This can also be seen in the conversation between Aris (23) and Cecilia (24) about kitchen renovations displayed offline and online:

Aris: *"We lived at a house and we remodelled, renovated our kitchen and it was like a small kitchen but we took it out and removed it, but when we did that, it was a visible change from the outside and*

all the neighbours that passed by started knocking and saying: "hey, can we come in, I saw you changed the kitchen!" and they came in and really liked it and almost two years later (...) everyone had done it."

Cecilia (24): *"Some, people these days, when they are renovating (1) they put up those pictures online, and (2) all the friends would see that and (3) also want to renovate the kitchen, so yeah it has expanded. I see it all the time: 'we are renovating', or: 'buying a new house'..."* Three things can be observed here. Firstly, SNS are being used to make things visible that could not be displayed before as indicated by number one, for instance renovation inside the house. Secondly, SNS accommodate this display to a much wider audience that reaches much further than the street. Thirdly, there is an awareness of the fact that relative consumption is still an important determinant of what people buy.

Again, the local reality still plays a role here, as not every network member discloses all insights in what they do or what they own on SNS. An important example of how people automatically compare and reflect upon themselves when faced with new information about others, whether in what they perceive as the real world, or in the virtual world, is the following: *"[e]ven now as students, we live in a corridor, and we do the 'tour the chambre', this is the time you actually see the other rooms and how people are designing the same room, in the same corridor, and it is interesting to see how people do it differently. You start thinking like "oh it would be nice to have a sofa there or a TV, I don't see how I could get this (comparison) by going online" (Niklas, 25).*

So, whether it is seeing holiday pictures of a vague friend online, or seeing how your physical neighbour decorates a similar space that you occupy, in both cases this information is instantly absorbed, and compared to the situation of one self, resulting often in an urge to 'Keep up with the Joneses'. However, it should again be noted that these two forms of information continue to overlap in contemporary society. The following example illustrates how one can compare, and be affected by, the goods that physical neighbours have, without having to actually know or even see them. It also illustrates how the availability of information online expands the reference frame that is being used for consumption decisions and thus expands the social multiplier effect, Aleksandra (24): *"[i]n my apartment building we have a group on Facebook so when the kids (students) moved out last semester, everyone was selling stuff and posted whatever they had, they literally try to sell spoons... But then you see... I don't know, everyone always tells me that my room is so cold. I have no pictures, I have nothing. I just move, I have nothing (homey) and I don't care. But I bought an Easter bunny now. When I saw them posting everything they had, I realized that if I actually had bought something it would have been nicer here. Someone even bought an armchair, and I was like 'I wish I had an armchair'. I ended up not buying anything because I am still leaving in one or two months but I*

bought an Easter bunny because everyone was saying I had nothing. They said that offline, but when I was looking online to everything they had, I saw people that had flowers and plants and everything. And I wish I had that. That is how I bought my Easter bunny”.

Online Neighbourhoods.

Aleksandra, in contrast of Niklas’s example above, is primarily affected in her behaviour through the digital information she is faced with, even though this information concerns her direct neighbours. So when Niklas states that *“I don’t see how I could get this (comparison) by going online”*, he overlooks the fact that many neighbours, especially in student cities, now form online communities in which they exert the same functions as traditional neighbours. On the Facebook profiles of the participants, we found that most of them are member of one, if not two, community groups that are related to a building, apartment complex, or neighbourhood. For instance: ‘Tenants at Palsjoang’ (Aleksandra), ‘Klostergarden 2013/2014’ (Alex, Simon, Elizabeth, Renske, Thomas) and even sub-communities like ‘The cool corridor of Klostergarden’ (Thomas). These groups have two main functions: the social support function and the exchange/ utility function.

As we found in our literature search, the neighbour has frequent face-to-face contact as a distinguishing factor, and is especially useful for services based on territoriality and often is called upon last-minute. What is interesting here is that within online neighbour communities, frequent face-to-face contact is not a given; outside the dinner get-together’s or soccer meetings, there is not much contact. However, people do call for help on a daily basis, borrowing tools, ingredients, or asking for advice that exceeds territorial boundaries and therefore range from asking why the common laundry machine is not working to what places in Europe are recommended to visit. In this sense, SNS are effective and time-saving tools for receiving direct social support from multiple neighbours at the same time. Which we can relate to the expert neighbour discussed in chapter 5.1.1. Additionally, the fact that those communities are constituted by students implies that most of the inhabitants have limited financial resources and are therefore more dependent on social support such as sharing expensive tools than they would be in later life stages. Therefore, there is a strong social character to these communities while at the same time one is not likely to connect to their neighbours for purely social reasons. For example, Alex (27) uses the ‘Klostergarden 2013/2014’ group to meet up with people to play soccer next to the apartment buildings but not so much to get to know people: *“I don’t really know my neighbours here, Martin and Flo to play Fifa with, but I don’t really know them.”*. In some sense, Martin and Flo here are ‘hired’, they have a utilitarian character in the sense that Alex needs them for entertainment, but doesn’t make any efforts to build strong relationships with them since they will likely never see each other again when they leave the city.

There is a continuous flow of goods to be observed; people are moving out, moving in, or selling commodities for other reasons. This has not so much to do with displaying goods for identity building, but, as we have previously seen in the example of Aleksandra's (24) Easter bunny, they do create an increased awareness in what others own, and how others decorate their rooms. It is important to note that all of these Facebook groups are typically related to student accommodation which implies three aspects: the time people occupy the space is in most cases no longer than one year so investments in furniture will not pay off sufficiently, and secondly, that a common assumption among members is that most of the members have limited (financial) resources and thus sharing and helping out become more important incentives when it comes to sharing, pricing or giving away goods. Therefore, despite the utilitarian character that was mentioned before, this dependence accommodates stronger feelings of community. A third aspect is that these student rooms are highly standardized, making comparison not only easier, but also inevitable: the excuse of having a different room to work with is not valid.

As this study uses neighbour relations to look at social comparison in general, these findings are important to keep in mind when considering social comparison processes online and offline at a larger level, including the entire network and not limiting the focus to neighbour influences.

This duality of social and non-social or utilitarian behaviour can also be observed on a larger scale. There are different dimensions of social behaviour to be observed among our participants. As we have seen, people's reference frames have undergone significant expansion through SNS. Given that the social multiplier has expanded with it, there is an observable expansion in the needs and wants that are being created through social comparison, in the words of Rita (27): "[y]our [Thomas's] brother for example, posts amazing pictures of South Africa and you really think... (...) Ah man, I would like to do that. Your start to rethink your own choices, it [Facebook] broadens your horizon that you consider other things that you might not have taken into consideration before.". Rita has met Thomas's brother once in her life. Yet he has, without even knowing perhaps, a significant effect on the needs and wants of Rita, from the other end of the world. With expanding networks, and with an increasing load of information about what is 'out there' in terms of consumption goods and leisure, consumption behaviour cannot remain unaffected.

This effect on consumption behaviour does not solely stem from the ability to compare to people around the world, the quantity of information. There is something much more fundamental, much deeper that influences this: the nature of this information.

The first important finding when talking about the nature of the social information that is being communicated within SNS is that single goods or brands may not play the biggest role; it is complete

lifestyles that are largely built upon the consumption of goods, leisure, travelling, political ideas, but not limited to them, as these lifestyles include also actions, achievements and experiences. However, as this research is conducted within a consumerist society, most of the above are closely related to consumption. Julia (27) brings up that: *“[i]t’s more the social and the hobbies and interests that defines me online, rather than pictures my equipment or whatever”*. Joggli (24) says: *“[h]aving a MacBook shows some sort of lifestyle that others want to identify with”* and Arjan (27) states: *“I have a friend that posts a lot of photos of healthy dishes he cooks and that definitely makes me want to live healthier and be more conscious. These are good things I think.”*. In other words, it is not so much the material goods that are being put to use, most of the comparison extend to the level of a complete lifestyle. Strikingly, during all of our focus groups that typically dealt with social comparison in the sense of ‘Keeping up with the Joneses’, goods are rarely mentioned. Of course, this lifestyle brings along certain changes in consumption choices and patterns, but on a much larger scale than just one single product or brand. Adapting a healthy lifestyle for instance, does not prescribe a certain brand of food (not directly, at least, but one could imagine that organic and ecological brands are in favour here), however it could prescribe the consumption of a gym membership, and less consumption of alcohol and fast-food.

This also relates to our second main finding in relation to the nature of the information within SNS: the information should strengthen one’s personal identity. Contrary to real life situations, SNS allows people to select, edit and modify what others get to see. In other words, there is a strong solipsistic character to it: *“[f]riendship is very selective in the way that I choose how much I want to talk. How much I want to tell you. So when we chat, it is much easier to show a certain side of me and talk about certain stuff. I think it is nice to keep in touch but I don’t think it evolves the friendship very much.”*(Aris, 23). This applies not only to conversations in chats; it also applies to what people post on their public Facebook walls. *“Everyone posts the best stuff of their life, not that you’re having a bad day. So it is not a true reflection of life.”* (Jenno, 26). And it goes further than exclusion of disadvantageous information, people might actually go as far as lying, or blowing up experiences: *“When you ask them: ‘how was the party’, they say ‘hmm, it was okay’, whilst on Facebook you see them posting like: ‘This party is awesome!’ and selfies with beer.”* (Willyant, 17). In addition to showing just the bright side of life to strengthen one’s identity, the information that is disclosed or shared with the network members should fit one’s aspired lifestyle. In other words, next to creating what we call ‘idealised selves’, there is strong sense of what we call ‘impression management’. Impression management comes across as something that is almost perceived as a skill, something that can be learned through experience.

