Rites of passage in the age of social media: the experiences of millennial undergraduate students transitioning to higher education

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Abstract

In the UK the transition to higher education is being made by increasing numbers of students. While the decision to attend university is not one which is made by all young people, for those who choose to enter education, this transition is arguably one of the most important and complex periods of the life course. This thesis provides an empirical, qualitative, study of UK-based millennials as they transition to higher education. The study focuses on students narratives of their experiences of the transition in the weeks leading up to the physical transition and in the first few weeks of university. In order to build a comprehensive understanding of the period, the research places focus on exploring the intersection of the participant cohort's experiences of adulthood, moving away from home, and changes to the structures of their personal communities. To provide a rich source of data, thirty-four interviews were conducted across two research sites: Keele University and Manchester Metropolitan University. Interview data is analysed through the theoretical lens of van Gennep's *Les rites de passage*. The research places specific focus on analysing how the infiltration of social media into the everyday lives of millennials has altered their rites of passage with respect to their transition to university. Findings suggest that social media has evolved the ways in which millennial students manage their personal communities during the transition to university, and this impacts how students experience the stages of separation, transition and incorporation as outlined in *Les rites de passage*.

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This thesis is dedicated to him.

Chapter One
Introduction to the Research

1.1 Introduction

This thesis is a study of the experiences of UK-based millennial undergraduate students as they transition to higher education. Based on in-depth interviews with 'home'[1] students from two higher education institutions, the research explores the various challenges young people face both in the lead up to their physical transition to university, and in the first few weeks of being a first year student. Applying van Gennep's work on rites of passage in tribal societies, the research explores the rites of passage of millennials as they transition to higher education. In order to build a comprehensive understanding of the rites of passage of the students as they made their transition into higher education, the research explores the intersection of the students' experiences of adulthood, moving away from home, changes in the structure of their personal communities and challenges faced and how they were overcome. The findings of this research echo much of the previous research which has been undertaken within the field of student transitions. In line with such research within the field (e.g. Tinto, 1975), the research highlighted that the transition to university for young people is a complex process and that the successful negotiation of both the social and academic spheres of university life is required in order to limit the stress students experience during their first few weeks. The research findings reveal that while the experiences of millennials transitioning to university are broadly similar to those of previous generations of students, social media has evolved the ways in which millennial students manage and interact with their personal communities during the transitional period. The original contribution to knowledge of this thesis lies in its exploration of how millennials use social media during the transition to university. Using van Gennep's rites of passage as a theoretical lens, this thesis argues that the online dimension social media adds to interpersonal relationships has evolved the rites of passage

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[1]In the UK, universities classify students as either 'home', 'EU' or 'overseas' students for the purposes of calculating tuition fees. This study places focus on exploring the experiences of UK-based home students as opposed to exploring the experiences of EU or overseas students. An in-depth explanation of the decision to study home students can be found in Chapter Five: Methodology and Research Design.

of millennials transitioning to higher education. This ultimately impacts how student experiences the stages of separation, transition and incorporation within the rites of passage.

1.2 Rationale for the Study

In the UK the transition to higher education is being made by increasing numbers of students. In the 2014/15[2] academic year 512,400 applicants were placed in higher education through UCAS (UCAS, 2015). For the 2014 entry cycle, the proportion of the 18 year old population who entered higher education represented the highest ever proportion of young people to enter higher education to that date (UCAS, 2015). While the decision to attend university is not one which is made by all young people, for those who choose this path, this transition is arguably one of the most important and complex periods of the life course. Research into the transitionary period and the experiences of first year students is extensive and has taken a vast array of approaches (Tinto, 1987; Briggs et al, 2012; Chickering, 1969; Chow and Healey, 2008; Berzonsky and Kuk, 2000; Fisher and Hood, 1987; Kember, 2001; Huon and Sankey, 2001; Astin, 1973; Goldscheider and Goldscheider, 1999). However, much of this research has taken place in North America and prior to the growth and embeddedness of internet mediated communication technologies into everyday life. This research therefore explores the experiences of UK-based first year undergraduate students, with particular focus placed on student's use of technology to facilitate interpersonal relationships and ties with family, friends and acquaintances during the transitionary period.

1.3 Inspiration and the Opportunity to Build on Previous Research

This research was jointly funded by The Sociological Review and Keele University and I was awarded the 'Ray Pahl Scholarship'. The aim of the funding was to utilise Pahl's research in a modern context. On reading Pahl's work *On Friendship*, I found the following most striking:

> Even if people are geographically separated, long telephone calls help to provide
> continuity… With about a third of young people going onto higher education, a
> concept of friendship binding has emerged, providing a source for close friends who

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[2] The interviews for this study took place in the 2014/15 academic year. Therefore, the statistics for this entry cycle are used.

may be part of a lifetime's personal community. Many readers of this book will have

had the experience of meeting friends at university and coping with the problems of

examinations, fluctuating relationships and sharing a house together

(Pahl, 2000: 117)

I was particularly interested in exploring and understanding how young people build continuity

with their personal communities once they have transitioned to university particularly given the

technological advancements to have taken place and technologies to have emerged since the

publication of this work. I therefore decided that this would form the basis of my research, and

proceeded to explore previous research to have been undertaken in the field. Unsurprisingly

undergraduate student transitions to university have been the subject of much previous exploration

with research having been undertaken in multiple academic disciplines and from a variety of

theoretical perspectives. Research in the area has placed focus on both the academic and social

spheres of university life. Such research has highlighted the complexity and challenging nature of

the transition, placing particular focus on how student retention can be affected by the challenges

students face due to the change in academic environments (e.g. Kember, 2001; Winn, 2002;

Prescott and Simpson, 2004; Huon and Sankey, 2001) and highlighting the importance of students

being able to successfully negotiate their support networks during the transitionary period (e.g.

Mackie, 2001; Pulakos, 2001; Richey and Richey, 1980).

Within the wider literature on the nature of undergraduate student transitions to higher education,

for young people the period is most notably characterised by a change in academic environments

and a move from living in the family home to living semi-independently in student halls of

residence. However, beneath the surface the transitionary period is a complex and interwoven web

of experiences. During this period of the life course, multiple concurrent changes take place in the

lives of the young people and several challenges are faced as they undertake the process of

redefining their social status in society as an adult and community membership as a university

student. Much of the previous research on student transitions has sought to understand the varying

factors which influence and affect the nature of the transition. The process of establishing friendship networks has been identified as a key influence of a successful transition to university (Rickinson and Rutherford, 1996; Thomas, 2002), alongside the quality of relationships between academic students and staff (McGivney, 1996) and learning, teaching and assessment strategies employed by universities (McInnis, 2001). As research has suggested (e.g. Tinto, 1975; Beder, 1997) successful integration into both academic and social spheres of university reduces the likelihood of withdrawal from university. Becoming a university student is not just about acquiring academic skills but also about constructing a new identity and sense of belonging (Beder, 1997) and it is common for students to feel homesick in the early stages of transition before they establish friendships (Wilcox et al, 2006). During this period "support from family and friends at home can act as a buffer against the stress of feeling alone in a strange environment" (Wilcox et al, 2006:145).

Today's generation of students entering higher education are considered to be part of the millennial generation, or more simply termed as millennials. The millennial generation (the cohort of people born during the 1980s and 1990s), are defined within the literature by the exposure they have had to technology and its developments. The technological advancements that millennials have experienced have altered their social experiences, and they are most notably characterised by their use of technology for entertainment purposes and interaction with others. Young people and their use of technology, in particular their use of social media for socialisation, has been examined in-depth with little consensus surrounding the perceived advantages and effects. However, previous research into millennials transitions to university has suggested that social media can aid and perhaps ease the transition to university, mainly by giving students the opportunity to develop connections with other students and the institution prior to their physical transition to university (e.g. Ellison et al, 2007; DeAndrea, 2012). With regards to their transition to university, today's generation of transitioning students differ from previous ones. Millennials currently undergoing the transition to university are venturing on their transition in a society where the internet and social media has become central within everyday life. This research therefore sought to explore how this

change in external societal structures has impacted and influenced the nature of the transition to university, particularly with regards to students' rites of passage.

1.4 Aim of the Research and Research Questions

Applying van Gennep's work on rites of passage to millennials transitioning to higher education, the aim of the research was to explore how millennials experience the stages of separation, transition and incorporation as they transition to university. Given the aim and due to the research being explorative in nature this study did not seek to provide definitive answers to the research questions, but, as the name suggests, to explore and better understand the subject. The research questions were used as guidance to explore specifically the role social media plays in the lives of millennials as they transition to higher education. The central research questions for this study were thus:

Question 1: What preparations do millennials make for their transition to higher education?

According to Tinto (1987), successful transitions to university are dependent on students being able to manage the demands of both the academic and social spheres of university life. However, do students prepare for life at university prior to their physical relocation to university? If so, do they prepare for both the change in academic and social environments that they will inevitably face challenges from? Given these questions, a key element of this research was to explore what preparations, if any, millennials make as they transition to university, when these preparations take place, and possible effects they may have on their experiences at university once they have physical relocated.

Question 2: What role do parents play for students transitioning to university, and what support do they give?

Research from the USA in the 1960's and 1970's suggested that parents were once overlooked as significant variables with regards to student transitions to university (Chickering, 1969; Tinto, 1975). However, research has since highlighted the important role parents play in the lives of young people as they transition to higher education. Predominantly, such research has explored

how student's relationship with their parents can influence their adjustment at university (e.g. Aquilino, 1997; Dubos and Peterson, 1996; Berman and Sperling, 1991). However, what role do parents play beyond influencing adjustment? What support, if any, do they provide? As has been demonstrated in previous research, successful transitions to university are dependent on a number of variables and complexities. However, central to the successful transition for many students, lies in the successful negotiation (both maintenance and creation) of support networks. Both parents and friends (old and new) ultimately play a critical role for individuals as they transition to university. During both the transition to adulthood and to university, parents play a varied and key role. Therefore, within this research, it was important to explore the role that parents play for millennials transitioning to higher education.

Question 3: What role do social media platforms play in the process of millennial students making friends at university?

During the transition to university students can experience significant changes in the structure of their friendship networks. In daily life the ways in which individuals negotiate their interpersonal relationships has been dramatically altered by the intertwining of digital media and social life (Baym, 2010). Previous research has suggested that that social media can aid students in building social connections at university prior to their physical transition (boyd and Ellison, 2007; DeAndrea, 2012). With this in mind, this research sought to explore the specific role social media plays for millennials seeking to develop their friendship networks at university.

Question 4: What role, if any, do social media platforms play in the sustaining of students personal communities from home once they have transitioned to university.

It is without doubt that social media platforms provide a space whereby the facilitation of communication between friends and acquaintances can take place outside of face-to-face interaction is possible (Ellison et al, 2007). A key element of this research was to explore what social media platforms play in the specific context of transitioning students and their maintenance of the ties they have with their personal communities at home.

1.5 Research Design and Sample

Following a review of the literature, a qualitative approach to this research was adopted. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the most appropriate data gathering techniques and prior to interview students were required to keep a diary reflecting on their experience of transitioning to university. These were used to gain information on the students prior to interview so that interviews could be personalised. The research sample consists of thirty-four first year undergraduate university students from two higher education institutions; Keele University (Keele) and Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU). An in-depth discussion of the rationale of using these universities as research sites is provided in Chapter Five. Twenty of the students were registered students at Keele, and fourteen were registered students at MMU. Eighteen students were female and sixteen were male. There were variations in the cohort with regards to their chosen discipline of study and their relationship status on entering higher education. All students had moved away from home to enter higher education, and lived in student halls of residence. Interviews took place between students 5th and 9th week of the first semester of their first year of their undergraduate degree. Interviews were recorded, fully transcribed and analysed with thematic coding, providing deep and rich information on participant's experiences.

1.6 Theoretical Framework: *Les rites de passage*

This research applies Dutch/French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep's *Les rites de passage* as a theoretical lens. Van Gennep studied the processes of individuals establishing membership in traditional societies. Concerned with the 'life crises' that individuals face during their lifetime, he saw life as being comprised as a series of passages whereby individuals moved from membership in one group or status to another. A rite of passage may be defined as an event in which an individual passes from one condition of life experience into another, from one stage of life, or state of social status, to a more advanced once (van Gennep, 1960). In the process of moving through membership, van Gennep referred to the rites of passage phases of separation, transition and incorporation, each with their own specialised ceremonies and rituals designed to move individuals successfully from one community to another.

The first phase, separation, involves the separation of the individual from past associations and is characterised with a marked declination of communication with members of the group from which the person has come. The second phase, transition, is a period through which the individual begins to interact in new ways with members of the group to which membership is sought. The third and final phase, incorporation, involves the individual becoming accepted into the group and taking on their new roles and interactions within it. Examples of rites of passage can include life-transforming events such as marriage, or parenthood. However, as Barton (2006: 339) notes: 'a rite of passage could also feature in other important life events, such as academic achievement… Thus, the social transitions experienced by students undergoing professional education may be compared with the staged processes of a rite of passage'.

While van Gennep's work provides a useful theoretical lens through which to analyse the process of individuals moving between two life stages, it has not been without criticism. Froggatt (1997) for example identified that particular rites of passage may more prominent dependant on the type of life event experienced. The separation phase may be more prominent during bereavement and the transition phase more prominent during new parenting and the incorporation stage during early marriage (Froggatt, 1997). Further to this, Turner (1969, 1974, 1982) viewed a rite of passage as a complex and sometimes contradictory model, arguing that a rite of passage need not always present as a process involving three uniformly staged and distinct phases. However, nonetheless, van Gennep's theory has provided a useful theoretical lens through which to understand how individuals transition between two stages in their life, and has been used by various authors (e.g.Tinto, 1993; McNamara, 2000; Barton, 2007; Schouten, 1991).

This study is not the first of its kind to apply van Gennep to student transitions to higher education and has been used by other authors in their explorations of the rites of passage of students in higher education (e.g. Tinto, 1993; Barton, 2006). Perhaps the most recognised application of *Les Rites de Passage* comes from the work of American sociologist Vincent Tinto. In perhaps one of the most recognised and cited pieces of research within the field of student transitions *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*, Tinto utilises van Gennep's *Les Rites de*

Passage as a theoretical lens through which to investigate, understand and ultimately develop a theory of why students choose to leave higher education. In *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*, Tinto uses van Gennep's distinct phases to explore and understand the stages student's go through during their academic careers. As Tinto argues:

> College students are, after all, moving from one community or set of communities (most commonly those of the high school and the family) to another. Like other persons in the wider society, they must separate themselves, to some degree, from past associations in order to make the transition to eventual incorporation in the life of the college. In attempting to make such transitions, they too are likely to encounter difficulties that are as much a reflection of the problems inherent in shifts of community membership as they are either of the personality of individuals or of the institution in which membership is sought

> (1987: 442)

As Tinto recognises, a student's transition to university and subsequent career through university is not necessarily marked by ceremonies and symbolic rite of passage. As Tinto warns, student transitions are complex and can be quite fluid. Given this he heeds warning that the process of transition to university cannot be simplified, nor can it be assumed that the stages of separation, transition and incorporation happen as succinctly as previously discussed. However, for Tinto, van Gennep provides a useful theoretical lens through which to understand the process by which university students become incorporated into the university community. In order to persist and succeed at university, students must pass through the stages of transition into university (i.e. leaving home, becoming independent). As Tinto writes:

> Many college students are, after all, moving from one community or set of communities, most typically those of the family and local high school, to another, that of college. They too must separate themselves, to some degree, from past associations in order to make the transition to eventual incorporation in the life of the college.

> (1993:94)

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As widely referenced as Tinto's application of van Gennep is referenced, it is also not without criticism. In his essay 'An Anthropological Analysis of Student Participation in College', Tierney (1992: 603) argues that Tinto misinterpreted the 'anthropological notions of ritual and in doing so he has created a theoretical construct with practical implications which hold potentially harmful consequences for racial and ethnic minorities'. This research seeks to overcome this critique of Tinto by applying strict participant criteria within the research. This thesis places a strong emphasis on the fact that not all student experiences of the transition to higher education are the same, nor can they be analysed as such. It is without doubt that there are a multitude of variables which can affect an individual's rite of passage into higher education, including but not limited to: social class, racial and ethnic minorities, disability, and gender. In Chapter Nine, the theoretical framework of van Gennep rites of passage is applied to the key findings to have emerged from this research. Given the prominence and well-developed nature of Tinto's application of van Gennep to student retention, the findings from this study is read both through the theoretical framework of van Gennep and Tinto. It is important to note that this research does not seek to utilise van Gennep and Tinto's literature to build on a theory of student departure from higher education. Instead, it utilises their research and theory to develop and understanding of how social media has evolved the process of transitioning to university for millennial students.

1.7 Scope of the Study

This research is concerned with the experiences of millennials as they transition to higher education, with particular focus on how millennial students use social media during the transitional period to negotiate their relationships with their personal communities. Definitions for the key terminology of millennials, social media and personal communities are provided below.

Millennials: There are various terms in circulation which are used to describe the cohort of people born in the 1980s and 1990s, the cohort most commonly viewed as following on from the infamous 'Generation X'. Generation X is generally used to define the demographic, social and cultural group in Western culture who were born in the 1960s and 1970s (Hamblett and Deverson, 1964). Generation X matured seeing the inception of the home computer, the rise of video games, and the

internet as a tool for social and commercial purposes (Levickaite, 2010). Millennials are the cohort following on from this and those belonging to this generation are considered to be the most recent generation to have entered adulthood. The cohort is seen to heavily rely on technology for entertainment and interaction with others (Bolton et al, 2013), and have benefited from the increased availability of personalised services and customised products (Bitner et al, 2000; Peterson et al, 1997). With young adolescents being at the forefront of technological shifts in new media, they have viewed the growth of the internet without deep embeddedness in older forms of communication (Young and Hinesly, 2012), a perspective which led to the generation being labelled 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001), or even simply the 'net generation' (Tapscott, 1998). This thesis places its focus on examining how embedded technology, notably the internet and social media, has changed the way millennials manage and negotiate their interpersonal relationships as they transition to university. That is not say that technological advancement is the only societal change that has influenced their distinctness as a generation. Instead this research has chosen to analyse just this one aspect of external societal condition.

Social Media: Social media is the social interaction among people in which they create, share or exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and networks. Social networking sites can be defined as web-based services that allow people to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, while articulating a list of other users with whom people share a connection, and allowing people to view traverse their range of connections and those made by others within the system (boyd and Ellison , 2007). Furthermore, boyd and Ellison (2007) identify that 'some sites cater to diverse audiences, while others attract people based on common language or shared racial, sexual, religious, or nationality-based identities. Sites also vary in the extent to which they incorporate new information and communication tools, such as mobile connectivity, blogging, and photo or video sharing'. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010: 61) define social media as a 'group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content'. Through their media research, Kaplan and Haenlien (2010) identified seven different types of social media:

collaborative projects, blogs and micro-blogs, social news networking sites, content communities, social networking sites, virtual game worlds, and virtual social worlds. While social media takes on many different forms ranging from internet forums to blogs, picture sharing to wall-posting, podcasts to the creation of social networks, many of those who use social media do so regularly, and use a variety of mediums depending on the social context of whom they wish to communicate with. Furthermore, the boundaries and classifications between each type of social media have become increasingly blurred. One of the central research objectives for this study was to explore how transitioning students use social media in the negotiation of their personal communities. In order to gain a wide spectrum of experiences, a loose working definition of social media was intended to be used. With the prominence of Facebook, many discussions in the interviews centred on the students use of the site. However, the site was not the focus of this research.

Personal Communities: The concept of personal community is utilised by Pahl and Spencer (2006) to encompass the wider set of social ties into which people are embedded. Influenced by the work of Wellman (1982) and his conceptualisation of people's social ties as the 'intimate and active ties with friends, neighbours and work mates as well as kin' (2006: 44), Spencer and Pahl use the term to refer to 'a specific subset of people's informal and social relationships- those who are important to them at the time' (2006: 45). This thesis originally set out to explore how social media is used by transitioning students to make and sustain friendships, and the effect that reliance on social media communications has on their friendship relationships. However, following a review of the literature and the prominent theme within this is that students require social support if they are to experience a successful transition, the lens of exploration was widened. In order to take into account that students receive social support through the transitionary period from a variety of avenues, this research adopted the loose working definition of 'personal communities' described above. From the student's narratives, this thesis therefore focuses on the most prominent areas of the students personal communities, which centred on friends and parents.

1.8 Structure and Overview of the Thesis

This thesis consists of ten chapters. This chapter has outlined the background to the study, its scope, and the research questions, aims and objectives.

The nature of this research required a wide conceptual framework to be developed in order to fully investigate the research cohort and their experiences. This included exploring in-depth the following strands of literature: the conceptual status of millennials and the integration of the internet and social media into daily lives; the simultaneous transitions experienced by students during the period of transition to higher education; and the nature of the transition to university, with particular affordance placed on students interpersonal relationships. The literature review is therefore divided into three chapters, with the literature to each strand pertaining to the research discussed at length.

Chapter Two therefore places its focus on discussing the characteristics of the millennial generation (the cohort of people born in the 1980's and 1990's). Focus is then turned to reviewing the vast array of literature which has been produced pertaining to the embeddedness of the internet and social networking/ social media sites into the everyday life of their users. This is particularly relevant for this thesis as millenials arguably rely on technology for knowledge and communication purposes. As the central research questions of this thesis place their focus on exploring how social media is used by students during their transition to university, it is also important to build a comprehensive picture on the role social media plays in daily life and in particular, the role it plays in the management of their interpersonal relationships. This chapter therefore places its focus on exploring the literature to have explored both the negative and positive effects embedded technology has, both on individuals and their relationships.

Chapter Three discusses the literature relating to the simultaneous transitions experienced by first year university students including; the transition from adolescence to adulthood, changing relationships with parents during this period the life course, increased centrality of peer networks, leaving home, and change in academic environments. From the review of the literature, we can see

the transition to university should be viewed as an umbrella transition, once which encompasses within it multiple changes within the lives of transitioning students.

Chapter Four places it's focusing on exploring the nature of the transition to university, with specific focus on literature to have examined the role students' social support networks play in their adjustment to life at university and development of a sense of belonging. The chapter concludes with reviewing the literature which discussed the potential of social media to provide support for transition students (e.g. DeAndrea, 2012; Ellison, 2007).

Chapter Five describes the methodological approach taken and the methods used for data collection and analysis.

While the research questions provided scope for the research, there are a variety of key themes and elements of experiences form the interviews which have been included in the data chapters of this thesis. The purpose of this is to provide a rich thesis of raw accounts from the students interviewed as part of this research. Therefore, in the first of three findings chapters, Chapter Six utilises the interview data to provide background to the students used in this sample in order to develop a general understanding of the cohort. Focus is placed on their general internet usage and social media use, which is then analysed through the theoretical lens of their belonging to the millennial generation. From this, focus then turns to the key findings with regards to the student's use of social media as a tool to facilitate friendship interactions and the pros and cons of their experiences. Within this, the student's approaches to the management of their social media accounts are also discussed. Towards the end of the chapter, focus turns to analysing the student's negotiation into adulthood, their motivations and reasons for choosing higher education and a university away from their home environment. An introductory discussion of the students home support networks is also provided.

Chapter Seven presents the key findings of the study which relate to the students experiences prior to their physical relocation to university. The chapter places its focus on the following prominent themes to have emerged: the students' feelings about moving away from home; practical

preparations undertaken prior to the transition; the variance in student approaches to the time they spent at home; relationship with parents; relationship with friends; the student planned (or not planned) management of the friendships and romantic relationships; student use of social media for knowledge development about the university; students use of social media to 'search' for other transitioning students; and the cohorts opinion towards the social media presence of universities.

Following the findings presented in Chapter Seven, Chapter Eight presents the findings data to have emerged from the interview with specific focus on the participant cohorts experiences of university during the first few weeks of their autumn semester. Prominent themes to have emerged from the data and discussed in his chapter are: how students maintain contact with their parents once they geographically relocated to university; the mediums students use to maintain contact with their friends from home; the development of the student cohorts friendships in their halls of residence and on their course; and problems experienced during the first few weeks.

Following the presentation and general discussion of the research findings in Chapters Six, Seven and Eight, Chapter Nine places focus on applying van Gennep's *Les rites de passage* to millennial students transitioning to higher education in an attempt to understand how social media alters the stages of passage of millennials students. The concluding argument of the chapter is that social media has evolved the rites of passage of students transitioning to higher education and has altered the way in which they experience the stages of separation, transition and incorporation.

To summarise his thesis, Chapter Ten presents a discussion of how the study has fulfilled its original aims and objectives. Within this, the limitations of this study are discussed, as well as suggestions for further avenues of research. Most prominently however, the chapter places its main focus on discussing the original contribution to knowledge that this thesis provides.

Chapter Two
Millennials and the Age of Social Media

2.1 Introduction

This thesis begins from the premise that in order to develop an in-depth understanding of the role social media plays in the context of millennial student transitions to university, it is crucial to explore previous research to have investigated the effects it has had in general on the nature of twenty-first century relationships. It is not the intention of this thesis to suggest that technological developments and the rise of social media are the only factors which have influenced the characteristics and experiences of millennials and I do not seek to argue that social media communication technologies have fundamentally altered the nature of twenty-first century relationships. However, there is some consensus amongst scholars that those born during the 1980s and 1990s have grown up experiencing multiple stages of technological advancement, particularly the infiltration of and growing reliance on internet mediated technologies for communication purposes. As suggested within the literature, these technological developments have had some impact on the ways in which individuals negotiate and manage their interpersonal relationships. The purpose of this chapter is therefore is to review the literature pertaining to the internet and social media, and develop an understanding of the ways in which they have affected how individuals manage their interpersonal relationships.

2.2 What is a Generation? Conceptualising Millennials

In this thesis I theoretically define the participant cohort as millennials; that is, they belong to the millennial generation. A key element of this research was to explore the significance of this conceptualisation and examine whether approaching the cohort through this theoretical lens could aid in the development of an understanding of the role social media plays in students' management of their relationships as they enter university. In this section I therefore discuss how generations are defined and the characteristics which arguably make millennials distinct as a cohort.

The term generation has been used to represent: a position within a continuum of kinship descent; as a synonym for a birth cohort; as a synonym for life stage; to mark a historical period; and to

mark a cultural generation (Elder and Pellerin, 1998). Research into generations and their formation and structure has focused on four main areas of interest: age and life course effects; cohort or generational effects; historical trends; and period effects (Elder and Pellerin, 2002). In epistemological terms there is one main approach to the definition of 'generation' which defines a 'generation' as a 'cohort of individuals who were born at a given time' (Edmunds and Turner, 2002: 6). This definition forms its basis on analysing the chronological location of generations, analysing the familial setting, and focuses on building an understanding of how groups born at a specific period in time are distinct from other groups born at different times (Edmunds and Turner, 2002). Given this, a generational cohort can therefore be viewed as a group of individuals born during the same time period, and who experience cultural and historical events at the same life stage. Members of a generational cohort are unified because they share the same cultural experiences during their formative years, which in turn, results in similarity in their values, beliefs, preferences, motivations and behaviours.

The key theoretical perspective comes from Karl Mannheim in his 1927 seminal essay 'The problem of generations'. Mannheim (1952) argues that whilst generations follow at regular intervals, the span of a generation is not measurable in the same way that life is measurable. Between life and death there is a definite measurable span of time, however, it is not possible for each new generation to choose afresh its own particular form of state, as it will always have been influenced by previous generations, and can only be experienced and studied in qualitative terms (ibid). Therefore, if we want to fully understand the inner workings of one particular generation it is imperative to take into account the continuous stream of events which have led to the generation being studied (ibid). Each generation cohort therefore faces a distinct life course from the one previous to them, and any to follow in the future. Only one birth cohort undergoes a particular period at a particular age, and thus each cohort is categorised by a history which is unique to their lifetime and reflected through their behaviour (Ryder, 1965; Mason et al, 1973). In agreement with this, Sessa et al (2007) argue that generational cohorts coalesce around their shared experiences which have been interpreted through a common lens based on their life stage. As generations

mature they develop distinct personality traits, work values, attitudes and motivations which fundamentally differ from previous generations (Smola and Sutton, 2002). However, it should be noted that involvement in a common destiny is not enough to define a generation (Edmunds and Turner, 2002). The formation of a generational consciousness is not necessarily one which is homogenous or coherent, and there can be distinct divisions within a generation (Mannheim, 1952).

With the aforementioned in mind, we can begin to examine the societal conditions which have influenced the formation of the millennial generation. For Castells (2000: 254), the defining feature of the technological revolution was the 'application of knowledge and information to knowledge generation and information processing through communication devices'. Castells argues that as the technological paradigm allows for close developmental relationship between technology and its users, computers and communication systems have become extension of the human mind. As Castells (2000: 356) states: 'the potential integration of text, images and sounds in the same system, interacting from multiple points, in chosen time (real or delayed) along a global network, in conditions of open and affordable access, does fundamentally change the character of communication'. With networks of interaction becoming mediated by the internet, technological systems have the power to change culture, language and interactions (Castells 2000). As May (2002) identified, from that point societal subjects were no longer dependant on proximity to communicate, and as such communication through superimposed means such as the internet transformed the lived experience of society. Those growing up in the nineties and noughties witnessed the transitional phase of a society becoming increasingly dependent on the internet and more dependent on social media for communication purposes. Thus it is possible that these technological developments influenced the formation of a new generational cohort as millennials represent the first generation of young people to grow up in a world saturated with networks of information, digital devices, and the promise of perpetual connectivity. The frequent exposure to technology millennials have experienced has had both its cognitive, emotional and social advantages and disadvantages (Immordino-Yang et al, 2012). The cohort is seen to heavily rely on technology for entertainment and interaction with others (Bolton et al, 2013), however have

benefited from the increased availability of personalised services and customised products (Bitner et al, 2000; Peterson et al, 1997). The following characteristics have been attributed by scholars (Ng et al, 2010; Twenge, 2010; Alsop, 2008; Brown and Washton, 2010; New Strategist, 2009) to the generation:

- 'want it all' and 'want it now' attitude

- confident and self-reliant;

- technologically savvy and connected;

- open to change and diversity;

- closely connected to family and social organisations;

- service orientated;

- effective at multitasking; and

- expectant of immediate access to information.

2.3 Embedded Technologies and Young People

With technological developments, online communication technologies (i.e. social networking sites) have become a dominant place for social networks and communities to interact, particularly for millennials. During the 1990s and early 2000s, there was a vast array of authors who explored young people's relationship with technology. boyd (2002, 2008) argued that as ownership of technology became inextricably embedded into young people's daily lives, this in turn made way for multiplicity in their meanings to young people, particularly in relation to consumption, communication, relationships, cultural interest and social life. Research by Hulme (2009) and Livingstone (2009) further suggested that social networking sites are not simply used to facilitate interaction and in many ways they have become the very essence of a young person living out his or her daily life. However, within the literature there appears to be a sharp contrast between scholars who view the rise of communication technologies as having positive effects, and scholars who identify and analyse the negative effects of the transition to a society that is increasingly dependent on the internet and social media. For example, Giddens argued that 'the advent of modernity increasingly tears space away from place by fostering relations between 'absent' others,

location ally distant from any given situation of face-to-face interaction' (1990: 18), while other scholars such as Baym (1997) and Sproul and Kiesler (1991) predicted that borderless global societies would flourish from the rise in online communications. As relationships started to become increasingly sustained by new communication technologies (Wellman and Guila, 1999), early debates on the social dimensions of the internet focused on one main question: does the internet allow for the development of new communities, virtual communities, or does it instead induce personal isolation, severing people's ties with society, and ultimately with their 'real' world? (Castells 2000). Wellman examined the social affordances of technology by focussing of 'the possibilities that technological changes afford for social relations and social structure' (2001: 228). According to Wellman (2001), the ubiquitous and portable nature of technology allowed for globalised connectivity and computer mediated interactions allow the following: greater bandwidth for non-face-to-face communications, globalised ease to connect with others, ease of accessing information, and the personalisation of technology and knowledge management. However, during the 1990's, the diffusion of the internet was held as evidence of individual's increasing alienation from society and public life (Kraut et al, 1998; White, 1997). Concerns were raised about the unsafe disclosure of personal information, risky behaviour, addiction and cyber bullies; particularly with regarding to social networking sites (Hodkinson, 2008; Koloff, 2008; Stone, 2007).

It is without doubt that media has the capability to transform culture and thus ultimately has the ability to change social environments and influence people and their behaviour (Meyrowitz, 1985). Each new wave of new media has the potential to fundamentally alter the structure of many aspects of daily life (McLuhan, 1964). In *The Culture of Connectivity* (2013), Jose van Djick discusses the variety of perspectives on social media that have previously been offered (technical, social, economic, and cultural). Ultimately, he argues that 'changes in our global media landscape have profoundly affected- if not driven- our experience of sociality' (van Djick, 2013: 5). The migration of computers into the home allowed means of communication to be liberated, allowing for a variety of communication tools to be used (Grinter et al, 2006). But what has this meant for millennials growing up? It has been argued that as a core social hangout space for teens, social media outlets

become home to the struggles that teens face as they seek status amongst peers (Milner, 2004) and are well documented as being conduits of gossip and drama among teens (Baron, 2008; Grinter and Eldridge 2001; Grinter et al, 2006). For example, Facebook's News Feed draws on teens desire to consume and reproduce gossip about those they know and are further used to publicly validate their relationship statuses (boyd, 2008). Ultimately, online and offline practices are closely intertwined (Leander and Kim, 2003) and social networking sites allow individuals to extend their social worlds beyond physical boundaries (boyd, 2008). Previous research has further suggested that interactions which take place online are reproduced and discussed offline (Leander and McKim, 2003), allowing for participation in online social interactions to fit seamlessly into everyday lives and complement other practices (boyd, 2008). This has ultimately had an impact on how young people manage their relationships with others. For example, research has found that peer networks which use instant messaging as a means for communication were found to have high expectations of availability (Ling, 2004), responding to messages in a timely manner is important to young people (Taylor and Harper 2002), and text messaging and instant messaging allow for invisibility of communication with peers (Grinter et al, 2006).