There is a personal attachment to this product, the idealised self. There is a certain style, a personal touch, which is attached to this artificial self as if one puts his soul into his artificial product. This is because one creates the online identity that he or she aspires, which is a reflection of one's true personality. This is where we find the classic paradox of distinction and its inherent dependence on belonging. For instance, Arjan (27) states: *"I'm a silent Facebooker; I watch other people struggle."*, consciously distancing himself from other and thus creating distinction. However, early on in the conversation he says: *"[t]ravelling is perceived as cool so that is why people share it."* while later, he states: *"I don't usually post but I do when I go travelling, to show that my life is exciting"*, indicating a more conformist behaviour. This illustrates the tension between standing out and belonging to a certain lifestyle, as well as the tension between one's real and one's digital identity.

Another example of a struggle to find the right balance between belonging (conformist) and distinction (anti-conformist) is that Willyant (17) says: *"[a]nd that while you know how they look like in real life!"* and Rixt (16) says: *"[t]hose selfies are so fake!"* while both of them posted a selfie on the day after the focus group. On the one hand, they look down on the superficiality of the selfie, but on the other hand they are part of this narcissistic trend themselves as well. The same can be observed when the participants talk about neknominations; there is mutual agreement on the silliness of it, yet most participants participated.

Overall, we can observe a form of conscious awareness about what is truthful information and what is not. The awareness is just as present among the younger focus group participants as the older. Additionally, even behaviour of good friends is actively being questioned during a discussion between Jenno (26) and Arjan (27) about a close friend's incentives for posting beautiful pictures of nature. They debate whether these pictures are shared for self-image or simply for sharing the wonders of nature. In other words, the 'realness' of online identities and incentives of posting are often questioned even among good friends.

The previous part discussed the primarily social uses of SNS, also noting that there is always a non-social or anti-social aspect in it. We identified the same duality in the virtual neighbourhoods; having a social function as well as an exchange or utilitarian function. This duality, we find, applies to the use of SNS as a whole. Throughout this chapter, we have highlighted several important aspects of social comparison processes that take place in a highly digitalized world. Therefore we move on to discuss the solipsistic and utilitarian use of SNS that although taking place in a social environment, is predominantly selfish.

We found, rather shockingly, that people are more and more seen as products. A reason for this could be as was discussed before: creating an identity as products, marketing and advertising them

consciously and strategically, and then reaping fruits of recognition and status. The logical result of creating these virtual identities that are not a truly complete reflection of you, but rather your product, is that people actually start shopping friends based on product traits: *"I'd like to think when I go somewhere that I can call them for a place to crash a day or two. That is basically the only reason, I have them in my network."* (Aleksandra, 24). And as Alex (27) states: *"I hope they get really good jobs later so I can say: "Hey, hook me up!" And it is not really a hassle for me to have them in, so why kick them out?"*. Also, friends can be included for strategic goals, to reach a certain level of social status: *"I use it strategically, for instance some of my brothers friends have really high job positions. Thus, I add them as 'friend' but not really to have conversations or just to have them as a contact."* (Julia, 27). The lingo that is being used when talking about this matter is also possessive, rather than connective: 'to have someone in Rome' or 'I had someone in Bratislava'.

Feelings of envy are strongly related to social comparison processes and are being found among many of the participants, indicating that the main driver of the social multiplier is still in effect. Susanne (24) states: *"[p]ictures from when you're abroad and nice beaches and so on, those pictures I don't think they create pressure for other people but they are intended to say 'Hey its awesome here and I want to make you jealous, aaaah you're at home in the rain and I'm sitting here"*. On the other hand, people appear to answer this call for envy: *"When I see pictures from beautiful beaches I would love to be there as well."* (Sjoukje, 16). As we found earlier, feelings of envy typically occur around leisure, around experiences, and not so much around goods.

On the other hand, feelings of happiness are present. The fun factor is for most people one of the main reasons to embark in social interaction online. For instance, Alex (27), talks about a funny joke he posted in the following way: *"[i]f it makes me laugh, it makes other people laugh, and who am I to keep people from happiness?"* Additionally, many of the participants that participated in the neknominations state that they did have a significant amount of fun while doing it, even though the fun part lies outside of the virtual realm; it is triggered by it, but it reinstates the importance of the offline as an important component of human interactions. Accordingly, happiness is increased when positive feedback on pictures is given: *"That really felt good"* (Willyant, 17). However, happiness can also be 'faked' in SNS: *"[p]eople whine so much on Facebook, then in school they seem all happy and on Facebook they post all depressing thoughts. When you ask them on Facebook what's up, they say "ooh nothing!"* Here we see a reversed sense of impression management, being all but ideal in the virtual environment, and being or acting happy within offline situations.

Summarizing, we have illustrated the expansion of reference frames, the functions of SNS in terms of social comparison, the role of the local, hybridized systems in relation to the social multiplier, online

neighbourhoods and their two main functions being social support and exchanges of utilities. Then we turned back to reference frames, discussing the quantity of social information that is being communicated, after which the nature of this information was discussed, as well as 'how' it is communicated. This is followed by the finding that many virtual relations have a strong utilitarian character. We should add here, that these dynamics have certain effects on emotional well-being. Firstly, a primary function that exists along with social comparison efforts is in fact; envy, and secondly, there are some indications that SNS do enhance feelings of happiness. The next chapter will further set out our findings that relate to the above, and will discuss the ways in which people seem to adapt to these tensions.

5.3.2 ADAPTABILITY VERSUS ANXIETY

In the past chapters we have seen how many tensions in social structure are created due to the digitalization and influences of SNS. In our research it has become apparent that participants do a brave attempt in adapting to the changes in social behaviour created by these tensions. Many concepts that have been discussed in previous literature like social comparison still play a big part in our lives. However, the way in which social comparison is manifested has dramatically changed from offline to an online environment in which you compare yourself with on average 338 'friends' (Smith, 2014).

In our analysis we found, how deeply SNS are embedded in our culture. This can be interpreted by the statement of Willyant (17): *"Facebook is part of my rituals, so I never miss out a day on Facebook, I always automatically check it."* As it has been only a few years since the dot.com bubble burst in 2000 (Curtis, 2013), this shows how in 14 years society has adapted to this new form of social life that manifests itself primarily digital.

Another form of adaptability that we have found is the influence of SNS on youth culture. One change that was perceived by our participants is stated by Aris (23): *"[p]eople also grow up more quickly. Because they become aware that people judge them, and they judge and get judged much earlier"*. Aris' statement indicates how this influences the children in growing up more quickly in the digital society. We noticed this also in our focus group of the younger generation by merely talking to them and hearing their well thought out, into perspective, future orientated answers. This younger generation seems to be some kind of hybrid between teenagers and adults. Elisabeth (26) continues with a statement that relates to the influence on consumption behaviour of these teenage adults: *"I think it's different [then it used to be], I also have people in my family at that age [13-14 years] now, and they are more like small adults, they buy clothes at the same stores as we do and they care more about the style rather than the price or brand. It's a bit strange."* As we can see from this statement,

the 'younger' generation really creates its own grown up style and the part where Elisabeth says they 'buy clothes at the same store as we do' indicates how this younger generation imitates the style of the older. We argue that SNS play a big role in how kids grow up and how they consume.

Furthermore, it appears that the teenage adults are not so much influenced by certain big brands anymore as Elisabeth stated and Alex (27) confirms: *"I think when I was in that same thing that I had to buy stuff, I have to siblings that are now 13 and 14 and they are now in that age where they should be like that as well but they're not because they have H&M and Zara and all that, brands nowadays."* In this quote Alex is referring to when he was 13 and he felt the offline pressure of class peers to have to buy something in order to belong. It seems that the young generation nowadays does not feel like that. This can indicate that the younger generation is becoming more individualistic and is not much influenced by what others think of their clothes, or what they communicate with their clothes.

Just as businesses need to adapt in order to survive, so must people. Digitalization processes have created not only an extreme fast pace of change but also created a network with many people that we feel we need to conform to. Niklas (25) states: *"[m]aybe instead of 20 people in your school class, now, you have 200 friends, you have to conform to"*. The power of groups has always been apparent although it may have been more clearly restricted. If people were part of one group, they did not have to be part of the other. Yet in your social network with people having on average 338 friends, there is a hybrid of different groups with different opinions, beliefs and systems. In one person's network there are so many different relations and heterogeneous entities that it is hard to conform to all of them even though there is the feeling *"...you have to"*.

In the literature review we have highlighted how consumption is a major form of showing someone your status. We believe that this has extended, goods are not the only way of showing someone your status but during our analysis the importance of 'likes' e.g. as a status symbol also became apparent. People want other people to see and know how many likes they have and this creates a certain form of respect. As Willyant (17) says proudly: *"[t]his time when I changed my profile picture I got 186 likes."* This news was answered by her friends with admiring words as: *"wow"* and *"that is so cool"*. The likes in this case had the same effect as if she would have shown a certain luxury good as main indicator of her status. Status symbols and one's social status in general have been widely discussed in sociology. However, it is interesting to see the new form it takes and also its influence on social mobility, the movement of people in across social positions. We believe that this is one of the reasons that people are striving for as many 'likes', re-tweets etc. as possible. Elisabeth (26) states: *"I think in the future I just put on picture I like, it is all different, you never know which picture is going to*

get more likes than another, it is hard to get some standard criteria". She indicates that she "in the future" will put pictures on Facebook that she likes, thus in the present she mainly posts pictures to get Facebook 'likes'. She confirms this later by saying: "[o]f course it makes you happy that you get a lot of likes. That means your picture is nice". There is a direct link between the amount of 'likes' and how happy that makes her and, more interestingly, she uses the likes as some kind of confirmation that her picture really is nice.

The hunt for 'likes' results also in how strategically the participants 'brand' themselves. As Rita (27) states: "[i]f you upload a picture at six in the morning you probably won't get as many likes as in the evening." So one starts to strategically think about when to post and also how exactly to post it in order to get the most 'likes' out of it. As stated by Alex (27): "My girlfriend takes sometimes 30 minutes to write one post and then checks every 10 minutes how much likes she got in already". This really demonstrates the importance for people to collect these 'likes'. Either in order to get confirmation how nice their picture is or to show others how great their life is and to make sure that others recognize that too. We find that efforts to collect status and recognition go as far as setting out impression management strategies as if it were a branding campaign with advertisements in form of posts being launched on a regular basis.

Thus, the digitalization brings a lot of change in a rapid pace and we either adapt or we fail to adapt and lag behind. This brings us in a state to which there is continuously pressure on us and the failure to adapt leads to a lot of anxiety in our contemporary society. These findings will be discussed in the next section.

During our research different forms of pressure became apparent. As we discussed earlier it is hard to classify relationships within SNS. This results in people feeling pressure of whom to add in their network. As Cecilia (24) states: "[b]ut if they add you and you see them every day in the gym I cannot not accept them, even though you don't really want to add them". This also shows a form of offline pressure to befriend someone online. It seems like the relationship in the gym is fairly shallow and therefore Cecilia does not feel the need to be friends with her acquaintances from the gym. However, this is experienced differently by those acquaintances. She is pressured to add them to her SNS, even though she does not want to, because otherwise this might jeopardise her offline relation.

A similar quote comes from Aleksandra (24): "I can't ignore them. It's rude, especially since they're older and are my parents friends, so I add them". Here we see again the offline pressure to befriend someone online. But furthermore, we see here that she is driven to the circumstances in which she feels a dichotomy, she feels trapped. She wants to "ignore" them, but she cannot out of respect for their age and the close offline connections with her parents so there is nothing else to do then to add

them. It can be interpreted in the way that we have discussed earlier, the need to conform. She will therefore add them against her own will just to not change the good image that they have of her now to an image that she is “rude”.

An interesting finding relating to pressure as well, is what we have found to be the pressure to ‘like or engage’. To maintain social online relations people feel pushed to comment or ‘like’ different statuses. As experienced by Aleksandra (24): “[s]ometimes, I kind of push myself to like or comment. For example if someone got a baby, then I see all my friends saying, congratulations, and this are not the most closes people to me”. Participants do feel the pressure to ‘like’ and ‘engage’ because everyone else is doing it. It is similar to what Aris (23) said: “[w]hat kind of person am I to not ‘like’ it”. And in our conversation with Alex (27) he states: “[w]auw, did you see how many likes Jannie got? I did not think the picture was that pretty”. Yet we saw that Alex did press the ‘like’ button for this picture as well. When confronting him with that and asking why he still ‘liked’ it even though he claimed to not like it he answered: “just because she had so many ‘likes’ already”. We interpret here a feeling that even tough Alex personally does not like it, he is in a state that he believes he should like it because the picture has ‘so many likes’ already. Here we detect a form of clouding your own judgement in a way that if a picture gets so many ‘likes’ it must be nice. So he feels a need to show that he recognizes the beauty, even though he does not.

It became apparent that even though SNS are already so much embedded in our culture, it still puts people in confusing situations. Situations in which you do not know what to say or how to react: “[i]f someone posts something like an obituary, should you press ‘like’ or do you have to comment with ‘sorry I for you?’ I mean I don’t know...” (Cecilia, 24). The focus group confirmed that these are difficult situations in which it is not clear what to do. An existing etiquette or requirements as to social behaviour online appears to be missing.

We have found that anxiety is also experienced by people that want to keep up with all the many different SNS which all have their own norms: “I think there is a lot of pressure in the sense that there are different social media channels that focus on different things. So there is a lot of pressure of being a good business professional on LinkedIn and then you have to have this social perfect life, do all this fun stuff all the time that you have on Facebook and Instagram.” (Elisabeth, 26). You have to manage your personal brand building and market your personality, but on every different platform there is a need to create a different image of yourself. Personal branding is a concept that has been around in literature (e.g. (Ries & Trout, 1981)) and an increasing form of personal branding includes the online identity management. For this purpose one wants to communicate his core values to the outside world, however, it is hard to decide on your core values as there are so many different networks with

different expectations. And on every network one desires to be the best, as every good brand requires a notion of expertise. This creates, as Elisabeth (26) states: "...a lot of pressure".

As has been discussed, an incentive to use social media and to be constantly connected is the 'Fear of Missing Out' on information as described in the literature. The concept 'FoMo' creates increasingly more anxiety and not only on information but also the FoMo became apparent related to the constant need to keep up with the lifestyles of 'the Joneses'. FoMo is a concept recently broadly discussed in sociological literature (e.g. (Przybylski et al., 2013)). We have detected a few forms of FoMo related to the social multiplier effect of goods. As stated by Jakob (17): "I want to see it [clothes] on someone and when, I like it I buy it". Or as stated by Sjoukje (16): "I always see what other people have, and when I like it I want it too". This can be seen directly in relation to 'Keeping up with the Joneses' which works in essence in the exact same way. FoMo is experienced by consumers when they feel that they have many options. For instance, you see someone wear certain clothes and you feel that you could have it too. The consumer becomes aware of different attractive opportunities. They then want to exhaust all the best opportunities and the fear to get limited by time or money in their choices makes them anxious. We argue that this concept has significantly increased due to SNS as consumers see even more possibilities from people all over the world. One might expect that therefore the FoMo in relation to consumer goods has increased as well. However, as we have discovered in our research, there is in fact a backlash of this concept. 'Keeping up with Joneses' was often regarded to the actual collection of material goods, but in our research it has multiple times shown that despite Jakob's and Sjoukje's statement the collection of goods is not that much of an influence. The biggest influence on the participants was seeing the opportunities of experiences like travels and experiences.

In this chapter we have found that by failing to completely adapt to the new forms of social interaction a lot of pressure, confusion and anxiety is created. We highlighted our findings in regard to how our participants have adapted but also in which ways they experience the anxiety created by failing to completely keep up with all their 'Joneses'.

6. DISCOURSE OF THE TENSIONS

Having analysed the findings the reader might ask what these findings specifically have to do with marketing and consumption. Our research focuses on the consumption effects of the social multiplier and we have found two other consumption practices, specifically: the consumption of SNS and the consumption of relationships. Our study has shown that virtualization and globalization have influenced consumer society to such an extent that it is characterized by several tensions. In this chapter we discuss our findings and how they contrast to or confirm the current literature. The

discussion of these three chapters will aid us in finding the answer to our three research sub-questions and eventually support us in answering our main question.

6.1 DISCOURSE OF TENSIONS AROUND THE CONSUMPTION OF SNS

In chapter 5.1 we have seen that virtualization processes create opportunities as well as concerns. And that people experience incentives as well as barriers to engage in SNS. This chapter will discuss the findings of that chapter and refer it to the existing body of literature.

6.1.1 THE DISCOURSE OF POSSIBILITIES AND CONCERNS

One of the findings was that it is hard to end digital relationships. This confirms what is stated in our literature review that *“people strongly and generally resist the dissolution of relationships”* (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p.503). Marshall (2007) adds that reasons for this are that ending relations involves our own vulnerability and mortality and the process of ending relationships is often found hard, embarrassing, painful and sad. However, we found that on SNS keeping relations is mostly for selfish reasons, like the utility potential of relationships. Thus, whereas Baumeister and Leary (1995) state that the resistance of ending relations *“...go well beyond rational considerations of practical or material advantage”* we however, have a strong reason to believe that it does not go *“well beyond”* but that in fact, for SNS the practical considerations are a main reason to keep relationships. This also is connected to a new concept that we introduced as the ‘expert neighbour’. As stated in our literature review people create an *“open project of self-formation”* (Tubella, 2005, p.258). By doing so, everyone knows the exact expertise of the people in their network and can rely on them and contact them accordingly, whenever and from wherever they need.

It also became clear that various organizations make use of the SNS to work on a good cause. One example in our findings was the *“Zwerfje”*, which included the finding that there is great awareness that people participate in this kind of activities to improve their personal image. This adds to what we have touched upon in the literature review; Veblen’s (1899) ‘conspicuous consumption’ and ‘conspicuous leisure’ which is done to show one’s place in social structure and society. We see now something online what is identified as ‘conspicuous compassion’ (e.g. (West, 2004)). West mostly touches upon the activities people undertake (e.g. wearing a red nose for the starving, send flowers to deceased celebrities). From our findings we can see that instead of physical activities people also participate increasingly more in online activities. This is even easier shared and has an even higher exposure so one can show more people what a caring individual one is and establish one’s place in society.

As referred to in our literature review, social relations increasingly are created outside neighbourhood boundaries (Keller, 1968, p.123). Our findings show that the digitalization makes it

increasingly difficult for people to draw relationship boundaries, we referred to this as the difficulty of 'fence management'. This finding confirms work of for example Karr-Wisniewski et al. (2011) that have written about managing SNS relations. They state in their article that often people are not aware that SNS offer tools for boundary regulations. In our research however, it appeared more that people, even though they did not like the certain 'unwanted' neighbours they did not intend to actually do something about it. Additionally in our research it appeared that most relationship boundary issues were related to distinguishing the social – professional boundary. This is a finding not touched upon by Karr-Wisniewski et al..

Connecting to that is our finding that our participants feel they have an overload on information and that sometimes this information is perceived "*too personal*". This is in line with the "information and cultural overload" findings as discussed by several authors (e.g. (Muise et al., 2009)). Muise et al. focus in their study on "*more information than you ever wanted*" in regard to romantic relationships. They argue how there is an increase of jealousy in romantic relations and state: "*Facebook provides a superb forum for the study of relational jealousy, and our study only serves as a starting point.*". We elaborate on their study, as through our study we can confirm that Facebook and other SNS not only enhance jealousy in 'romantic' relationships but also in all other relationships within one's entire network. Additionally, we found that most jealousy causes were based on lifestyle.