2.4 Who Do Young People Socialise With Online?

It is without doubt that developing communication technologies have infiltrated day to day life and had some effect on the ways in which people interact with one another. However, the question of whether social media communication technologies can be used to make and develop social connections in addition to maintaining them is subject to much debate. It has been argued that online interactions have the potential to complement other forms of communication, since they often facilitate face-to-face interactions (Wellman et al, 2001). Thus, with the internet expanding our access to information and relationships (Turkle, 1995), social media has the ability to influence and aid friendship formations (Orr et al, 2009). However, whilst theoretically social media enables teens to connect with new people (Rheingold, 1994), surveys of American adolescent social media users in the late noughties indicated that most use social media to socialise with people whom they

already know or whom they are already loosely connected to (Lenhart and Malden, 2007; Subrahmanyam and Greenfield, 2008).

During the initial process of setting up social media accounts users are asked to make connections through the site with people they know who also use the service. As such, users of Facebook generally tend to use the site to maintain their existing social networks as opposed to creating new ones through the site (Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe, 2007) and it has previously been argued that relationships which are sustained solely through non face-to-face communication have usually originated from pre-existing tangible ties (Carley and Wendt, 1991). boyd (2008) further argued that social media platforms provide a place for young people to 'hang-out' and adolescents typically join social networking sites due to the fact that their friends have account or profiles, thus providing the ability to maintain and enrich social connections. This would suggest that it is perhaps more challenging for individuals to use social media to develop connections than it is to use platforms to sustain relationships. However, Lichlider (1993: 24) suggested that 'Life will be happier for the online individual because the people with whom one interacts most strongly will be selected by commonality of interests and goals than by accidents of proximity' (1993: 24).

2.5 Sustaining Friendships through Social Media

There has been much previous research into how social media is used by individuals to sustain their social networks and friendships. During the 1990s research into online communications and its connection to intimate relationships tended to place focus on romantic contexts as opposed to friendships. Focus was particularly placed on the way in which the internet could facilitate interpersonal connections, analysing how the structure and nature of the online world could impact and indeed encourage the development of romantic relationships (e.g. Cooper and Sportolari, 1997). Research within this area further acknowledged that online forums could vary in nature (i.e. one-to-one or group communications, anonymous communications, synchronous or asynchronous etc.) and ultimately each different forum could offer their users a unique opportunity to pursue a relationship of some nature (Cooper and Sportolari, 1997). Following the quick expansion of the internet into daily life, online dating quickly became widespread in a short space of time (Brym and

Lenton, 2001). Kauffman (2012) argued that the one of main advantages of internet dating is the safety of it. Being able to log on and off with one click allows users to be in complete control on their social contacts whilst also in some respects being able to overcome some of the initial obstacles which individuals face when dating (ibid). Though the development of romantic relationships is not the focus of this research, it is interesting to note that while the internet and social media may not be used to develop new social connections with regards to friendships, it has a widespread effect on how people meet and interact with new love interests.

With regards to the maintenance of friendships, according to boyd (2008) social media channels are most valuable with high network density, meaning that individuals gain the most value from social networking sites when their friends are also using the site. Research has found that individuals use social media to facilitate communication with their friends and acquaintances, renew old friendships, and use the platforms to share information about activities, interests and opinions (Ellison et al, 2007). In the early stages of the internet, Wellman and Gulia (1999) found that people interact happily and fruitfully online and interact in similar ways online to face-to-face interactions. This shift to a personalised online world allowed personal communities to develop their support networks online, allowed individuals to be more sociable, provided information, and gave those who use online technologies a sense of belonging (Wellman, 2001). Ultimately, it has been argued that online technologies allow people to manage their personal communities in their own individual ways (Wellman, 2001), and various academics have noted that people use different communication channels for different interactions (Bryant et al, 2006; Grinter & Eldridge, 2001). However, several academics have noted the darker side of the internet. For example, Turkle (2011) argued that technology is seductive in its offerings, meeting human vulnerabilities. As we are lonely yet fearful of intimacy, digital connections and their apparent sociality may offer the 'illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship' (Turkle, 2011: 1). As technology offers an easier solution to communication (for example we would rather text than talk), our current climate of networked lives allows us to hide from one another behind a screen or phone, but still be

connected (Turkle, 2011). Given this, we can see that social media has the potential to add a layer of complexity to people's interpersonal relationships.

2.6 Social Media and the Strength of Social Ties

Previous research on social media and the strength of social ties developed and sustained through social media has produced mixed results. One the one hand, there is some consensus that computer-mediated communications results in more weak ties than strong ties (Donath and boyd, 2004; Leung and Lee, 2005). Research in this field has found that although ties through Facebook can vary from weak-ties to strong-ties, the majority of ties on Facebook in particular are in fact weak (Ellion et al, 2007; Lewis and West, 2009). It was also suggested by Jones (1997:17) that computer mediated communications results in 'aimless connectedness'. However, there are studies of adolescents online social activities which have found that adolescents who engage in online social networking feel they have a closer bond with their friends as a result of online activity compared with adolescents who do not participate in online social networking (Subrahmanyam and Greenfield 2008; Willett and Ringrose, 2008). Further research has shown a positive correlation between directive communication activities online, and the strength of people's social ties and their perceived social capital (Young 2011). Gefter (2007) argued that an online social life does not detract from offline relationships; rather they are simply manifestations of the same network of friends. Demonstrating the positive effects of social media, research has found that platforms can allow individuals to overcome shyness, and facilitate friendship formation (Valkenburg et al, 2005), can provide individuals with opportunities to keep in contact with close friends (Valkenberg, 2007; Stern and Taylor, 2007), and aid in the development of social capital (Ellison et al, 2007). It has also been found that those who are less secure in face-to-face interaction are more likely to turn to social media to communicate with their peers, and social media can provide individuals the opportunity to raise their self-esteem and give collective group identity (Barker, 2009). Ultimately most people communicate with others by any means available and necessary to their relationships, whether offline or online, and the closer the tie then the more media variety is used within relationships (Haythornwaite and Wellman, 1998; Hampton and Wellman, 1999).

Thus computer mediated communications supplements relationships rather than replacing offline communications with online ones (Anderson and Tracey, 2001; Howard et al, 2001; Katz et al, 2001).

2.7 Dissolution of Relationships Online

Thus far in this chapter I have focussed on discussing the literature pertaining to the use of social media in developing and sustaining social connections. However, what happens when a relationship breaks down, either offline or online? In recent years this has increasingly become a topic of conversation and investigation as the act of 'unfriending' or 'unfollowing' is now common dialect in the context of peer relationship breakdown on social media. In the USA in 2009 'unfriend' was named word of the year by the *New Oxford American Dictionary*, the definition of which is as follows: "unfriend - verb - To remove someone as a 'friend' on a social networking site such as Facebook". Research by Lewis and West (2009) suggested that there exists uncertainty as to the etiquette of the unfriending process and the social norms regarding this process. Because of this users may instead choose to hide others posts from their display so as to avoid officially unfriending them (Sibona, 2014). With regards to investigations into why individuals unfriend on social media, both online and offline reasons have been found in research as justifications for the process of unfriending. Reported frequent/ unimportant posts, polarizing posts (politics and religion), inappropriate posts (sexist. racist remarks etc.) and everyday life posts (child, spouse eating habits etc.) have been identified as online reasons for unfriending someone, while changes in the dynamic of interpersonal relationships and a general dislike someone's behaviour have been identified as offline reasons (Sibona and Walczak (2011) .

2.8 Effect on the Individual: Social Capital

Over the past two decades, there have been a vast array of studies which have explored how the internet may affect psychological and social wellbeing, with a mix of results (e.g. Kraut et al, 1998; McKenna and Bargh, 2000; Nie, 2001, Valkenburg and Peter, 2007). On the one hand there has been some research to suggest that people who use social networking sites experience greater well-being (e.g. Burke et al, 2010; Steinfield et al, 2008). However, research by Kraut et al (1998) found

that heavier internet use was associated with various measures of loneliness, depression and stress and they argued that this was because weaker ties generated online were in fact replacing stronger ties offline. With this in mind, it is important to ask whether internet and social media therefore have positive or negative effects, and how they benefit young people and their social lives.

Several researchers have analysed the impact of the internet on psychological wellbeing, with some findings indicating that the internet has positive impacts on wellbeing (Bargh and McKenna, 2004; McKenna and Bargh, 2000; Shaw and Gant, 2002). In research with socially anxious adolescents, Valkenberg and Peter (2007) found that the internet to be a valuable tool for intimate self-disclosure in comparison, demonstrating that the internet can open communication avenues to people who may struggle with their interpersonal relationships offline. There is also a vast array of literature which examines the relationship between internet use and social capital and wellbeing. Such research has found that online communications can have a positive effect on an individual's social trust and participation in community life (Best and Dautrich, 2003; Kavanaugh et al, 2005; Kobayashi et al, 2006). Ellison et al (2007) suggested from their research on the Facebook usage of college students that the site could closely be related information and maintenance of social capital, concluding that Facebook was associated with measures of social capital, including both bridging and bonding forms of social capital. In another study of college students, Valenzuela et al (2009) suggested that Facebook appears to have connections to personal contentment, greater trust and participation in civil and political activity. Ultimately, Valenzuela et al (2009) argue that the way in which scholars conceptualise the medium ultimately has an impact on the way whether they see the internet as having a positive or negative effect.

2.9 Are Young People Digital Natives?

Prensky (2001) argued that students were 'native speakers' of the digital language of computers, video games and the internet. Prensky argued that rather than using digital technology merely as a part of their everyday lives, technology is essential to young people's existence- depicting young people as now being constantly surrounded and immersed by new technologies in ways that older generations were not. This notion of children and young people as being confident with and experts

of the latest technology has proliferated popular Western rhetoric for the past 30 or so years. Stories about young people and digital technology echo earlier representations of children and twentieth century analogue media such as film, radio, television, comic books and magazines (Wartella and Jennings, 2000). However, despite the widely acknowledged embedded presence of the internet and social media/ social networking sites into the lives of the Western world, there still exists digital divides and inequalities within this. For example, Brown and Czerniewicz (2010) argued that the concept of the 'digital native' is conceptually and empirically problematic, criticising it for being an 'othering' concept by creating a binary opposition between native and immigrants. Whilst the above theorisations are commonplace, some critics have warned that it is based on little or no empirical evidence, and as such the notion of a completely tech savvy youth should not be assumed (Bennett et al, 2008). As such, considerable academic attention has been paid to address the notion of the 'digital divide', discussing divisions within society between those who have access to digital technologies and those who do not (Bromley, 2004; Warschauer, 2003; Selwyn, 2003). As argued by Livingstone and Ellison (2007) , as access is no longer a unitary phenomenon focus should be shifted to inequalities in the nature and quality of access. Therefore, discussions surrounding the divide have turned to focus on the financial, educational and cultural factors which may influence a person's access to and ability to use digital technologies (e.g. Loges and Jung, 2001; Hoffman et al, 2001; Rice and Haythornwaite, 2006) and it argued that digital exclusion is strongly associated with traditional forms of social exclusion - by socioeconomic status, region, deprivation, etc. (Norris, 2001). For example, during the first three decades of its history, research showed that the internet was dominated by people with a high or medium level of education, both inside and outside work and school (Deursen and Dijck, 2014). Hargittai (2002) conceptualised this as the 'second level digital divide'. Research within this area thus takes a refined approach to analyse digital exclusion as a 'continuum of divides' (Mascheroni and Olafsson, 2016: 1658). This places focus on how divides in access, unequal skills and differential motivations of use combine to produce a gradations of digital exclusions (Hargittai and Hinnant, 2008; Livingstone and Helsper, 2007).

2.10 Themes Relevant to This Thesis

It is widely acknowledged within the literature that modern communication technologies have changed interaction patterns and as such the boundaries between online and offline relationships has been blurred (e.g. Utz, 2007). Ultimately, technology has becoming increasingly important and prevalent in people's lives. The use of these communications has been heavily attributed as a primary tool to reinforce existing relationships, both with friends and romantic partners (Subrahmanyan and Greenfield, 2008). Today's technology allows for a wide variety of popular communication forms to be present in the lives of adolescents, including: instant messaging, text messaging, forums, chat rooms and are social networking platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Whatsapp etc.. Given this, within this research it is key to explore the roles these technologies play in the lives of students as they transition to university.

The increased prevalence of social media has led to much speculation about its possible effects on our lifestyles. While it has been argued that internet users have fewer face-to-face interactions (Nie, 2001), further research has found that online communications have a positive effect on individual's social trust and participation in community life (Best and Dautrich, 2003; Kavanaugh et al, 2005; Kobayashi et al, 2006). While there is a battle between cyber-pessimists and cyber-optimists, it has been argued that the positive and negative effects of the internet are contingent on the way academics choose to conceptualise the medium (Williams, 2006) and how people use it (Ji-Young, 2006; Kwak et al, 2004). Social networks and sites that facilitate interpersonal relationships have previously been linked to indicators of well-being such as depression and life satisfaction (Acock and Hulbert, 1993; Perry and Pescosolido, 2010; Totterdell et al, 2008), highlighting that mediums can have positive effects. This is a particularly relevant and poignant for this thesis, as I sought to explore the effects social media has on students' management of their interpersonal relationships and personal communities during their transitions to university and focus on the following:

- how is the internet and social media used by student in the transition to university?

- are transitioning students reliant on social media to facilitate their friendship ties with their friends from home once they have made the physical relocation? If so, how does this affect their friendships?

- how do transitioning students manage their social media profile during the transitionary period to university?

Chapter Three

Simultaneous Transitions

3.1 Introduction

For young people, the transition to university is one which is traditionally characterised by multiple changes and transitional periods, including but not limited to: changes in living arrangements and academic environments, changes to friendship networks, and a requirement on students for increased responsibility for both their personal and academic lives (Pittman and Richmond, 2008). Given that the transitionary period is one which encompasses multiple changes for a student, this research sought to take into consideration that in order to fully understand young people's experiences, the transition to university should not be viewed as an isolated and singular transition, but rather as a period in the life course which can be affected and influenced by the various transitionary periods and changes which are simultaneously taking place within the lives of students. In addition to this, literatures on the period of adolescence to adulthood suggest that young people begin their transition to adulthood in their late teenage years, and this period of transition can continue into their twenties. Therefore, as the student cohort of this study transitioned to university, it can be theoretically understood that they were also experiencing their transition into adulthood. As such, it makes little sense to study the transition to university outside of the context of the transition to adulthood. This aim of this chapter therefore is to review both classic and contemporary literatures (both theoretical and empirical) on the simultaneous transitions students experience in order to give insight into the complex and multifaceted nature of the transition to university and the challenges faced by first year university students.

It is important to note here that the experiences of first year undergraduate students (e.g. general challenges they face, the dynamics of their interpersonal relationships, factors which influence happiness at university) have been heavily researched within the UK, USA, Canada and Australia, as well as other countries worldwide. Much of the literature to date on the transition to university comes from North America, and thus refers instead to the transition to college. For the purposes of ease within this thesis, discussion of these literatures will refer to 'university' in place of 'college'.

3.2 Arnett: Emerging Adulthood

The transition to adulthood has had considerable attention paid to it from a variety of academic disciplines, including but not limited to sociology, psychology and anthropology. Studies of the transition have typically focused on the visible and 'formal' markers of adulthood (Mortimer and Aronson, 2000; Shanahan, 2000; Hogan and Astone, 1986). Such research has specifically focused on the timing, sequencing, and the effects of five key life events during the transition to adulthood (completing education, entering the labour market, becoming financially independent, getting married, and becoming a parent (Mortimer and Astone, 2000; Shanahan, 2000). Thus, adult status is generally designated not by a single event, but by involvement in a number of adult-like activities (Mortimer, 2003). However, in recent years the transition to adulthood has dramatically changed in the substance, timing and sequencing of the aforementioned events (Mortimer, 2000; Mortimer, 2003; Shanahan, 2000), and as such it has become 'a more extended, diversified, and increasingly individualised period' (Buchmann, 1989: 1987). Due to historical changes in the economy, education, work, marriage and parenthood, the transition to adulthood has been significantly impacted. Thus, according to Modell (1989), the movement into concentrated adult roles has become extended. This is particularly prevalent for young people who choose to enter higher education. As more young adults pursue post-secondary education, they inevitably as a result delay their entry into the full-time labour market (Modell, 1989; Peters et al., 1992). Further to this, it is argued that changes in the global economy has resulted in an insecure employment market and deteriorating opportunities (Buchmann, 1989), and young people may be socialised to expect career uncertainty (Moen and Orrange, 2002). As a result of these changes, the transition to financial and residential independence is more 'fragile' and reversible than what it was in the past (Goldscheider and Goldscheider, 1999). Ultimately contemporary transitions to adulthood are complex and incredibly difficult to define in terms of age, status, and responsibility.

American Sociologist Jeffrey Arnett has sought to conceptualise young people between the ages of 18-25 as 'emerging adults'. Arnett (2000) argues that the nature of the period from adolescence to adulthood has undergone considerable change, and the postponing of transitions into marriage and parenthood 'leave the late teens and early twenties available for exploring various possible life

directions' (2000: 471). Several authors have argued that the transitions faced by young people (i.e. adolescence to adulthood, education to the labour market) have become increasingly complex and nonlinear (e.g. Thompson et al, 2002; Jones and Bell, 2000). For example, in his seminal essay 'Sociology of Adolescence in the 90s', Furstenberg (2000) argued that the prominence and increasing length of adolescence is the cause of global structural forces which have resulted in the period of youth being extended beyond the teen years. As a result of these life course changes, Arnett (2000) argues that the term 'emerging adulthood' might be considered to be more suitable, a period in the life course which is demographically and subjectively different from other stages.

Between the ages of 18-25, a person's demographic status in terms of marriage and parenthood becomes difficult to predict on the basis of age (Arnett, 2000). During this period, the emerging adult's status is unpredictable due to the fact that they are less likely to be constrained by role requirements meaning that a wider variation of possibilities is open to them in a way that aren't available to people who belong to other ages groups (ibid). While Parsons (1942) viewed the adolescent as the 'roleless role', Arnett (2000) argues that this phrase is better suited to describing those in the emerging adulthood phase of the life course. Those in the phase of emerging adulthood do not see themselves as adolescents, but do not entirely consider themselves to be adults either (ibid). Consistently accepting responsibility for one's own actions and making independent decisions have been found to be among the most important factors for young people looking to categorise themselves within the camp of adulthood (Arnett, 1997; Green et al, 1992). Therefore, for Arnett (1997), becoming a self-sufficient person is an important goal for the emerging adult.

3.3 Erikson: Psychosocial Development

Whilst there are variations in the theoretical approaches offered to understanding the nature of the transition from adolescence to adulthood, it is without doubt that the period is one which is complex and challenging. During the transition, young people face a multitude of challenges, including seeking independence, re-negotiating their support networks and the development of their identities. Perhaps one of the most recognised contributors to the field of adolescence and adulthood comes from developmental psychologist and psychoanalyst Erik Erikson. He proposed

and discussed his theories on the psychosocial development of human beings in depth in his classic texts *Childhood and Society*, *Identity and the Life Cycle*, and *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, with the main focus of these texts relating to identity development during the period of adolescence. In his essay 'The Eight Stages of Man', Erikson tracks the developmental progress of the ego[3] throughout the life course, theorising that each human being when striving to achieve full development transcends through 8 stages of life. Most relevant to this research is the fifth stage of development; 'identity vs. role confusion', which analyse the development of identity through adolescence and young adulthood. Erikson describes the adolescent individual's mind as a 'mind of the moratorium, a psychosocial stage between childhood and adulthood, and between morality learned by the child, and the ethics to be developed by the adult' (1968: 236). He further argued than an adolescent's mind is that of an ideological state, based on the individual's ideological outlook on life and an eagerness to be affirmed by his or her peers. During the search for social values to guide his or her identity, an adolescent ego is confirmed by rituals, creeds and programmes.

In his discussion of the fifth stage of life, the stage of adolescence, Erikson argued that individuals are apt to experience role confusion as they ponder the role they will eventually play in the outside world when they reach full maturity. The new addition of genital maturity to identity development leaves the rapidity of body growth equal to that of childhood and as such, growing and developing youths are faced with a psychological revolution within themselves, becoming ever primarily concerned with tangible adult tasks (ibid). This concern with external social factors renders the youth to increasingly consider themselves and their identity from the perspective of others; how they appear to others, how they feel in comparison to others, and how their own roles and skills which have been cultivated by external society actually match the occupational prototypes set out within their society. Although in this thesis I do not seek to build a psychosocial theoretical

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[3] It is important to note that Erikson forms his discussions around Sigmund Freud's theorisations of ego, and thus ego is a central theme within his seminal pieces of work. However, as this research does not concern itself with identity development per se, Erikson's work is only discussed in minute detail to give a broad overview of his contribution to the field.

understanding of student transitions, Erikson's work gives an important insight into the psychological development of young people.

3.4 Challenges of the Transition to Adulthood

In order to develop a comprehensive understanding of what the transition to university entails, we must also understand the challenges young people face as they transition to adulthood given the fact that these two transitions happen in synchrony with one another. Eccles and Gootman (2002) argue that young people take on an active role in their own development and the successful management of the challenges faced during the entry to adulthood is dependent on the psychosocial, physical and cognitive aspects of the individual. They identified several specific challenges faced by developing adolescents:

- they experience a shift in relationships with their parents from one of subordination to one which reflects the adolescent increasing maturity and responsibility, both within the family and community

- they are in the process of exploring new roles (both social and sexual)

- they begin to have the experience of intimate partnerships

- they are undergoing a process of identity formation (both social and personal)

- they have begun to forward thinking about the future, planning and taking necessary steps to pursue those plans

- they are beginning to acquire a range of skills and values required to make a successful transition into adulthood (including work, partnership, parenting, and citizenship).

These challenges demonstrate the complexity and importance of the psychological transition into adulthood. In order to manage these challenges, Eccles and Gootman (2002) identify that young people must learn to:

- manage multiple demanding roles

- develop the ability to identify personal strengths and weaknesses, and further refine the skills needed to succeed

- find meaning and purpose in the multiple roles acquired

- assess and make necessary life changes and cope with said changes.

3.5 Structure of Social Life: Parents

A key area of exploration in this research centres on developing an in-depth understanding the role parents play in the lives of transitioning students as the relationship between children and their parents is arguably the most important social relationship. In order to be able to develop this understanding, it is important to review previous research to have explored the nature of the parent/child relationship during adolescence and emerging adulthood.

The transition from childhood to adulthood brings about a change in many aspects of social life for the adolescent (Damon, 1983) as their network of 'significant others' is restructured (Meeus et al, 1991). During childhood and early adolescence the central position in the network is occupied by parents and having a close relationship with one's parent during childhood can have a significant impact later in life. In the adolescent and emerging adulthood years the process of maintaining strong ties to family is important due to parent-child relationships being highly related to youth wellbeing (Roberts and Bengton, 1996). The support that families give ranges from financial to emotional, and in particular parents acts as important role models and hold a role in the provision of social capital (Zarrett and Eccles, 2006). However, during the period of early adolescence conflict between parents and their children often increases as the adolescent begins to demonstrate their desire for autonomy and independence and as such may increasingly resist family roles and rules (Yau et al, 1991; Collins, 2001). The family system therefore may become unbalanced due to the physical, cognitive and emotional changes experienced by adolescents (Parra et al, 2015). Within many Western cultures this process is broadly viewed as functional, allowing and aiding the young person to develop their own competence and adolescent's relationships with their family generally improve as they move into their late adolescent years (Zarrett and Eccles, 2006). Confrontations and disputes between emerging adults and their parents often become less frequent, something which has been attributed to the idea that parents feel less justified to intervene in the child's lives and consider it to be no longer their duty or business to know (Aquilino, 1997; van Wel ter Bogt and Raaijmakers, 2002).

3.6 Structure of Social Life: Peer Networks

The idea of a friend implies closeness, great mutuality, and a relationship where trust is firmly established between the individuals in question (Lydon, Jamieson and Holmes, 1997). Friendship is distinctly different from other social connections and bonds due to the voluntary and self-expressive nature of the social bond. Friends have previously been identified as playing a critical role in the development of social skills (Greca and Lopez, 1998; Berndt, 2002) and seen as having the ability to contribute to positive mental health and psychological development (e.g. Perlman, 2007). Furthermore successful transitions can be facilitated by secure attachments with the characteristics of trust and support centre to this (Schulman et al, 2009). Given the aforementioned, we can therefore view friendship as being a fundamentally important relationship, one which is central to our happiness.

As children move into adolescence friends gradually come to occupy the central position and assume increasing importance. During the period of adolescence, young people begin to turn to their peers for support formerly provided by the family (Douvan and Adelson, 1966), and peer interactions expand beyond dyadic and small group relations (Hartup, 1983). This exposure to new social interaction situations is crucial for the development of different social interaction skills (Grinder, 1982). The ability to socialise with peers and make friends is a core part of growing up (Berndt, 1996; Newcomb and Bagwell, 1996). As argued by Pahl (2000), the 'personal communities' that children and teens develop help them to negotiate identity and intimacy. Romantic relationships during adolescence also play an important function and have an impact on social integration. Longitudinal evidence has indicated that by late adolescence feeling competent in romantic relationships contributes to feelings of general competence and positive feeling of self-worth (Levesque, 1993).

Friendships are ultimately unlike other forms of relationships due to their flexibility, and tend to be understood as individualised and personal relationships (Allan, 2008). As individuals negotiate their way through the life course their relationships with others change and develop in response

(Allan, 2008). However, distance can impact and affect 'on the character of the relationships that people sustain' (Allan, 2008:5). As Allan argues:

> Collectively, personal networks change as a result of the mobility of the set of people involved in them rather than just that of the individual taken as central. Over time, this not only fosters change in people's networks but also encourages new ways of maintaining these relationships if they are to continue, such as supplementing face-to-face contact with electronic technologies.
>
> (2008:5)

Whilst the characteristics of friendship change during the life-course, it is an important developmental resource from childhood through to old age (Hartup and Stevens, 1997). The quality of friendship that adolescent and adult individuals have with their peers can directly impact upon their social development, self-esteem and ability to adjust (Berndt, 2002). For young adolescents, exposure to new social interaction situations is crucial for the development of different social interaction skills (Grinder, 1978) and the ability to socialise with peers and make friends is a core part of growing up (Berndt, 1996; Newcomb and Bagwell, 1996). Aristotle noted that people 'love those who are like themselves' (2000: 1371) and similarly Plato observed that 'similarity begets friendship' (1968: 837). Therefore, similarity in social status and/ or spatial location provide a basis for which friendships can form and develop (Verbrugge, 1977; Festinger et al, 1950) as can similarity of values, personality and behavioural traits (Kandel, 1978; Newcomb and Bagwell, 1995). As young people enter adolescence friendships become based on mutual reciprocity and understanding (Hunter and Youniss, 1982).

Research has suggested that intimacy emerges as a salient expectation of friendship (Berndt, 1986; Bigelow and LaGaipa, 1975). Older children and adolescents report trust to be a main indicator of friendship, alongside confidentiality, sharing of thoughts and feelings, and feeling emotionally close (Bagwell and Schmidt, 2011). Furthermore, several studies locate self-disclosure and mutual support becomes more prominent during the adolescent period (Buhrmester and Furman, 1987; Gottman and Mettetal, 1986; McNells and Connelly, 1999). Adolescents therefore organise their

friendships around sharing ideas and feelings with friends who provide security and support (Hartup 1993; Schulman at el, 1997). In a study of adolescent socialisation processes in the USA, Eckert (1989) found that young adolescents being faced with the entry to high school recognized the need to expand their networks to avoid being lost and isolated in their expanding environment, thus highlighting the importance of friendship in adolescence during transitional periods.

In analysis of the psychological development of the adolescent individuals, special importance is attributed to friendships (Berndt, 1982; Berndt, 2002). Popular conception of the period of adolescence view the transition from child into adult as a period of storm and stress, where adolescent's close friends and peers become their primary form of socialisation during their strive for independence (Berndt, 2002). Research into adolescent socialisation has suggested that adolescents find themselves at their happiest when socialising with their peers (Csikszentmihalyi, Larson and Prescott, 1977; Boute et al, 2007), thus highlighting the importance of friendship during this period. However, as children progress in years, their expectations of friendship change, and thus meanings and definitions of friendship change (Bagwell and Schmidt, 2011). Adolescent friendships, much like adult friendships, endure a period of platform establishment were relationship development occurs and thus increasing mutuality and interdependence (Newcomb and Bagwell, 1995). It is further argued that those of different ages may experience different trajectories in relationship development, thus values of friendship differ between individual adolescents (Newcomb and Bagwell, 1995). Individuals are accepted into their peer networks on the basis of their qualities, and their ability to place themselves within the structured values of the society they are a part of (Eckert, 1989).

During the transition into adulthood relationship quality plays a key role (Arnett, 2000; O'Connor et al, 1996) . The development of mature relationships with peers becomes progressively more central to life (Allan and Land 1999) and relationships with peers and parents have the potential to impact life satisfaction and wellbeing (Paterson et al, 1994) alongside being associated with happiness (Demir, 2008; Demir and Weitekamp, 2006). During emerging adulthood most young people have both close friendships and romantic relationships (Collins and Madsen, 2006),

however, it has been suggested that during the period of emerging adulthood individuals are likely to place more focus on developing romantic relationships, sometimes at the expense of friendships (Collins and Laursen, 2000, 2004). Within their social networks emerging adults identify their friends and romantic partners to be important in their social networks (Fraley and Davis, 1997). Research into friendship and the transition from secondary school to university has suggested that school friendships tend to decrease in satisfaction, commitment, quality, and quantity (Shaver, Furman and Buhrmester, 1985; Oswald and Clarke, 2003), and that friendship which individual embark upon during their first semester at university have high success rates (Hays, 1985).

One of the strongest predictors of how often friends get together is residential proximity (Verbrugge, 1983; Tsai 2006). However, the question of whether geographic proximity is a determinant factor of friendship is subject to much debate. According to Butts (2002), real friendships develop through tangible interactions, interactions which are much more common when friends live in close proximity, and Fehr (1999) has suggested that distance has the potential to cause friendships to deteriorate or terminate. However, as acknowledged by Djist (2006), the effect of geographic proximity on social relations has been transformed with the advent by the development of modern transportation and communication technologies. This is particularly important given the research cohort of this study. Those who move away from home have the challenge of maintaining their current friendships at a distance. Research by Johnson et al (2004) and Rohling (1995) has suggested that this is possible. Their findings revealed that university students who move away from home can still have long distance friendships where they still feel psychologically close to their friends (Johnson et al, 2004; Rohlfing, 1995).

3.7 Change in Academic Environments

University differs greatly to previous education institutions as it is an environment which requires self-direction and independence (Kember, 2001). The process of developing a capacity for independent learning can be a disorienting experience, and students have to adjust to a context where self-motivations is emphasised (Winn, 2002; Prescott and Simpson, 2004). As recognised by Huon and Sankey (2001: 1) 'when students begin their first-year at university, they are required to

reorganise the way they thinks about themselves as learners, and as social beings'. High levels of academic autonomy, a strong sense of educational purpose, and the ability to form mature interpersonal relationships were found to be the most important contributing factors to successful university transitions in research by Berzonsky and Kuk (2000). However, it has further been acknowledged that during the transition to university support is needed in order to enable student to both adjust and develop learner identity and autonomy (Briggs, Clarke and Hall, 2012).Further research has suggested that the main factor for student dropout rates in failure to adjust rather than intellectual difficulties faced (Pikehtly and Prosser, 2001). As the literature demonstrates, the change in academic environment is challenging for first year students. Not only is a successful transition dependent on the development of independence and the successful management of social support networks, but also highly dependent on the individual being able to successfully manage the challenging nature of the academic environment. These challenges can ultimately affect a student's happiness at university.

3.8 Leaving Home

A key part of the process of transitioning to adulthood is leaving the family home and establishing a residence of one's own (Astin, 1973; Herndon, 1984). According to Chickering (1974), this act is an overt manifestation of adulthood. The transition out of the parental home is therefore a key moment in young people's lives during their transition to adulthood (Avery et al, 1992; Clark and Mulder, 2002), however, there does exist international variation with regards to the specific timing of leaving home (Billari and Liefbroer, 2010; Breen and Buchmann, 2002; Furstenberg, 2000). As the literature suggests, age related norms somewhat govern the timing of events in the life course (Neurgartan et al, 1965) and this appears to be specifically the case for the timing of young people leaving the parental home. Research on young people's movements out of the family home and into independent residence has placed focus on the effect this has on other areas of adult development. Studies have demonstrated that young adults who leave the family home demonstrate higher levels of academic success in comparison to those who remain with their parents (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005), demonstrate higher levels of personality development (Valliant and Scanlan,

1996), have better relationships with their parents (Flanagan et al, 1993), and report greater feelings of social success and achievement (Baird, 1969).

As identified by Goldscheider and Goldscheider (1999), living away from home gives individuals the opportunity to gain experience in dealing with the challenges of adult life, such as managing finances and maintaining a household. Jordyn and Byrd (2003) argue that such experiences allow individuals to become better managers of their time and resources, and this in turn links in with academic success and general pressures in life, with are dependent on the aforementioned factors. However, the effects of living arrangements on university student have not been clearly defined in research (ibid). The effects of living arrangements on university students are in fact complex, and suggestions have been made that parental level of education, cultural context and expectations of children and parents have to be taken into account in research to fully understand the effect of living arrangement on students (Baird, 1969; Goldscheider and Goldscheider, 1999).