As pointed out in our literature review by Sampson et al. (2002) there are several studies on the neighbourhood and social control. In our research it has become apparent that this is still very apparent in a sense e.g. Willyant (17) states she cannot go somewhere without her physical neighbour noticing it. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) argue in their article about a loss of control on information that is available about a person or organisation. Although, we agree with them on this point, we also argue that in a sense there is actually an increase in controlling others on SNS. In our study it has been shown that SNS are a form of control mechanism by family members. We also have a strong reason to believe, despite what has been written by Kaplan and Haenlein, that one can actually have an increase in information control through presenting him/herself in exactly the way he or she likes.

In our literature review we have seen many writers that have raised critique and concern regarding globalization and virtualization and the effect on the future (e.g. (Ritzer, 2004) (Belk & Ger, 1996)). Our research has contributed in showing that it is not only authors, philosophers or politicians that have this concern, but also the current 'ordinary' SNS users like our participants. There is little literature that expresses these users concern. Most literature about the concerns is in regard to privacy concerns (e.g. (Feng & Xie, 2014) (Chen & Yonghwan, 2013)). Whereas, our research exposed

how participants have future concerns, in particular about how kids grow up nowadays and what the influence of that will be on our consumption society's social structure.

6.1.2 THE DISCOURSE OF INCENTIVES AND BARRIERS

We became aware of the concept of FoMo on information, especially in regard to missing something online and therefore be excluded in conversations offline. FoMo is a concept that has risen in internet discussions (blogs, etcetera), yet has not been researched much in academia yet. Though in one study, Przybylski et al. (2013) expose anxieties related to not be in touch with online conversations happening across their network, focusing only on the online behaviour. However, the form that we have found, - missing out online which influences you offline -, is a particular form of FoMo that appears to be missing in the literature. In chapter 6.3.3 FoMo will be discussed more in detail as we strongly believe that even though it also appeared as an incentive to stay connected to SNS it has a much more significant influence on anxiety.

Two incentives to post and engage on SNS we found during our analysis are the need for attention and the need for compassion. As has been stated in the literature review the neighbours and friends can provide grounds for identification, self-reflection social support and feelings of belonging (Weiss, 1974) (1987) (Wellman, 1992). We have a strong reason to believe this is still the case as the participants emphasized the importance of friendship and a good neighbour. However, our research has shown that the social support functions nowadays have extended into the digital world. One will be able to find online support from many more people and can gain sympathy from near-strangers. As we have showed in the findings, some need for attention went into the extremes. The extreme need for attention is referred to as Histrionic Personality Disorder (HPD) (Am, 1986). Based on our focus group's input and netnography we believe that SNS have increased the commonality of HPD. Through an extra review of literature in relation to this topic, we can confirm a study by Rosen, et al. (2013) that speak of "iDisorders" – the negative relationship between technology usage and health. In their research they speak of Facebook's influence on HPD and that in general people with HPD have a network with *more* friends, *more* impression management and *more* general use. In relation to our research topic we could therefore argue that the increased reference frame (the *more* friends) lead to a need for more impression management to keep up with all the people within your frame and when keeping up in the form of likes or comments does not work, people switch to a scream of attention showing signs of HPD. It is interesting to see how more intense usage of websites that are intended to be social, ironically, increases the signs of antisocial disorders.

Summarizing this chapter, our participants found it hard to end relations, the main reasons for keeping relations are selfish and utilitarian. This is highly connected to our concept of the 'expert

neighbour'. We found that SNS increase possibilities for conspicuous consumption practices. Furthermore, we referred to the difficulty of fence management, in relation to an information overload and jealousy. An important differentiation we made with other authors is the ability to enhance information control. In addition, our research has shown that it is not only authors, philosophers or politicians that have future concerns, but also the current 'ordinary' SNS users like our participants. Lastly, we have briefly touched upon the FoMo concept and on how the need for attention can escalate in serious (i-)disorders like HPD through SNS usage.

6.2 DISCOURSE OF TENSIONS AROUND THE CONTEMPORARY SETTING OF SOCIAL COMPARISON

In chapter 5.2 we have shown the findings in regards to this topic. In this chapter we take the opportunity to elaborate on those and reflect upon our findings by aiding the literature.

6.2.1 THE DISCOURSE OF GLOBAL AND LOCAL

Regarding the relationship between the local and the global, there are some important insights to further discuss and to reflect our findings back to established literature.

To start with, we found that in terms of consumption ideology, there are symbols, imagery and ideas that are globally common but occur across different localities, a finding that is also reflected in the work of Kjeldgaard and Askegaard (2006) in their account on local appreciation of global ideologies. In other words, the global is undoubtedly present in many ways and in many localities. However we believe that their terminology of 'glocalization' is overlooking the tense relationship between both, and pulling them in one word might indicate that the relationship is less tense.

Additionally, we found that this global market ideology triggers the aspiration of a merely cosmopolitan identity that is particularly globalized but does not exclude the local completely, a finding coherent with the work of (Appadurai, 1986). As we found in the literature, social capital can be increased by doing conscious investments in social interaction (Resnick, 2002). This strongly relates to the cosmopolitan theories discussed in the literature review, often suggesting cosmopolitanism to be a dominant consumer attitude that is both created and sustained by the globalized contemporary marketplace (e.g. Thompson & Tambyah, 1999).

Holt (1997), as well as Thompson and Tambyah (1999) note that social status or capital can be acquired through adopting cosmopolitan lifestyle attributes such as travel, as a typical representation of openness for strangeness and exotic excitement (Belk, 1998). Our findings suggest that travel indeed plays a vital role in trying to be cosmopolitan; whether it is in tourism, living, studying or working abroad. In this sense, having a rich, global and diverse social network would indicate a cosmopolitan stance towards life, one that would enhance cultural capital and social

status. We find that although the enhancement of social status is often done through the expansion of networks on SNS, this is directly linked to network inclusion for purely cosmopolitan efforts. With this finding, we develop the notion of Lin (2001), Putnam (2000) and Valenzuela et al. (2009) in regards to offline network expansion, and we agree with Resnick (2002) that conscious investments in social interaction are a possible way of increasing one's social capital.

Hannerz (1990) discusses cosmopolitanism in terms of tourists opposed to locals, in which he argues that tourists observe other cultures purely out of curiosity, rather than receiving intrinsic advantages from it. Our findings disprove this claim as follows: we find that other cultures are only partly of appeal for our participants in terms of curiosity, whereas the ability to use this experience in social status enhancement processes might be much more important and would eventually serve the goal of displaying a cosmopolitan attitude towards the world. The reason we use the wording 'cosmopolitan attitude' rather than 'a cosmopolitan' is that our findings suggest that cosmopolitanism is typically an attitude, a motive, and not so much a state that can be reached. If it were a state that could be achieved, then eventually we would end up with one common global cultural orientation that lacks mere diversity, as also stressed by Levitt (1983). We find that the structural local interpretations of the global ideology illustrate that this is not the case. This confirms the argument of Kjeldgaard and Askegaard (2006) in their account on youth culture.

We find that people are generally facing barriers that divide the local from the global, such as language, a finding that is coherent with what Thompson and Tambyah (1999) found. However, what appears to have been left unattended in cosmopolitan literature, is the role of language as such as an useful tool in the hands of aspirants for displaying cosmopolitan identity efforts (e.g. posting status updates mainly in English even though the network consists primarily of non-English friends). We believe that cosmopolitanism research could excel by looking beyond cultural perceptions, consumption practice and also focussing on the communicational aspects of its manifestations. For instance, the participants typically talked about the global and the local in terms of fast and slow, indicating that there is a tension connected to the difference between the global and the local, a friction of two different objects that are inseparably connected but moving at different paces.

As most of the cosmopolitan literature views cosmopolitanism as some sort of breaking free or overcoming the local, parochial, (e.g. Holt (1997)). We contribute to community cosmopolitanism research by bringing up the connection that appears to exist between locals and local culture and that this connection is simultaneously negative and positive, both enabling and constraining. On the one hand, we found a negative attitude towards the local: "*[e]verything goes so slow here*" as if the local is merely holding its members back from their cosmopolitan efforts. On the other hand, it is the

local that allows its members to make these efforts, because if it were on the same level with the global, cosmopolitan efforts would not make sense because diversity would not exist. This way the relation between the local and the global, is like selling and buying, there is no buying of culture, when no one is selling it. This is mediated by the global, through symbols, borrowing them from all of the different localities of which it exists. These symbols wane over time, so therefore must be given new meanings at all times. This way, the system reinstates itself, making way for compulsory cultural reinvention of meaningful symbols. We believe that the production of culture therefore becomes everyone's task, in the sense that, if we do not, we will become culturally dead. Ritzer (2004) raised critique on globalization by explaining the cultural imperialist idea behind what he calls the 'McDonaldization' of society. Ritzer illustrates a common approach to globalization that can be found throughout the literature; one that views globalization as culturally empty. We do not completely agree with this view because, although we find that globalization does empower homogenisation processes, we also find significant indications that indicate how total cultural homogeneity is not an option: difference is needed to be able to position oneself in society. This becomes evident in how our participants perceive neknominations, and indicate that globalization may not enhance cultural enrichment, but does accommodate cultural reinvention.

Global cultural flows and increased appreciation of the global, stems from technological change and in its slipstream the rise of global communication systems which are accessible for anyone that has sufficient resources. Also, as we found, these developments intensely increase expectations of what is possible in terms of solutions, lifestyles, sports, and what is available in terms of material goods. This was also stressed by Cannon and Yaprak (2002) who identified forces that lead consumers to the adaptation of cosmopolitan values rather than a local consumer orientation. They discuss briefly the shift towards building the self-concept around cosmopolitan values, which we have, a decade later, not only confirmed but also extended. For, we found that the self-concept or identity is largely build upon the display of extraordinary experiences, new things, and especially travel. Our contribution here is that through the commodification of relationships, contacts are now being used as symbolic expressions of a cosmopolitan orientation that is expected to enhance social status through cultural and social capital.