With entry into higher education becoming an increasingly popular option for young people, those choosing to make the transition to university leave university without the same sense of permanency as others. University students often return to the parental home for weekends and holidays, and many return permanently once their degree courses have finished. Home as such for higher education transitioning young adults still plays a central role in the lives of many. The transition to university can be made more difficult for some if they choose to move away from home, as they then have to manage both the stress of the transition into the university environment, but also have to endure separation from parents, siblings, friends combined with the stress of relocating to a new place (Buote et al, 2008). For all individual's, residential status has a profound influence on the development of a sense of place (Hays, 1998) and is dependent on individual's being able to negotiate community attachment (Kasarda and Janowitz, 1974), a sense of community (Sarason, 1974), place attachment (Gerson et al, 1977), place identity (Proshansky, 1978), and place dependence (Stokols and Shumaker, 1981). The development of attachment and belonging to a place comes through having a deep connection to a place (Hays, 1998). When first year students move to university they arguably have yet to develop their sense of place for the

university campus and town/city their university is in or near, however this develops over time and students adjustment to life at university is a process which continues through the first few months of university (Briggs et al, 2012). Learning the institutional discourse of the university (Harvey and Drew, 2006) and developing a sense of belonging are factors which can influence how quickly students settle into life at university.

3.8 Summary and Themes Relevant for this Thesis

The purpose of this chapter has been to review the literature pertaining to the multiple concurrent transitions experienced by first year university students. Together, the theories and concepts discussed in this chapter provide a broad overview of the nature of the transition to adulthood and university, and the various relating themes and ideas which emerge from the discussion of these transitions.

While the theories and contributions of Erikson, Arnett, Eccles and Gootman and the other others discussed within this chapter have their strengths and weaknesses, together they demonstrate that the transition from adolescence to adulthood is one which presents several challenges. It is a transition which not only affects the way they see themselves, but also how they define their relationships with others. Whilst this thesis does not place focus on examining in-depth the research cohort's experience of the transition from adolescence to adulthood, it is important that this remains within the broad remit of the research. In addition, much like the transition to adulthood, the transition to university is one which is complex. During the transition it is possible that students many experience problems adjusting both socially and academically, and as Tinto (1987) suggested, a successful transition is dependent on students being able to adjust to both the social and academic spheres of university life. This includes an individual's ability to negotiate their support networks and create a sense of belonging at university (Tinto, 1987).

Chapter Four
The Transition to Higher Education:
Social Support, Adjustment and Belonging

4.1 Introduction

The experiences of first year undergraduate students have been studied in-depth, predominantly within the USA, Canada, Australia and the UK. Within the literature there is broad consensus that the transition is one which can be challenging for many students and in order to experience a successful transition students must adapt to the demands of life at university. Most notably this includes the successful renegotiation of support networks (Mackie, 2001), developing an identity as a higher education student (Briggs, Clarke and Hall, 2012), and developing a sense of belonging (Hoffman et al, 2002). Ultimately, as Tinto (1975) argues, the transition to university is a significant social transition which requires new students to integrate themselves in both the academic and social spheres of university life. Interlinked with the aforementioned, research into the university transition process has placed focus on the role geographical location plays in relation to 'home' for each individual (Chow and Healey 2008), the extent to which adjustment and a lack of the familiar is important (Chow and Healey 2008), and how anxiety and vulnerability to homesickness can affect the adjustment to the new university environment (Fisher and Hood, 1987). The purpose of this chapter is to review empirical studies which have placed focus on exploring the nature of university as an institution, the nature of the transitionary period (including the challenges students face), and the general experiences of students during their first year of university in order to create a broad understanding of the nature of the transition to university. In particular, this chapter will highlight that previous studies have demonstrated the social support is vital if students are to experience a successful adjustment to life at university, and develop a sense of belonging.

4.2 Social Displacement

Briggs et al (2012:3) suggest that, for many students, the transition to university poses 'significant social displacement'. The process of leaving the security and familiarity of the home environment may lead some students to experience considerable personal stress as they tackle new demands and

more rigorous academic challenges (Chickering, 1969). Previous research has demonstrated that although many individuals manage to successfully make the adjustment to university, others experience long-term maladjustment and depression (Gall et al, 2000; Hammen, 1980; Wintre and Yaffe, 2000). It has been suggested that before the transition to university, students have difficulty envisaging what life at university will be like and struggle to accurately predict their student experience (Peel, 2000; Sander et al, 2000; Tranter, 2003; Smith and Hopkins, 2005). Thus the mismatch between aspirations and the reality can leave students finding the transition to university difficult and students may experience problems adapting to life within higher education (Tranter, 2003; Smith and Hopkins, 2005). As Tinto (1987) suggested, successful adjustment to university rests on both managing both the social and academic demands that higher education presents.

4.3 Factors Which Can Influence a Successful Adjustment

Research from a psychological perspective on the transition to university has shown that social support is vital for successful adjustment to university life (Lanonthe et al, 1995). Ultimately support from different sources (e.g. peers, tutor, parents) all play different role within a successful transition to university (Tao et al, 2000). During the transition to university, students inevitably experience changes to the structure of their social support networks. However, as Mackie (2001) argues, in order to successfully transition to university, students must go through the process of negotiating such networks (Mackie, 2001). This includes redefining existing relationships with family and friends at home alongside making new friends at university (ibid). Thus, the process of making and maintaining friends as an undergraduate is of particular importance (Pulakos, 2001). The development of a sense of university belonging (Hoffman et al, 2002) and the quality of friendships (Fass and Tubman, 2002) are also factors which are extensively attributed to successful university adjustment. In addition to this homesickness and friendsickness have also been found to contribute to maladjustment to university life (Paul and Brier, 2001). From their research, Richey and Richey (1980: 528) concluded that transitioning university students 'need the social support offered by a best friend'. Given this argument, we can begin to understand how important it is for first year students to make social connections and ultimately friends at university, given that friends

provide advice, guidance, reassurance and a sense of belonging (Tokuna, 1986; Weiss, 1974), act as role models (Tokuno, 1986), and provide companionships (Richey and Richey, 1980).

There has been some suggestions from previous research that the process of adjustment to university life begins before the transfer (e.g. Perry and Allard, 2005; Briggs et al, 2012). Visits to higher education institutions and contact with current students allow students to begin to imagine what life at university will be like (ibid). As suggested by Perry and Allard (2005), making connections before the transition can aid adjustment. Although the adjustment process continues through the first few months of university (Briggs et al, 2012), 'students adjust quicker if they learn the institutional "discourse" and feel they fit in' (Harvey and Drew, 2006: iii). Beder (1997) argued that ultimately, in order to successfully adjust to life at university, a sense of belonging is required. In their research of student perceptions of student belonging, Hoyle and Crawford (1994) found that those who reported a greater degree of involvement in group activities at university had stronger perceptions of belonging within their university environment. Within wider social contexts, the importance of belonging has been the subject to much research. Individuals experiencing or having a sense of belonging has been linked to psychological and physical well being (e.g. Barden et al, 1985; Hagerty et al, 1992; Hale et al, 2005). According to Baumeister and Leary, the need to belong represents a 'fundamental human motivation' (1995: 497).

4.4 Personal Communities and Social Support

Early research from the USA suggested that parents were once overlooked as significant variables with regards to university transitions (e.g. Chickering, 1969; Tinto, 1975). However, since then there have been various studies which have sought to understand the role that parents play in their offsprings' transition to university, including how a student's relationships with their parents can affect their university adjustment (e.g. Aquilino, 1997; Dubos and Peterson, 1996; Berman and Sperling, 1991). There has been some research to suggest that the relationship between individuals and their parents improve once individuals make the transition to university and/or emerging adulthood (Aquilino, 1997; Rice and Mulkeen, 1995; Thornton et al, 1995). In research by Kenny (1987), the majority of first year college students described their relationship with their parents

positively, and further research has found that those who leave the parental home to go to university are better adjusted to college life than those who remain at home (Dubos and Peterson, 1996; O'Connor et al, 1996). Ultimately the relationship university students have with their parents can contribute to psychological wellbeing and adjustment (Berman and Sperling, 1991; Wintre and Yaffe, 2000). Specific studies which have focused on the role of attachment between undergraduate students and their parents has found that securely attached students demonstrate a better adjustment profile (Kenny, 1990; Lapsley et al, 1990; Lopez, 1991) and the relationships that transitioning students have with their parents are highly relevant when it comes to analysing university adjustment (Adams et al, 2000; Wintre and Yaffe, 2000).

Astin emphasised the importance of social support for undergraduate students, stating that '...the students peer group is the single most potent source of growth and development during the undergraduate years' (1993; 398). The creation of satisfactory interpersonal relationships is therefore also central to success at university. Failure to do so has the potential to result in outcomes such as depression, anxiety, and attrition (Hoyle and Crawford, 1994; Tinto, 1987). Friends at university are a source of social and emotional support for students during the transition (Harley et al, 2007) and failing to make compatible friendships puts the student at risk of withdrawal (Mackie, 2001) General well being and sense of belonging are enhanced for students by the support networks they create, and these networks often can help students overcome any problems they may face (Thomas, 2002).

4.5 The Influence of Living Arrangements

There is a vast and rich amount of literature which has previously examined students living arrangements during their time at university. When young people make the transition to higher education, they have the choice of geographically relocating to the university of their choice or staying at home and commuting to university. Within the literature, there is broad consensus that the choice students make about their living arrangements (particularly during their first year) can have an effect on the friendships they make at university, which can then in turn affect their ability to adjust and happiness at university (e.g. Chickering, 1975; Astin, 1984; Valez, 1985; Qingjiu and

Maliki, 2003; Wilcox et al, 2006; Thomas, 2002). This section thus places its focus on reviewing literature pertaining first year students living arrangements.

Several researchers have explored the relationship between living in halls of residence and satisfaction with student experience. Compared with students who commute, those who live in halls have been found to be more likely to express overall satisfaction with their undergraduate experience (Chickering, 1975; Astin, 1984), particularly with regards to social life and friendships (Astin, 1984). Further to this, the excitement and positivity towards the new experience of university can be greatly elevated for individuals where geographical relocation is involved (Chow and Healey 2008). Friendships at university are often formed in student halls. The interdependent networks of support which are created in these settings often become a surrogate family for transitioning students (Wilcox et al, 2005) and student halls have been recognised as one of the primary places where first years students have the opportunity to establish friendship networks (Christie et al, 2002).

As previously discussed, the transition out of the family home can be both a momentous and stressful time for an individual. Research from the USA has demonstrated that residing in student halls of residence can be linked to persistence at college. For example, Peltier et al (1998) found that living in halls of residence, particularly during the first year of university, is associated with an increased likelihood of graduating from college and completing the degree within the minimum time period. Further to this, research by Valez (1985) found that students who lived on campus were more socially integrated into college life. As suggested by Qingjiu and Maliki (2013), the university campus environment provides undergraduates a space where gradual adjustment, coping, adaptation and integration to adult and university life can take place.

Within the literature there is conflicting opinion on the nature of student halls and their benefits. Student halls have been viewed as enriching environments (Silver, 2004) which are specifically designed to encourage culturally like minded people to interact (Morgan and McDowell, 1979). Student halls have the potential to be pressurised spaces due to the multiplicity of student identities

residing within them (Talke-Johnson, 2010) and can promote specific cultures, notably night time drinking cultures (Andersson et al, 2012). Wilcox et al (2005) argued that students may question their position within their university due to potential of incompatible identities impacting integration within halls of residence. If students fail to make a successful transition and struggle to meet the demands of university life they may experience underachievement, lack of fulfillment or even drop out (Lowe and Cook, 2003). For some students social support may be lacking in halls of residence due to individuals students preferred levels of socialisation (Wilcox et al, 2006).

4.6 Friendship Development at University

In terms of studies placing focus on friendship development in the first year of university, there are relatively few. However, within the existing literature it is recognised that friendships undergo significant change during the period of the transition. During the transition to university, a loss of friends may occur due to the disruption of social support networks which typically appears (Kenny, 1987) and the transition can leave many students with a sense of disengagement (Jorgenson-Earp and Stanton, 1993). Previous research has suggested that long distance friendships with people from home help students feel a sense of continuity during the time of change (Johnson, Becker et al, 2009), and many students who move away from home make the commitment to 'keep in touch' with their friends from home (Johnson et al, 1995). However, once university begins, first year students who move away from home may experience the dissipation of previous friendship networks (notably those from school) as the frequency of contact is likely to decrease (Buote et al, 2008). In contrast, those who choose to commute to university and remain at home are more likely to continue their involvement in the groups, sports and activities they were a part of before their transition to university, although these networks may become smaller (Buote et al, 2008).

Making compatible friendships at university is tied up mostly with accommodation in halls of residence (Wilcox et al, 2006). Students who do not live in halls of residence are 'more likely to feel marginalised from their peers' (Thomas, 2002; 436). Other studies have also found that those who leave home are better adjusted than those who choose to stay at home and commute (Dubas and Peterson, 1996) and those who move away to university make more friends than those who

commute (Hays and Oakley, 1986). Research by Wilcox et al (2006) on first year university students and their creation of friendships found that developing friendships help to decrease reliance friends and family at home for support. As argued by Thomas 'this represents the importance of the interaction between the institutional habitus and the familial habitus of the student, and indicates how friendship helps to bridge gaps and overcome difference (2002:436). Ultimately, it has been argued that making good friends at university is central to integration into university life and new friendships created become the central and principal source of social support for students during term time (Wilcox et al, 2006).

4.7 University Facilitated Support

Though not a focal point of this research, it is important to note that university institutions have a role to play in ensuring that undergraduates have the best possible student experience. As demonstrated throughout the literature, students integration into university and feelings of connection are extremely important factors in determining university experience, and can ultimately impact decisions about whether to leave or remain at university. Generally, higher education institutions make attempts to assist students through the process of integration to life at university through orientation programmes, social opportunities and mixers, and first years seminars which place their focus on giving students the opportunity to engage with each other through group work (ACT Inc, 2010). In 2002, the Pew Internet project found that students agreed that online communication tools such as email and instant messaging positively impacted their academic experiences. These tools gave students avenues through which they could contact members of staff, co-ordinate with their peers, and most importantly stay socially connected to others (Jones, 2002). In response to this, Gray et al predicted that social networking sites such as Facebook represent a 'powerful avenue through which students can connect with peers and thus adjust more easily to college life' (2013: 195).

4.8 Degree Course: Developing Social Connections

Social support at university not only comes in the form of friendships made in halls of residence but also through the actual degree course itself. As previous research has highlighted, student

relationships with academic staff are an important part of integration into university life (McGivney, 1996; Tinto, 2002). Further research (Tinto, 2002; Yorke and Wintre, 2003) has suggested that course structures which encourage small group work can encourage students to get to know one another, and ultimately develop support networks that are not dependent on accommodation contexts. While most students develop their close relationships within their accommodation, it is also common for students to make friends with people on their courses, particularly for students who live commute or are mature students as courses provide the opportunity to meet other students (Wilcox et al, 2006). However, Wilcox et al (2006) have suggested that students can find it difficult to make friends with people on their course due to a perceived difficulty of infiltrating friendship groups which have already been formed.

4.9 University: An Institution Which Can Aid the Transition to Adulthood?

As has been demonstrated throughout this chapter thus far, students require emotional support to deal with both the culture shock of transitioning to university, entering a different academic environment and the emotional shock of moving from the familiar to a new setting (Beder, 1997; Kantanis, 2000; Wilcox et al, 2006). However, as the previous chapter identified, during the transition to university, young people who enter higher education at 18 are simultaneously negotiating their transition to adulthood. Given this, what role does university play in aiding students with their transition to adulthood? As identified by Flanagan, Schulenberg, and Fulgini (1993), the university environment offers a different level of independence for adolescents heading into higher education, bringing an opportunity for them to practice self-governance, individuation from parents and the ability to direct their own lifestyle, often delaying many adult responsibilities . Further to this, Zarrett and Eccles argue that 'in essence, universities are social institutions that have become increasingly tailored to provide a sort of semi autonomy to assist the transition into adulthood (2006: 18). According to Goldscheider and Goldscheider (1994), for students who move away from home to attend university, the period of transition into student accommodation halls is one categorised by semi autonomy. The nature of student halls allows students to take on some of the challenges and responsibilities of living independently, whilst also simultaneously leaving other

responsibilities to their parents or the university (ibid). This interlinks with the previously discussed offering from Arnett (2000) that emerging adults do not see themselves as being firmly based in the camp of adulthood.

4.10 Social Media Use of Undergraduate Students

As acknowledged by Harley et al (2007: 231) 'in recent years the process of integration into university life has been transformed by the emergence of new forms of communication technology'. During the transition to university, social networking sites offer the possibility of increased social contact with others (Lewis and West, 2009). Further to this, it has previously been argued that advances in media communication have had an impact on the ways in which college students sustain existing relationships and cultivate new ones at university, making the transition process easier (Ellison et al, 2007; Urista et al, 2009). As Grey et al state:

> In addition to more longstanding opportunities to meet and interact with other students (e.g. shared residential spaces and student organizations), today's generation of students enter the college environment with access to social media tools offering communication affordances that may proves beneficial for the adjustment process ...social media-including social networking sites (SNS's), personal blogs, and geographically bounded discussion forums- may ease students transition from highschool to college by providing them with information and social support as well as a way to find and connect with other students

> (2013: 193)

Research studies on the use of social networking sites by college students in the USA have placed focus on the use of social networking sites to disclose health issues (notably depression) (Moreno et al, 2011), layers of electronic intimacy between college students (Yang et al, 2013), social adjustment to college in the age of social media (Gray et al, 2013), and the relationship between social networking sites and social capital (Valenzuela, Park and Kee, 2009). Research by Ellison et al (2007) for example speculated that Facebook may aid students who experience 'friend sickness' after the initial transition to college. Further research within the USA has examined the use of

social networking sites for academic activities (Lampe et al, 2011) and the use of sites to connect with other students about course related work (Dahlstrom et al, 2011). Facebook thus enable students to interact with other students and to find/share information and organise social activities (Heiberger and Harper, 2008) and has 'become an important site for the informal, cultural learning of 'being' a student, with online interactions and experiences allowing roles to be learned, values understood and identities shaped' (Selwyn, 2007: 18). . In addition, DeAndrea (2012) identified that many US universities conduct programmes in order to help transitioning students develop support networks. One of the most prominent attempts at this was by Michigan State University who developed SpartanConnect. The site was created with the purpose of enhancing feelings of connection between students and their peers on campus (DeAndrea, 2012). Further research has suggested that social networking sites offer undergraduate students a unique opportunity to socialise by allowing students to learn more about their peers and university (Yu et al, 2010). In turn this can create satisfaction for the students as well as creating affiliation with the university (ibid). In comparison to the rich literature to have emerged from the USA, research within the UK is limited, but has placed focus on university student's Facebook friends in the public and private spheres (West et al, 2009) and use of Facebook by students on a campus based university (West et al, 2009).

4.11 Summary and Concluding Thoughts Relevant to this Thesis

This chapter has placed its focus on exploring the nature of the transition to higher education, with particular focus afforded to exploring previous research to have demonstrated the importance of social support for transitioning students. Due to the focus of this study, much of the literature reviewed and discussed within this chapter is based on sample populations who can be seen to have had a 'traditional' student experience. However, it is important to note that these literatures may not take into account the broad range of factors (both personal and institutional) which can influence student experience. There are various bodies of literature which have examined in-depth inequalities within higher education, particularly placing focus the impact class, race and ethnicity, and disability can have on student experience.

Along with Chapters Two and Three, the literature reviewed provides rich background context on millennial's as a distinct generation, the general nature of the transition to university, and the various factors which can influence a student's' experience of the transitionary period. To conclude the literature review, the purpose of this sections is to identify the key themes to have emerged from the vast array of literature discussed within the chapters, and provide a discussion of how these influenced the focus of this research project.

Chapter Five
Methodology and Research Design

5.1 Introduction

In every research project, the research design, strategy and methodology are considered in relation to the research questions, aims and objectives in order to ensure that the most appropriate approach is taken. The aim of this research was to explore the experiences of UK-based undergraduate students as they make the transition to higher education. Particular focus was afforded to exploring the challenges students face both prior to and post the physical transition from home to university alongside students' use of social media during the transitionary period to facilitate the creation of new social connections at university and maintain existing connections from home. Like much of the previous research within the field (e.g. Chow and Healey, 2008; West et al, 2009; Briggs, Clarke and Hall, 2012) this study adopts a qualitative approach to study the nature of student transitions to university. Semi-structured interviews were used to capture students' personal narratives of their transition to university in order to develop an in-depth understanding of student experiences. Within this chapter I present a detailed account of the research process, including: research design, ethical considerations, empirical data collection, and management and analysis of the data. I conclude this chapter by reflecting on my journey through this process, and discussing how my positionality as a researcher affected the key findings of this study.

5.2 Identifying the Key Issues

Previous research in the field has taken a variety of focuses and a mix of research methods have been used to draw empirical evidence-based conclusions on the nature of undergraduate student transitions. Given this, at the start of the project I thought it was important to map the key issues to be explored in this research, taking into account the overarching aim of the study. I therefore identified the following as key areas of exploration to include in the line of enquiry: student's simultaneous transitions, students' personal communities and interpersonal relationships, and social media communication technologies and their effect on the processes of interaction. As the literature suggests, it is a transition which is made of multiple simultaneous transitions and new experiences

and so it was important to take into consideration that the transitionary period to university should not be viewed simply as a singular, isolated life course transition. Conceptualising the period in isolation of the peripheral events which take place could have been potentially harmful to the findings of the research. In this research I therefore sought to include an exploration of the students transition to adulthood, experience of leaving home, and changes to the structure of their interpersonal relationships and personal communities within the context of their transition to higher education. In light of developing communication technologies and conceptualisation of the current cohort of students entering higher education as millennials, I wanted to explore how students negotiated their interpersonal relationships during the period, particularly focusing on the role of social media.

Following the literature review it became apparent that, for young people most predominantly, the transition to university is an important and complex life course experience. This was something I knew from my own experiences as an undergraduate student. I applied to university via UCAS in the 2007/08 academic year, and started university in the 2008/09 academic year. At this point in time, UCAS had designed a social media platform for students who had applied to university. The aim of the platform was to provide students with an opportunity to meet other students who had applied to the same universities as them. The design was such that, on signing up using school/college email address and unique UCAS number, students were able to connect with other people who were going to be entering university in the same academic year as them, and who were considering the same universities. On reflection, it was a platform built specifically to encourage students to begin building social connections with others as they made their choice about which university to attend. I saw it being used by students as a space, where, in beginning the building of their social connections, they started to feel at ease about their transition to university, shared anxieties with other students, and made social connections with other students before moving to university. One of the most striking elements of the platform was that it gave people the opportunity to meet other students *prior* to the physical relocation that transitioning to university

entails. In my personal experience, it also gave me the opportunity to develop social connections with people who I think I may never have met once at university.

Once we (myself and other students) had gone beyond the general conversation of 'Hi, how are you? What are you studying?, some conversations and relationships[4] in their infancy began to migrate onto other social media platforms, predominantly Facebook. From my perspective this appeared to be a natural transition and in the same way as friendships in day-to-day life naturally develop, only some connections migrated across onto Facebook. The 'Friending'[5] process added an element of intimacy and real life into the conversations. Because I didn't Friend everyone I talked to on the platform, the use of Facebook as an external media meant that it became a more personal relationship. Further to this, I noticed that it was via this group that students began discussing setting up Facebook pages and groups to find people who were going to be in the same halls of residence as them. It is not my intention to suggest that this occurred only as a result of the site and wouldn't have happened naturally without it, but from my personal experience it had an unquestionable influence on the social connections that I developed in the weeks leading up to my transition and in my first few weeks at university. Like every social connection, you don't get on with everyone, but I made lifelong connections via the UCAS platform in addition to meeting people through the 'traditional' means (i.e. halls of residence, groups and societies).

Following on from this reflection, I revisited previous research I had undertaken within a similar field. Prior to embarking on a PhD, I had undertaken earlier postgraduate research in which undergraduate student use and strategic management of Facebook was explored from a Goffmanian theoretical perspective. Though not the focal point of that research, a number of participants in the research discussed their use of social media as a tool to facilitate their friendship ties both with their friends at home and university. This raised several questions:

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[4] 'Relationship' as an umbrella term and includes: acquaintanceships, friendships, and romantic relationships.
[5] Facebook uses 'Friend' to describe the connection between two members on the site. To avoid confusion within this thesis, 'friend' is used when referring to an offline relationship and 'Friend' is used specifically when referring to the social connection developed on Facebook.

- How do students manage and build their 'personal communities' during the transition to university

- What sources of support do university friends give?

- Given technological advancements, how has social media changed the way in which individuals are able to build continuity in their relationships once they have transitioned to university?

Combining my reflections on my own experience as an undergraduate with my earlier postgraduate dissertation, this research originally intended to investigate the effects of social media communications on interpersonal relationships, in particular friendship, within the context of student transitions to university. Initial research questions centred on how social media was being utilised by transitioning students to facilitate interaction with their social support networks, and what affect this was having on the relationship. However, in order to gain an in-depth understanding of these issues and questions, I thought it was important to widen the scope and explore the transitional period with a broad focus. The scope of the study was therefore altered slightly to place more focus on the general experience of the transition and general use of social media rather than focus being placed on whether friendship could maintained and facilitated partially or fully through social media/ social networking sites.

5.3 Research Philosophy

According to Jennings et al (2005:145), "Either explicitly or implicitly, researchers base their work on a series of philosophical assumptions regarding ontology, epistemology, and human nature, which have methodological consequences" (2005: 145). Ontology and epistemology concern what is commonly referred to as a person's worldview. Carter and Little (2007) argued that the design of any research project is governed by the philosophical methodological stance adopted by the researcher. As such, a strong interrelationship between method, methodology and epistemology provides the fundamental ground for research design (Carter and Little 2007). Thus, the epistemic and methodological stance adopted by the researcher at the start of the project will determine the methods of data collection most appropriate to be used (Carter and Little 2007). Given this, it is

particularly important for researchers to make explicit the philosophical assumptions that underpin their approach to the research topic and the paradigm they adopt. A research paradigm is an all-encompassing system of interrelated practice and thinking that define the nature of enquiry (Terrblanche and Durrheim, 1999). A paradigm hence implies a structure and framework of ideas, values and assumptions (Olsen, Lodwick, and Dunlop, 1992). This has significant influence on the perceived relative importance of the aspects of reality. According to Lather (1986), research paradigms reflect our beliefs about the world we live in and want to live in.

This research was ultimately designed to gain insight into the experience of millennial undergraduates as they transition to university. The aim was to develop current sociological theory within the field of student transitions to higher education which explored the vast array of experiences young people have, with specific inquiry into how social media has altered the ways in which undergraduate students manage their interpersonal relationships whilst at university. In order to achieve this, from the beginning of the project I placed importance on gaining first-hand accounts of student experiences, and so much like previous research within the field, a qualitative approach to the research was adopted. Qualitative research is 'an extension of the tools and potentials of social research for understanding the world and producing knowledge about it' (Flick, 2007: 7). It has also been characterised as an approach which attempts to learn about and describe social phenomena from the perspective of insiders by giving voice to individuals (Lapan et al, 2012). Qualitative research can therefore provide rich insight into groups and individuals, and in particular give insight into 'how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences' (Merriam, 2009: 5). As the central aim of my research was to access first year undergraduate students perspectives, a qualitative approach was considered most appropriate to facilitate this. As suggested within the literature, qualitative research is more focused on the meanings, social relations and practices of human beings. This is particularly fitting for my research as I seek to explore the transitions of individuals at a particular stage of their life course, and attempt to develop an understanding of how developments in the social world affect their social relations and practices.

Qualitative approaches rely heavily upon interpretation. Our understandings of situations, the behaviour of others, and our own records of these observations are based on our interpretations of these events. I approached this research from an interpretivist ontological position. Interpretivism is based on the premise that humans create their own meaning through experiences as they interact with the world around them (Lapan et al, 2012). As there is no single reality which exists, what is sought through an interpretivist approach is an in-depth understanding of human beings, their individual experiences, and their multiple realities (Denzin, 2010). Schensul (2012: 69) argues that the interpretivist paradigm is 'driven by the views of those in the study setting' and takes 'the position that social or cultural phenomena emerge from the ways in which actors in a setting construct meaning'. For this reason, qualitative researchers tend to immerse themselves in these social setting to observe, record and learn about individuals within their social contexts. This reflects my research in that I conducted in-depth interviews with students, in a setting familiar and comfortable to them. However, there are many factors which ultimately play a part in the way we interpret others, and the situations we experience. These factors include gender, life experience, religion, culture and education (Mukherji and Albon, 2010).

The knowledge we hold is often based on a combination of previous experiences and cultural and contextual values which we draw from when constructing participants' identities (Greene and Hill. 2005). As Emond (2005: 126) states, 'the research process… cannot be considered as independent of the researcher', and as researchers we share the social world of our research participants. Given this, scholars recognise the importance of being reflexive about how we interpret our data, our role in the analytic process, and the preconceived ideas and assumptions we bring to our analysis (Devine and Heath, 1999; Henwood and Pidgeon, 1997; Olesen et al, 1994). Researchers are encouraged to reflect on and record their interpretations, and the robustness of their interpretations is dependent on being able to justify how they were reached (Boulton and Hammersley, 1996; mason, 1996). For example, Strauss and Corbin (1990:75) cautioned that 'The trouble is that researchers often fail to see much of what is there because they come to analytic sessions wearing blinders, composed of assumptions, and immersion in the literature'. Ultimately reflexive practice

could be described as a method of self-analysis: being in continual state of awareness of how our personal and academic preconceptions impact our own practice and research outcomes (Davis et al, 2008). The key aspects of this process include:

- continual and intensive scrutiny of interpretations, methods and practice

- internal dialogue and questioning

- challenging your principles and actions

- challenging preconceptions and assumptions

As I draw on an interpretivist perspective in this research, it is important to acknowledge that I will have different interpretations of the social world than those of another researcher. In addition, it is possible that I may attach meaning to social situations and interactions with others based on my own experiences, values, and possible gender or age (Oliver, 2010). My own experiences as an undergraduate student had a strong influence on the way in which I approached this research, something which I reflect on within this chapter. At the start of the research process I was not immediately concerned with ensuring that I engaged in a reflexive manner with my research. However, as the interview and analysis processes progressed, I became increasingly aware of how my own assumptions (influenced by my own experiences as a undergraduate student) were influencing the manner in which I conducted interviews, and 'looked for' meaning in the data transcripts. My reflections on this are provided throughout this chapter in the relevant sections.

5.4 Data Collection Methods

As the aim of the research was to explore the experiences of undergraduate students as they transition to higher education, gaining first-hand narratives was imperative. Semi-structured interviews were selected as the most appropriate data gathering technique. This evidence gathering strategy is often used when interviewing, providing 'detail, depth and an insider's' perspective' (Leech 2002: 665) whilst allowing for the modification of the line of enquiry based upon the interviewee's responses to open-ended questions (Robson 2011). With an emphasis on the interviewee's own perspectives, the interviewer can depart from the question schedule, where necessary, asking follow up questions that will facilitate the generation of 'rich descriptions'. When

planning the data collection methods, the choice of conducting interviews was made at the expense of conducting an online ethnography. Whilst an online ethnography would have given the opportunity for online social interactions to be explored in much greater depth and would not have involved participant analysis of their own interactions, time and ethical constraints meant that conducting interviews was the most proficient and apt choice of data collection methods.

The interview is probably the most widely employed method in qualitative research (Bryson, 2001). Berg (1998) defines interviewing as conversation with a purpose. Specifically, the purpose is to gather information. Semi-structured interviews involve the implementation of a number of predetermined questions and/or special topics. These questions are typically asked of each interviewee in a systematic and consistent order but the interviewees are allowed freedom to digress, that is, the interviewers are permitted (in fact, expected) to probe far beyond the answers to their prepared and standardised questions. Farr suggests that the interview is "essentially a technique or method for establishing or discovering that there are perspectives or viewpoints on events other than those of the person initiating the interview" (1982: 36). Using qualitative interviewing to map and understand the respondent's life world is the entry point for social scientists, who then introduce interpretative frameworks to understand the actor's account in more conceptual or abstract ways. The method also has a number of advantages. There is an emphasis on greater generality in the formation of initial research ideas and on the interviewer's own perspectives. Interviewers can depart from any schedule or guide that is being used. They can ask new questions that follow up interviewee's replies. This is an essential component in generating 'rich descriptions'.

Although I had conducted interviews as part previous postgraduate research, I was incredibly nervous about the process. Ultimately I was a novice, and I was very aware of the fact that I had a lot to learn about interview techniques. To conquer my nerves and anxiety, I felt as though I needed to be 'armed' with information about participants before the interview so I could be prepared for what was likely to come up. Therefore, prior to interview, participants were asked to keep a reflective diary based on their observations of their own social media usage alongside reflections

on their thoughts and feelings about how they managed the transition to university. The purpose of this was to gain insight into the student's own understandings of both their use of social media, and how they viewed their transition to university. The template that was designed and given to participants can be found in Appendix A.

Timing of the Data Collection

As this research sought to focus on first year student experiences of the transitionary period, in order to best capture the experiences of the students it was decided that the interviews should take place in the first few weeks of their undergraduate study. While this may have implications for the reliability of the data (i.e. the student were asked to give retrospective accounts of their preparations for the transition which could have been misremembered or romanticised), for practicality purposes this timing was deemed to be most appropriate. As this research took place during students first few weeks at university, I did not get the opportunity to interview anyone who had dropped out, nor was it possible to keep up to date and continue a longitudinal study of students past their first few weeks at university. However, during the interview process several participants did discuss their contemplation of dropping out and or alluded to the idea that they would have dropped out had they not made friends.

5.5 Research Sites

The ability to access, recruit, and interview sufficient participants face-to-face was of central importance to this research and so the consideration of potential research sites happened early in the research process. For geographical convenience I made the decision to restrict the number of universities to source potential research participants from and collated a list of potential sites. As has been previously mentioned, one consideration for the direction of the research was to undertake a comparison of student experiences from two different higher education institutions: one campus rural based university, and one campus based city university. While I had decided that this approach was not the most appropriate to meet the aims of the research, I still wanted to capture a variety of student experiences. Semi-structured qualitative interviews had been deemed the most

appropriate data gathering technique, and this ultimately dictated the practicality of which universities to pick as I intended to conduct face-to-face interviews rather than via telephone. After much consideration, I chose two universities as research sites: Keele University and Manchester Metropolitan University.

Keele University

As a PhD student at Keele University, I primarily chose it as a research site for reasons of convenience. Firstly, I thought that being based in Keele would afford me flexibility in the recruitment and interview stages of the project. Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, I thought that my own experiences as a Keele student had given me a good working knowledge of the Keele undergraduate experience and local area, and thought that this knowledge could provide me advantage in interviews with students. As the recruitment and interviews stages progressed simultaneously I found (for many practical and reasons), that being in close geographical proximity to Keele and having been an undergraduate student at the university had both its advantages and disadvantages[6].

Manchester Metropolitan University

As conducting face-to-face interviews was a key aspect of this research, I was somewhat limited in my options for a second research site. Access was at the forefront of my mind when making the decision, and so I assessed the pros and cons of the shortlist of universities in close geographical proximity to Newcastle-under-Lyme and thought Manchester Metropolitan University to be the most appropriate option. Manchester is easily accessible by public transport, and relatively affordable to travel to.

For more information on the research sites, please see Appendix B.

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[6] An in-depth discussion and reflection of these stages can be found in section 5.6 Participant Recruitment and 5.7 The Interview Process of this chapter

5.6 Participant Criteria

As previous research has demonstrated, undergraduate students experiences of the transition to university differ dependant on a number of factors, including but not limited to: choice of university, age of the student, whether the student leaves home to attend university, where the student lives during their first year (i.e. in student halls of residence or shared housing), and ultimately the individual personality and circumstances of the student. Taking into consideration the aforementioned, once I had made the decision about which universities would be used as research sites in the study, I turned focus to deciding upon participant criteria.

During the process of mapping a potential criteria framework I turned back to my literature review for inspiration. As previous research has demonstrated there are variations in how students experience the transition to university. I thought it was important to take into account that there are a variety of factors which can have influence over the nature of a students' transition, particularly factors concerning the individual self, personal circumstances and choices made regarding the transitionary period. In particular, for those who make different choices about their transition to higher education or those who belong to a marginalised group, this undoubtedly has the potential to influence their overall undergraduate student experience. For example, mature students, non-British nationals, commuter students, students with a disability, and students from different ethnic backgrounds could all have differences in their transitionary periods. Thus, their experiences during the transitionary period of entering higher education and the challenges they face and how they manage these could also be different. Given that student experiences of the period can be affected by multiple factors, in order to be able to view the cohort as a somewhat homogenous group and compare 'like-for-like', I decided that a tight framework for participant criteria was essential. The following were therefore mapped out as the framework:

1. 'Home' students
2. Aged between 18 and 20 and left further education in the 2013/14 academic year and entered higher education in the 2014/15 academic year

3. Moved away from home to attend university and were living in student halls of residence, and prior to moving to university had always lived with their parent(s)/in the family home

4. Had at least one social media account and accessed it on a daily basis

I made the decision to focus on the experiences of 'home' students and to exclude EU nationals and international students from the research as I thought that international geographical location was a factor which would have to be taken into account in the analysis and would add further complexity to the research. Further to this, I was personally interested in specifically exploring the experiences of students with a university experience similar to my own which I could relate to. This therefore involved focusing specifically on students who had entered university at 18 and geographically relocated to university (as opposed to being a commuter student). As the period of living is halls of residence has been identified as a space of semi-independence for transitioning students, I wanted to capture the experiences of students where university was the first time they had lived independently. Further to my personal preferences, as previous research has revealed, the experiences of commuter students can differ greatly and as such I felt that their experiences may not have the opportunity to be fully explored and fairly represented in the research. Finally, after consideration that the scope of the research would include an exploration of how students use social media during the transitionary period to maintain and make social connections, it was decided that that this would form part of the criteria.

All of the individuals that were interviewed met the above criteria. However, my rigid enforcement of this framework presented some challenges in the recruitment process. A full discussion of this can be found in 5.8 Participant Recruitment.

5.7 Creating an Interview Schedule

Drawing on the key themes to have emerged from the literature review, my first step in creating an interview schedule involved creating an outline of the key areas I wanted to explore in the interviews with students. As Patton (1980) suggests, when beginning the process of developing interview questions, researchers should begin with an outline, listing all the broad categories that they feel may be relevant to their study. This preliminary listing allows them to visualise the

general format of their interview schedule (ibid). In this initial mapping phase, there were several lines of enquiry that I wanted to pursue in the interviews. These were as follows:

- students home personal communities prior to the physical transition to university

    - dynamic of relationship with parents

    - dynamic of relationship with friends

- students home personal communities after the physical transition to university

    - changes in the dynamics of the above relationships

- use of social media to develop new social connections prior to the physical transition to university

- evolution of new social connections after the physical transition to university

- students experiences of the transition to adulthood during this phase of the life course

Once I had completed this mapping exercise I turned to thinking about the types of questions I wanted to ask. Ultimately I realised that the kind of questions asked in interviews is highly variable. Kvale (1996) suggested that there are nine different kinds of questions, involving introducing questions, probing questions, follow-up questions and interpreting questions, to name a few. At the centre of this research was the exploration of a number of interconnected themes, and as such, I wanted to create an interview schedule which was open and allowed students to lead the interview the narrative which were most important to them. Therefore, I tried to create an interview schedule which omitted any leading questions. For example, rather than asking students direct questions about their opinions on social media usage, I wanted to ask questions that encouraged students to speak openly about their social media usage and the role social media plays in their interpersonal relationships. I tried to create broad questions which would give students the opportunity to lead the discussion. A full interview schedule can be found in Appendix C

5.8 Participant Recruitment

The process of participant recruitment was, in some ways, one of the most challenging phases of the research process. The recruitment of all participants in this research reflected a convenience sample. As Bryman (2012:201) defines: 'a convenience sample is one that is simply available to

the researcher by virtue of its accessibility'. This method led to recruitment of thirty-four students; twenty students were recruited from Keele, and fourteen students were recruited from MMU. A healthy mix of male and female students were sampled; sixteen students were male and eighteen were female. A list of participants is provided at the end of this chapter.

In the initial phase of the recruitment process, I identified social media platforms Facebook and Twitter as possible channels through which participants could be recruited. There are, of course, significant sampling problems when conducting recruitment through online methods. Not everyone is online, nor is everyone using the same social media channels, thus making it extremely difficult to acquire sampling frames of those who are online. This ultimately meant it was difficult to get an idea of the sampling frame and answer questions such as '...how many people see the announcement? What types of people saw the announcement?' (Hewson et al, 2003: 38). While these concerns were taken into consideration during the research process, time and geographical limitations meant that initially recruiting through this method was necessary. In August 2014 I therefore created new Facebook and Twitter to advertise the study and give interested students to the opportunity to approach me. To advertise the study, posts were placed on various Facebook groups (with explicit permission sought from a group administrator before posting). The accounts created gave information regarding the study with my contact information. In addition to this, I approached societies through Facebook to ask if they would be willing to advertise the study and most were willing to do this. Eighteen participants were recruited through social media. In general I found it to be a very useful recruitment tool, particularly for the long distance recruitment of MMU students and because it gave exposure to the study. However, I did experience one problem following the advertisement of the study on a Facebook halls of residence accommodation group. As discussed above, explicit permission was sought from Facebook group administrators before posts were placed. In one instance I sought and received permission from an admin member of a Keele halls of residence Facebook group to advertise the study within the group. However, the post was taken down by another admin member (a PhD student familiar to me but someone I was not acquainted with) who revoked permission to use the group as a space to advertise the study.

While I had found social media to be a very useful and convenient sampling tool, there were moments where I thought the recruitment of participants was happening at a slower pace than I would have liked. This led me to be concerned about being able to recruit sufficient numbers within the time frame I had set (i.e. in the students first few weeks at university). Therefore, at my request, there were several individuals who advertised the study to their friends and acquaintances who then agreed to take part in the research, resulting in snowballing sampling. In this sampling method 'the researcher makes initial contact with a small group of people who are relevant to the research topic and then uses these to establish contact with others' (Bryman, 2012: 202). Bryman writes that snowball sampling may be the only possible approach in research where there is 'no accessible sampling frame for the population from which the sample it to be taken' (2012:203). In total 10 students were recruited through this method, which ultimately had a significant impact on my recruitment numbers.

Perhaps not surprisingly, I found it easier to recruit Keele students than MMU students. I cannot say without doubt that this was due to my geographical location, but I do think it had an overall influence during the recruitment process. For example, following the utilisation of social media to advertise the study, I was approached by a member of the Keele Digital Marketing team who was interested to gain more information about myself and the research. Following an initial meeting, he offered to help recruit students which resulted in 6 participants from Keele being recruited through him. The ability to organise interviews at short notice with Keele students was also an important factor. In addition to this, the participant criteria I had developed inevitably provided a framework within which interviewees had to sit. As Creswell (2009: 217) writes: 'In qualitative data collection, purposeful sampling is used so that individuals are selected because they have experienced the central phenomenon'. At the beginning of the research process I thought that having a rigid participant criteria would strengthen my research findings as I would be placing focus on a particular group of students and the 'traditional' university experience. I therefore enforced this criteria quite strictly during recruitment and turned down the opportunity to interview

five students who approached me to enquire about the study following advertisement. These students were a mix of mature and commuter students.

5.9 The Interview Process

In the planning phase of the research process I decided that all interviews would be conducted in-person rather than via telephone. As previously discussed, research sites were chosen on geographical location and proximity to Keele University to make this possible. Although there are many alternatives to face-to-face interviews, in-person interviews have a number of advantages. The familiar, conversational nature of a face-to-face interview feels more comfortable and natural to the interviewee than one conducted via media technology, and "if the interviewee feels comfortable, they will find it easier to talk to you" (Rapley, 2007: 19). It was important that I created an environment that enabled students to feel comfortable, particularly as some of the key areas of exploration in this research were very personal in nature. In order for a comfortable environment to be created I placed importance on the consideration on appropriate venues for the interviews to take place and my own interview skills.

Organising Interviews

I found that it was easier to organise interviews with Keele students as these were able to be carried out with relatively short notice. The average time between first contact with participants from Keele and conducting an interview was 4 days. Following first contact and agreement to participate in the study, interviewees were given the diary template to complete. As I wanted to give interviewees sufficient time to record their diaries, I did not provide with them with a time frame but merely asked them to let me know when they had begun recording. On completion of the diaries, I was able to organise interviews at a mutually convenient time. In these instances interviews were arranged for the same or next day. Organising interviews with MMU students was more challenging. Although Manchester is in close geographical proximity to Newcastle-under-Lyme, it wasn't practical to organise interviews for the same day, and in some cases, the next day. The average time between first contact with participants from MMU and conducting interviews was 7 days. However, on two occasions it was possible to organise two interviews in one day.

Venue

I decided to conduct interviews in a public place (such as the university library or local cafe) in order to create an environment where research participants were able to feel comfortable and at ease. It was important to me that the interviews felt as natural as possible, so I tried to create a situation that resembled two acquaintances or friends having a conversation over coffee. I found interviewing in cafe's to be a very unique experience that had both its advantages and disadvantages. Conducting the interviews in cafe's meant that the comfortable environment I wanted my interview to take place in happened naturally. I offered to buy each interviewee a drink on first meeting. Most of the interviews immediately accepted, but there were two interviewees who did not want to accept my offer and instead bought their own drink. For the most part, interviewing in a cafe was a pleasant experience. However, during two of the interviews the cafe we had chosen to meet in became quite which affected the noise level. Kale (1996) identifies an important component for successful interviewing: listening. This involves being very attentive to what the interviewee is saying and being active without being too intrusive (ibid). Therefore, I knew it was it was important for me to allow interviewees the freedom to speak at will and to respond appropriately to the comments made and ask appropriate coding questions. Choosing to interview in public places meant that it was relatively easy to set the desired tone and pace of the interviews. However, as previously mentioned, there were a couple of occasions where the atmosphere of the cafe's became distracting and so listening and responding became more difficult. During these interviews there were moments where it was difficult to keep the conversation flowing as it was so loud, and this further had an effect on the interview recordings.

All of the interviews with MMU students were conducted in cafes in Manchester city centre. All of the interviews conducted with Keele students took place on Keele campus, with most of them taking place in a cafe in the Students Union and some of the interviews taking place in Keele library.

Starting the Interviews

At the start of each interviewee I gave participants an additional copy of the information sheet and the consent form to sign. In addition to this, I reassured interviewees that they were under no obligation to answer any of my questions, that there were no correct or incorrect responses, that all responses would remain confidential, and most importantly that they were free to suspend the interview and withdraw themselves from the study at any time. Permission was requested for the interviews to be recorded. In all cases, respondents agreed to this request. I knew it was a possibility that interviewees might feel self-conscious given the nature of the subject matter. To counter these understandable tendencies and to encourage and interviewees to talk at length and expand on the emotional and intuitive content of their views and to be frank, I knew it was important for me to put the interviewee at ease and establish a relationship of trust and confidence, in other words, rapport. This was achieved by the interviewer's form of questions, by verbal and nonverbal reinforcement, and by being relaxed.

Taking Notes

In the first few interviews I conducted I took notes throughout. I thought that this would allow me to link themes together as interviews progressed. Instead I found it to be very distracting for both myself and the interviewee. While taking notes I stopped listening as intently as I should have been and I found that it made the interview process feel more formal in nature, something which I didn't want to happen. At the end of each interview, once the interviewee had departed, I used this opportunity to take notes on my initial thoughts and feelings of how successful I thought the interview was and how the interview linked to previous ones I had conducted.

5.10 Ethical Approval and Considerations

Any research involving participants must take into account the ethical considerations of the study: 'Any qualitative researcher who is not asleep ponders moral and ethical questions' (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 288). Bryman (2012) notes that authors who write about ethics within the social science research can differ about what is and is not ethically acceptable. He notes that many or the

arguments do not seem to have moved on in the past four of five decades, while at the same time they are becoming ever more central to debates about research by those who oversee and regulate it. Primary ethical concerns include: informed consent, protection from harm for both the researcher and participant, and the participant's right to privacy and confidentiality. This section discusses the ethical considerations which underpinned this research.

Gaining Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for this research was gained from both Keele University and Manchester Metropolitan University. Ethical approval was first sought from Keele University's Ethical Review Panel (ERP). Following the initial review of the application for ethical approval, there were some amendments to the documentation which needed to be made in order to gain approval from the panel. Following revision to the documentation, ethical approval was granted from Keele's ERP. However, one of the key outcomes of the application was that Keele University advised that they could not give provide me ethical approval to interview students from Manchester Metropolitan University and that a separate application for ethical approval would have to be made to MMU. Following this, I then further applied for ethical approval from MMU, which was I successful in being granted. Confirmation of ethical approval from Keele and MMU can be found in Appendixes D and E.

Consent Forms

Research participants should always give their agreements to take part on an informed and voluntary basis. A formal information letter was provided for interview participants to retain, giving details about the research and the ethical commitments that I had to adhere to in my position as a researcher. This was provided to participants via email prior to interview, and then a paper copy was provided at the beginning of each interview. Participants were given time to read through the information letter to ensure they fully understood the nature of the research, their rights, and the responsibilities that I had. A sample of the information sheets used can be found in Appendixes F and G. Two consent forms were also provided (one giving consent to participant in the study, and one giving consent to use quotes from the interviews in the write up). Two copies of each were

given to interviewees prior to the interview starting for them to sign. One copy of each was retained by the participant, and one was kept for the research records. A sample copy of the consent forms used can be found in Appendixes H and I.

Anonymity, Confidentiality and Trust

It is suggested by Berg (1998) that confidentiality and anonymity are sometimes mistaken as synonymous. However, they have quite different meanings. Confidentiality is an active attempt to remove from the research records any elements that might indicate the interviewee's identities. In a literal sense, anonymity means that the interviewee remains nameless. In most qualitative research however, because the investigator knows the interviewee, anonymity is virtually non-existent. Thus, it was important to provide subjects with a high degree of confidentiality. Reinforcing confidentiality was a key factor in the development of trust between myself and the interviewees. However, as Bryman (2012:136) notes: '[The] issue of confidentiality raises particular difficulties for many forms of qualitative research'. There may be limits to the levels of confidentiality that a researcher can guarantee to research participants. For example, in cases where a researcher suspects that a participant may be a danger to himself/herself or others. This was explained as part of the consent procedure, as was my duty to act if any potential danger was suspected.

Fontana and Fay (2000) suggest that researchers need to develop trust with their interviewees. Reflecting on the interview process I found the process of establishing a positive relationships with the interviewees relatively easy and this can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, choosing public places allowed the interviews to resemble interactions between friends. This allowed the interview to feel natural to myself as the interviewer, and each interviewee also appeared to be at ease. Secondly, being close in age to the interviewees also made the interview feel more like a natural conversation. There were times where, from my perspective, it did feel as though I was merely having a coffee with a friend. While I believe this had a positive effect on the data I was able to gain (i.e. interviewees felt comfortable enough to talk to me about personal aspects of their life), I think it had a somewhat detrimental effect on my interviewing skills. For example, there were instances where I didn't ask follow up questions when I perhaps should have, and I only picked up

on this when transcribing. This was more apparent in the interviews with Keele students. As they discussed their experiences about transitioning to Keele there were times where I felt that their transitional experience was very similar to my own and so I failed to probe. On reflection I needed to ensure students explicitly stated their feelings, rather than me just recognising their vague descriptions of their feelings as synonymous with my own.

Right to Withdraw

Researchers should endeavour, at all times, to protect the rights, interests, sensitivity and privacy of the participants in their research. The protection of participants rights is closely connected to the issue of informed consent. Interview participants were reminded before the beginning of the interview that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time, or choose not to answer any questions. Explicit permission was sought to use a digital device to record the interview, both on the consent forms and verbally prior to the start of the interview. None of the interviewees refused to be recorded, and none appeared to be noticeably uncomfortable about being recorded. Following one interview, I was contacted by the participant with a request to not include a section of the interview conversation in the research write up. Following the request, the section of conversation was permanently deleted from the interview transcript, and does not feature in the findings.

Storing Data

Further to this, the security of research participant's data is vital, particularly where personal or potentially harmful information may have been collected. Identifying data stored in electronic forms was password protected, and stored on Keele University's S drive[7]. Data in paper form was stored in locked cupboards and filing cabinets, and document containing participant's personal information (such as consent forms) were kept separately to interview transcripts. All research participants were given pseudonyms in the write-up.

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[7] The S drive is Keele University's hard drive. Every student has access to a secure personal folder where they can save and store their files and documents.

5.11 Transcribing the Interviews

Transcribing the interviews was time consuming, but an essential component of the research process. I tried to ensure that interviews were transcribed as soon as possible after they were conducted, however, in practice this was difficult as I was still in the process of participant recruitment and conducting further interviews. However, there were a number of considerable advantages with recording interviews and taking the time to produce transcripts. Firstly, the procedure is important for detailed analysis and to ensure that the interviewee's answers are captured in their own terms (Silverman, 2000). Further to this, Heritage (1984: 238) suggests that the procedure of recording and transcribing interviews has the following advantages:

- it helps to correct the natural limitations of memory

- it allows more thorough examination of what people say

- it permits repeated examinations of the interviewee's answers.

The technical process of transcribing the interviews was also important. How detailed the transcript needs to be, and what does and does not need to be included, are a matter of judgement that depends on the purposes of the research (Ochs, 1979). Where detailed analysis of the process of discourse is involved, pauses may need to be timed, overlaps in talk between one speaker and another clearly marked, as well as other verbal and nonverbal features of talk included. Although I did not prescribe to a specific exemplar, within the transcription process I captured non-verbal noises such as laughing, and word emphasis.

5.12 Data Analysis

"Analysis is the act of giving meaning to data" (Corbin and Strauss, 2008: 64). As Bryman states "unlike quantitative data analysis, clear-cut rules about how qualitative data analysis should be carried out have not been developed" (2012: 565). The analysis was undertaken at the end of the fieldwork by both reading through transcripts and listening to sections of the recordings. This helped to remind me about the 'feel' of the interviews, particularly where several weeks had passed. The analysis of interview transcripts were undertaken in NVivo 10, a type of qualitative research software known as CAQDAS (Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software).

Document and files can be imported into NVivo, where they can be analysed: codes can be created, personal noted or memos written and linked to the original source files, and connections between files can be identified and recorded. As further discussed by Gibbs, NVivo 'support the storing and manipulation of documents' and allows users to construct analysis of data by linking search queries, models, annotations and theoretical notes together in the same space (2002:16). The analysis of data was conducted in 2 stages. Coding 'entails reviewing transcripts and/or field notes and giving labels (names) to component parts that seem to be of potential theoretical significance and/or that appear to be significantly salient within the social worlds of those being studied' (Bryman, 2012: 568). As suggested in the literature, when coding it is important to establish the units of analysis, what Krippendorf (1980: 62) calls 'themantic units'. On the importance of coding, Gibbs asserts the following 'coding … is an essential procedure. Any researcher who wishes to become proficient at doing qualitative data analysis must learn to code well and easily' (2002:17). As such, the coding stage of the analysis was undertaken through line by line analysis.

In the first stage of the coding process I searched for links to the key themes I had identified as central to the research at the start of the process: simultaneous transitions, personal communities, and social media use in the management of interpersonal relationships. In this respect, I built a 'conceptual schema' that was concept driven (Gibbs, 2002: 59). While the experiences of the students were unique to them, there were broad similarities in their overall experiences of the transitional period. As such, the first stage of analysis was relatively straightforward. The second stage of analysis involved applying Tinto's application of van Gennep's *Les rites de passage* to student transitions to higher education to the data I had gathered. In the interviews it was common for students to discuss about their experiences of transitioning in chronological order, talking about their experiences prior to their physical transition and then moving on to discuss their life at university. Applying the concepts of separation, transition, incorporation to the data was a natural process. I found it particularly that the theoretical framework had previously been utilised in a similar research setting (Tinto, 1987) and so I did not experience any significant problems interweaving the theory through the data set.

5.13 Reflections on the Research Process

As I alluded to at the beginning of this chapter, at the start of the research process I was not directly concerned with issues of reflexivity and ensuring my continual professional development as a sociologist. However, on reflection this is something that I wish I had engaged with throughout my research. As Finlay (2002: 532-533) notes:

> Reflexivity can be defined as thoughtful, conscious self-awareness… At one end of the scale, reflection can be understood as "thinking about". As a subject, I reflect on an object. The process is a distanced one- the thinking is about something else and it takes place after the event. At the other end of the scale, reflexivity taps into a more immediate, continuing, dynamic, and subjective self-awareness… the challenge is to identify that lived experience that resides in the space between subject and object. The researcher strives to capture some of the connections by which subject and object influence and constitute each other

Once I had started to the writing up the findings of the research, I began to reflect more on the process and how I had perhaps influenced the findings of the study. Though this was not my first experience of conducting an empirical research project, I approached the process with a mix of excitement, nerves and anxiety. However, I found that gaining access to the 'insider' student perspective in one respect to be relatively straightforward. Whilst I faced the usual recruitment challenges that many research face, gaining the rich narratives from the students seemed natural. Although it would be hard to prove definitively, on reflection I think that the simple fact that I was close in age to my participants (and essentially still a student) afforded me a warmer reception than if I had perhaps been older and in a position where I was researching them from a higher professional standing. Further to this, although from the very start of each interview I received a warm reception from each of my participants, I found that I felt more at ease in the interviews with the students from Keele, most likely because I has been an undergraduate student at the same university and had familiarity with their narratives given my own experiences. I sensed my ease from the very

beginning with these students led them to appear at ease. That is not to say that the interview with students from MMU were not smooth during the first few minutes, but it was easier to find common ground with the students from Keele.

While I was not explicitly aware of it at the time, my own experiences as an undergraduate student had a profound influence on each stage of the research process, and thus ultimately affect the findings of this study.

5.14 List of Participants

A full list of the participants interviewed in this research is provided below. Additional information is given where appropriate.

Table 1 List of Participants

Name	Age	University and Course	Relationship status on entering university	Additional Information (where relevant)
Adam	20	Keele English and Politics	Single	Participant recruited through a member of Keele's digital marketing team
Alice	19	MMU History	Single	Member of MMU's women's hockey team which she joined in the first few weeks of university
Andy	18	Keele History and Politics	In a relationship	
Bethany	18	MMU English Literature	Single	
Claire	18	Keele Sociology	Single	

Craig	20	Keele Geology	Single	Participant recruited through a member of Keele's digital marketing team
Dan	18	MMU Politics	In a relationship	
Dave	19	Keele Medicine	Single	Participant recruited through a member of Keele's digital marketing team
Dean	20	Keele Music	Single	
Elvis	19	MMU History	Single	
Erika	18	MMU Dance	Single	Member of MMU's Dance Society which she joined in the first few weeks of university
Greg	18	Keele Biochemistry and Neuroscience	Single	Joined Keele Men's Football team in the first few weeks of university
Henry	18	MMU History	Single	
Isla	18	MMU Criminology	Single	
Jack	18	Keele Chemistry and Maths	In a relationship	
Jenny	18	Keele Psychology	In a relationship	

Jessie	18	MMU Politics	Single	Participant recruited through a member of Keele's digital marketing team
John	18	MMU Geography	In a relationship	Joined MMU Men's Rugby in the first few weeks of university
Lara	18	Keele English and Psychology	Single	
Lauren	18	Keele Politics and International Relations	Single	Participant recruited through a member of Keele's digital marketing team
Lesley	19	Keele Law	In a relationship	
Liam	18	MMU Law and Criminology	In a relationship	
Lucy	18	Keele Medicine	Single	
Mike	19	Keele Environmental Politics	Single	
Olivia	18	Keele Criminology and Sociology	Single	
Paul	18	Keele Medicine	Single	Joined Keele Men's Football team in the first few weeks of university

Rachel	20	Keele Social Work	Single	Participant recruited through a member of Keele's digital marketing team
Sally	18	MMU Law	Single	
Sara	18	Keele Psychology and Human Resource Management	In a relationship	
Sarah	19	MMU Psychology	In a relationship	
Serena	18	MMU Criminology and Sociology	Single	
Trev	18	Keele Human Resource Management	Single	Joined Keele Men's Football team in the first few weeks of university
Zach	18	Keele Neuroscience and Biochemistry	Single	
Zara	18	MMU English Literature	Single	

Chapter Six
Background Information:
Developing an Understanding of the Participant Cohort

6.1 Introduction

This chapter is the first of three findings chapters to present the key findings which emerged from the interview data and provides background information from the data gathered in the interviews to give context for the following two main findings chapters. An insight into the student's general use of social media is provided in order to build a comprehensive understanding of how the students in this research project used social media in their everyday lives. This was an important aspect of this research as a key element of it was to study what role social media plays in the lives of the students as they transitioned to university, particularly with regards to the extent to which it is was as a medium to sustain their personal communities.

While the criteria for this research specified that to be eligible to participate students would have to use at least one social media channel on a daily basis, I did not wish to make assumptions about how social media was used by each student. Given this, general questions were built into the interview schedule in order to build an understanding of how the students in this study were using social media in their daily lives. The most common themes and narratives from these discussions are thus provided in this chapter.

In addition to the above, this chapter gives further background information for the participant cohort with regards to the following: their experiences of negotiating adulthood; their motivations behind choosing higher education; and what aspects of university life they attached importance to when they were choosing which university to attend.

6.2 Internet and Computer Use from a Young age

As identified by Prensky (2001), computers, video games and the internet in the late 1990's and early 2000's became embedded into the lives of young people growing up, leading him to conceptualise them as 'digital natives'. Whilst his conceptualization has received criticism, within this research it was found to be a useful tool to broadly conceptualise the participant cohort and

their lived experiences of technology and its developments. The interview data revealed that the internet, social media and other communication technologies have become deeply embedded into the lives of the participant cohort.

At the start each interview, participants were asked if they had a computer in the family home, and if so at what age did it become a feature, where was it kept, and how often they used it. All of the interviewees stated that they remembered a computer at home from a young age, though most struggled to recall an exact age. However, the age of 4 and 5 were given as the most common answer for those who were able to give a definite answer or rough estimation. Several interviewees identified that they could not put a figure on it because a computer had "always been there". These opening questions also revealed that for the most part, participants were allowed to use the family computer on a regular basis.

When asked about their use of computers in the family home, in all of the interviews conversation quickly turned focus to the students use of the internet. In particular, the adoption of the internet and social media at an early age for entertainment purposes was a common narrative of the participants of this study. When asked how they would react if the internet would cease to exist, several participants recounted horror stories of times when their family homes had power cuts or lost connection to the network:

> *"That would not be cool. Like, yeah, so not cool" (John)*

> *"My mum changed internet providers and we didn't have internet for a week. We live in a rural area as well so my data connection is appalling. It was the longest week of my life" (Jack)*

Although subject to criticism, Prensky's notion of the 'digital native' is highly applicable to these students. The students openly identified the profound impact and effect that the internet had on their lives.

6.3 Facebook: The Main Social Media Platform

Social media has become the very essence of young people living out their daily lives (Hulme, 2009; Livingstone, 2009). Discussions with every participant centred on Facebook, and for each participant this was the main social media platform they used. When asked about their motivation for using the site, some participants struggled to give an answer:

> *"Literally everyone has Facebook. I actually don't know anyone who doesn't and I've forgotten why I use it. I just do" (Mike)*

> *"Me and my mates have had an account since we were like 14 and it just stick as a part of what you do. I'm so used to logging and it being a part of my life that I continue to do it" (Claire)*

> *"I've had one as long as a I can remember. It's just a thing now. Like it's actually built and programmed into me to check Facebook" (Liam)*

For most of the students in this research, Facebook had become such a central part of their everyday life that they could no longer explain or rationalise their motivations behind using the site, as the above quotes illustrate. The majority of the students began using the site when they were in early adolescence, and following years of use, the site had become deeply embedded not only within their daily activities (i.e. logging into the site several times a day) but also distinctly changed the way they communicated and interacted with their friends and peers, and also their parents.

6.4 Profile Browsing

Previous research has discussed the affordances of social media for communicative purposes (e.g. boyd, 2008; Osgerby, 2004; Milner, 2004), and there is much debate surrounding the effects of using social media for interpersonal interactions on people's relationships. For example, previous research has placed focus on examining whether online interactions detract from offline relationship quality or whether it supplements it (e.g. Leander and Kim, 2003; Haider-Yassine, 2002). While there this little consensus about the dichotomy between offline and online

relationships, previous research has been able to examine trends in the ways young people use social media in their everyday to gain information about people. For example, previous research has examined how social media is used to 'stalk' people (i.e. to gain information about a person using their social media profile) (Sarno, 2007; Sng, 2007). In the diary component of this research nearly every participant noted that they logged into Facebook several times a day, not to directly communicate with their Facebook Friends, but to view their Friends updates and posts:

"Checked Facebook about 3 times today already. Nothing's really happened but logging in is just quite addictive" (Sarah, diary)

"Generally just log in to see what's happening. It's a good way to keep up to date with what people are up to" (Paul, diary)

As the narratives of the students in this study demonstrate, the affordability of Facebook allows people to engage in the 'profile browsing' of others using the site. As a prominent theme to have emerged from the reflective diaries, questions about this were incorporated into the interviews. It was common for participants to refer to the experience of looking through both their friends and people they didn't know or were perhaps acquainted with to 'learn' about their life:

"It's an easy way to learn about someone" (Craig)

"It's like our generations ID badge. It might not be the best thing ever but it certainly has its uses if you want to find out something about someone" (Isla)

Authors who have examined this practice in-depth have referred to this process as 'profile stalking (Sarno, 2007) and 'Facestalking' (Sng, 2007). Whilst use of the terminology 'stalking' may sound cynical to some, for the students who took part in this research this was just a natural part of having a Facebook profile.