Our expectations as stated in the beginning of this chapter, the fundamental changes in perceived remoteness and closeness, are partly proven to be appropriate. However, a more traditional sense of who is close and who is far seems to be still present by some of the participants. Most of the participants were found to be aware of changes in perceived proximity as an effect of globalization processes. Our study confirms the effects on perceived proximity that were heralded decades ago by Keller (1968) and Wellman (1979). Recently, authors such as Luttmer (2005), and Guven and

Sorensen (2012) suggested that neighbours still play a significant role in people's lives in contemporary society, which is confirmed in our findings. However, as most social-influence-model based papers, these papers pay little to no attention to how neighbour influences are manifested through the global communication system as a complement to existing local spheres of influence. These are now taken into virtual worlds which indicates the cultural adaptation and re-invention that was suggested earlier.

6.2.2 THE DISCOURSE OF THE VIRTUAL AND THE REAL

The relation between the global and the local, is closely related to the tension that arise when the virtual and the real world meet. As shown in the literature review, digitalization processes accommodate - and political influences advocate - a more individualistic attitude towards society. We have seen that a large share of offline interactions are directly related and influenced by one's virtual identity project, confirming the view that our identities are increasingly self-created by putting to use the symbolic resources available (Tubella, 2005). Putnam (2000) has made important contributions in regards to the erosion of communities in his work 'Bowling Alone', however his argument has been revisited when virtual communities started to become more and more present in society and were assigned the same attributes as real communities (Van Dijk, 2006). In his book 'The Internet Galaxy' (2001), Castells argued that the disintegration of the traditional nuclear family - as stated before - results in networked individualism, however, we argue with authors such as Van Dijk (2006) that stress that more individuals spend more and more time online, but that this does not mean they behave non-social. What is evident in our findings is the coherence with authors such as Thomson (1995) that argued that digitalization processes have altered the organization of social life. We confirm that digitalization processes create new forms of relationships and novel ways of relating and interaction among individuals, for instance looking at the notions of 'unwanted neighbour', 'expert neighbour' and the 'glocal neighbour' that we saw emerge from our data. It is evident that these new forms of global communication help the social systems recreate themselves and alter social concepts like identity and community; blurring geographical and cultural boundaries and expanding social networks and communications (Tubella, 2005). Also, our research shows that we live in exciting times in terms of discovering the modern application of more traditional sociological and consumer-related concepts and theories, and understanding them.

In terms of consumption then, we illustrated how Facebook, which is a strictly social environment, has allowed us to consume social relations. There is, to a large extend, the ability to ignore information and, more dramatically, persons, without facing direct consequences. This leaves us with an enormous expansion of consumer choice options in regards to social interaction. Choice, according to Schwartz (2004), is "*[w]hat enables each person to pursue precisely those objects and*

activities that best satisfy his or her own preferences within the limits of his or her financial resources.”(p.99). But what if these ‘objects’ come with no price tag, in the form of Facebook friends? Virtual friendships become consumer goods, and can, just like tangible products, be used for identity creation or personal gratification. This commercialization of identity will be discussed in chapter 6.3.1.

In regards to virtual and real worlds, it appears that the current generation of young adults has experienced living in both worlds; it has experienced the traditional social interactions in the pre-internet era, at the same time witnessing the internet causing a shift and perhaps, erosion, of relationships and interaction in their lives as young adults. Disoriented as they seemed, they appear to be the product of radical changes in communication, driven by technology. We find some evidence for ‘a generational divide’ between those that grew up digital and those who did not, what was suggested by Castells (2010), and brings out the on-going academic debate around digital natives and digital immigrants. Here, we found proof that goes for example, against Prensky’s (2001) vision of a digital native, in which all young people who have been raised during the rise of the PC and the internet are natives and that the rest is automatically; digital immigrants. A ‘digital native’ is then defined as an individual who has grown up with, and adapted to, digital technology. Immigrants however have been exposed later and mistrust it, whilst not being able to adapt quickly enough. We have found, like Dede (2005) that such is not the case; attitude towards digital systems varies between persons and not strictly between generations. It is important to raise awareness for our findings in regards to sceptical attitudes among both the younger and the older focus groups. There is a dominant attitude amongst most of our participants that can be described not so much as fear, but as suspicious and anxious. Realness of the virtual world is often questioned, even by young teenagers. It seems that, in order for the digital native and immigrant hypothesis to hold truth, this divide should perhaps be seen over a few generations, as it appears that digital systems are, although deeply embedded in the lives of our participants, still being viewed as somewhat intrusive with traditional social interactions. Bennett (2012) noted that most research concerning the adaption and magnitude of the role of digital-ness is survey based and called for qualitative depth-analysis such as this study. We found that digital systems are not so much embraced by what Prensky called ‘digital natives’; they are rather forced upon them by the need for its practical use for work or school, or in stronger presence, the need for social comparison, belonging and self-actualization. We do however find that the virtual has an increased influence on the quality of actual conversations and is increasingly present in young people’s lives. For instance, the neknominations exist of both physically offline (the drinking) and virtual acts (the sharing online) that are needed to create a complete act of participation in a trend, and if one part is missing, some acts are not perceived valid or ‘real’.

We found some examples of the pressures exerted by what we called the ‘unwanted neighbours’; offline social ties that in the offline world have a specific label, such as parents, or acquaintances, that have a specific function, such as control or a professional relation, and that usually cannot be categorized as friends. However, they are for various reasons accepted into the network, causing certain problems in terms of ‘looking over the fence’ even though participants wanted to keep them out. This is an example of the deeper, problematic aspect of virtual networking: the limited ability to classify or categorize network members. Boyd (2004) notes that therefore we simply identify anyone we not actively dislike as ‘friend’, since that is the only option. In our opinion however, she does not stress enough the problematic effect on self-disclosure. This has become apparent in our study and confirms what has been stated by Gladly, Gross and Acquisti (2005), who seem more aware of the fundamental differences between online and offline ties.

As technologies develop, we find that virtual networks are therefore becoming what Castells (2010) calls a ‘real virtuality’ that is a part of an increasingly hybridized life, also referred to as a hybrid form of community build upon face-to-face and computer-mediated communication (Etzioni & Etzioni, 1999). Our findings are coherent with Castells’s (2010) hypothesis about ‘the culture of real virtuality’, in which he argues that the new modes and structures of social communication and interaction have included so many expressions of culture and personal experiences that the virtual is increasingly becoming an essential part of our reality.

A finding that was not touched upon by Castell, but by various other scholars (e.g. (Dominick, 1999) (Ellison et al., 2006) (Valkenburg et al., 2006) (Walther, 2007) (Acar, 2008)) is the problematic tension that occurs between real identity and virtual identity. We elaborate on how social networks offer the possibility for advanced self-presentation, impression management and identity creation that will be discussed further on in this chapter, resulting in virtual identities that are false - or at least incomplete - reflections of the actual personality.

In this chapter we have discussed the tense relationship between the global and the local, that is indicated by cosmopolitan attitudes and local appreciation and reinvention of global symbols, ideas and goods. Additionally, we found a tension between virtual and real social lives; selective self-presentations, superficiality, and the commodification of identities altogether blur the line between the real and the fake.

6.3 DISCOURSE OF TENSIONS AROUND SOCIAL COMPARISON IN CONTEMPORARY CONSUMER SOCIETY AND ITS EFFECTS

Chapter 5.3 has shown the tension that we have found in relation to social and anti-social aspect of SNS. In this chapter we elaborate further on these findings as well as how our findings contribute or confirm the current literature.

6.3.1 THE DISCOURSE OF SOCIAL COMPARISON AND SOLIPSISM

The differences between real and virtual environments have a certain impact on social comparison processes. From a wider perspective, we have seen that SNS are typically subject to social as well as non-social uses. We found that that digitalization processes have especially dramatic effects on social processes in at least three ways: the amount of social information that is being communicated, the nature of this social information, and the way this information is being communicated.

The Amount of Social Information

We found that reference frames are constantly being expanded through SNS. It appears that practically no one can be fully excluded from one's reference frame, as new information is, as suggested before (Veblen, 1899) (Bourdieu, 1984) (Mussweiler, 2009), always reflected upon one's own situation. Of course, the nature of the relationship does determine the degree of influence, but most contacts can provide information on 'what is possible' in terms of consumer goods and experiences. This finding is coherent with that of Chou and Edge (2012), who found that social media has further increased our possible frame of reference to mirror our consumption behaviour. When it comes to 'Keeping up with the Joneses' this relative consumption becomes an important topic as this phenomenon is all about our position relative to others, in the traditional sense of the expression: the direct neighbours. Galbraith (1958) stresses the importance of relative consumption in explaining increases and patterns in consumption. He also stresses the role of emulation in making consumers keep up with, or get ahead of the consumption of others (Pressman, 2011). However, we found that in contemporary digitalized society, goods do not play the same role they played when Whyte (1954) proposed his theory on clustered consumption, since in contemporary society, lifestyles, that include but are not limited to the consumption of goods, are especially important in social comparison processes.

The expansion of reference frames is also closely related to what we found in regards to attitudes towards all that is related to the global. Kjeldgaard and Askegaard (2006) found that people living in the locally constrained periphery are especially globally oriented since their aspired lifestyle is not present in their near environment. We find that for most of our participants, who come from locally constrained peripheries, the global seems slightly more appealing than those who do not.