Participants reported that they viewed the platform as a place whereby both they and their Friends could publicly discuss and share information about their life without the need for the exchange of direct dialogue:

> *"It's not always necessary to have a conversation with someone. Sometimes you just wanna tell people what's happening. It's a way of sharing stuff I guess" (Zara)*

6.5 Communication with Friends Via Social Media

Every participants reported to using a combination of communication technologies to maintain in contact with their friends outside of face-to-face interaction (i.e. text message, Whatsapp, Facebook chat). However, most of the students expressed that they preferred to use Facebook chat as the primary medium to maintain a line of communication with their friends. Reasons for this tended to centre of ideas of convenience and suitability of the platforms for the content and level of communication they wished to engage in at different times:

> *"Facebook chat is easy and like non-intrusive. Texting and phone calls are a bit more intrusive. If it's urgent then I'll text. If not, then chat is fine" (Dean)*

> *"I don't like ringing my mates. I never have. It's just a bit rude" (Isla)*

> *"No-one I know texts anymore. I don't think I could even explain why we use chat but it's become a thing and it's just easy I guess" (John)*

While there was an obvious preference for using Facebook chat, the students recognised the pro's and cons of the medium. Discussions on the positive aspects of social media communication centred on the ease and convenience of the medium. It was clear the participants viewed social media as providing an avenue of communication with their friends that requires minimal effort:

> *"It's just easy ya know. Notifications come straight through to your phone when someone messages you so it's just really handy yeah" (Andy)*

> *"It adds that bit extra to your relationship with your mates I think and it is much easier than texting, even though it's actually sort of the same thing" (Olivia)*

However, despite the positive aspects of the ease and convenience of social media communication, several flaws of the medium were identified. There was the sense that it was common for people to misread communications due to not being able to decipher the tone etc.:

"I have had arguments before that have been caused by literally nothing because someone's misread what I've put" (Jenny)

However, some of the interviewees also discussed how emoji's and emoticons made this process easier at time:

"I always add a winky face when I'm saying something a bit off but I don't mean it so that other people know I'm joking" (Sally)

6.6 Who to Friend

According to research by Lenhart and Malden (2007) and Subrahmanyam and Greenfield (2008), most people use social media to communicate with people they are already loosely connected with. Furthermore, Ellison et al (2007) argued that people use social media to maintain their existing social networks instead of creating new ones. These arguments were true and applicable to the participants of this study. The majority of the cohort used Facebook as a medium through which they could build an online connection with someone they knew personally, or had at least met in person:

"At the very least I only add people or accept requests from people that I've met at least once" (Mike)

In addition to this, there was the commonly held view that Friends should be people who they had positive or neutral feelings towards:

"I don't add anyone who I don't like. What's the point?" (Claire)

Further to this, the students generally held a negative view of people who had added others as Friends without having met them:

> "It's just a bit weird I think. I don't know you and you don't know me. Why would I want to give someone an insight into my life that I didn't know? And I certainly don't care about them" (Lesley)

> "It's something that like 13 year olds do I think. Everyone went through a phase when we were young where it was 'who could have the most Friends'. As you grow up that competition disappears and you start to realise that you only want as little people as possible as Friends" (Jack)

Several participants also held a negative view towards others who they perceived to have 'too many' Friends:

> "You see some people that have like over a 1000 Friends and that's ridiculous. There's no way you know all of those people" (Jenny)

> "It makes me a bit sceptical having someone like that as my Friend. I just think it say something about them as a person" (Sarah)

Some participants had previously received Friend requests from someone who wanted to be 'nosy' about their life, and this was held in a negative light:

> "My parents just bought me a car for my birthday and I put a few pics on Facebook. Then I started getting loads of Friends requests from people that I knew but didn't like. I knew they were just being nosy. It's awful when people do that" (Lucy)

6.7 Family as Friends

Every participant had family members as Friends, which included a mix of parents, siblings, aunties and uncles, cousins and 'distant relatives'. However, for some this was not through choice but rather an expectation that family should be Friends:

"It's just an expected thing. I hate getting a request and having to say yes just because you're related" (Jessie)

"I once had a massive fall out with my cousin 'cos I didn't accept her Friend request. We don't even like each other so I didn't understand why it was a big deal" (Lara)

Previous research has found that parents and older adults reflect the fastest growing new demographic to adopt and use Facebook (Facebook, 2012; Hampton et al, 2011; Lenhart, 2009; Nielson Company, 2011; Qualman, 2009). In this study, there were 12 participants who had their parents as Facebook Friends. Within discussions on the practicalities of having parents as Friends, some participants discussed their concerns, deeming it as an invasion of privacy. Discussions mainly centred on mums:

"I do have my mum as a friend but I don't want to. I kind of feel like she set up a Facebook when I was coming to university just so she could spy on me" (Lara)

"I refused to accept my mum's request. I don't particularly want her to see stuff, not that I've got anything to hide but it's the principle isn't it? She doesn't need to know what I'm doing all the time anymore" (Paul)

These findings are in line with the suggestions of Child and Petronio (2011) that young adult Facebook users have the potential to feel vulnerable about the increased potential to encounter their parents on Facebook. As the above two quotes demonstrate, it is possible that young people feel that their parents may be using the site to 'spy' on their activities. Having parents as Friends on Facebook can indeed trigger issues around privacy dilemmas as researchers have found in other contexts (e.g. Petronio and Jones, 2006; Pietroni, Jones and Morr, 2003). However, this is not the case for all young adults, as other students who took part in this research had a much more relaxed view about having their mum's as Friends:

"It doesn't bother me. My mum knows what I'm like. She puts some daft stuff on hers that I don't think I should be seeing. I think she goes out more than me" (Adam)

"I think it's a way that she can keep in touch with me without her having to ring to see if I'm alright and that's the good thing about it" (Lucy)

6.8 Unfriending

The process of Unfriending (deleting someone as a Friend on Facebook) was something which was discussed by several participants:

"I have unfriended people before. Like this one guy just kept on posting vile stuff and his opinions and approaches to things like politics were just insulting. I didn't want someone like that as a Friend because I didn't want to be associated with him" (Alice)

"I once unfriended someone 'cos they kept on sending me proper inappropriate messages. Like really bad. I blocked them as well" (Olivia)

A few of the participants had also been on the receiving end of someone unfriending them:

"I got unfriended a few weeks ago. I'm not actually sure why they did it. It was a bit awkward afterwards seeing them 'cos it was like we've not fell out but you've unfriended me. Awkward" (Greg)

There were three participants who discussed how they at some stage had a 'cull' in order to purposely reduce the number of people they had as Friends:

"I have quite regular culls. It's a good way of keeping on top of it otherwise you just end up with too many people and it's stupid" (Dean)

"I like to be quite careful who I leave on as a Friend so every now and again I go through my Friends list and get rid of people who I'm not bothered if I have as a Friend or not. You know, they can see everything you post and if you don't really know them or talk to them I'm the kind of person who doesn't want them to be able to keep up to date with what's happening in my life" (Bethany)

6.9 Changes in Use of the Site

There was consensus among the interviewees that they were using Facebook in a different way to when they first joined the sites:

> *"I think I used to add more people as Friends when I was young. Like the more Friends the better. Now it's the fewer the Friends the better *laughs*" (Rachel)*

> *"I used to post a lot more personal stuff. There's no way I'd post half the stuff I did a couple of year ago now" (Elvis)*

Several participants noted how they had started using Facebook chat messenger more regularly than directly 'posting' on their Friends Facebook 'walls'. It was also common for participants to make distinctions about conversations they had on social media publicly and privately:

> *"There's stuff that you just don't put up there. If you're going to have an argument, then do it in private" (Trev)*

> *"I like my privacy. I know social media sort of makes that a bit impossible because it's designed for you to share stuff about your life everyone but I like to be careful. There's a medium for every conversation. Personal things should be kept out of public view" (Lauren)*

6.10 Distinct Opinions About Social Media

The findings of this research are broadly similar to suggestions made by other researchers who have provided commentary on the nature of Facebook and notions of privacy and the sharing of personal information (i.e. George, 2006; Evans, 2012). George (2006) argued that the amount of personal information that Facebook allows its users to publish online is working to alter the idea of personal privacy. Evans (2012) further identified that the nature of Facebook meant that it is overtly nonymous as a social media channel. As Evans (2012) discussed, since its inception Facebook has had a meteoric rise to the top of the social networking ladder, with the (over)sharing of personal information central to the success and popularity of the site. Personal feuds are fought over, pictures liked, friends connected, comments made and then deleted, all of which can intrigue,

infuriate or bore, as friends randomly scroll through status updates (ibid). The following responses from three participants illustrate concerns surrounding privacy and the over sharing of personal information:

> *"I always find it really awkward when someone you know posts something about their grandma or something has died… and you see people 'like' it. What's that about? Firstly, remember that you have like a thousand friends and are sharing your life with them, but I'm not going to 'like' that your grandma's died, that's not being supportive is it. And I'm not going to message you privately or comment to say 'sorry' cause I don't even know you"* (Sarah)

> *"My friends boyfriend cheated on her and she put a status about it. It was just public… there for everyone to see. Everyone. Why would you want everyone knowing that you boyfriends been cheating on you. To me, that's private and no-one should know… But she was broadcasting it. I think some people just do it for attention, then don't actually care, but that's an even worse reason"* (Dan)

> *"Some people need to remember that what you post can't be unseen by people. Yeah you can delete it, and you probably feel like it's been got rid of, but people have probably already seen it, screen grabbed it, whatever… There's a sense of permanency that people don't realise. Just stupid"* (Elvis)

6.11 Management of Social Media

There were variations in the students approaches to the content they posted. For example, Isla kept her posts neutral and simply posted updates about lifestyle:

> *"Facebook's not the place to have political arguments with people. You never know who you're offending and I'm the kind of person that I'd rather have a debate in person"* (Isla)

In contrast to this, there were several participants who approached their posting with the view that their profiles were their private space, and thus posted what they wanted:

"I don't care if people don't like what I post. They could delete me if they wanted to. There's too many people who get caught up in the 'oh but what will they think'. I just put on what I want. I mean I guess everyone's bothered about what people think otherwise they wouldn't post stuff cos it's a popularity thing about how many likes you can get. At the end of the day though I manage it how I want" (John)

Most of the students described their privacy setting for their profiles as being strict, limiting their content to be viewed by Friends only. There was the general opinion that they didn't want 'random' people being able to view their information and it was important to them to maintain some degree of privacy:

"I don't want people I don't know viewing what I post. You never know how people could use the information you put on there" (Dan)

There was one participant who had what she referred to as 'quite sophisticated' privacy settings, limited what she posted to only be viewed by certain groups in her Friends list:

"There's times where I don't want all of my Friends to see what I've posted so I do restrict who can see what quite a bit. I think it adds an extra layer of protection for me as well" (Isla)

However, there were five participants who claimed to have no knowledge of what their privacy settings were. Zach for example maintained that it did not bother him who may view what he posted, as he was careful:

"I don't post anything that could back to bite me in the arse in 5 years' time" (Zach)

Several students had untagged themselves from posts or photos which they deemed to be unflattering or something that they did not wish to be associated with. This strategic management was deemed to be necessary in order to maintain a degree of privacy:

"I do it quite regularly, especially after a night out. Other people think it's funny to put on pictures of you looking hammered but I don't want that kind of thing on my profile. I prefer to be a bit more private like that and just have a laugh about it as a group, more in private" (Erika)

"I once had quite a big fallout with one of my auntie's. She posted something quite racist and tagged a load of the family in it. I was so embarrassed to be associated with it. Anyway, I untagged my name from it and she noticed and sent me private message giving me a mouthful" (Liam)

In addition to the above, many of the students had at some point deleted a photo or post that they had put on. This had mainly been done following the receipt of unwanted or derogatory comments from Friends:

"There was a picture from prom that I'd put on and it showed a bit of cleavage. Before I knew it there was people asking if I'd had a boob job and making nasty remarks about it. In the end I took it down because the hate was just horrible" (Rachel)

"I posted an update about something, don't really want to say what, but it caused controversy between my Friends. There were people having a mass argument on my status. If I realised what it was going to cause I wouldn't have posted it" (Adam)

6.12 Negotiating Adulthood

The aim of this thesis was to explore the experiences of first year undergraduate students during their transition to university. However, given the participant criteria for this research (which was influenced by the review undertaken of previous research), the experiences of the students who

participated in this study could not solely by read as a singular, isolated transition/ transitionary period. Given that, as the literature suggests, first year undergraduate students are simultaneously experiencing the transition to adulthood as they transition to university, one strand of this research was to explore the students experiences of their transition into adulthood within the context of their transition into higher education. This was therefore reflected within the interviews as the students were asked about their thoughts, feelings and understandings towards their transition from adolescence into adulthood, and this section will draw on these discussions. During the transition to adulthood adolescents strive for independence and separation from their parents. This was a prominent theme within the interviews, however, several students discussed that they found it difficult making the transition when they felt as though other people were not treating them as adults:

> *"People always say if you act like an adult then that's when they'll treat you like one. It's a load of rubbish. I've had it where I feel like I'm the one being more mature in situations but then you're treated as if you're still a kid. It's like you're in the middle even though you're 18" (John)*

Further discussion similarly focused on the idea of maturity. There was the sense that the idea of 'being mature' was an elusive or undesirable state:

> *"Who wants to be mature anyway? That's for when you're getting old and tied with a wife, mortgage and 3 kids *laughs*" (Adam)*

> *"I'm not sure anyone knows what being mature is. It's a term that's thrown at you a lot when you start growing up but no-one ever fully explains what it means" (Claire)*

Twelve of the students interviewed had part-time jobs. Having a job was recognised as a defining characteristic of becoming more responsible:

> *"You've got to be responsible when you've got a job and I think you learn to take other things into consideration in an environment that's more restrictive" (Jack)*

6.13 The Choice of Higher Education

There are various choices that students have to make with regards choosing the path of higher education. Choices included: whether or not to enter into higher education, course choice, which university to attend, and whether or not to commute or to live at home. In addition to this, half of the participants expressed fear of student debt as reasons why they considered not coming university:

> *"I'm not sure what I want to do and so making a decision where you know that you're going to come out with at least 30 grand of debt makes a difficult choice. I wondered whether it was worth it to be honest" (Greg)*

Choosing which degree course was identified as the biggest challenge for the students. There were variations between those who were driven by a fixed career path, and those who were unsure what career they wanted to pursue in the future:

> *"I've wanted to be a doctor since being about six, so I always knew that I'd do a medicine degree" (Lucy)*

> *"How can anyone know what they want to do at 17? I chose Sociology because I took it at A Level and enjoyed it" (Sara)*

Each participant had their own set of criteria when choosing which university to attend. These criteria ranged between both the social and academic spheres of university life, including but not limited to: quality of nightlife, league table rankings, student satisfaction rankings, and a general feeling of 'being at home'. On average students visited between 3 and 6 universities before making the choice which ones to apply to, and ultimately which one they wished to pick as their first choice. Choosing a university where they could see themselves being settled was ultimately the most important criteria for the students. Students from both Keele University and Manchester Metropolitan University stated that when they visited on open days, they had the feeling of being at 'home':

> *"As soon as I got here I knew this is where I wanted to be. There's just something about it that makes me feel like I'm home" (Erika)*

These findings demonstrate that from the first visit to a higher education institution, students begin to imagine what their life at such university will be like, and have initial thoughts and impressions about the university. The first impressions that students have of a university have a strong influence on their decision to attend that institution. A strive for independence was also a key contributing factor when the students were making the decision to move away from home to attend university:

"I could have stayed at home and gone to uni there but it wouldn't have been the same. I feel like I just needed to get out and do my own thing" (Dean)

"I just wanted to be able to do what I want. It's stupid but little stuff like being able to eat crisps for breakfast if I want to is what I like most" (Trevor)

"My mum's proper overbearing while my dad's quite relaxed. It does my head in though when I go on a night out and she waits up for me to come in. It's like she doesn't trust me. At uni you can do what you want without feeling like you're being watched"(Lauren)

As several authors have discussed, during the transition to adulthood, young people begin to crave autonomy and increasingly resent and attempt to resists family role and rules (e.g. Yau and Hanson, 1991; Collins, 1990). These findings demonstrate that young people view university as providing them the opportunity to begin their adult lives and live 'by their own rules' The apparent freedom attributed to living in halls of residence was a recurrent theme:

"You can do what you want pretty much but like in a safe way. You don't have to worry about bills or anything yet *laughs*" (Zach)

In addition to this, there was the general view that living in halls of residence had a direct impact/effect on the quality of student experience:

"I don't understand how people who don't live in halls in their first year could have a good time" (Andy)

"It's all part of the experience. I can imagine some people miss out on a lot if they live at home" (Jessie)

6.14 'What were you most looking forward to ?'

In order to be able to understand this within the wider context of this research and their decisions of choosing higher education participants were asked the following question:

MW: Before you came to university, what were you most looking forward to?

While responses to this question varied, responses centred on the strive for independence and opportunities to meet new people:

"Moving away from home...gaining my independence and meeting new people and seeing new places" (Trev)

"Making new friends and meeting new people. I come from a small town and everyone knows each other so it was nice to look forward to meeting new people… people I haven't grown up with and spend the last 7 years of my life in school with" (Jenny)

"It's nice to be able to strike out my own and make my own decisions about what I do whether they're good or bad- it's good knowing that it's up to me now. That's the bit I was looking forward to" (Lesley)

"I think I was just looking forward to being able to do what I want when I want to do it" (David)

During the transition into adulthood, young people strive for independence and separation from their parents while peer relationships become increasingly central to their social lives. As the above excepts demonstrate, university was viewed by the students as being able to provide the independence they were striving for. Several students discussed how they viewed university as being a 'safe' environment to be making their initial entry to adulthood:

> *"One of my mates from has been in full time work since we did our GCSE's and is getting a mortgage soon. I couldn't have done that. I don't think I'm ready to work full time. I needed to come to university to figure out what I wanted to do because I don't know. I don't understand how anyone knows at my age but I wanted to figure it out in my own time. I guess uni has given me the breathing space to be able to do that but I'm still doing something productive" (Jack)*

> *"I think it's the sort of environment where it gives you time to figure out what you want to do without too much pressure. It's the safe option because you come out at the end with a degree" (Erika)*

The period of entry into university life, in particular with regards to living in halls of residence, gives undergraduates students semi-autonomy, allowing them to manage some of the responsibilities of being independent without the full responsibilities of adult life (Goldscheider and Goldscheider, 1994). In this research, this was acknowledged and understood by the students, perhaps demonstrating that higher education is becoming a 'safe' choice for young people to be able to step into the 'adult world' without full responsibility.

6.15 Discussion

Understanding How Young People use Social Media

In the literature it is suggested that the internet and social media have become embedded into people's daily lives, and ultimately this has had some effect on the ways in which people interact with one another. But how has the growth in internet mediated communication technologies affected the lives and relationships of the students in the participant cohort of this study. The

interviews demonstrated that social media plays a prominent role in the lives of young people. For the students in this study, Facebook was a central platform which they used to share their thoughts, feelings and activities with their Facebook Friends. Although this research did not intend to focus solely on the students use of Facebook, throughout the interviews, discussions predominantly centred on the platform. This demonstrates the popularity of the site among the cohort of students and chimes with Hulme (2009) and Livingstone (2009) in their assessment that social media plays an important role in the lives of young people.

Discussions with the students about their social media use predominantly centred on the two ways they used platforms: private instant messaging and 'public' status updates. For the students in this research Facebook had become a medium through which they could share their feelings, thoughts and activities without having to directly communicate with one another. As discussed in Chapter Two, previous research has examined social media platforms as providing an opportunity to 'profile stalk' or 'Facestalk' others users (Sarno, 2007; Sng, 2007). For the students in this study, the process of using Facebook to keep abreast of their Friends lives without having to directly communicate with them is not quite as cynical as 'stalking' suggests. Instead Facebook was used by the students as a platform to communicate and showcase their activities with others without the need for direct communication. As one participant stated in their interview, they viewed Facebook as a kind of 'ID badge'. It appears as if Facebook has become a platform through which people can present themselves and make a statement about who they are as a person and their likes. This is perhaps not surprising given that, as the literature suggests, the millennial generation has grown up in a world saturated with networks and their lives intertwined with digital technologies.

With a few minor exceptions, all of the students in this research prior to their transition to university used social media as an extension of face-to-face interactions to communicate with their offline friendship networks. This corroborates previous research that social media is mostly used by people to socialise with people whom they already know or are loosely connected to (Lenhart and Malden, 2007; Subrahmanyam and Greenfield, 2008). While the students recognised that communicating through social media has both advantages and disadvantages, outside of face-to-

face communications it was the preferred method of communication. McLuhan (1964) argued that each wave of new media has the potential to fundamentally alter the structure of many aspects of daily life. It is clear from this research that social media has altered the ways in which young people interact with one another. An interesting reveal from the research was that phone calls and text message were deemed by the participant cohort to be rude, antiquated methods of communication. This perhaps suggests that students value not being interrupted by a telephone ringing and having the opportunity to respond to a friend's message when it's appropriate to them. At one time this was afforded by text message, but it appears as though this process has now migrated to online communication technologies. However, this is in contrast to previous research which found that young people have high expectations of availability (Ling, 2004) and expect messages to be responded to in a timely manner (Taylor and Harper, 2002) as the students in this research did not appear to be concerned by availability and time constraints. While these factors may still hold importance for some, it was not something that the students I interviewed alluded to.

Although the participant cohort consisted of people who were mostly unacquainted with each other, it appears as though they were all governed by unspoken and unwritten rules about social media use best practice. Students in the cohort were also very aware of their privacy and it would appear as though young people have a strong awareness of the sinister aspects of the mediums. On the whole, the young people in this study demonstrated a mature approach to their social media use, interactions and communications. This is not to suggest that social media has not had negative effects on their lives, but rather suggests that young people do have an awareness of the potential negative effects social media can have, and take steps to ensure they engage positively with platforms. Given the extent to which social media technologies have become embedded within the lives of the students in this study (demonstrated in this chapter), it seems appropriate that I considered students use of social media during the transitional period to be an important line of enquiry in this study. For young people, the growth in computer mediated communication technologies has definitely allowed for globalised ease to connect with peers and friends and personalisation of relationships online, as suggested by Wellman (2001). Rather than the students

becoming alienated from their peers due to the rise in online communications (Kraut et al, 1998; White, 1997), young people are in fact able to use technology to best meet the needs of their relationship, seemingly allowing them to flourish with the added option of communication via different mediums.

Conceptualising the Transitions of the Cohort

During their lifespan individuals experience multiple life course transitions. At the point of entry into university, young people experience changes within most avenues of their lives. These include but are not limited to: changes in how they approach their relationships and the nature of these relationships, moving to a new physical environment, and a maturing process of becoming increasingly responsible for oneself. It is these changes which I have come to conceptualise in this research as 'simultaneous transitions'. In their discussions of their negotiations of such simultaneous transitions, the young people who took part in this study demonstrated an awareness of their current status between adolescence and adulthood. As suggested within the literature, it is almost impossible to put a definitive age on when young people transition to adulthood, or indeed how long the process of transition lasts (Mortimer, 1992; Buchmann, 1989; Modell, 1989; Goldschieder and Goldschieder, 1999). Particularly for the millennial generation entering adulthood, the period has become increasingly complex and nonlinear and can now be considered to extend beyond the teenage years (Arnett, 2000; Thomason et al, 2002; Jones and Bell, 2000). However, this state of 'in-between' can be confusing for young people, and can result in both positive negative reflections on the transition and what 'being an adult' entails.

Many of the young people in this study held the view that while their eighteenth birthday was an official marker into adulthood with regards to the law, in day to day situations the age in reality held no real significance. This demonstrates the development from previous theories that adulthood can be defined by visible and formal markers (Hogan and Astone, 1986) to an approach which shows that the status of young people is one which is fragile and subject to change (Goldscheider and Goldscheider, 1999). Previous research has found that young people view the ability to make independent decisions and accepting responsibility for one's own actions to be important factors

for adulthood (Arnett, 1997; Green et al, 1992), and maturity can be seen to be a key aspect of this. It could be assumed that these are factors which are promoted by parents and other role models in young people's social worlds, and by the social structure in which we live. The young people in this research held conflicting views on maturity: on one hand being mature was attached to the aging process and visible markers such as marriage and becoming a parent were deemed undesirable, while on the other hand having a job was attached to notions of responsibility, which indirectly is attached to maturity, and was a source of pride for some. This demonstrates that the transition from adolescence into adulthood is not one which is linear, nor are there any predetermined factors which need to be met for adulthood to be reached. More than being reversible (Goldscheider and Goldscheider, 1999), the period between adolescence and adulthood is one which is fluid. This fluid status is one in which young people can straddle both adolescence and adulthood, having attachment but no firm footings in either.

Although all of the young people in this research had chosen the path of higher education and thus can be seen as having bias views towards it, it is important to recognise the significance of their viewpoints and what they mean for contemporary young people in terms of their transition to adulthood. It is argued that becoming a self-sufficient person is an important goal for emerging adults (Arnett, 1998). However, as changes in the global economy have resulted in an insecure employment market and deteriorating opportunities (Buchmann, 1989), young people have become socialised to expect career uncertainty (Moen and Orrange, 2002). For the students in this study, university presented itself as a gateway to access their chosen career and as an opportunity to move away from home, take some of their first steps into adulthood, and start the process of becoming independent. This highlights that as societal institutions, universities serve two functions: to aid in the preparation of a future workforce and to provide young people with a safe environment in which they can manage the transition from adolescence into adulthood. While most of the students in this study recognised the latter opportunity that was being provided to them, only a few chose higher education with their future employment prospects in mind. The majority of the students in

this research viewed university as a space where they could manage the transition between adolescence and adulthood, ultimately demonstrating their status as 'emerging adults'.

6.14 Conclusion

In this chapter I have used excerpts from the interview data which give context to the lives of the students who participated in this research. Although not all of the narrative excerpts presented in this chapter directly relate to the research questions, they do provide background and context for the key findings presented in Chapter Seven and Chapter Eight.

The findings reveal that prior to their transitions to university, social media communication technologies were deeply embedded into the student's everyday lives and their social interactions with others. For the students of this study, social media played a central role in their lives, and particularly with regards to the management of their interpersonal relationships. In addition, this chapter demonstrates that the students broadly fall into the category of 'emerging adults'. The experiences of the students in this study can be directly linked to Arnett and his theories of how emerging adults see themselves and their place in the world (i.e. do not entirely see themselves as adolescents but not entirely adults either). The majority of the students interviewed as part of this research were craving their independence yet had a simultaneous awareness that they were not adults in their entirety. With regards to the experience of the transition to university, these findings demonstrates that students look forward to meeting new people at a time in their lives where the development and creation of new peer relationships is central to their life.

Chapter Seven
Students' Experiences Prior to the Physical Transition to University

7.1 Introduction

In this research I aimed to capture a broad range of student experiences. Each student I interviewed had their own unique story. Given the vast amount of data that was collected, not all of the data could be used in the write up and analysis. In this chapter I present the narratives which relate to experiences prior to the physical transition to university. The following key themes are therefore presented and discussed: the student's feelings about moving to university, the practical and emotional preparations which were made which helped students begin their transition, the students use of social media for knowledge development about the university and to begin the development of social relationships, and the students opinions towards universities having an active social media presence.

7.2 Feelings About Moving

As previous research has highlighted, the transition to university is a complex process and not without its difficulties. Previous research has suggested that prior to the transition, students may have difficulties envisaging what life at university will be like, and some may struggle to accurately predict what their overall student experience may be like (Peel, 2000; Tranter, 2003; Smith and Hopkins, 2005). Given the findings and suggestions of such previous research, it was important in this study to capture how the students felt prior to their physical transition to university. As discussed in the previous chapter, the students of this study were looking forward to moving to university and the opportunity to gain independence and begin their journey into 'fully fledged adulthood'. Whilst every student expressed their excitement and general feelings of looking forward to the new experiences and adventures that they imagined they would have at university, a common focal point of discussion in interviews was students discussing how in the months leading up to their transition they had begun to fear the unknown and realised that in moving to university this would be the first time they would be responsible for themselves. Several participants

expressed that they had had fears and anxieties about leaving home, as they had never lived alone and were unsure exactly what to expect:

"I was worried about being lonely but that fear ran deeper than that. Being the first time I'd ever been away from home for more than a week was a scary thought and I felt like I was entering something not knowing everything. It's a real uproot I think. Everything is changing all at once and you have to manage all these things together" (Elvis)

"The realisation that I'd have to start taking care of myself a bit more and doing more for myself was a shock. I got this picture in my head that uni would just be full of laughs but for me reality started to kick in a couple of weeks before I came. Yeah it made me feel quite nervous to be honest" (Isla)

"My mum joked that I didn't know how to use the washing machine and I laughed 'cos she was right. It's weird thinking about all those things that you have to do once you move that you didn't have to do before. It made me a bit nervous realising that I'd have to start being a bit more responsible for myself in that way" (Daniel)

The acknowledgement that undergraduate students experience nerves and fear the unknown as they transition to university is not a new research finding. As Chickering (1969) acknowledges, the process of leaving the security of the family home can cause students considerable stress as they begin to tackle the new demands of university life. The transition out of the parental home is a key moment in young people's lives as they transition into adulthood (Avery et al, 2002; Clarke and Mulder, 2002), and for the students of this study, moving out of the family home was attached to the transition to university, ultimately meaning that they had begun the process of taking on responsibility for themselves. The notion of gaining independence and taking responsibility for oneself is a further key marker of the transition to adulthood (Eccles and Gootman, 2002). As illustrated through the above quotes, it was the practicalities of moving away from home and being responsible for oneself which was a daunting prospect for some of the students interviewed.

However, for some students this was made easier with the knowledge that their experiences were not unique, and that their peers were also experiencing similar situations to theirs:

"It sort of does make it a bit easier knowing that basically we're all in the situation. Like we've all moved away from home and having to make new friends and deal with being more responsible for ourselves" (Sally)

"It was good knowing that I was going to be living on campus because it took away some of the worry about moving away from home. At least on campus everyone is sort of in it together" (Zach)

The students of this study expressed a high degree of awareness that life at university would be different to life at home, and that they would face challenges. For Isla in particular it is was the knowledge that she would be undertaking the transition alone that increased her fears and she stressed that her nerves and anxieties surrounding moving were driven by a fear of being lonely:

"I went through a period after I accepted my offer where I was really worried about making friends and not knowing anyone. I found it really daunting. I think it was because I knew I was going to be alone. You know everyone is in the same boat, but that doesn't mean that it's not a lonely process" (Isla)

However, whilst the participants had various feelings and concerns about what their transition to university would entail, underpinning some participants feelings about moving was the knowledge that they had a fixed date which they knew they were going to be moving on. There was the sense from these participants that having a fixed date of going to university in some way helped them feel prepared:

"It was a bit like going on holiday. Everything had to be bought and packed and ready and if it wasn't then I was going to moving with nothing. It made me get my act together a bit and sort stuff out" (Trev)

"You've got loads of time to prepare and I think that helped me. It's not like it just happens and you're not expecting it 'cos you are" (Erika)

"I knew I had to be prepared. It's kind of a psychological preparation I guess. Preparing yourself to be ready" (Mike)

One interviewee in particular expressed that they saw the move as non-permanent, and the knowledge that always being welcome back at home helped ease their anxieties about moving:

"Moving away isn't forever. I knew at most I'd only be gone for a few weeks, until Christmas at most. I knew that I could go home whenever I wanted as well. Like if I just got up one day and felt really shit then I could just get on a train back home. Knowing that helped a bit. Plus a degree is only three years and unless you've got something figured out after that then you know you're moving back eventually" (Bethany)

As discussed in the previous chapter, many of the students were looking forward to the perceived independence that their transition would bring. In the majority of the interviews, particular attention was drawn to the fact that leaving home and the gaining of such independence would mean that they would no longer have to live by their parents' house rules:

Adam*: "I was much more restricted at home. I think my mum just forgot what she was like when she was a teenager. I just really looked forward being free I guess and not being watched over"*

MW*: "What do you mean by being 'free'?"*

Adam*: "Like not having to live by 'the house rules'"*

MW*: "What kind of house rules did you have at home?"*

Adam*: "Doing my washing on a certain day, not staying up at 11 on a college night or after 1 on a weekend. That kind of stupid daft thing"*

"I did really look forward to being able to do my own thing without my mum breathing down my neck" (Greg)

"I really looked forward to being able to do my own thing make my own mistakes and finally start being treated like an adult by my parents. I hoped that in moving and being more responsible they'd see that I'm actually an adult now" (Jenny)

In contrast to this, one interviewee expressed that they knew they would miss the family home and the structure that living at home gave them:

"I knew that it was going to be difficult. I don't really like change much. So yeah I guess I'd say that I knew I'd miss living at home and everything that came with it because I like structure" (Greg)

There were also variations among the students regarding how often they thought they had planned to visit home. Some interviewees did not plan on returning home until Christmas, while others said that they had planned on visiting but did not know when as they wanted to time their visit to coincide with when their other friends who were also going to university would be at home:

"I want to make sure that I make the most out of my visits home. There's no point in going if you're only going to have half an experience. When I visit I want it to be the same as when I left" (David)

7.3 Fearing Homesickness and Friendsickness

While concerns were expressed about what the transition would entail and the onset of adult responsibility, some students placed more emphasis that they were worried about experiencing homesickness and friendsicknes:

"I knew I'd miss my mum and dad and my mates and I think that's what I was most worried about before I came" (Rachel)

"It was strange realising that I wouldn't see Amanda every day. We still talk and Facetime but it's different. We talked about this before we went to uni. We knew it would be difficult because we've been best friends for five years" (Alice)

"Of course I miss my parents but not in the same way I miss Friday night's out with Greg and Dave *laughs*" (Mike)

"It was awful moving... like my mates are home at literally the best but you know they're not gonna be there and that they're gonna be off making their own mates at uni and I was worried that it would be difficult to find mates as good as what they are" (Sara)

Previous research studies have shown that the experiences of homesickness and friendsickness by first year students is common once they have transitioned to university (e.g. Fisher and Hood, 1987), and both are factors which can contribute to maladjustment at university (Paul and Brier, 2001) . However, this research differs from previous research in that this was a fear of participants before they had transitioned to university. As argued by Berndt (2002), friends become the primary form of socialisation for developing adolescents. Furthermore, Csikszentmihalyi et al (1977) argued that adolescents are most happy when they are socialising with their friends and peers. It is perhaps not surprising then that the students expressed more concern about their separation and detachment from their peer groups in comparison to their parents. Ultimately, the findings of this study demonstrate that some students fear that they will experience homesickness and friendsickness prior to their physical transition to university.

7.4 Practical Preparations

There were various differences between the cohort in how they prepared for their transition to university. In order to build a comprehensive understanding of how students prepare for life at university, participants were asked about what preparations they had made in the weeks leading up to their move. In most of the interviews, respondents first answer to this question centred on practical preparations that had been made, however, the start of practical preparations happened at

various times. While some had packed weeks in advance, others had left organising their belongings until 'the last minute'. Reasons for this were varied:

> *"I only packed my stuff the day before I came 'cos I didn't want to do it 'cos I was avoiding realising that I was leaving home" (Serena)*

> *"I was only taking clothes and a laptop. How long does that take to pack? Took me about 10 minutes. Me ma did the rest though, she's a good 'un" (David)*

In line with Serena's experience, several other female students discussed how they had 'put off' packing until the last minute as this was the symbol that the transition was due to be taking place soon and they would have to start facing the reality and responsibilities of what the transition to university was entailing. However, there was the sense that some students were perhaps simply more organised than others, as Jack and Sally interviews illustrate with their comparison of their preparations with their friends:

> *"I like left packing 'til basically the last minute but all my friends who were going to uni as well had been packed for weeks" (Sally)*

> *"I think it's just about how organised you are. I mean I know I left packing 'til the week before but I guess some people like to be organised where as I've always liked to be last minute about things 'cos it adds to the excitement" (Jack)*

For several students, whilst they were striving for their independence, they were still reliant on their parents for financial support during the transitionary period to university and emphasised their appreciation of the financial help their parents had given them:

> *"My mum and dad have bought most of the stuff for me moving. It's been expensive as well. You think you only need a few bits but they add up. I wouldn't have bought half of the stuff 'cos I wouldn't have been able to afford it" (Lesley)*

"They've helped me out a lot financially over the past couple of months and for coming to uni. I'm grateful. If they hadn't I'd probably have had to get a part time job" (Greg)

As previous research has demonstrated, the relationship that transitioning students have with their parents is highly relevant when investigating their university adjustment (Adam et al, 2000; Wintre and Yaffe, 2000). However, what the responses from these students demonstrate is that this relationship is not only important when looking at adjustment, but also on a more general level of student transitions. Parents are undoubtedly an important form of social support for transitioning students, and the data from this research gives an insight into the role which parents play in students preparations for the transition to university. Many of the participants also reported that their parents had stopped taking responsibility for them at home in a bid to encourage them to build their confidence and skills in negotiating the practicalities of adult life:

"I had to start doing my washing and ironing in the lead up so I 'knew what I was doing' in my mum's words. Didn't actually iron anything though. I think it was a gentle push from my mum and dad to get my fucking act together" (Jack)

"My mums always worked so I've always had to chip in around the house doing cleaning and that but she increased this before I moved saying I 'needed to know what it was like to run a household'" (Lauren)

As previous research has identified, the transition to university can cause significant stress for transitioning students (Chickering, 1969; Briggs et al, 2012). Several participants discussed how being organised with the practical preparations help them to feel calmer and more confident about moving, and parents played a central role in this:

"Having mum and dad help me get everything together that I needed made me worry less about getting to university. I knew I had all the basics I needed to start and that I wouldn't have to worry about going have to buy stuff to survive and where I'd buy it from and how I'd carry it through the city" (Jessie)

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"There's so much to worry about when you're going to university like new people and place and finding your way around but having all the basics taken care of took the pressure off a bit so I could focus on the other stuff like going out and having fun when I got here instead of having to go to Wilko's to buy bedding *laughs*" (John)

7.5 Spending More or Less Time at Home

Moving out of the family home is not only a key signifier of the transition to adulthood (Astin 1973; Herndon, 1984) but was also a key part of the transition to university for the students in this study. Several of the participants discussed how they noticed that they had either been spending more or less time in the family home in the weeks leading up to the physical transition to university. In following up questions, there was the trend that those who had been spending more time in the family home wanted to spend time with their parents before they moved, while those who noticed that they were spending less time at home were spending more time with their friends:

"I didn't spend much time at home in the weeks leading up to me moving. I was trying to get my mum used to me not being there *laughs*" (Jack)

"All my mates were going to uni so summer was going to be the last time we were going to see each other 'til probably Christmas so we spent loads more time with each other even if it was just walking around town" (Isla)

"I knew I was leaving my mum on her own 'cos I'm an only child so I wanted to spend as much time with her as I could before I moved and I knew I'd miss her as it's always been just us. It was nice" (Andy)

As the above quotes illustrate, between the participants there were varied approaches to how they began to manage their social relationships differently in the run up to the transition to university. Some interviewees also discussed that they had begun to imagine what life at university would be like in an attempt to ease their doubts and anxieties about the transition:

"You kinda like imagine what it's going to be like so you look forward to it even more than you thought you would" (Sara)

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"I was really worried so just realised that if I thought positive thoughts it would make it easier" (Erika)

Thoughts and imaginings of university life centred around the successful creation and maintenance of friendships and generally 'having fun'.

7.6 Preparations for the Change in Academic Environments

In order to experience a successful transition to university, as well as negotiating the social spheres of university life students must also grapple with and manage the change in academic environments (Tinto, 1993). Though not central focal point in this research, questions were incorporated into the interview schedule to briefly explore if the students in this sample had made any preparations for the change in academic environments prior to their physical transition to university. The majority of the students in the research sample had not undertaken any specific preparations. However, reasons for this varied:

"It's not required of you is it really. I think if it was then I might have done a bit, but it's easy to say that now I'm here and I know exactly just how much work you have to do" (Elvis)

"There was no way I was going to do that. What's the point? I just didn't think about it before I got here. To be honest, I've still not really thought about it and it's 6 weeks into term" (Daniel)

The notable exception to this came from the three medicine students who were interviewed. Bethany in particular expressed how she had worried about how she would deal with the demands of her degree and so had tried to get a head start on her studies:

"I knew it was going to be really challenging. I mean I know I'm smart but that only gets you so far. If you want something you have to work hard. I didn't want to just 'get by' so did spend a lot of my summer studying" (Bethany)

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7.7 Relationship With Parents During the Preparations

Previous research has demonstrated that parents play an important role during the transition to university. Therefore, in this research it was important to explore the relationships that the students had with their parents before they moved to university. Parents were generally spoken of fondly, with many students expressing their appreciation for both the financial and emotional support their parents had given them. Several participants noted that their relationship with their parents had changed and developed as they had progressed through their teenage years. For example John had had a rocky relationship with his parents through his early teenage years, putting this down to his 'teenage years rebellion', but had noticed that he'd grown a lot closer to his parents before he had come to university:

> *"I was spending a lot more time at home and for once actually got on with my dad. We've had our ups and downs but that finally got put to bed. I think as you grow up your relationship with your parents change and you have recognition for each other's feelings and take that into account a bit more. That's what helped us" (John)*

For Isla in particular, , her transition to university had led her to think about her appreciation for her parents in a way which she had not done previously:

> *"I remember the moment when I stood back and understood how my parents must have felt. It made me feel quite guilty because they'd done so much for me and I don't think I'd ever said a 'thank you' but I just sort of expected it. So after that I made a big effort to try harder and be more appreciative" (Isla)*

The students recognised not only the emotional and psychological support their parents were giving them, but also recognised that the financial support and help they received was equally important.

7.8 Relationship With Friends During the Preparations

Earlier in this chapter, the students emotional preparations for university were discussed, with variations in students spending more or less time with their friends in the lead up to their move. The majority of the participants were part of friendship circles where every member was going to university which meant that although the group dynamics were changing, the students felt as though their friendships would remain strong:

"Everyone was getting ready to move on. It's a big change. We have a strong friendship group though so yeah the dynamic was changing as we all looked forward to going our separate ways but there's a bond there that's not easily destroyed" (Alice)

John in particular approached the changes in friendship group and structure with a laissez-faire attitude:

"We were all prepping ourselves to leave and you know that you're all going to build new friendships and that the friends you meet might end up being more important than them, or the other way around. People do drift apart, it's just natural. But that doesn't mean you're not still friends" (John)

The notable exception to this was Zara. As the only one in her friendship group who was going to university, she knew that things would change once she was at university, but was surprised that her friends started being 'weird' with her a few weeks before she left:

"It became a running joke, you know, that I'd miss out on stuff. The it went too far and they started getting weird about the fact that I was going and they weren't, saying how they wished they'd decided to. It was a bit of a damper to leave on" (Zara)

7.9 Planned Management of Existing Friendships

The majority of participants in this study discussed how they didn't need to 'plan' to keep in touch with their family and friends as they felt that this would happen naturally:

> *"We're mates and we always just chat on Facebook or text or whatever. You don't really make plans to talk to each other 'cos you just do anyway" (Paul)*

Several of the male participants discussed how, before they transitioned to university, they had regular[8] gaming nights with their friends and planned in conjunction with their friends to continue these once they had moved to university:

> *"Me and a couple of my mates play World of Warcraft and we're in a guild[9] and we raid every Tuesday and Sunday night. It's what we've always done and we planned to keep doing it" (Adam)*

Apart from this however, it was uncommon for participants to have made plans to keep in contact with their friends.

7.10 Planned Management of Existing Romantic Relationships

Nine of the thirty-four students who took part in this research were in a romantic relationship when they transitioned to university. The length of these relationships differed from three months to four years. There was the sense that the maintenance of this relationship held importance:

> *"It was really important that me and my girlfriend recognised that we needed to make time to talk to each other day. We both sort of knew that the first few weeks would be a bit hectic getting settled in and that we could help each other through if we talked to each other about it" (Andy)*

During the transition to adulthood, peers not only become central to individuals lives, but so do romantic relationships. The findings of this study suggest that during the transition to university,

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[8] In probing questions, 'regular' was defined by the participants as 2 or 3 times per week.

[9] The participants in this study played World of Warcraft. The terminology 'guild' and 'raid' relate to this game.

romantic relationships are managed differently to friendships. In follow up questions, participants were asked what methods they had intended to use maintain contact with their romantic partner. Several participants had planned to have 'date nights' with their partner using various forms of technology/ social media:

> *"Me and boyfriend planned TV night so that we'd watch something on TV but be on Skype at the same time so we could 'watch TV together'. We did that a bit when we were both at home but it made more sense to do it at uni as well. We figured it would keep us connected and that. Conversations don't always have to be 'Ohh I love you'... that's boring. This was a good way to do stuff together even if it's just watching TV" (Jenny)*

> *"We planned to 'eat dinner together' a couple of nights a week on Facetime. I think stuff like that's a good idea 'cos it's more like you're there together" (Dan)*

While it was common for those in relationships to have in some way pre-planned keeping in touch with their boyfriend/girlfriend, three of the participants reported that they had not discussed this before they came to university:

> *"We didn't want to put pressure on our relationship by having to plan when we'd Facetime 'cos then if something comes up and you can't then you're letting the other one down and it starts to look bad if that happens a lot" (John)*

During the stage of making a final decision on their choice of university, five participants had thought about going to the same university as their boyfriend/girlfriend, but most thought that this could have a detrimental effect on their relationship:

> *"We thought about it but then realised that if we broke up then one of us would have given up the uni of our choice to make that decision and we didn't want that hanging with us" (Liam)*

"We'd both picked Keele but then Glen decided that he was going to go Leeds instead. It puts a bit more pressure on the relationship if you're going to the same place" (Sara)

The exception to this was Andrew:

"We talked about going to the same uni and we both wanted to. Went we went looking we wanted to find somewhere that we both like and we both sort of fell in love with Manchester as a city that was that. I'm glad we picked the same" (Andrew)

7.11 Knowledge Development: Learning About the University and Town/City

Social media platforms were used by every participant in the weeks leading up to the physical transition to university to gain more information about the university and town/city. Several participants had asked questions to the official Facebook pages/ Twitter accounts of the universities. Students who had approached the university using via a social media platform were appreciative that they had an easy line of communication to their institution:

"I just had a few general questions about the campus and a sabbatical officer answered them pretty much straight away. It's good because you don't actually really know a lot about uni before you come and in the weeks leading up you do have a lot of questions so it's helpful that they can be answered" (Dean)

One student noted that there appeared to be some contention between unofficial and official 'freshers' groups which were created:

"I joined a Facebook group that was closed down because the university deemed it unofficial. The uni created their own one and I just remember thinking if they'd had the gumption to do that in the first place then it would have just made it easier wouldn't it" (Jessie)

The majority of participants had also undertaken general internet searches or used Facebook in order to find out more about nightlife both in the student union bars and the town/city of the university:

> *"I think social life is a big part of it. I mean you pick your uni based on what course you want to do and where you sort of feel most at home when you visit but after that I wanted to know that I was gonna have a few good nights out at least *laughs*" (David)*

> *"It's part of the experience isn't it. I think it's the time in your life where you can let your hair down and do daft stuff and it's not important if you mess up" (Sarah)*

As previous research has demonstrated, success in managing the social spheres of university life has great important and great influence over whether students experience a successful transition. The students of this study were aware that they would be unhappy at university if they failed to make friends:

> *"I don't think you'd survive at uni without any friends 'cos it would be quite isolating I think" (Erika)*

While the successful creation and maintenance of support networks is essential for successful student transitions into higher education, several authors have discussed that student retention is also dependent on students being able to successfully manage the academic sphere of university life in addition to the social. Most of the participants in this study stated that they had limited knowledge of what their degree course would entail prior to starting their course. In comparison to their interest in developing their knowledge on the social aspects of university life, there was the sense that students were less interested in developing their knowledge on their degree course:

> *"I wasn't really too bothered about knowing that much about my degree. I mean I looked at the course pages online but that's about it. I was more interested in the social side of things 'cos that's what you come to uni for as well" (Jack)*

"I just figured we'd find out about our options and that when we got here so it didn't really occur to me to try and find any information before I came. I was just interested in having a good summer before I left home" (Greg)

However, several participants stated that they had 'liked' their School/Department of Facebook and were keeping up to date with some of the academic staff's research activities and there were some participants who had made attempts to engage with their degree course prior to university, with mixed success:

"Yeah I did a search my department and liked their Facebook group that they have. It was actually quite interesting to find out a bit more about what was going on before I got here" (Sara)

"I tried to find out a bit more about what my options would be but found it difficult" (Mike)

"I tried to get hold of my timetable before I got here but couldn't. I work part time at Tesco and was taking a transfer of stores so I could still work when I moved and wanted to try and be able to sort my shifts before to make it easier" (Zach)

7.12 'Friended' by a Sabbatical on Facebook

Several students had been added as a Friend by sabbatical officers prior to moving to university:

"After I'd liked the uni Facebook page I got added by someone… this was months before I came… but anyway they added me and I went on their profile and realised it was one of the student union officers and they were obviously just adding every student" (Lucy)

Students noted their presence on Facebook and saw this as a useful and innovative way for student union representatives to engage with students:

"It's an inventive way to engage with students and it might not always work but that's the way we sort of communicate now isn't it" (Jessie)

Several students also identified that it was perhaps of particular importance for Sabbatical officers to begin their engagement with transitioning first year student prior to the academic year starting, as it had helped them feel more prepared when they had questions (both academic and social in nature) that they wanted answering:

> *"There was a couple of things that I was a bit panicked about with living in student*
>
> *halls in the city and I had no idea how far away stuff was and how long to get to the*
>
> *uni campus so it was useful that the questions I had were answered before I got here*
>
> *so it put me at ease a bit more" (Claire)*

7.13 The Search for Other Students

It became clear in the interviews that the process of creating peer networks for many students began prior to their physical relocation to university. In this study, every participant had used social media in attempt to find other students and begin building their networks of social support to ease them through the transition. What became clear was that social media was the driving force and facilitation of this practice. Facebook was the primary social networking sites that the students used in their search for other students. As has already been discussed earlier in this chapter, students had joined both 'official' and 'unofficial Facebook groups and it was through these groups that the students in this study had the opportunity to 'meet' and develop connections with other students. Primarily, students used Facebook to search for students who were going to be living in the same halls of residence which arguably best opportunity for first year students to meet new people and build their networks of support. Every participant in this study had used Facebook in an attempt to find other students who were living in their halls of residence:

> *"Once I got my accommodation offer through then I tried to find a group for my halls*
>
> *as I'd seen them been shared around on the university's official page. I wanted to try*
>
> *and see if I could find anyone who was going to be living near me" (Andrew)*

In follow up questions, interviewees asked what motivated them to seek out other students:

> *"I thought it would make it easier moving if I knew people" (Andrew)*

"I'm quite a shy person and find it difficult to talk to people that I don't know so it was nice to be able to try and connect with people through Facebook first. I thought it would be easy you know if I already knew some people" (Isla)

"You're going to meet people when you get there but if you can meet them before then do it" (Craig)

"I liked knowing a bit about people before moving here. It makes it easier when you get here because you're not starting from scratch if you've already chatted to someone a few times on Facebook. I mean it's quite easy to meet people once you're here and I don't think it's completely necessary to have the opportunity to get to know other students before you come but it can't do any harm can it?" (Andrew)

Making connections with other students through social media enabled some students to feel more confident about their transition:

"It definitely made me feel a lot more confident 'cos I am a shy person and do find it difficult but you realise that everyone's sort of the same and it makes it easier once you've realised that" (Trev)

Dave's response in particular emphasised why finding out who potential living partners are may be more important for some people in comparison to others:

Dave: *"I'm in a shared room. In my offer they said it wouldn't be for long 'cos people usually drop out of campus in the first few weeks, but it's five weeks and I'm still living there"*

MW: *"Did you know who you were going to be living with before you moved?"*

Dave: *"Yeah but I found him on Facebook. The uni wouldn't tell us, they just said that it was against their privacy policy. Bit stupid really when you think about it. They wouldn't put us in touch with each other 'cos of privacy but I'm living in a room with this person. How stupid is that?"*

MW: "How did you find him on Facebook"

Dave: "In an accommodation group that was created. I'd put a post on asking if anyone had the offer letter through for that room and he had as well. I ended up seeing his post and messaging him"

MW: "What contact did you have with him before you moved to university?"

Dave: "Quite a lot actually. We added each other as friends and started chatting and that. It made it a lot easier. If you think about it, I was going to be sharing a room with this person, we did need to try and get on and luckily we do, I'd say he's one of the best mates I've made while I've been here. We're lucky really, 'cos I could have been sharing with someone I didn't get on with, that would have made it more difficult"

Respondents were asked how they thought this had impacted their feelings about moving to university, with mixed responses:

"It did make it easier. I felt as though I wasn't going knowing no-one, that at least I knew someone" (Bethany)

"It was alright meeting people before and having them as a Friend but it didn't really take away from the fact that I didn't really know anyone" (Lauren)

In comparison to their eagerness to develop relationships with other students who were going to be living in the same halls of residence, there was the sense that participants were less interested in developing social connections with people on their course before they came to university:

"I was happy once I'd found a couple of people I'd be living with and so wasn't really bothered in trying to meet anyone who might be on my course" (Craig)

"Didn't see the point in looking for anyone. For me it was more about seeing who I'd be living with" (Erika)

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Five participants further discussed how they felt that pages which had been created on Facebook (both official and unofficial) seemed to be more centred on halls of residence, sports societies and nights out than course related:

> *"I think I've joined six different groups for nights out and a couple of halls ones. I've not seen any that are really used for us to meet other students on our courses" (John)*

> *"My department's got a Facebook group but they don't post anything on it. The one's for the union posts loads" (Sara)*

Several participants stated that while they were interested in trying to create links with other students who were on their course, they found this more difficult:

> *"It wasn't as easy finding people on my course. You don't expect to know people before you go so it was actually alright not meeting anyone" (Jenny)*

The notable exception to this was three students who were undertaking medicine degrees. All three stated that they had made connections with people on their course prior to coming to university:

> *"I joined the Keele Medicine Group as soon as I got accepted. I figured it would be useful to try and meet some people before starting as I knew it was going to be a tough degree and it was good to know that I knew other people who were preparing for the same struggle as I was" (David)*

Generally, the participants held a negative view towards the idea of adding people they had never met and several participants recalled how they had at first been quite reserved with their 'adding' of other students and reserved this for people who they had conversations with on groups threads:

> *"I didn't want to just go round adding people 'cos I wouldn't do that normally so I just added and accepted requests from people I'd had brief 'conversations' with on the groups" (Liam)*

"To start with I only added people that I'd sort of chatted with on some group threads on Facebook or who I'd seen post something about where they were in halls and they were going to be near me so I'd comment on their post then add them" (Lesley)

However, several participants recalled how they had been 'randomly added' and didn't mind as much as they thought they might, instead realising that using the opportunity to make as many connections as possible might be beneficial for them when they got to university:

"I wasn't really adding many people but noticed that some people were just adding anyone they could and then I got added by a few people. I did sort of realise that it is an opportunity to sort of meet people and it doesn't really matter if you don't talk to them but there is sort of a connection there if you want to. It's like it opens a door of communication" (Sally)

This practice for many appeared to be contrary to what they had said earlier in their interviews when they were asked about their views and approaches to using social media. Several participants were aware of their contradicting views and justified this:

"It's different when you come to uni 'cos you're adding people who you're gonna be at uni with and might build a connection with once you've got to uni so I don't think it matters as much 'cos it's not like adding someone you've never met and never going to meet" (Elvis)

"I know I said earlier that I don't get it when people add people they don't know but it's about context as well. This was the kind of context where it's alright to do it" (Jenny)

"You kinda got the impression that everyone who posted in the groups were up for meeting other students" (Jack)

"If anyone's posting in the groups then they must want to engage with other students otherwise you just wouldn't bother but it's also a good means to be able to start that initial conversation with people you don't know" (Lara)

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In follow up questions, participants were asked if they had used other mediums of social media to connect or communicate with students they had added as Friends. While it was common amongst the participants who used Twitter to 'follow' other students also registered to the social networking site, there was the suggestion from several participants that using any other method or medium of communication was not appropriate:

"I think it would have been a bit off to start asking people for their mobile number or following them on Snapchat or something 'cos actually you don't know each other you're just going to the same uni" (Bethany)

"Conversations never went any further than on Facebook. It's weird 'cos in a way you're looking to make friends before you go but that's all you really want to do. Properly getting to know each other starts when you get to uni doesn't it?" (Dan)

7.14 Relationships Development with Other Students Pre-Transition

As early research reflected (Rheingold, 1993; Turkle, 1997), the development of relationships online is a very different process to developing relationships face-to-face. In general, students conversations with their potential peers helped them feel more comfortable about their transition to university, but it was acknowledged by some participants that trying to develop the relationship further than this prior to the transition was in some way 'awkward':

"You do want to sort of meet people otherwise you wouldn't have joined the group and added people as Friends but it would have been awkward to ask someone for their mobile number or whatever" (Trev)

"I chatted to a few people but didn't take it any further than that. It's sort of like getting yourself onto the radar without drawing attention to yourself. You don't want people to think you're a weirdo before you even get here so you don't push any further development in the connection 'cos that happens naturally once you get here. Chatting on Facebook just breaks the ice a bit" (Olivia)

In contrast to this however, there were several Keele University students who had organised to buy events tickets for concerts and nights out in the student union prior to starting university, and this had taken place in conjunction with other first year students who they had met through social media:

"The student union does Freshers passes and you get a big discount if you buy the tickets in advance for a full weeks pass so me and a couple of the lads that I'd chatted with who were going to be living in the same block said we'd all get one" (Rachel)

Distance prevented most participants from meeting other students whom they had met in person prior to the transition. However, two of the students (separately) had met up with other students. In follow up questions, they were asked about their motivation for doing so:

"We live only like a 20 minute drive from each other and I'd put a status on Facebook one night that I was in town and she commented saying she was as well and it would be funny if we met up so we swapped numbers and had a drink" (Zara)

"Me and Frank realised we knew a couple of the same people so both tagged along to an event they were going to. It was pretty cool actually getting to meet him before we came and a bit strange knowing that we lived so close yet had never met and we were going to be living in the same block" (Zach)

7.15 Management of Social Media

Students were asked if their approach to the management of their social media accounts and profiles had changed after being Friended by other students, with most of the interviewees saying that their approach had not changed:

"Nah, I don't do anything different. I'm not really bothered who sees what a post. Like I said, I try not to swear but beyond that it doesn't bother me who sees what's on there" (John)

"I'm quite careful with what I post anyway so it's just stayed the same" (Olivia)

In contrast to this, the Friending of 'random' other students made Sally more aware of what she posted:

> *"I suddenly became a lot more careful. When you know who you have as a Friend inside out then you don't think about it. But knowing that I was adding random people made me think a bit more about what if I was posting stuff that might be a bit un-PC or whatever. The last thing I'd want to do would be to offend someone I'd not even met in person yet" (Sally)*

Along similar lines, Mike had actively looked through his past posts on Facebook and Twitter to check that he was happy for them to still be there:

> *Mike: "When I post something I do it with conviction. But when you're adding people you don't really know or don't know at all in this case then I tend to be a bit more careful. Some people say that it's your profile and if they don't like it then forgot about it. That's a bit of a naive view. You have to see it from their perspective, and if you think it might offend then take it down. I did that with a couple of things"*
>
> *MW: "What kind of things?"*
>
> *Mike: "Wouldn't really want to say. But political stuff I guess that you realise after might be a bit far"*

7.16 'Should Universities Have a Social Media Presence?'

Every participants was asked the following question:

> *MW: Should universities have a social media presence, and how important was it to you prior to moving to university to find university presence on social media?*

Students were eager that universities 'get with the times' and 'embrace' a presence on social media as they had benefited from it:

> *"Yeah it's important that uni's get with the times and I think they are. It's definitely a good way to try and reach out to us as students" (Liam)*

"Obviously it's really important that uni's do what they can to engage with their students and for us social media is the best way. Like I've said, I followed my courses' social media page but there was nothing on there. They're wasting an opportunity to be there for there us" (Jenny)

In follow up questions to this, participants were asked about the specific social media presence of sabbatical officers. Students received this presence very positively, viewing it as in invaluable resource to all students not just transitioning first years:

"It's good as a student that you know where you can go to for support and help. Their presence on social media is really good though here. It's like they know how they can best reach us and how to approach us" (Jessie)

"It definitely opens a door for communication. Not everyone has got the time to go into the union to track someone down when you just want a bit of advice. Being able to send a Facebook message to a Sabb is simple and quick and just easy really" (Craig)

As discussed earlier in the chapter, all of the participants in this study had joined, posted and 'Friended' other students in the Facebook groups for halls of residence and found these groups to be an invaluable resource in their transition to university:

"I honestly don't know what I'd have done if I didn't talk to some other students before coming to uni. It made the move a lot easier for me 'cos you realise that everyone is in the same boat" (Sarah)

"It was awesome to be able to start meeting people. It's the bit I was looking forward to most so it was good to start building that network of people. Even if you don't speak to them that much online before you come I think it does open a line of communication between students" (Paul)

There were suggestions by students that these groups should be centrally managed by student accommodation, however, there was also the recognition that these would be difficult to manage:

"I think it would be good if accommodation groups were all managed centrally by student accommodation but it would be difficult. But then that's where you get situations where some blocks have groups and others don't" (Andrew)

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, students appeared to be less interested in building a connection with their department and knowledge on their degree course prior to coming to university. However, the majority of participants expressed that they thought it was a 'good idea' that departments and courses utilise Facebook in order to have an 'online presence':

"Even though I wasn't really bothered about it I do think it's a good idea for the students who might want to" (Greg)

Several interviewees noted that these groups would be useful for students who wanted to gain more information about members of staff, and if they had any questions about the department and/ or course both prior and through the academic year:

"They're a good idea 'cos it's a nice way to get to know a bit more about the people who are teaching you... like I know one department who posts stuff about research their lecturers are doing which I think is quite interesting. I'd love to know more about that side of the uni and telling us though groups like that would be a really good idea" (Bethany)

"I'd find it really useful if my department answered questions on Facebook. Sometimes you don't want to bother someone with an email for something daft or a general question. Like I'd have found it useful if I know I could have asked someone how many lectures and seminars we'd be having a week before we came so that we could sort of be prepared for that kind of thing" (Dean)

"I think members of staff building a rapport with students before they come is a really good idea but I don't think it happens much. It would be good to have it now though, like if our course had its own page then we could use it to ask questions" (Zach)

These findings highlight that today's generational cohort of university students expect a social media presence from universities and they view it as an appropriate method for universities to engage with the students. Social media therefore can be used as a front facing way to get information out to students. The students in this study found Facebook to be a useful and easy way in which they could ask questions to and engage with their student union sabbatical officers and departments before transitioning to university. However, at the time of this research some students felt that social media was perhaps not being used to its full potential by their university for student engagement.

7.17 Discussion

Leaving Home: An Emotional Time

From the sample of students interviewed, a strive for independence prior to their physical transition to university emerged as a central theme. For many, this underpinned and influenced their motivation to move away from home to attend university, and ultimately had a profound influence on their feelings about the transition, which were predominantly a distinct mix of excitement and nerves. These mixed emotions felt by the students reflect the complexity of the transitional period, demonstrating that the period encapsulates multiple strands of transition. Although each interviewee's narration of their feelings and experiences of the period prior to their physical transition to university was personal to them, there appears to be distinct commonalities in the overarching nature of the period. In this section I provide a full discussion of the key findings of this study relating to student experiences of the transition to university prior to their physical relocation.

For those who choose to move away from home to attend university, geographical relocation is a key aspect of the transition to higher education. While this traditionally viewed as a process which students look forward to, this research revealed that students have a complex relationship with the

act in reality. From the data gathered in this study it can be seen that in the weeks leading up to the physical move, young people experience a mix of emotions and undertake a variety of practical and emotional preparations in an attempt to fully prepare themselves for the change in environment. They also begin to experience changes in the relationships they have with their parents and friends. As previous research has demonstrated, these are key milestones in both the transition to university and to adulthood (Douvan and Edelson, 1966; Avery et al, 1992; Flanagan et al, 1993). Ultimately, the students I interviewed were very aware of their feelings during the transitional period and engaged in a process of thought and reflection about them; this was particularly evident in their discussions of how they felt about moving away from home. However, a key finding of this research is that it highlights the diverse nature of student cohorts. In my sample of students, there were those who reflected as being 'ready' to move to university, and those who reflected that they were 'not ready' and as a result had more deep rooted fears about what the transitional process would entail. This demonstrates that every individual's experience of the transition to university is one which is unique to them, and how they approach their transition is dependent on their personal circumstances and influenced by their life experiences. In this study geographical relocation was central to the student's narratives of their experiences prior to moving to university. The students' feelings towards relocation were intricately tied up in how they felt about leaving home. While traditionally leaving the family home has been seen as a key part of the transition to adulthood (Astin, 1973; Herdon, 1984), the transition to university can mean this process happens prematurely for those who do not feel ready to do so- resulting in some students feeling nervous.

Avenues of Support for Transitioning Students

Previous research has demonstrated that the structure of adolescent's social life changes as young people transition into adulthood, and peers steadily become more central to life (Damon, 1983). The findings from this research reveal that parents continue to play an active role in their child's life as they prepare to transition to university, demonstrating the importance of this relationship for young people. While parental support with the transition process varied from student to student, it was evident in this research that some of the students depended on their parents to help them with

both the practical and financial challenges transitioning to university presented. The support that parents gave in the weeks leading up to the transition was both practical (such as appearing to take step back so that their children could learn new skills for themselves or helping their children pack), and/or emotional. These findings chime with previous research that parents play a key role in aiding young people to develop their competence (Zarrett and Eccles, 2006). In order to explore this in greater detail, future studies would need to explore the parent/child relationship during the period by studying both parties in great detail. However, what was evident in this study was that the majority of young people appreciate the efforts of their parents, and recognise that they still have a key role to play in their lives despite craving for their own independence and separation from their parents.

This research predominantly focussed on exploring the dynamics of students' personal communities and interpersonal relationships during the period of transition. It is without doubt that students require support from parents and friends during the transition to university. However, what role do universities have to play in this process? Is it also their responsibility to provide support for students to aid them in making a successful transition? Previous research has identified that orientation groups (ACT Inc, 2010), email (Jones, 2002), and social media (Gray et al, 2013) can, in one way or another, help students to successfully adjust once at university. However, a key finding of this research was that students begin to negotiate a relationship with their university prior to the physical transition using social media. Several of the students I interviewed had been Friended on Facebook by sabbatical officers and had noticed that various Facebook pages had been created for the purposes of engaging students (i.e. student union, accommodation), ultimately demonstrating that universities are increasingly using Facebook as an avenue of communication with students. As a method of communication Facebook is cheap, fast, relatively to use, and extremely popular with young people, so it is perhaps no surprise that universities are using social media mediums. It was recognised by several students that their universities use of social media had helped them feel at ease about their transition, and all students interviewed said that it was important for universities to have a social media presence. These findings raise particularly important questions about how university sabbatical officers see themselves and their role within

confines of student engagement via social media. How do they use social media to provide pastoral care, and offer support and advice? Do they use social media to promote social activities? How can social media be used to reach marginalised groups? While these are questions that cannot be answered from the data gathered in this research project, they are key areas of consideration for future research within a similar field. What is clear from the findings of this research however is that while there are various factors which influence the nature of a students' transition, universities do have an important role to play in this process, and this is something which is universities are apparently becoming increasingly aware of.

Negotiating the Transition Using Social Media

In the previous chapter the prominent role the internet and social media played in students' day to day lives was discussed. What is most notable from the findings of this research is the key role that they continue to play as students prepare to transition to university. As acknowledged by Harvey et al (2007: 231) 'in recent years the process of integration into university life has been transformed by the emergence of new forms of communication technology'. Social media in particular offers the possibility of increased social contact with others (Lewis and West, 2009). The findings of this research echo this, highlighting that social media offers students the opportunity to develop their knowledge of their university and the town/city they are moving to and ask sabbatical officers general questions about the university. Having this opportunity can help students feel more at ease about their impending transition and help dilute any immediate worries and concerns. The findings of this research highlight practice which has been previously found in other studies, predominantly within the USA (e.g. Ellison et al, 2007; Urista et al, 2009, Gray et al, 2013). These studies found that social media can make the transition process easier by providing students with the opportunity to sustain existing relationships and cultivate new ones. Most notably this research revealed that social media is increasingly being used by UK-based undergraduate students to develop social connections with other students prior to the physical transition to university. It is perhaps no surprise given the important role peer networks play as young people journey through adolescence into adulthood. During the transition to university a complete renegotiation of one's peer network

is required, and for many students this is the first time in their lives that they will have to manage existing relationships while been geographically separated and cultivate new friendships in a new place. Social media has an important role to play in this process as it allows students to begin building a bridge between their lives at home, and their impending new lives at university. Facebook was predominantly used by the students to seek out and attempt to begin building a relationship with other students who would be living in the same halls of residence as them. Living arrangements can have a significant impact on students' success making friends at university as previous research has found that friendships are predominantly formed through halls of residence (Valez, 1985; Christie, Munro and Rettig, 2002; Wilcox et al, 2005). If students can begin to build connections with other students they will be living with before the transition, this has the potential to make the process of the transition much easier. This was something that the students reflected on in-depth.

7.18 Conclusion

This chapter has presented and discussed the main findings to have emerged from the interview data with regards to the students experiences prior to their physical transition to university. Although the student's experiences were unique to them, there were key strands which emerged from each interview which highlighted commonalities between the participant cohort. It is these commonalities that are presented and discussed within this chapter. Looking across the participants accounts of their experiences we can see that the students were conflicted in their feelings towards their impending transition. In the previous chapter the students motivations for wanting to attend university were discussed, with a prominent narrative being that the students craved independence and separation from their parents, and were looking forward to the new experiences that life at university would inevitably bring. However, most of the students in this research also expressed their nerves about the impending transition. The key findings further demonstrate that students undertake both practical and emotional preparations in an attempt to prepare themselves for their transition and for most of the students, parents played an active role in helping their children prepare for life at university.

8.1 Introduction

The transition to university extends beyond the physicality of relocating to university and a new town/city and leaving further education to enter higher education. In fact, much like the transition to adulthood, the transition to university is a psychological transition with an undefined beginning and end. As the findings from the previous chapter highlight, those entering higher education undertake extensive preparations prior to the physical relocation to university. However the process of transition is one which continues to take place during the first few weeks and even months of university. This chapter therefore examines the issues emanating from the interview data in relation to the participants experiences of establishing new social relationships, maintaining existing social relationships, managing independence and settling into university life during the first few weeks of transitioning[10].