Digitalization has made a dramatic impact on reference frames; they have become multi-modal and the amount of social information seems overwhelming. Giddens (1991) stated over twenty years ago that identity projects were becoming reflexive processes in which the self is negotiated in terms of many optional lifestyle choices. Schwartz (2004) beautifully argues that plurality of choices makes us in fact unhappy. The materialization of lifestyles that are communicated globally and embraced in local markets, make available many options to consider. As seen in the literature review, the global economy of culture can be analysed by the use of the five landscapes, as metaphor used by Appadurai (1986). The flow of people, technology, finance and capital, mediated images and lastly the flow of ideas and ideologies increase the supply of symbols that become available in more and more places (Appadurai, 1986) (Waters, 1995). As we have seen earlier, these flow help create and re-create consumer culture and are a more or less dialectical process between the global and the localities it exists of (Giddens, 1991). In our study it has become apparent that numerous lifestyles and symbolic materials are being communicated towards individuals in SNS, creating a 'choice overload'. The overload of choices as described by Ariely (2009) forces individuals into a hedonic treadmill.

The Nature of Social Information

We argue that, in order to deal with this choice overload, society needs to adapt in a way that to make sense of this plurality of symbols, our participants seem to aspire not goods, but complete lifestyles. For instance, we found that there is an increased sense of lifestyle choices and more developed sense of what fits a certain lifestyle. Additionally, we found that identity projects are rather individual endeavours; subcultures are still relevant, but since individuals are presented new subcultures almost on a daily basis, we note that most of our participants were afraid to adopt a certain style in more strict ways. This is in line with the work of Bauman (2001) and one could argue that this indicates a hybridization of lifestyles (if many are adopted, yet not fully), or what Firat (1997) calls the 'Globalization of Fragmentation'. However, we want to stress that, throughout the data, we find individualistic attempts to create distinction in the form of giving new, local meanings to attitudes towards life, experiences and the use of goods rather than goods in particular, so in fact there is cultural reinvention that reinforces the plurality of the globally available lifestyle options. We believe that the work of Adams (1998) is an important contribution here; SNS may be the only tools that fit the rapid flows of culture and symbols, as they enable us to both acquire and send out cultural messages high speed and to many of our connections. Recently, Manago et al. (2012) predicted that if network size would keep growing, the amount of superficial relations would increase, and that this would lead to lower levels of satisfactory recognition that would need larger amounts of self-expression in order to receive a satisfactory emotional fulfilment. We agree that this

is true for our participants, for instance, Elizabeth posts multiple times a day and indicates to closely watch the amount of likes she receives. We suspect that this may lead to an important misconception or illusion in some cases: that we will always be heard, which in turn, could lead to addictive use of SNS.

However, as discussed earlier, there is a certain difference, at least on a perceptual level, of virtual and real identities. We noted the importance of being able to select, edit, modify and polish social information about oneself in SNS. Some authors have linked this to increased upward comparison and sometimes lower levels of social self-esteem (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007) (Muisse et al., 2009), and we argue that there is general agreement of that ‘they have better lives than me’ as also has been touched upon by (Chou & Edge, 2012). However, this is highly dependent on both the life situation and life phase as well as on personality. Salimkhan et al. also wrote an account on the construction of the virtual self on MySpace, and found that visualization is used to create a visual narrative of the social self, and that multimedia imagery “*becomes integrated in the sense of self as the line between advertisement and self-promotion disappears.*”(2010, p.1). Interestingly, we found that this is relevant for the connection between the real self and the virtual self as some experiences become ‘only real when shared’. For instance, Cecilia (24) feels a need to post a picture on Facebook when she is having ice-cream with her family, because otherwise it feels like it did not happen. Here, it seems like Cecilia almost becomes her digital identity, as for her the only real experiences are those that are put online.

The Strategic Intent

Apart from the amount of information that is communicated and the nature of this information, we also found that there is a significantly present strategic intent when it comes to how and when things are being communicated. We find that the virtual self is increasingly seen as a product that has to be marketed in order to get personal recognition and life satisfaction. This finding is coherent with the work of Goffman (1990) who argues that people are consciously and unconsciously interested in controlling the impressions they convey. Mehdizadeh (2010) found important correlations between profile photos and profile details and levels of self-efficacy, and our findings confirm the relation Mehdizadeh draws between self-efficacy and SNS activity. Impression management becomes a constant struggle, and some scholars (e.g. (Petkova, 2006) have noted that it is increasingly easy to switch between different identity projects, a notion that is coherent with this study. Therefore, people enter “*ever-present worry of needing to perform oneself appropriately*” (Clark, 2005, p. 217). We found significant evidence for a social multiplier effect in SNS. According to our empirical data analysis, subjective well-being is pressured by SNS and the desire to ‘Keep up with the Joneses’ is more severe than ever.

Earlier on we noted the important effects that reference frame expansion has on social comparison processes. It is suggested in the literature that one of the main reasons to include someone in an online network is to maintain offline relationships (Manago et al. (2012). But we found, rather shockingly, that people are more seen as products, what we call the commercialization of identity, and that they are used for ego-centred (and cosmopolitan) identity projects. In this commodification of friendship process, we see another type of neighbour arise, which we call the 'glocal neighbour'. This glocal neighbour has a global character in the sense that he or she was met in an unfamiliar setting (abroad), and that he/she is typically far away. Additionally it has a local character, in the sense that he/she is used to the localities of his/her country. Preferably, this neighbour is willing to take 'friends' that are unfamiliar to the place to what we relate to Tonnie's (1967), backstage and let them experience the locality from an insider's perspective. These ties are typified by their usefulness: they are often referred to as 'random person' (Susanne, 24 and Aleksandra, 24), and their network inclusion is primarily based on the exchange of services, such as offering a couch to sleep on. Then, there is a mutual willingness to host these contacts and take them backstage. This way, both parties receive an increased sense of cosmopolitanism, which is then advertised on SNS, and simultaneously can be used to show that both individuals have exciting lives.

Returning to the utilitarian character of relationships, this glocal neighbour is sometimes useless for daily interaction due to e.g. a language barrier. The friendship is not being sustained, and the contact becomes an empty relationship. We believe these relations have two main use values: to be able to contact a 'familiar foreigner' (and consciously overcome the language barrier) in case one needs access to a locality or a place to stay. Secondly, they are used to indicate cosmopolitan capital and the possession of an extensive network to indicate social capital.

The Neighbour and Social Comparison

Relating back to the traditional perception of 'Keeping up with the Joneses', in the sense of neighbourhood influence, we found that physical neighbours are still present in the consumption reference frame of our participants, but that their influence and interaction has shifted towards the virtual realm. Both main uses of the online neighbourhood communities as identified in the literature review (Unger and Wandersman 1985) – social support and exchanges – have social and non-social (ego-centric) aspects in it and we find support for this conclusion.

The neighbour function is social in the sense that most of the social support or help is quickly requested and given, because there is mutual feeling of community among 'less affluent' students. Satisfying one's individual emotional needs is perceived to be possible without returning any emotional affection. We argue that this stems from the commercialization of identity as is subject to critique to

scholars such as Bauman (2013): the mixing of social rules between the real and the virtual social interactions that become blurred because the real and virtual become blurred. Castells (2001) argued that the disintegration of the traditional nuclear family results in networked individualism, and our empirical findings support individualistic behaviour as well as solipsistic ideas.

The exchange function on the other hand, is social in the sense that these exchanges enhance social comparison processes and the marketization and giving of products. The standardized dwellings accommodate effortless social comparison and the online community page creates higher awareness of how others style their rooms. The exchange function is non-social in the sense that exchanges are usually made for utilitarian purposes only and that connections are only made when both parties benefit from it in terms of selling and buying goods.

Social comparison processes therefore seem to be subject to at least two trends that determine both the magnitude and the effect of the social multiplier. On the one hand, social comparison processes are found to have taken a leap in recent years, fuelled by SNS and marketing, accruing the pressure to keep up with consumer goods, experiences and lifestyles. However, as people engage in virtual social interaction, they seem to have the weapons to fight with. Additionally, virtual communities may offer a sense of belonging, even though belongingness to virtual communities appears to give much weaker satisfaction than belonging to real groups that are based upon offline interaction. On the other hand, we see an increased sense of individualism, solipsism and inflated selves that also reflects clearly in the utilitarian and ego-centric uses of platforms that are supposed to be 'social'. There is a constant pressure for the created identity to be marketed and recognized as a member of the virtual society, creating a strong focus on those contacts, experiences, actions and purchases that enhance the social status of the 'second self', the virtual self-created product.

Overall, the social multiplier still has a tremendous effect on consumers, exposing them to numerous ideal neighbours to keep up with. In the traditional sense, consumer goods played a major role, whereas the contemporary working of the social multiplier has the following traits, as identified in this project:

1. SNS enable people to show off possessions, experiences, etc. that were invisible before.
2. SNS enable people to show off possessions, experiences, etc. to a worldwide audience, an increase from a limited audience to a mega-audience.
3. SNS have a much stronger effect on consumer behaviour and behaviour in general, because of the plurality and magnitude of impulses.
4. SNS enable proximate neighbours to run social comparison processes without face-to-face contact.

We found that social comparison processes in SNS bring out feelings of envy and unhappiness, but these differ between persons. We also found that a reversed impression management occurs among some individuals, showing their 'dark' side on SNS, and pretending to be happy in real life, for example at school. This is exceptional, as for the vast majority this seems to be reversed, real life includes ups and downs, advantages and disadvantages, whereas the virtual includes positive information only. This could be explained by the fact that posting personal thoughts on Facebook may be an easier way to express feelings than in real-life situations. An interesting approach to this, significantly small percentage of Facebook users, is taken by Forest and Wood (2012) who argue that individuals who struggle to connect to people (often with low self-esteem) have difficulties establishing and maintaining intimate relations and that self-disclosure is an important tool for this. Accordingly, they argue that contrary the expectations that these people would benefit from SNS as safe places of self-disclosure, these disclosures have a reverse effect on their well-being that may pull them into a negative spiral of returning back to SNS for social support for these negative results of self-disclosure.