8.2 Maintaining Contact with Parents

Previous research has demonstrated the importance of parents in the transition to university as they provide many avenues of support for transitioning students (e.g. Kenny, 1990; Berman and Sperling, 1991; Wintre and Yaffe, 2000). Whether it was to simply 'catch up' or to feel more connected to home, the act of maintaining contact with parents was important for the majority of the participants in this study. For some participants, the realisation of leaving home hit in the weeks leading up to the move, while for others it didn't hit until they had actually moved into their halls of residence and their parents had left. For example, Lesley recalled how she was so excited to be moving to university that she hadn't prepared herself for how she would feel about not living at home:

> *"It was only when my mum and dad left me that it hit me really. I was the first one to*
>
> *move on to my corridor as well so when they left there was no one else there. I was*

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[10]All students were interviewed during the autumn semester between their 5th and 9th week at university. A discussion of this can be found in Chapter Five: Methodology and Research Design.

just on my own. It was horrible. I didn't think I'd miss home and my mum and dad but

I do" (Lesley)

It was more common for female participants to openly express that they wanted to keep in contact with their parents, with discussions predominantly centred on contact with mums:

MW: *"Who did/do you live with at home?"*

Sara: *"My mum and dad, and I've got a little brother as well too"*

MW: *"Are you keeping in contact with them?"*

Sara: *"Mainly talk to my mum I've got a good relationships with my mum so it's nice to talk to her about what's happening here and at home"*

MW: *"Do you talk to your dad?"*

Sara: *"Only if he answers the phone when I ring"*

Maintaining contact with parents allowed participants to remain connected with their family home, which for some participants was important as they experienced homesickness:

"Whenever I'm feeling a bit lonely and miss home I Facetime my mum and that helps a bit 'cos then it feels like I'm there and it's a bit more intense of communication than what ringing is" (Serena)

There was the sense among the male participants that although they were in regular contact with their parents, this was instigated more so by their parents than by them:

*"My mum rings me more than I ring her. Think she misses me being at home and wants to check up that I'm managing to do my washing alright *laughs*" (Elvis)*

Several of the male participants further stated that had to make a 'conscious effort' to keep in contact with their parents:

"It's a bit of a conscious effort to make sure I ring my mum to let her know how stuffs going. It's not that I don't want to speak to her as sorts but I guess I just sort of forget" (Greg)

"It sounds bad but I'm not really that bothered about ringing me mum all the time but I know she misses me being at home and that she worries so I do try to ring her a bit more than what I'd choose to" (Daniel)

There were variations within the cohort in how often they kept in touch with their parents, with some talking to them every day while others only spoke to them once or twice a week. In this study, female participants kept in contact with their parents more than the male interviewees. It was common for the male interviewees to report to speaking to their parents on average once per week. Several of the male interviewees stated that, while they had a good relationship with their parents, they had had limited communication with them. In addition to this, this research found that it was common for participants to use multiple mediums of communication to maintain contact with their parents, commonly phone calls, text message, and social media messages. Several participants reported that they used text message instead of phone calls if they wanted to ask a question, or just 'check in' as this was an easier and quicker method of communication:

"I'm not really bothered about speaking to my mum on the phone every day but I do text her 'cos then she knows I'm alright and it doesn't need a half hour phone conversation to establish that does it?" (Sarah)

"I always text me dad when we're in the pub and having a debate about something to see if I can get a cheeky heads up over the lads… but I guess that's us keeping in touch as well" (Mike)

For those who used social media to maintain in contact with their families, Facebook message was predominantly used. Participants reported that the medium had both its advantages and disadvantages:

"It's good being able to just message my mum on Facebook 'cos it's quick and easy and I'm always on there but she can see when I've read messages and if I'm online so I've had to start turning my chat to offline so she doesn't know" (Jack)

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"Having me mam as a friend on Facebook lets her see all my stuff that I post so she's knows I'm alright. It's better me for me 'cos she rings me less but she still sort of gets to know what I'm up to and that I'm alright. It's sorta win win" (Dean)

While the majority of participants kept in touch with their parents via other methods of communication, for Liam and David, social media was the only method utilised to keep in touch with family members. When asked about their reasons for this, they stated the following:

"I do and I don't get on with my mum. We both know that if we spoke on the phone we'd probably find something to argue about 'cos I'd end up telling her how much I'd been out and that and she probably wouldn't like it and would say I need to focus on my studies then I'd get mad for her interfering… it's just easier to have a bit of space" (Liam)

"I'm not really one for ringing people. It's a bit intrusive I think 'cos you never know if you're interrupting the other person from doing something else. With Facebook chat my mum can message me when she wants and the same for me. It works for us" (David)

Although social media was used by 11 of the participants to keep in contact with their family, this was not necessarily the only or preferred method of communication. Sara and Alice noted that:

"It's much easier to pick up the phone to my mum and have a proper chat to her. Facebook and Whatsapp are good to use 'cos I can share pictures and stuff with her and send a quick message but otherwise like I say if I want a proper chat then I'll ring her instead" (Sara)

"I tend to Facetime my mum while I'm cooking dinner or something. Messaging on Facebook can be easier as when I get on the phone sometimes convo's last forever but I find it easier to talk than type but it sort of feels less personal I think. Plus I think my mum appreciates it more if I pick up the phone" (Alice)

While for Sara and Alice social media communication was a less personal method of communication, for four of the participants, social media was 'too personal' as their parents were able to maintain knowledge about their life at university that they didn't want their parents to know:

"I wish I'd never accepted my mum on Facebook 'cos I feel like I have to censor stuff now 'cos there's stuff I don't want her to see or that she wouldn't be happy if I posted it" (Trev)

Furthermore, two of the interviewees discussed how their parents had seen things on social media that they were trying to hide:

"I was meant to be going home for the weekend 'cos it was my mums birthday but all the lads from my block were doing a pub crawl so I told my mum that I was ill and couldn't go and then she saw some pictures that I was tagged in. She was not happy to say the least" (Lauren)

"Some of the lads were trolling my wall on about this lass I'd pulled and the next thing I know when I'm talking to my mum she puts me dad on the phone so he can have a chat with me about 'staying safe' and all that. It was awkward" (Paul)

These findings echo that of West et al (2009: 253) who in their study of undergraduate student use of Facebook who stated the following: 'The key point is that when individuals have 'secret lives', Facebook is too accessible'.

8.3 Continued Support from Parents

Parents played an important role in the preparations for the transition to university for the interviewees (as discussed earlier in the previous chapter). Several participants discussed their appreciation for the support their parents had given them in the transition university (both financial and emotional):

> *"It wouldn't have been possible for me to come without them. They've done so much for me. I should probably tell them how grateful I am. I've missed them as well. Didn't really think I would but I have. Don't tell them though *laughs*" (Jack)*

> *"I think I owe them like a gazillion pounds. Hopefully they won't send the debt collectors round *laughs*. Seriously though, they've been awesome" (Bethany)*

These findings further demonstrate the importance of parents during the transitionary period to university and within the first few weeks. Though parents were not the primary focus of this research, parents were prominently discussed by student's throughout the interviews, further highlighting that students place importance on the support they receive from their parents. Throughout the life course, individual experience changing relationships with their parents. The parents of the student who participated in this study played a key role in their child's transition to university, one which was ultimately appreciated by many participants. This research has further demonstrated the importance of parents as providers of social support during the transition to university.

8.4 Remaining in Contact with Friends

As identified in Chapter Six, the use of the internet, social media, text messaging, online gaming and other communication technologies were central to the lives of the participants in this study and their management of their social relationships. It was more common amongst the students to use social media to maintain contact with their friends in comparison to their parents. All of the participants in this study used social media to maintain contact with their friends after transitioning to university. As mentioned in Chapter Five, the participants of this study used a combination of

social media channels to communication with their friends and this was still common post-transition. However, some participants noticed that the frequency of communication had increased when they first moved to university, then at the time of the interviews frequency of communication had decreased:

"In the first couple of weeks we were talking on our group chat every day to find out what each other were up to and how it was going but that's teetered off a bit now we've all got a bit more settled. Plus it's good to save some stuff to talk about when we're all back home together" (Olivia)

It was also common for participants to engage in 'profile browsing' of their friends social networking platforms. There was the awareness from these participants that they could still be up to date on their friends lives and movements as social media offered a platform through which they could see their friends activities without having direct contact with them:

"It's good to see what they're up to without having to text and that. That way it's really easy to keep up with what each other are doing then when we're home at Christmas we can just get straight into it" (Zach)

"I don't have to know what they're up to know they're having a good time 'cos you just post stuff on Facebook so that people know. It's like a way of communicating but not really" (David)

A common occurrence in this study was the use of multiple mediums to maintain contact with friends from home. Several interviewees mentioned how they had directly contacted their friends after seeing a post on social media and them 'wanting to get the full story':

"You do see some stuff sometimes that your mates post and it's a bit cryptic so you message them to find out what's going on. Like the other day my mate posted something about something embarrassing that had happened to her but didn't really say what so that was me straight on chat to her to get the full story" (Claire)

There were variations amongst the cohort as to whether the frequency of communication they had with their friends changed once they had transitioned to university. Due to the lack of face-to-face socialisation, Alice found that she rang her friends, sent texts or Whatsapp or Facebook messages more than in comparison to before their transition:

> *"When you're used to seeing them like 3 or 4 times a week then it's a bit more relaxed with how you communicate when you're not with them. After I moved away though I have found that I message my mates most days on Facebook chat and text them a bit more as well. It's like you've got to make an extra effort to make sure you keep in touch" (Alice)*

In contrast to this, Mike's contact with his friends had decreased a few days after his move to university:

> *"When we all first moved we all checked in on each other to see how stuff was going, That's stopped now and I don't really talk to them. We'll all be home at Christmas and catch up then" (Mike)*

The practice of 'profile browsing' and lack of direct communication led three participants feeling as though they were starting to drift apart from their friends:

> *"I've noticed that some of my friends have changed a bit since we've all come to uni. You see stuff on their profiles and wonder 'well why've you done that for?' or 'you wouldn't do that at home'" (John)*

> *"My best mate at home Jenny has proper changed. Like I saw this morning that someone had put some photos on Instagram and tagged her on Facebook. They were doing Jagerbomb shots which she's never done at home" (Lara)*

Interestingly, two participants reported to having a closer bond with their friends once they had transitioned:

"We've got to make an effort now. Before it was just sort of taken for granted and now it's like I have to try and keep in contact due to not seeing them. I feel like I'm much more interested in what's happening with them now than I was before" (Elvis)

8.5 Dissolution of Friendships

Only one of the participants in this study had experienced the dissolution of a friendship. Jenny had been 'best friends' with Leah since early childhood, but felt that once she transitioned to university the closeness in their relationship has begun to change, a change which eventually led to the termination of their friendship:

Jenny: "Leah didn't go to uni this year. She flunked the first year of her A Levels and so re-sat it. I always thought she was happy for me that I was going and before I came here things were just the same as ever. But as soon as I moved then she just started being weird and different with me"

MW: "How do you mean?"

Jenny: "I put a status update about how I'd had a good night out one night but while I was out she'd text me but I'd not text her back. So she commented on it being like 'oh is that why you didn't message me back last night cos you were too busy with your new friends'. We've got this thing where if we're joking we put a winky face on the end so that other knows not to take is serious but there wasn't one. So I messaged her to say sorry and ask if she was alright and she never messaged back so I rang her. She was dead frosty on the phone and was being proper funny so I asked her straight up what was going on and she was just dead bitchy for like no reason. Later on I noticed that she'd unfriended me so that was that"

MW: "Have you asked her about it?"

Jenny: "I messaged her but she never replied. I'm gutted"

Although there may have been more to the dissolution of Jenny and Leah's friendship than what Leah was prepared to discuss, the situation does raises some interesting discussion points about the dissolution of friendships during the transition to university.

8.6 Maintenance of Long Distance Relationships

Nine of thirty-four participants in this study were in a romantic relationship when they transitioned to university. The length of these relationships differed, and there was variations in the participant's approach to how they thought they would manage their relationships before they made the physical transition to university. Participants were asked how they kept in touch with their boyfriends/girlfriends, and it was common for participants to use a combination of communication channels. These predominantly included text message, phone calls, Facebook messages, Whatsapp messages and Skype/Facetime:

> *"We keep in touch throughout the day via text and then will Facetime on an evening and sometimes we'll even give each other a quick ring during the day if we're feeling bored. It's nice to have so many options to be able to remain in contact with him" (Sara)*

Four of the participants had 'untagged' themselves from photos taken on nights out for fear of their boyfriend/girlfriend seeing them and it having a negative impact on their relationship:

> *"There was a pic that was put up the other day of my with my arm around this lass in a group photo. There was nothing in it but I know what Cara would say if she saw it 'cos it just looks a bit bad" (Daniel)*

> *"I told James that I wasn't going out when I was 'cos he always worries that something's gonna happen. Then one of the lasses I live with put pre-drinks selfie up that she'd took and I had to ask her to take it down. I probably shouldn't lie to him but it's not worth the hassle to have an argument with him about going out" (Lesley)*

Of the participants who had entered university in a romantic relationship, two had broken up with their boyfriend/ girlfriend in their first few weeks. One of the interviewees did not wish to discuss

why their relationship had ended, but said that the decision had been influenced by something they had seen on Facebook. On the other hand, Jack went into detail about the end of his relationship:

"It just got a bit pointless. Like it's easier to not see your friends everyday but it's different with a girlfriend. I didn't see Daisy every day at home but we both found it a struggle going to different uni's and being apart. We did spend the first 3 weekends together, she came here then I went to her uni, but we both realised that we were missing out on experiences. It was a mutual decision and we both want to say mates but just realised that it wasn't going to work long term" (Jack)

8.7 Developing Social Relationships in Halls of Residence

The process of meeting new people and making new friends was highlighted as being a defining feature of university. University was seen not only in terms of the educational value gaining a degree would give, but also viewed as adding life experiences and providing the opportunity for participants to meet people they wouldn't have had the opportunity to if they had not come to university. As identified in the previous findings chapter, many of the participants in this study had 'met' people in their halls of residence prior to moving to university. In these interviews participants were asked if they felt having this connection on social media beforehand had positively impacted their relationship with that person once they were at university. Responses were generally positive:

"I don't think I would have met Andy once we here. We live in the same block but he lives a couple of floors below… When I got here I just thought I'd go and knock on his door but I wouldn't have done that just randomly if I'd not known him before I came" (Craig)

"I get on better with Frankie that I thought I would… she is one of the nicest people I've met. We seemed quite a bit different when we were chatting before we got here but we're quite similar I think" (Jenny)

> *"Knowing Alex and Hannah made me feel more at ease and it was nice when we first met in person to have some common ground sort of already in place 'cos I find it quite awkward meeting new people"* (Olivia)

This highlights the importance of first year students making social connections and developing relationships. Halls of residence provide an environment which facilitates the creation of new friendships for transitioning students. They are also the primary place where students first meet other students and have the opportunity to develop friendship networks (Christie et al, 2002). This research further revealed this to be the case. Most people reported that it was through their halls of residence that they had met new people. Halls of residence were identified as providing a good opportunity to meet new people and an atmosphere in which people were encouraged to socialise:

> *"Everyone's here to have fun and we're all in this boat together"* (Andrew)

> *"It's part of the experience isn't it? That's how most people make friends at uni"* (Rachel)

For most participants, making new friends was tied to their place of residence in halls and this experience was viewed positively by most, though not without its flaws. Jack specifically expressed his dissatisfaction with the standard of the accommodation but perceived halls as being the best way to meet new people:

> *"The rooms are a bit small and pretty shit to be honest but I don't think I'd have made half as many friends if I hadn't been living in halls to be honest with you"* (Greg)

A common occurrence in the interviews was for participants to discuss their surprise at how quickly the initially large networks had unconsciously separated into distinct smaller groups:

> *"I live on a corridor of 8 and we all started going out and hanging out all together in the first week. Then you just sort of see that you go to knock on some people's doors more than others and make plans with them and not the rest of the group. It's weird*

‘cos I think we’ve all found one or two people out of the eight that we get on better with. But we still get on good as a group though” (Claire)

“There’s a big group of us that get on from two or three corridors that sort of formed on our first day. Not all of us hang out together all the time though and we do different stuff together but it’s nice for us all to go out in a bigger group on a night out” (Dean)

It was a common narrative that the friendships made in halls of residence had in multiple ways eased the transition:

“It’s made it a lot easier having some good friends. If I didn’t get on with these guys then I’d be lonely and wouldn’t have been happy at all” (Alice)

“The lads have really taken care of us like. It sounds daft but I can’t cook or do laundry for shit and they’ve helped us and that with it… if they hadn't have helped us I’d have probably been living just off ready meals… wouldn’t have exactly been healthy would it?” (Liam)

“If I hadn’t have made friends I know I would have dropped out ‘cos I wouldn’t have been able to stay” (Zara)

While the majority of the participants found halls of residence to be on the whole a positive experience and fruitful environment to meet new people and make new friends, this was not the case for all. For three of the participants their experiences had not been positive and this led to two of them contemplating moving back home and undertaking long distance study or leaving their degree programme.

“I live on a corridor of 8, but I don’t get on with anyone else but they all seem to get on. It’s pretty miserable living there to be honest. I have considered dropping out or just moving back home” (Bethany)

In the previous chapter, the practice of 'random adding' was discussed, whereby the participants of this study reported that prior to the transition to university they had added other prospective students and then not had direct communication with them. Several participants reported that they found it 'weird' seeing these students once they got to university, either in halls of residence or around the campus or town city:

"It's strange walking round campus and seeing people that you recognise from your halls Facebook group but haven't met yet. And then they see you and it's even more awkward 'cos you don't really know whether to say hello or not and you just sort of nod *laughs*" (Isla)

"It is weird having someone as Friend when you've never actually spoke to each other, and then it gets to the point where you're a few weeks into uni and if you were gonna strike up a conversation you probably would have done it by now so it's too late to do it" (Mike)

8.8 Developing Social Relationships Through Degree Course

As identified in the previous findings chapter, several participants had 'met' other students on their course prior to moving to university. The development of these relationships was mixed:

MW: "Did you meet anyone who is on your course through social media before you came to university?"

Trev: "Yeah I talked to a few people"

MW: "Did you add them as 'Friends' on Facebook?"

Trev: "Yeah, I've got all of them"

MW: "How often do you see them and do you speak to them when you do?"

Trev: "Nah not really, like his lad Simon we've never actually spoke to each other. When we've seen each other around we've just sorta acknowledged each other and that's it"

MW: "How often did you communication with each other before coming to university?"

Trev: "Not that much to be fair. We sent a few message about football but that's it. I don't think we actually have that much in common"

MW: "Have you developed friendships with any of the other people?"

Trev: "Not friendships no. If I see any of them around I'll say hiya and that but I don't hang around with any of them"

For the majority of the students interviewed, it was more common for them to have made friends in their halls of residence rather than through their courses. Satisfaction with the relationships created with others in the same halls of residence did lead some participants to reflect that they had perhaps not taken as many opportunities to meet new people as they perhaps could have. As Jack stated later in his interview:

"If I'd not met people I liked who I lived with then I'd have probably put more effort into trying to meet people on my course or something" (Jack)

Craig also reported a similar viewpoint:

"None of the people I live with have made that many friends outside of our group but if you get on as a group then there's no need to really put yourself out there to try and meet new people. I probably should have though" (Craig)

Several participants reported that they were more tentative with making friends on their course, in comparison with the ease they felt making friends with people in their halls of residence:

Sara: "I feel nervous in seminars going to sit next to someone. I don't really know why"

MW: "Are you a nervous or anxious person generally?"

Sara: "Not really. Like I found it really easy to make friends in halls but found it really difficult on my course. I sort of feel like it's weirdly really difficult to get to

know people in lectures and seminars. Everyone I know has basically had the same experience"

There was also the suggestion among some that there was the general sense and feeling that people whom they had interacted with on their courses seemed disinterested in making friends and that it was difficult to infiltrate friendship groups on courses once they had already been formed:

"People just seem less bothered if they don't know anyone. Most of us sit on our own in seminars. It's really different to how it was on the first day in halls 'cos there it seemed like everyone wanted to talk to each other" (Isla)

"You can't just go and sit next to two people that are sat chatting when you go into a lecture or seminar like I thought you could. Maybe you can but I think people would find it weird" (Liam)

These findings are similar to Wilcox et al (2006), who argued that student may find it difficult to infiltrate already formed friendship groups. The notable distinction to this came from three medical students who were interviewed. Within their interviews they discussed that they had made most of their friends through their medical degrees, stating that the demands placed on them in their degree meant that it was easier for them to socialise with one another as they were unlike other students. As David's interview demonstrates:

***David**: "I've sort of noticed that us medics seem to just stick with one another. I've heard that that's the case for all medics though and for nurses as well"*

***MW**: "Have you made friends with anyone who you live with?"*

***David**: "Not really. I mean we say hello and that and cook together a couple of nights a week but I spend most of my time with the other medics"*

From the three interviews, it became clear that the demands of the medicine degree course meant that these students felt they had less in common with other students and had less time to socialise in comparison:

> *"We've just not got as much time. We're in lectures and labs nearly all the time then when we're not we've got to study. It's proper demanding and we all study together so that's how you become friends really" (Lucy)*

> *"The people in my halls just go out all the time with each other. I sometimes wish I could go but I've got too much work to do. I feel a bit lost when I'm with them because they're all getting on great and I'm a bit of an outcast but the other medics are great. It's hard when the other people you know live across campus though so you just can't go and knock on their door for a chat and that" (Paul)*

Course structures which encourage small group work can encourage student to get to know one another (Tinto 2002; Yorke and Winter, 2003). The findings of this study support this, as seminar group work was the most common way through which students had developed relationships with people on their course. There was the sense that this encouraged students to get to know one another:

> *MW: "How is your course going?"*
>
> *Claire: "We've got presentations in one of my seminars coming up"*
>
> *MW: "How do you feel about that?"*
>
> *Claire: "I think it's good 'cos it makes you talk to people on your course"*
>
> *MW: "Do you think group work has had an effect on your seminars?"*
>
> *Claire: "It's a bit more livelier now. Before people just wouldn't talk to each other or were really quiet but now we're actually a bit more interested in getting to know each other"*

Participants were asked about whether or not they had connections with people on their course through social media. It was common for students to add each other as Friends on Facebook in

order to be able to facilitate group work. There was the sense that this enabled students to converse with ease:

"We've been using Facebook to manage our project presentation. It's easier 'cos you can have group chat and send pictures and attachments of the stuff you've done" (Dean)

Several interviewees mentioned that this had encouraged them to get to know people they were doing group work with outside of seminars:

"Once we'd been partnered up I asked Fran if she fancied having a coffee afterwards and we could talk about the presentation. It was nice 'cos we actually started to get to know each other a bit after that. I think sometimes you just need a bit of a push to talk to someone then you'll find you get along. I get on really well with Fran and spend quite a bit of time with her now. In fact, we're going out tonight just the two of us 'cos no one else we know wants to go out but we do" (Olivia)

However, for some participants, relationship development from this was limited with the identification that these relationships created were more 'course acquaintanceships' as Adam described in his interview:

Adam: "I think it's different with people on your course"

MW: "How?"

Adam: "You're more sort of course acquaintances"

MW: "What do you mean by that?

Adam: "Like someone who you know but you don't really. It's not in a bad way it's just I don't think you really become friends"

8.9 Developing Social Relationships Through Sports and Societies

Six of the participants in this study had joined sports societies in their first few week at university. While participants were generally in agreement that sports provided a good opportunity to meet

people, some concerns were raised about their approaches to first years students. This was most apparent in Greg's interview, who discussed his experience of joining the men's football team:

"We stick out like a sore thumb us fresher's on the team and get the piss taken out of us. They say we look young and that. It's only banter but you do feel as though you're yet to find your place. They've been here longer so know the uni better and feel as though they belong a bit more than us I think" (Greg)

Two other participants who described themselves as playing sports recreationally reported that the sports societies they had joined seemed unwilling to place first year students on the university first team, suggesting that this was due to being a new student rather than being based on their sporting ability:

"There's a joke that goes round that freshers don't get picked for the team. It's like being back at school and you see some of the lads that play on the first team and you don't want to big up your own ability but they're not very good. I guess that's the way it is. You've sort of got to earn your respect with the lads a bit I guess" (John)

"You earn your way onto the team, you don't get there just by being able to play football" (Paul)

However, the majority of students had a positive experience joining sport societies. In follow up questions, these interviewees were asked if they had made friends through these societies. There was the sense from these interviewees that whilst they felt it was more difficult to develop a friendship with people they played sports with in comparison to how easy they made friends in their halls of residence, they felt as though they were developing connections that were stronger than acquaintanceship:

"It's a bit more difficult to build up connections with people in societies 'cos I guess it's down to lack of exposure. But we all go out for a drink afterwards so that build it up and I like to think I'm starting to make some good friendships" (Erika)

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"Once you get to know everyone a bit and start accepting invites to go out then you become a bit more confident and start coming out of your shell" (Alice)

Participants also expressed that they appreciated developing friendships with people who had shared interests with them:

"Having football in common gives you something to talk about. None of the lads I live with are really football keen they're more rugby so I do miss the banter but I can have that with the lads from the footie team" (Trev)

8.10 Problems Experienced

For the majority of the participants in this study, the transition to university happened with ease. However, unsurprisingly, some experienced problems, which to some extent had an effect on their happiness at university. Previous research has identified the academic challenges faced by students during the transition to university. As the learning environment is centred on self-direction and independence (Kember, 2001) and emphasis is placed on self-motivation (Winn, 2002; Prescott and Simpson, 2004), students may struggle to adapt to this new environment. From early on, the difference in demands from school to the academic environment was recognised by the majority of participants. While some relished the increasing pressure of the environment, other were surprised at how much time at university is directed towards independent study:

"I'm a bit shocked by how much reading you have to do. It's quite hard as well some of it. I don't think I was expecting to be doing this much" (Daniel)

"Having to read a book every week is a bit challenging. I like reading but it's hard when you can't get into something… then you've got the theory on top. I know some people just don't bother doing it but I couldn't do that" (Alice)

In total, thirteen participants expressed that they had found the academic side of university more challenging than they had imaged. These participants were asked follow up questions about how

they felt this had impacted their transition and happiness at university, and whether they had considered dropping out as a result. Responses were mixed:

"It's hard but that's what you come to uni for isn't it? It's meant to be harder than what school is" (Alice)

"The jump form A Level to this is ridiculous. I just sit in lectures sometimes wondering if everyone gets it 'cos I don't. It got me down a bit the first couple of weeks but I'm trying but I'm putting in a lot more work that I thought I'd have to. I'll get there though" (Zach)

"I'm considering dropping. Maybe uni isn't for me" (Erika)

While some students struggled to adapt to the change in academic environment, others struggled to adjust to the social sphere of life at university. As discussed in the previous findings chapter, prior to the transition to university each interviewee undertook some kind of preparation prior to the physical transition, whether that be practical or emotional. For some participants these acts were their way of preparing themselves for life at university. However, others were surprised at how much they missed home. For these participants home was seen as synonymous with the physical (i.e. the house they lived in, familiarity with the town/city) and the relationships they had with the people there. Fisher and Hood define homesickness as a 'complex cognitive-motivational-emotional state concerned with grieving for, yearning for and being preoccupied with thoughts of home (1987: 426). Family and friends were important social relationships which tied participants to home:

"There are some days where I miss home. To me home is more like where your family and friends are than where you grew up" (Serena)

"I don't think you can ever make uni as 'homely' as your actual home because it's the relationships which tie you there and it takes time to make the kind of memories which make you think really fondly of a place. I don't think it's the place but more the people you know there" (Lucy)

While relationships with family and friends were important to the participants of this study, the most interesting reveal from these interviews was that the relationships that participants were reminiscent about extended beyond family and friends. For example, one interviewee when referring to what he missed most about home expressed:

> *Adam: "I'm surprised that I miss Gina"*
>
> *MW: "Who's Gina?"*
>
> *Adam: "She works in the local Revolution bar. I used to go in there quite regularly at home"*

Several participants discussed how they missed their family home and the town which they came from. There was the sense from these interviewees that they missed the familiarity of the structural and geographical aspects of 'home' rather than this simply being limited to people:

> *"I'm still getting a bit lost in and around Manchester. It's different to how you feel when you're at home and you know where you're going" (Sally)*

> *"I'm still figuring out the best pubs and bars and that which takes a while. I miss home 'cos you know where all the best kebab spots and that are and some of the buildings in my home town are quite nice and I used to go out for a walk to take it all in. I miss the familiarity of home" (Bethany)*

8.11 Negotiation of Independence

As discussed in Chapter Five, the strive for independence is what motivated some participants to move away from home. Once they had transitioned to university, students then had to grapple with negotiating their independence, which did present challenges for some:

> *"It's only when I moved that I actually realised how much my mum did for me at home… like washing my dishes and doing my laundry and that. It was a couple of weeks into the semester when I turned around and realised that I'd got no clean socks. It sounds like a joke but it's not. You sort of begin to realise that you're like… that you've got to be more responsible" (Elvis)*

"It was my third day here when I broke down crying 'cos I couldn't boil an egg. Crying over a bloody egg but it's more than that to you. It's the realisation that you don't really know what you're doing and that admitting that you could have probably done with staying at home a bit longer *laughs*" (Jessie)

Many participants reported feeling a greater sense of independence after having moved away from home with some recognising that the university environment provided them with a sense of independence which they didn't have in the family home:

Paul: "It's nice to be able to do what I want without having to worry about getting in trouble for anything"

MW: "What kind of things?"

Paul: "Just like being able to go to bed when I want. My parents have this rule where lights have to be off by 11.30 through the week. That grates"

"I went to town last week and bought this short bodycon dress that I knew I would never have got away with wearing at home" (Jenny)

A few of these reported to having taken this new found independence too far in their first few weeks at university:

"I never really got drunk with my mates at home 'cos I didn't want to home in a state 'cos I knew what my dad would say. Anyway, it was my birthday during fresher's and I was challenged to do 19 shots of flavoured vodka. Safe to say I didn't actually make it out and I was sick as a dog for about 3 days after" (Liam)

"I spent all my student loan in the first like 3 weeks on clothes and beer. I've had to take a massive dip into my savings so that I don't starve to death. Don't think I would have done it at home 'cos the 'rents would have gone mental like" (John)

Several participants discussed how they felt that had matured during their first few weeks:

"I've definitely grown up a lot these past few weeks. I think I relied on my mum and dad a bit too much but now I've got to do stuff for myself then it's forced me to take a bit more responsibility and grow up a bit" (Erika)

"I'm quite happy at the minute. Uni is so much better than what school ever was. It's just different and I think everyone's growing up" (Paul)

8.12 Use and Strategic Management of Social Media

Several participants discussed how having a social media profile enabled them to keep their family and friends up to date without having to maintain a line of direct communication (as discussed in the section 'Maintaining Contact With Parents'):

"I don't really ring my mum but I think she likes having me as a Friend so that she can see I'm still alive and not wasting away" (Liam)

Earlier in this chapter, the strategic management of Facebook profiles by two participants in long distance relationship was discussed. The strategic management of social media was not just limited to these participants. Several interviewees discussed how they had 'untagged' themselves in photos posted by others from their Facebook profile:

Paul*: "I've untagged myself from a few pics like where I've been absolutely mortal"*
MW*: "Why did you do that?"*
Paul*: "It's embarrassing isn't it. I didn't want people to see me in that kind of state. It's bad enough that you get yourself into them without having the proof afterwards that it happened"*

Two participants discussed how they wished they could 'hide' their life at university, but that social media made that impossible:

"Sometimes you just want people to not know what you've been up to. Like it's nice to keep things to yourself. If I've told my mum that I'm not going out then I get tagged in a selfie then she knows I've lied to her. You can't hide anything really 'cos people put

too much stuff on. I'm just as guilty but when it gets you into trouble you realise it's a bit daft" (Mike)

Sara: "I do find myself trying to hide some of the stuff I'm doing. I don't think other people realise that some people want to be a bit more private than what they do"

MW: "What do mean by that?"

Sara: "Like some people just post stuff cos they don't care who sees it. But I care. If I want someone to know that I've gone on a date that's went bad I'll do it. I don't need me mate taking the mickey on a wall post"

There was the sense from most of the participants that they somewhat lacked control over what other people were posting, and that 'untagging' themselves was the most they could do to manage their own profiles and what was posted about them. Each of these participants were more concerned about their parents and other family members viewing the posts than they were about their friends seeing them:

Dan: "Not really bothered about what your friends see because you can have a laugh with them about stuff but it's different when your parents see something that you don't want them to"

MW: "How is it different?"

Dan: "It just is. It's embarrassing and I think you get to a point where you just want some privacy. You're not a kid anymore so your parents don't need to know everything about you"

While the process of individuals untagging themselves from posts and photos took place before the transition to university, there was the sense from participants that because they were away from home, in some ways they longed for their privacy more. In Chapter Five, the cohorts general opinions on the over sharing of personal information on social media was discussed. For Trev, it was only moving away to university that led him to rethink his and other people's use of social media:

> *"It's only since I've moved to uni that I've realised that people share way too much information on like Facebook and that. I mean you sort of notice it before when you've got people as Friends that you don't really know but know a bit about what's going on in their life when you perhaps shouldn't. But yeah I've started to notice a lot more that people share too much. Like it's good to have people as Friends just in case but then I don't really want to see the personal stuff they share" (Trev)*

8.13 Settling In. Belonging and Developing an Identity as a 'Uni of X Student'

The development of an identity as a university student, and development of a sense of belonging are prominent themes within the literature pertaining to student transitions. When asked how they felt about they felt there first few weeks at university had gone and if they had settled in, participants responded positively, mainly commenting on how much they enjoyed life at university:

Adam: "I'm having a mint time"

MW: "What's so good about it?"