6.3.2 THE DISCOURSE OF ADAPTABILITY AND ANXIETY

One of our main findings was the adaptability of the digital consumer culture to the digitalized world. This has shown among others through how relatively quickly, technology has been embedded in our culture. The social networks we see as a form of homogenized culture that is identified by Belk and Ger (1996). As Firat and Venkatesh (1993) state, the homogenization is characterised by the commonalities between nations. We have seen in our multinational focus group that SNS are used in exactly the same way and that homogenization also has played its part in how many people only post in English (whereas they are of a different nationality). This homogenized behaviour contradicts a study by Ji et al. (2010), that have discovered differences in SNS usage of three nations and difference for the reasons to use SNS. Based on our study, we expect that SNS usage will only increase homogenization and the will to adapt to or keep up with different cultures. This standardisation of SNS use is a good example as stated by Horkheimer and Adorno (1996) as the 'culture industry'. Even though SNS use becomes more homogenised, we also see, as stated in the previous chapter, how cultures reinvent by for example the Nekominations.

Further, influence off virtualization processes on youth culture has also been one of our main findings. As stated we have reason to believe that SNS and its comparing processes have a direct influence on adolescents and children. Firstly, we have identified that kids grow up quicker. Secondly, by having so many people to conform to, they feel the need to conform at a younger age. It has been identified that media in general influences the process of children growing up (e.g. (Von Feilitzen & Bught, 2001)), yet there has been only little academic research on how social media in

particular influences this. We have recognized that SNS have become an integral part to a teenagers life. Teens do most of the communication and interactions these days behind the screen, not in person. In relation to our study this means that they do not see one person, or one group with whom they hang out at the mall, but they scroll through their newsfeed in which they only see how great everyone seems. As stated in the literature review there is a significant expansion of reference frame (Chou & Edge, 2012) (Castells, 2010) (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006) and more importantly as we have identified, this reference frame only exists of idealized images. The need to adapt to all this idealized images is stated. This significantly influences the development of identities of teens as stated in an online article by the Child Mind Institute (Ehmke, 2013). We argue with this institute and elaborate on their findings in regard to social comparison of identities. People compare themselves with this idealized images and if they cannot portray an equally good or better image of themselves, they fail to keep up and will experience anxiety. Furthermore, we contribute that this does not only involve teens and adolescents that still are in the process of developing their identity. We found that the adults in our focus groups also experience group pressure, the pressure to conform, and anxiety in this sense.

As stated in the literature, people rather compare with a reference frame favourable to their situation to reduce feelings of inferiority (Guyen & Sorensen, 2012). However, due to all the idealized identities on SNS it is almost impossible to compare downward. And as the need to compare to others is so deeply embedded in our consumer culture (Veblen, 1899) (Bourdieu, 1984) (Mussweiler, 2009), many comparisons are upward, hence increasing our feelings of inferiority.

This being said, the peer pressure to adapt and being just as amazing as the rest is found to be present in our teen (16-17 year old focus group) as well as in our older groups. As we have touched upon in the literature review stated digitalization is linked to several forms of anxiety (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007) (Kim et al., 2009) (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011), and our study has confirmed that this failing to adapt or constantly striving to adapt increases social anxiety.

A study by Valkenburg et al. (2006) focusses on how SNS indirectly influence social self-esteem and well-being. They point out that *“peer acceptance and interpersonal feedback on the self, both important features of friend network sites, are vital predictors of social self-esteem and well-being in adolescence.”* We have found the same in our study, for example Elisabeth (26) that states when she receives a lot of ‘likes’ she knows her posted picture is nice. This adds to what Valkenburt et al. (2006) say in a way that the principle is not only applicable to adolescents but also to adults. Furthermore, we found that the main factor that shows *‘peer acceptance and feedback’* are the amount of ‘likes’, ‘comments’, ‘retweets’ etc. that one gets. It can function as some kind of new

status symbol like a luxury good used to be. We argue that 'likes' become a 'Veblen good', carrying out meaning of social status and are desired by others. Through the 'likes' people now are actually getting a polling how much others like them and their appearance. These 'likes' now show ones social capital, which can enhance one's social mobility. 'Likes' as a social capital status symbol contributes to what has been discussed in the literature review, authors stating an increase in social capital through: the grander size of one's network (Valenzuela et al., 2009, p.877), the increase of social interaction and the adaptation of a cosmopolitan lifestyle (Thompson & Tambyah, 1999).

We have found the rat race for likes to be a reason that people are working hard and spend hours to create their own idealized image. However, this only creates more pressure, as when they scroll through their newsfeeds they see how perfect, grandiose, and impressing everyone else's life is.

As discussed in our literature review, some scholars argue for the negative relationship between self-selected identities and well-being (Valkenburg et al., 2006) (Acar, 2008). In our research this has become apparent too, illustrated above. Additionally, we have identified another concern. Creating of identities does not only stop by one platform. Our participants feel the need to be visible on several platforms, which all carry out their own message. As all identities get enhanced to keep up and compete on these social and professional platforms, one ends up with different identities that one wants to proliferate by SNS consumption. As argued by (Miles et al., 1998) consumption gives people a feeling to fit in whilst simultaneously giving them some semblance of individuality. However, in the light of our data, what happens when one has to many identities to keep up with? In our study it became apparent that this causes stress, confusion, and overall anxiety as people start consolidating who they are. This more often than not can create in essence a difference between who you appear to be and who you think you are. This is similar to what is called the imposter syndrome (Ehmke, 2013), which occurs when people cannot internalize with the person that they show to be on the outside (e.g. in our case: on SNS). One of the reasons that they cannot internalize, is that they feel like a fraud (Caltech, 2014). This is understandable in the light of our study, as one has to keep up (semi-true) appearances in all the different networks one engages in.

As discussed in chapter 6.2.2, there might be a difference in the way people adapt between generations. We have found that digital natives do not embrace SNS but the SNS are actually forced upon them, this is in contrast to what Prensky (2011) argues. To keep up, both the digital natives and immigrants respond with an adaptation strategy as discussed above, by falsifying information and creating embellished identities. Another strategy is to be passive and resistant. Many of the participants are increasingly aware of how superficial and carefully constructed newsfeed updates are. Additionally, they become aware how this influences their well-being negatively as well as their

behaviour. There is a resistance to SNS in the sense that participants are thinking of deleting their profiles or a desire to be less active on SNS.

We have found that SNS change the amount, quality and communication of social information that is used for comparison and self-evaluation in which the option to create ideal selves proves to be problematic. We have reflected our findings upon the literature and found some contradictions, some confirmations and some extensions of existing theories or findings. However, it remains evident throughout the entire discussion that social structures, interactions, etcetera are subject to incomplete literature and limited understanding because of their emergent nature.

7. KEEPING UP IN CONTEMPORARY CONSUMER SOCIETY

The purpose of this study was to shed light upon the complex social comparison processes of today by looking at the working and the effects of the social multiplier in contemporary consumer society. The general theoretical literature on this subject and specifically in the context of social uses of internet is inconclusive on several vital questions within the social anxiety discourse. Therefore, we sought to answer three questions:

1. What are the practical considerations for whether or not to consume Social Networking Sites?
2. What is the current setting of social comparison that evolves from globalization and virtualization processes?
3. What are the effects of the social multiplier in contemporary consumer society?

By linking these investigations together, we sought to develop a thorough understanding of intensified social comparison efforts in the complex social system of today. We did this, by taking a limit attitude towards marketing (Tadajewski and Brownlie, 2008). Although recognizing the benefits and advancements that we reap in today's society, we argue with Richins (1995) that through the promotion of goods and services, marketing often stimulates envy and consumer discontent.

7.1 EMPIRICAL FINDINGS.

To digest the large amount of rich data collect through four focus groups and complementing research methods, the main empirical findings were divided into three chapters of which each answers one of the research questions. Chapter 5.1 relates to question 1, chapter 5.2 relates to question 2, and chapter 5.3 relates to question 3. We synthesize the empirical findings, in order to answer these questions which we will discuss below.

What are the practical considerations for whether or not to consume Social Networking Sites?

There appears to be a set of tensions that are the result of different considerations that are paradoxical:

- **Opportunities and incentives to consume SNS.** Network expansion for primarily selfish reasons, displaying conspicuousness, exerting control functions and practical usage. To reduce the fear of missing out on what others are doing, to satisfy the need attention and compassion, to market one's identity and indicate cosmopolitan values, and to chat with friends.
- **Reasons not to consume SNS, concerns and barriers.** These include: privacy concerns when people are looking over the hypothetical fence, the social control that is present on SNS, and being exposed to an information overload. Another reason not to use SNS is the fear of becoming too dependent on it.

What is the current setting of social comparison that evolves from globalization and virtualization processes?

Here, it appears that globalization and virtualization processes both have considerable effects on the understanding of two paradoxes that are highly relevant to social comparison processes:

- **Globalization: the tension between the global and the local.** We find that the relationship between the global and the local is tense, and that the global is increasingly present in the lives of people; they are adopting a cosmopolitan attitude. The local stills remains influential and cosmopolitan efforts are not always successful, for which the local is often blamed. We find that the fast-paced flow of cultural symbols accommodates cultural enrichment and reinvention. Perceptions of closeness and remoteness have significantly changed through digitalization and globalization, changing the fundamentals of social constructions such as the neighbourhood.
- **Virtualization: the tension between the virtual and the real:** Digitalization processes have changed the organization of social life, but the social system re-creates itself. Virtual friendship makes unlimited choice possible; resulting in the 'consumption of friendships', and the increased commodification of identity. Virtual identities enable selective self-representations, conceivably making social comparison a different game. A sceptical attitude towards the 'realness' of social interactions on SNS is clearly present; however, many social interactions can only be complete when they include the virtual component. The limited ability to classify network members and the ease of 'adding friends' results in moral struggles. Similar to how globalization influences the local, the virtual seems to increasingly enter what is perceived as real.

What are the effects of the social multiplier in contemporary consumer society?

The answers of the first two questions indicate that the working of the social multiplier is subject to changes in contemporary consumer society. We found that social comparison expands and therefore, we become more and more ego-centred. Along with this, we found that there is a thin line between adaptability and social anxiety.

- **Social comparison and solipsism:** SNS enable people to show off possessions, lifestyles and experiences that were invisible before, to a worldwide audience, more frequently and more strategically. This creates severe social competition, in which SNS provide the tools to keep up with others through selective self-presentation and the creation of artificial and 'ideal' personalities. Every friend that is added to a virtual network means another ideal identity to keep up with and down-ward comparisons are made on a daily basis, increasing feelings of inferiority. Gathering from the overload of attractive opportunities that is present on SNS, people try to keep up and enter a hedonic treadmill.
- **Adaptability and anxiety:** This treadmill naturally creates anxiety. Social evolution processes create increasingly skilled self-marketers and impression managers. Strategic branding excels, however, conflicting identities on different platforms make it increasingly complex and require increased cognitive efforts. Disorientation, classification problems, and fear of missing out occur. In other words, 'Keeping up with the Joneses' seems impossible for more and more people.

7.2 THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS.

The theoretical body on the issues described is infantile when it comes to contemporary application. We shed light upon the complex social comparison processes of today by looking at the working and the effects of the social multiplier in contemporary society. We contribute to the literature on contemporary social systems and the influences of forces like globalization and virtualization by highlighting their effects in terms of tensions. We believe that there is not a singular outcome to these forces, but they rather have a tense working on social structures and people are actively trying to make sense of their situation.

Whyte's (1954) account on the social multiplier does not hold truth in the sense that physical neighbourhoods play an important role in social comparison processes. However, his conclusions hold truth when it comes to the fundamental notion of social comparison and self-evaluation within reference frames. We have developed the neighbour as a concept that transcends the locality and physical state, accounting for the drastic changes in reference frames of nowadays. We identified

several kinds of neighbourhood influences that are exerted by different network ties in relation to SNS.

Social practice theories, such as those developed by Veblen (1899), Bourdieu (1984), Festinger (1954) and Douglas and Isherwood (1979) have appeared to not only be relevant when it comes to studying distinction and belonging on SNS, but also to be vital in understanding these practices, as suggested by Bennett and Maton (2010).

This study found that, like media, identities are now being 'consumed': commoditised, marketed, and acquired for utilitarian traits; a notion that has also been developed by Bauman (2013). People acquire contacts for reasons that go far beyond affection. This, and other structural changes in social networks such as the crumbling of traditional social structures, has also been addressed in the work of Castells (2010), which contrary to our study, does not explicitly link them to social anxiety. Other authors however, have linked society's immaturity in adapting to this new and increasingly digital social world to loneliness, addiction and depression (e.g. (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007) (Kim et al., 2009) (Muise et al., 2009) (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011)).

Selective self-representations have lately been subject to scholarly attention, but the effects are explained differently (Ellison et al., 2006) (Walther, 2007) (Muise et al., 2009) (Haferkamp & Krämer, 2011) (Chou & Edge, 2012). For example, Ellison et al. (2006) also find that there is a tension between creating an 'ideal self' and being afraid of being superficial. However, their study overlooks the overall effect of self-evaluation when seeing other profiles. Arguably, SNS did not become such a significant part of lived reality in 2006 yet, that it could influence emotional well-being significantly. Chou and Edge (2012), more recently linked selective self-presentations to feelings of inferiority and the desire to 'keep up', however they used a quantitative approach and could therefore not account for personal experiences in the way this study does.

Keller (1968), Wellman, (1979) and Fischer (1982) predicted the effects of urbanization and globalization on traditional social structures. This study proved them right; however, we should note that these traditional structures still fulfil a role in the construction of identity and the way in which people make sense of the people and the world around them.

Overall, most of the literatures concerning the wide array of topics that connect to this paper are subject to quantitative and American studies. We sought to complement this body of literature by linking key aspects of the current social order to widely recognized sociological and consumer culture theory a novel way. This qualitative endeavour accounts for individual experiences and perceptions in order to create understanding of this complex phenomenon.

7.3 IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGERS AND POLICY-MAKERS.

Our findings indicate that consumers are not only willing, but in desperate need for new symbols to be put to use in the social competition. This readiness and interest in new tools for identity building, such as novel brands or fashion, will increasingly crumble down brand loyalty. Therefore, not only consumers need novel symbols and cultural reinvention to function, marketers need the same.

7.4 CONCLUSION

Our main research question was as follows: 'How do virtualization and globalization processes in contemporary consumer society alter the working of the social multiplier?' The purpose of answering this question was to shed light upon the complex social comparison processes of today by looking at the working and the effects of the social multiplier in contemporary society.

We believe that complex social processes should be approached creatively and by combining the case of traditional neighbourhood influences, traditional and contemporary literature, qualitative empirical data, as well as our own experiences as users of SNS, we have developed a comprehensive argument on the topic of study.

We should note here that efforts to 'Keep up with the Joneses', or the 'Fear of Missing out' can have a positive working as it widens the scope of interest, drives people towards leading more exciting lives and it enhances the idea of using our talents to the fullest. However, our study indicated a need to raise awareness and prevent the foreclosure of the 'dark side' of it.

Based on our empirical findings, we can conclude that, there is an increased freedom of choice in almost every aspect of identity. Additionally, we are exposed to many more options to choose from, willingly or unwillingly. We find proof both the consumption and production of new social structures through SNS: traditional social structures no longer structure our lives like before, and acceptance of individual authority creates strong solipsistic feelings. We are no longer bound to inherited social status and identity, and the quest for the one's identity starts early on, not only embedding freedom of choice deeply into toddlers' minds, but also making them better at choosing. Technological developments, which include SNS, expose us to (entrepreneurial) success stories from around the world, creating the belief that anything is possible. In sum, the social multiplier is running overspeed and 'Keeping up with the Joneses' has become 'Keeping up with the World', which explains the social anxiety that was found in this study. But, ironically, withdrawing ourselves from SNS would - for some people - mean unplugging from life: we are caught in the Net.

7.5 LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

In our methodology chapter we have stated our concrete limitations for this study. This research is mainly restrained by time and scope. We expect that the social comparison processes on SNS will further develop over time. We would therefore, like to encourage further research on this topic in order to create an even deeper understanding. This research project is conducted in a European setting and should be further tested on populations outside of Europe, as well as in less-affluent countries. Also, we identify a need for longitudinal research designs, especially among children, in order to study adaptation efforts. We raise the question that is also raised by our participants: “What is virtual now, will that be real for next generations?” The existing body of literature on the ‘generational divide’ and ‘digital natives’ (Prensky, 2001) that is especially focussed on educational developments, could therefore be of good use among a wider audience of sociologists. Some psychological issues and adaptation problems have been discussed by social scientists (Bessiere et al., 2008) (Burke et al., 2010), but as these problems are especially emergent in recent years, there is a need for qualitative endeavours that further investigate how different generations cope with intensified social competition through SNS. Additionally, we believe that cosmopolitanism research could excel by looking beyond cultural perceptions, consumption practice and also focussing on the communicational aspects of its manifestations, especially in virtual environments.

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APPENDIX 1: AID MEMOIRE

To conduct our focus group interviews we have made use of an aid memoire in order to make sure all points of our interest would be discussed. However, we took a flexible approach in order to let our participants talk freely and leave a degree of spontaneity with the aim of discovering other interesting non-predefined topics.

Introduction:

- *Thank the participants for coming*
- *Briefly state the focus group process and time frame*
- *Brief introduction of our research topic, making sure not to give away too much as to prevent bias*
- *Invite them to talk freely and be completely their self, let the conversation flow*

SNS Usage and Role Models:

- *Which social networks do you use? How active are you on social networks?*
- *How would you describe the people that you interact with online?*
- *Do you actively keep track of TV Stars, celebrities or other role models, and why?*
- *Do you have a specific role model/someone that you admire? Who? How do you keep up to date with that person?*

Globalization + Consumption:

- *How do you think globalization changes social relations?*
- *Can you explain why you think some relationship significantly changed in nature through digitalization and Social Media?*

Behaviour:

- *From whom do you feel pressure to **do** things? (Lifestyle) → Nekominations, education, travel? how?*
- *Who influences your behaviour most?*

Buying behaviour:

- *From whom do you feel pressure to buy things? Parents, friends, neighbours etc?*
- *Who influences your buying behaviour most?*
- *How do you think this was 50 years ago? Why has it changed?*

Social Comparison:

- *What do you think are the main criteria by which people make their judgements about others? And why?*
- *Is that criteria different online and offline?*
- *Do you know your neighbours?*
- *Do you have frequent contact with them?*
- *Who are they?*
- *How would you describe your relationship with them?*
- *Do you compare your life to people from higher, lower, or the same social class?*

Digital life and happiness:

- *Is there a difference between how you reflect on life events online and offline? Are things you put on your Social Media 'real' or 'less real'?*
- *Do you share things you buy, if yes, what kind of things? Do you use visuals for that?*
- *How does it feel when you accidently leave your phone at home? Even though you don't need it?*
- *Does it seem to you that there are others in your networks that have a better life than you? If you could swap lives with someone, who would it be and why?*
- *Continuing the above, do you think life is fair?*