Adam: "It's just different. Different people. Different place. Stuff going on all the time"

MW: "You've settled in alright then?"

Adam: "Yeah definitely. I'm really enjoying it"

MW: "What are you enjoying most?"

*Adam: "Everything. Apart from the amount of reading *laughs*"*

The majority of the participants in this study identified themselves on their Facebook profiles as a student of the university they attended. There was the sense that this was important for the students to be identified as a student of the university:

> *"Your uni becomes a part of who you are and you want people to know where you go to uni and that you're having a good time so that's why I added it" (Henry)*

> *"I'm proud of going to Keele so I guess I wanted to show it off to other people" (Zara)*

Participants at both research sites discussed how their knowledge of their university had developed in the first few weeks. This included knowledge on both the social and academic spheres of the university, including but not limited to: navigating their way around the campus, increased knowledge on nightlife and 'the best' nights to go out on, and learning about student jokes relating to academic teaching staff. There was the sense that this increase of knowledge had enabled them to feel more at home at university:

> ***Liam**: "Once I started to get used to stuff here then I started to feel more at home"*
> ***MW**: "In what way?"*
> ***Liam**: "Like at home you know where to get the best coffee or where to watch the footie. When we first got here we had to figure all that stuff out. Once I did do though it felt more homely like I said"*

> *"There was a lot of stuff to get used to. I was a bit intimidated in the first few days. Moving away from home was a bit hard 'cos you've got attachment there. Moving is like having to start that attachment again but it got easier as time went on" (Rachel)*

While the majority of participants discussed how they missed their home, they also felt 'at home' at university once the first few weeks had passed by:

"Once I got used to being away from home then I started to feel more at home here. I've made some really good friends as well and that's made it a whole lot easier to feel settled in" (Lesley)

"It does feel like home here. It's a really homely campus. That's what I liked about it when I first came to visit. You have to get used to a place before a bond grows but it's made easier when it just feels right being here" (Adam)

"This is home now. If you don't view it that way then you struggle to accept that you're going to be here for the next three years" (Jenny)

Several participants discussed how learning more about the university (i.e. best nights out etc.) meant they felt like they now 'fitted in':

"Once I learned my way around and got used to stuff then I started to feel like I fitted in here. I've never really felt like that before but people here are so diverse that everyone finds their place and I've found mine" (Sarah)

There was the recognition from many that the process of settling in and developing a sense of belonging took time. Sara for example was happy that she had persevered through the struggles she faced through her first couple of weeks at university:

"I'm glad I stuck with it. I had a rough few days when I got here, realising that I was like starting from scratch with everything. It was hard making new friends. I'm quite shy and find it difficult sometimes to talk to people I don't really know but it was easier once I put that aside and just got on with it" (Sara)

Several participants reported a similar experience and feelings to Sara, further highlighting that it is common for students to experience struggles during the transition to university. However, the students of this study were aware that the transition would get easier over time.

8.14 Visits Home

As discussed in the previous chapter, there were variations between students in the cohort about how often they planned to visit home. There was only one participant who had visited home every weekend. Isla had a boyfriend at home, and had chosen to visit home every weekend so that she could sustain their relationships. However, when interviewed she felt as though this was having a detrimental effect on her life at university:

> *Isla: "I miss out on a lot that's for sure. It's not that I don't want to go home to see Lee but I want to stay here on a weekend sometimes too. I don't think he'd understand though if I didn't go"*
>
> *MW: "What do you mean by 'you miss out'?"*
>
> *Isla: "Simple stuff like nights out and that. But I think it' getting to the point where it's deeper than that. I feel like I'm missing out on developing a relationship with my mates here"*

There were several students who had not visited home during their first few weeks. For three of these students, it was money that prohibited them from visiting:

> *"Train tickets are so expensive. It's not that I've not wanted to but I'm not gonna chop an arm off to get there *laughs*" (Jack)*

Other students had upcoming visits planned, and expressed their excitement about going home:

> *"I'm off next weekend. It will be nice to be back and I'm really looking forward to it. Yeah I can't wait" (Elvis)*

For the students who had visited home in their first few weeks, some had found that things had changed, either in the family home, or with regards to their relationship with their parents and/or friends:

> *"My little sister's moved into my room. I mean, I know I'm not there but it's like I've just been kicked out. Bit gutting" (Lauren)*

"I felt a lot closer to my mum and dad when I went back. They were telling me how proud they were. It was nice to be home. I would say that my relationship with them has improved for coming to university" (Liam)

Lee in particular had an interesting experience:

"I text me mam right that I was going to be coming home. It was a bit last minute. Then all of a sudden I gets a phone call to say they're holiday. Bloody holiday. She'd never even mentioned it" (Dean)

8.15 Discussion

Parent/Child Dynamic After the Transition to University

It was clear in this research that parents continue to play an important role in the lives of students after they have made the physical transition to university. All of the students had lived at home with parents continually prior to moving and as such had limited experience (in some cases no experience) of living independently. For those students who kept in close contact with their parents, these findings raise interesting questions about the parent/ child dynamic during a young person's transition from adolescence to adulthood. Did they maintain a general level of contact because they had a good relationship with their parents that they wanted to continue, or did they maintain close contact because they needed the support their parents gave them? From the data gathered, it can be seen the maintenance of the relationship stems from a desire for both. The transition to adulthood brings about changes to the structure of young people's social lives (Damon, 1983; Meeus et al, 1991), and what can be seen from this study is that the parent/child relationship dynamic can be greatly affected by the transition to university. On the one hand, there are students who see the transition as an opportunity to 'break free' from their parents and maintain limited contact with them. On the other hand, there are students who choose to maintain close contact with their parents, regardless of the motive behind it. However, what is clear that in some ways, parents have little say in the frequency of contact they have with their child, and not all students had frequent contact with their parents. Some students raised concerns that they felt their parents were judging their

university lifestyle, and actively sought to keep their lives private. This is contrary to previous research to have suggested that conflict decreases between emerging adults and parents due to the notion that parents feel they are no longer justified to intervene in their child's life (Aquilino, 1997, van Wel. Ter Bogt and Raaijmakers, 2002). More research into the parent/child dynamic is required in order to explore this further and answer some of the questions this research has raised. Nevertheless, the fact that parents continue to play a key role in emerging adults' lives once they have transitioned to university is an important finding from this research.

Maintenance of Social Connections

This research further highlighted that students use a variety of mediums to maintain contact with their parents after their relocation, with a small sample using social media platforms. An interesting reveal from this is how the benefits of social media are conceptualised. The students recognised that the medium in some way limited the closeness of the relationship, and this was viewed as both a positive and a negative dependent upon the student and the level of contact they wanted to maintain with their parents. This has implications for how we conceptualise social media platforms and their affordability in sustaining interpersonal relationships. It is argued that millennials have grown up in a world saturated with computer mediated networks (boyd, 2008; Hulme, 2009; Livingstone, 2009). As the findings of Chapter Six demonstrate, the students in this research had a close relationship with technology, and conceptualising them as 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001) seems natural. It was argued in the 1990's that the infiltration of the internet into people's daily lives was responsible for individual's increasing alienation from society and public life (Kraut et al, 1998; White, 1997). The students I interviewed recognised that communication via social media platforms had the ability to affect the quality of the relationship they had with their parents, with some students feeling that they were unable to sustain the level of closeness in their relationship which they desired. On the other hand, there were students who enjoyed the distance communication via social media gave to their relationship. Ultimately this demonstrates that social media can be used to sustain relationships on a surface level, but is perhaps unable to give the depth to a relationship that some students require. In addition to this, social media also had a

profound impact on the way students managed their romantic relationships after they had moved to university. Romantic relationships during adolescence can have a profound impact on young people's sense of self-worth (Levesque, 1993), therefore it is no surprise that the students in this research who were in a romantic relationship when they transitioned to university viewed the relationships as having great importance in their lives. All of these students wanted to ensure that they were able to maintain their relationship despite the geographical distance and the additional challenges this would bring to the relationship. Perhaps not surprisingly, some of the students feared that their partner would see content on social media that would have a negative impact on their relationship. This demonstrates that events can be misrepresented on social media, and what happens on social media has the potential to affect the way users live their lives offline. Ultimately there is the complex intertwining of offline and online practice that Leander and Kim (2003) suggested. The extension of individual's social worlds beyond physical boundaries (boyd, 2008) is not necessarily positive for relationships.

Development of Social Relationships With Fellow Students

The development of the students social relationships at university was closely tied to their halls of residence and to a much more limited extent their courses, and the groups and societies which they had joined. While social media had given students the opportunity to begin the process of developing social connections prior to their physical transition and this helped them to feel more at ease with the process, once they were at university they were still required to engage in the difficult process of cultivating new friendships (even with people whom they had Friended on social media prior to the transition). Prior to their transition, all of the students in this study imagined that halls of residence would be the place that would give them the best chance of making friends at university. This can be seen in their use of social media to build connections with others living in the same halls of residence as them prior to moving to university. Previous research has shown that students living arrangements can have a profound impact on the friendships they make at university (Chickering, 1975; Astin, 1984; Valez, 1985). Further to this, previous research has found that friendships are predominantly formed within halls of residence (Wilcox et al, 2005; Christie,

Munro and Rettig, 2002). Therefore it is not surprising that the majority of the students in this research developed most of their social connections with people who they were living with, or who lived close by. While social media can play a prominent role by giving students the opportunity to develop social connections prior to transitioning to university, it is evident that students are still required to follow the process of previous generations of students in forming connections face-to-face.

While it is not surprising that the students in this research predominantly developed social connections within their halls of residence, it was surprising that they thought (and sometimes found) that students on their course were unwilling to develop social connections. Given how important peer networks are for a successful transition, it is surprising that students may close themselves off from developing friendships outside of their halls of residence. Halls of residence have been seen as enriching environments (Silver, 2004) and by the very nature of students living in close to proximity to others who are similar in age to them means that friendships are very likely to develop. However, why do students potentially approach making friendships on their course more cautiously? This is a question which cannot be answered from the data gathered in this research., but it does highlight an interesting area for future exploration within the field.

Management of the Challenges

While most of the students in this study were able to successfully manage their transition with ease, there were some students who struggled to manage the demands the transition placed on them. Several of the students found the academic demands of university challenging, which ultimately had an impact on their happiness at university. While much of the emphasis of this research has centred on students ability to successfully negotiate their support networks during the transition, it is important to acknowledge that this is only one aspect of experiencing as successful transition. This is evidenced by the fact that their struggles with the academic environment had led some students to consider leaving university. University is an academic environment which places emphasis on self-direction and independence (Kember, 2001), and it was this that some of the students struggled to manage. What is interesting from this is that student may be able to manage

some of the challenges of the transition (such as living independently) but may struggle with others. Previous research has identified that university support is needed to aid students to develop their learner identity and autonomy (Briggs et al, 2012). This research did not focus on exploring what support networks the universities in this study have in place for those who struggle to meet the demands of the academic sphere of university life, nor did it seek to find out if the students had any knowledge of them or had engage with them. Therefore it is limited in its exploration of how students manage the academic sphere of university life, and is one area for future research.

In addition to experiencing struggles with the academic change in environment, some students struggled to negotiate their independence during the first few weeks. This is not surprising given the multiple changes and challenges that they were required to simultaneously negotiate during this time. While moving out of the family home gives young people the opportunity to gain experience of the challenges of adult life (Goldschieder and Goldschieder, 1999), university definitely provides young people the opportunity to gain such experience in a safe environment, as suggested by Flanagan et al (1993). For those who choose the path of higher education and choose to live in halls of residence, university allows them to tentatively enter the adult world at a pace that is appropriate for each individual.

8.16 Conclusion

This chapter placed it focus on reviewing the key themes which emerged from the interview data with regards to the interview participants first few weeks at university: maintaining contact with parents and friends, long distance relationships, the development of friendships post-transition, development of relationships on their course and problems experienced with this, and their general experiences of independence and settling into university. This research has highlighted the important role that networks of support play for young people during the transition to university. Whilst we might expect that young people become less dependent on their parents for support once they have transitioned to university, this research revealed that parents continue to provide young people with support during their first few weeks at university. Parents ultimately play an important role in the same way as peer networks. Further to this, the findings from this chapter highlight that

while social media plays a prominent role in allowing young people to develop social connections before moving to university, it somewhat limits students ability to maintain a close connection with their personal communities from home once they have geographically relocated.

Chapter Nine
Rites of Passage of Millennials Transitioning to Higher Education

9.1 Introduction

In the previous three chapters, the key findings of this study were presented and discussed. While each student had a unique narrative of their experiences during their transitional period to university, they expressed significant similarities with regards to the overall nature of their transition to higher education. Using these findings, this chapter will seek to build on van Gennep's rites of passage and its application to university student transitions. In particular, I seek to build on Tinto's application of van Gennep's work by exploring how social media affects the phases of separation, transition, and incorporation. It is important to reiterate that in his book *Rethinking the Stages of Student Departure: Cause of Student Attrition*, Tinto uses van Gennep's theoretical framework to understand the causes of student attrition in the United States. This thesis does not seek to explore the stages of rites of passage in the context of student attrition. Instead, it explores the ways in which social media affects the rites of passage in the transitionary period, without attempting to build on the cause of student departure from higher education.

As Tinto acknowledged himself, his use of van Gennep's rites of passage was not a 'one size fits all' approach to understanding the nature of student transitions. However, it does provide a useful way of sociologically examining student experiences, and how they manage the transitionary period between two life stages. In addition to developing van Gennep's theory of rites of passage, this chapter seeks to emphasise the continuous nature of the separation, transition and incorporation periods, and that these extend beyond simply the transition to higher education. For example, a student's successful transition and incorporation into higher education is accomplished in relation to their successful transition to adulthood, successful renegotiation of their social support networks, and successful negotiation of the changes in academic environments.

9.2 Separation

At the centre of the transition for the students in this study was the geographical relocation from home to university. Leaving home is both a key part in the transitional process from adolescence to adulthood (Avery et al., 1992; Clarke and Mulder, 2002) and for many students, a significant component in the transition to university. However, as previous research has noted, the transition to university can be made more difficult for some if they choose to relocate to university and thus are required to manage the stress in change of environments alongside the stress of being physically separated from family and friends (Buote et al, 2008). As Tinto writes:

> The first stage of the college career, separation, requires individuals to disassociate themselves, in varying degrees, from membership in the communities of the past, most typically with the family, the local high school, and local areas of residence

(1993: 95)

For students undergoing the transition to university, the process of separating themselves from the past can be isolating, stressful, and disorienting (Tinto, 1993). In this research, this can be seen through the students' feelings towards moving, discussed in Chapter Seven. While the majority of students expressed their excitement about making the transition, they were also aware that their transition to university would involve some separation from the communities of the past. An important finding from this research notably came from the interviews of Rachel, Alice, Mike and Sara, who discussed that before their move to university they had concerns about feeling homesick and friendsick. Their fears were based on the awareness that once they were at university they would be physically separated from their personal communities. Further to this, they would miss not just the physical presence of the people in their personal communities, but also the emotional and social support they received from them. For Daniel, his nerves centred on the knowledge that he was soon to become more responsible for himself with the practical aspects of university life, such as having to do his own washing. Along similar lines to this, Elvis expressed that he felt that everything in his life was changing in a short period of time, and that he found it difficult to manage the variety and multitude of changes. This raises an interesting point with regards to what aspects of their lives students are preparing to separate themselves from, as the findings of this

research reveal that some participants, for example Daniel, were also preparing to disassociate themselves with their adolescence and take a firm step into adulthood. The process of separation can therefore include students beginning to disassociate themselves with their adolescent identity. While this may only be through small steps such as becoming more responsible for oneself with the practical tasks of life as an adult (tasks which were previously undertaken by their parents), it can still add to the nerves and fears experienced by students preparing for the transition. The fear, stress and nerves that students feel prior to their physical transition can therefore be due to a combination of factors (i.e. they are beginning to disassociate from both the communities of the past and their identity in the community they are a part of). The interviews of Zach and Sally revealed that some students find comfort in the knowledge that they are not on their own in separating themselves from the past, and that transitioning students develop an understanding that most other students are in the same position as they are. In this research, for Zach and Sally this eased to some extent the nerves they felt about moving. These students experiences highlight that the process of separation is one which transcends geographical relocation. This point will be discussed in greater depth later in the next paragraph.

The varying degrees of disassociation from communities past to which Tinto refers can be seen in the student's emotional preparations for university. As discussed, there were variations in the participant cohort between individuals choosing to spend more or less time at home with their parents and with their friends in the weeks leading up to their transition. Jack for example chose to begin his disassociation with his mum weeks before making the transition, joking that he wanted to get her used to him not being around the family home. This raises interesting questions as to how parents view and are able to deal with the changing relationship they have with their children when they are preparing to leave for university. While this cannot be answered it this research, it raises an interesting discussion for future research. While there were differences between Isla and Andrew in who they chose to spend more time with prior to their transition (Isla with her friends, Andrew with his mum), they had both made a conscious effort to spend more time with their personal communities. This can be interpreted as them delaying the process of disassociation,

suggesting that perhaps for some students the process of beginning to disassociate oneself from past communities may not happen until they have made the physical transition to university, if at all. These findings also demonstrate that students will vary in the extent to which they want to disassociate themselves from the various components which make up their personal communities. Some students may want to disassociate more from their family, while others may sacrifice spending time with their friends and dissociate themselves from that community to postpone the separation from their family. Moving back to the point of separation and geographical relocation. In choosing to spend more or less time at home in the weeks leading up to the physical relocation to university, students can begin to psychologically prepare themselves to be geographically distanced from the different components of their personal communities. Different students take a different approach to this; either they spend more time with those close to them while they have the opportunity to, or they begin to distance themselves to make the process of the geographical separation easier.

In addition to the above, the process of separation is not limited to occurring prior to the transition and can continue to take place after students have made the physical transition to university. A key element of this research was to explore how students maintain contact with their personal communities once they have made the physical transition to university and become physically separated from those close to them. The findings revealed variations with the extent to which students separate themselves from the myriad of components which made up their personal communities (i.e. family and friends), and the methods which they use to maintain the relationship. Most notably, there were very distinct variations in how students managed their relationship with their parents, and the extent to which they wished to separate themselves from this part of their personal community. Sara and Serena for example reported to having good relationships with their mums, and had a close connection which they wanted to maintain despite the physical distance. This suggests that some students, while they long to move away from home and gain their independence, they may not wish to separate and disassociate themselves completely from their parents. What is interesting here is the differences between the mediums Sara and Serena chose to

use in maintaining contact. While Sara found that ringing her mum was sufficient to maintain the relationship, Serena preferred to Facetime, particularly at times where she found herself feeling lonely. While both wanted and were able to use technological mediums to maintain their relationship, they differed in their views as to which technological medium offered the best way for this to be achieved. This highlights differences between how, in general, people view technology and its affordances.

In direct contrast to the experiences of Sara and Serena, Greg and Daniel chose to distance themselves further from their mums. While for Greg the lack of contact with his mum was not directly deliberate, it highlights the fact that once students have made the physical transition to university the process of separation and disassociation with past communities in some way comes naturally. It is a natural life course transition to begin to separate oneself from parents both through the transition to university and transition to adulthood, so it is not surprising that Greg found he had to make a conscious effort to maintain contact with his mum. In contrast to this, Daniel was aware that he wanted to separate further from his mum, and expressed that he wanted the maintenance of contact to be on his terms. This further highlights that for some students, the process of separation from their parents can be both a deliberate attempt at maintaining independence and merely a natural part of the transition to adulthood and gaining independence. Furthermore, while this research cannot conclusively say this to be the case, the findings highlight that there may be differences between the extent to which male and female students wish to disassociate themselves from their parents. In addition, as the majority of discussion centred on the students relationships and communication with their mums, these findings are not applicable or transferable to the students relationship with their fathers.

In addition to the differences the students had in frequency of communication with their parents, there were notable differences to the mediums used by the cohort which extend beyond the previously highlighted differences of Sara and Serena. As discussed in Chapter Eight, some of the students in this study used social media as method of maintaining contact with their parents. Inevitably, this meant that there were further variations with the extent to which the students

separated themselves from their parents. For Dean, Facebook provided an opportunity with which he could disassociate himself to an extent from his mum by not having to maintain direct communication all the time, but also provided his mum with an opportunity with which she could keep up to date with what was happening with his life at university. Liam and David appeared to want to disassociate themselves further from their mums, and only utilised Facebook to maintain a line of communication, stating that phone calls were too personal a method to keep in touch. However, in direct contrast to this, some students found that with having their parents as Friends on Facebook, they were not able to separate themselves to the extent they would have desired. For example, Trevor, Lauren and Paul found that they were not able to keep aspects of their life at university that they didn't want their parents to know about secret. These findings suggest that for some students, the process of separation from parents is quite deliberate, and they wish to limit the extent of the knowledge their parents have about their life at university. This is of course, a natural part of the transition to adulthood that students also experience as they transition to university.

Further to this, in the transition to university the separation and disassociation stage students undergo with their parents extends beyond membership of the communities of the past (which includes changes to the nature of the relationship and frequency of communication). The support parents give also changes through the period of transition. A central theme of the students relationship with their parents was the support that some of the student's parents had given them both in the weeks leading up to their transition to university, and once they had transitioned. Most notably, the participants of this study placed high levels of recognition on the financial support their parents had given them, in particular Jack and Bethany expressing that they would not have been able to manage the transition to university without continued financial support from their parents. This interestingly highlights the varying degrees to which student separate themselves from their parents; they may step back with frequency of communication, but can still rely on their parents for support they cannot yet provide for themselves (i.e. financial stability). This research has thus highlighted that the relationships students have with their parents during the transition to university are highly complex and individualised.

Similar to the variations in the extent to which the students separated from their parents, there were distinct variations among the participant cohort with the extent to which they separated and disassociated with their friends after they had made the physical transition to university. While some students made an effort to keep in contact with their friends on a regular basis in an attempt to keep the relationship sustained, other students appeared more relaxed with their approach to maintaining contact. For example, Alice messaged her friends through Facebook chat everyday while Mike found the frequency of communication with his friends had decreased after the first few days at university. While this research does not comment on the extent to which these individuals had become disassociated with the friend section of their personal communities (i.e. the frequency of communication one has with their friends cannot be directly correlated to the extent to which they have become dissociated and separated from them) it reveals that each student has their own experience and unique way of managing their relationship with their friends once geographically separated. These findings highlight that changes occur in the ways relationships are sustained once individuals have transitioned to university.

An interesting finding from the research was that the students expressed awareness of the fact that the nature of the relationship with their friends was changing, whether that was down to deliberate or accidental separation and disassociation. What was apparent from some of the interviews was that social media provided them a platform with which they could keep up to date with their friends lives, and it was through this that they began to notice changes to the personality of their friends. In their interviews, both John and Lara placed heavy emphasis on the fact that they felt their friends who had also made the transition to university were changing. Both John and Lara struggled to comprehend the dissociation process that their friends were undergoing. This suggests that some students may find it difficult to understand the process of disassociating oneself from past communities once they have transitioned to university, even if they perhaps have also began to disassociate themselves.

9.3 Transition

Moving to exploring millennials experiences of the transition phase of rites of passage. As Tinto writes:

> The second stage of passage, transition, comes during and after that of separation. It is a period of passage between the old and the new, before the full adoption of new norms and patterns of behaviour and after the onset of separation from old ones
>
> (1993: 97)

During the transition stage, many students find themselves in an anomic situation whereby they are 'neither strongly bound to the past nor yet firmly tied to the future' (Tinto, 1993: 97). As discussed in Chapter Eight, some of the participants in this study experienced difficulties in adjusting to life at university once they had made the physical transition, both with the social and academic spheres of university. The struggles experienced led to two of these students considering dropping out of university. For Bethany, it was that she had struggled to develop strong social connections with the people she lived on a corridor with in halls of residence. She had found herself in an anomic situation whereby she was physically separated from the members of her personal community at home, and had not yet developed her community to include members from the student university community. The question of whether Bethany's struggle to make friends with the people she lived with was due the fact that her past had not adequately prepared her for the future (as what Tinto offers as an explanation as to why individuals may experience anomie during the transition) cannot be answered. I am unable to speculate the exact reasons behind why Bethany found it difficult to make friends as university, however, her story confirms the findings of previous research that in order for students to experience a successful transition, they must undergo the process of renegotiating their networks of social support on entering university, particularly with regard to friendships (Mackie, 2001). Furthermore, due to the timing of the interviews, in Bethany's case it is impossible to speculate whether her troubles were temporary due to the period of transition, or whether she struggled with the process of incorporation into the university community. Her experience however does highlight that the experience of anomie during the transition can be particularly stressful and isolating, and can cause students to consider leaving university. This is

not to say that every student who experiences anomie during their transition will drop out, or even consider it, but it does pose a very real threat to their happiness and security at university.

A key part of an individual's transition to adulthood is them becoming more responsible for themselves and redefining their existing social relationships with those around them. While some early research traditionally tended to place focus on the visible and formal markers of adulthood (Mortimer, 2000; Shanahan, 2000; Hogan and Astone, 1996), it has been recognised that in recent years the transition to adulthood has changed dramatically in substance, and an individual's status as adult can no longer be predicted on the basis of age alone (Mortimer, 2000; Buchmann, 1989; Arnett, 2000). As such, for millennials, the transition to adulthood has become increasingly complex and nonlinear (Thomson et al, 2002; Jones and Bell, 2000). As the students in this research began their separation from the communities of the past, they also began to separate themselves from their position within the family as adolescent. As they began the transition to life at university (both physical and psychological), they simultaneously began to transition further from adolescence into adulthood. While the students in this study had not become fully incorporated into the university when the interview for this research took place, they had begun this process. Furthermore, in moving out of the family home and becoming more independent, the students had begun their incorporation into adulthood.

As identified in Chapter Four, previous research has demonstrated the importance of social support for transitioning students. From a review of the literature, while the relationships students have with their parents have a significant impact on how students experience adjustment to life at university; it could be argued that friends play a more significant role. While parents can aid their children in being prepared for the transition and ultimately the challenges they face, once at university students are more likely to rely on the social support given to them in the form of friendships they make with other students. For students who leave home to attend university, during the transition they have to inevitably not only renegotiate their existing networks of social support, but build new networks of support within the university institution. As previous research has identified, students generally build these connections through halls of residence, and less

commonly through their course and sports and societies. For the students in this study, social media provided an opportunity for students to begin to engage with the process of making friends with fellow students prior to their physical transition to university. Once they had received their offer letter for halls of residence accommodation, every student in this study used Facebook in an attempt to build social connections with other students who would be living in close proximity to them within the halls of residence. The ability to be able to develop social connections prior to their physical relocation enabled some of the students in this research to feel more confident about their transition.

As Attains (1989) acknowledges, the nature of an individual's transition to university also rests on the extent to which students have begun the process of transition prior to formal entry. In this research, it was prominent for students to have begun their period of transition and incorporation into the social spheres of life at university by using social media as a tool through which to develop social connections with other students prior the physical relocation to university. In addition to this, some students had attempted to connect with their departments to learn more about their course before moving to university, with limited success. Beyond this, several students recognised that it would be useful for departments to connect with new students via social media pages, and that this could help students with their knowledge development with regards to the department, staff and course prior to moving to university. While students had more success in beginning the process of entering the social sphere of university prior to moving, the findings of this research reveal that some students are open to beginning their process of transition into the academic side of university life prior to geographical relocation, however small that transition may be. In Chapter Seven, the participant cohorts opinions with regards to their university's official social media presence were discussed. Every student in this study held the view that social media platforms provided universities with an opportunity to engage with their students on a more personal level outside of the prominent mediums mainly used (i.e. university website and email). While these findings on one level demonstrate that millennial students expect universities to have a social media presence, it also highlights the unique opportunity that social media platforms provide for student

engagement with their university, and then ultimately their incorporation into academic spheres of the university.

9.4 Incorporation

The psychological transition to university is one which begins to take place in the months and weeks leading up the actual physical relocation. As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, participants discussions of the period prior to the physical transition predominantly centred around feelings of anxiety about living in a new place, making new friends and being unsure what to expect (both socially and academically). However, what became clear from the interviews was that every participant had in some way began their adjustment to university life before the physical transition. While this included visiting the university and/or city, much of the pre physical transition adjustment took place online with participants undertaking internet based research on the university and local area, joining both official and unofficial university Facebook groups, and establishing social media relationships with other students (both other soon to be 'freshers' and current students). The interview data revealed that social media played a significant role in allowing participants to begin their psychological adjustment to university life.

Incorporation into life at university can be a difficult process. As Read et al (2003: 96) identify "even before students have attended their first lecture or attempted their first essay, they will have begun the process of confronting and negotiating the (largely unwritten) 'rules of the game' of university life". During this stage, many students take advantage of the multiple opportunities available to them by trying out various lifestyles, developing new ideas and extending the period of self-exploration (Sherrod et al, 1993). While for some students, incorporation into university life comes easy, for other students this process can be a struggle. The review of the literature pertaining to friendship in Chapter Three highlighted the significance of the relationship. As demonstrated, friends have the ability to impact and influence happiness, provide support, and ultimately are significantly important throughout the life course due to the social functions they provide. Mackie (1998) in his research found that the students who had dropped out of university had generally failed to socially integrate, and this was partly due to both difficulties in making friends and

homesickness. Further research by Thomas (2002) demonstrated that the development of new social networks at university often provided support for students to overcome difficulties such as homesickness. Wilcox et al (2006) further suggested that the transition to university is a complex process, one which requires the student to negotiate between the life they have left behind at home (e.g. family, friends) and the new life they have ahead of them. This is ultimately part of the complex process of students finding their place (ibid). Thus, it is no surprise that friends played an important role in the lives of the students in this study as they became incorporated into life at university.

The majority of the students in this study developed social connections with people they lived with in halls of residence. Within the discussions on the desire and decision to attend university and aspects of university life which the students were looking forward to, a strive for independence and separation from parents and the family home emerged as a central theme. The students in this study, pre-transition, identified halls of residence as a space whereby this desire could be met, but also as a place whereby they thought they would be easily incorporated into university life. Making compatible friendships in their halls of residence led many of the students in this study to feel at ease and at home at university. However, for Bethany, making friends in her halls of residence was not a fruitful experience, and this led her to consider dropping out of university. This further highlights that incorporation into university is dependent on students being incorporated in the social spheres of university, but halls of residence does not necessarily guarantee incorporation.

An interesting finding from the research was that while the students used a variety of methods to communicate with their friends from home post-physical transition, there was a trend in preference for the use of social media communication platforms to 'keep up to date' with their friends, and then use phone calls and texts to engage in more personal one-to-one communication. This provides further evidence towards the assessment that social media has infiltrated the lives of its users and changes the way individuals communicate with one another. For the students in this study, as they began to incorporated into university life, they used social media, phone calls and text message to remain incorporated into their friendships with people from home. Thus, this

demonstrates that students do not wish to completely disassociate themselves from the past once they have physically transitioned to university. Instead, to varying degrees, they wish to be incorporated into both relationship spheres. However, while social media provided the students in this study the opportunity to remain incorporated into their friendships from home, the students were also aware of the pros and cons of the medium. For example, several students referred to situations where they had rang they friends after 'profile browsing' their Facebook accounts in order to have a more personal conversation with them about what they had seen. This suggests that the practice of 'profile browsing' does not provide a medium through which transitioning students can remain fully incorporated into their friendships from home due to the lack of personal communication. While previous research has reflected that social networking sites that facilitate interpersonal relationships have been linked to indicators of well-being (e.g. Acock and Hulbert, 1993; Perry and Pescosolido, 2010), research into the intimate nature of friendships has suggested that face-to-face friendship are more intimate than online communications (Haider-Yassine, 2002). This would suggests that online communications, whilst they can be beneficial for friendships, can perhaps not offer the conditions for friendship needed in order for said relationship to be intimate in nature. This can be seen through the students use of phone calls and text message (in addition to their use of Facebook) to remain connected with their friends from home post-physical transition.

While some students faced difficulty renegotiating their social support networks and personal communities, others struggled to meet the demands in the academic sphere of university. The nature of the learning environment of university and explanations as to why first year students may experience problems have been well researched within the fields of education, sociology and psychology. Such research has demonstrated that students may struggle to adapt to the new environment of independence and self-motivation (Winn, 2002; Prescott and Simpson, 2004). In this research, Alice and Daniel in struggled with the amount of reading they were having to do for their courses, and in Daniel's case in particular, he had not been expecting the amount of work university would entail. Similarly, Zach found the leap from A Level study to degree level study

particularly challenging. This raises interesting questions as to whether A Levels adequately prepare students for meeting the demands of university education.

9.5 What Does This Thesis Add to van Gennep's *Les rites de passage*?

For millennials transitioning to university, the separation stage is perhaps the most complex period. As argued throughout this thesis, the transition to university should not be read in isolation to the other changes that simultaneously take place in students life as they prepare to transition to university. During this time, students are also beginning to separate themselves from the family home, their personal communities, past identity as learner, and their adolescent identity. This separation from adolescence into autonomous adulthood does not however happen instantaneously. Instead, as van Gennep identified, the period is made of multiple rituals designed to allow individuals to make their way through. For millennial students transitioning to university most notably these rituals include undertaking both practical and psychological preparations for the transition. These preparations allow students to begin their separation. In addition parents play an important role in this process. While the strive for independence comes naturally for the individual, they may not have the ability to carry out the passage on their own. Thus, both practical and social support from parents is required within the period of separation.

During the period of transition, individuals begin to interact with new members of the community they are to become a member of. As can be seen from the findings of this research, for millennials transitioning to university, this happens in two stages: using social media to develop connections with others students prior to the physical transition and the physical transition itself. The process of using social media to develop connections meant that some students felt more settled about making the physical transition to university. This further demonstrates that the transition stage is both a psychological and physical transition.

The third and final stage of rites of passage involves individuals becoming incorporated and accepted into the group and taking on their new roles. As the findings of this study demonstrate, the incorporation period is a process which can take several weeks and months for students. While

some students feel at home instantly once they have made the physical transition, others are still simultaneously experiencing the stages of separation and psychological transition. Ultimately, during the transition to university, students experience multiple transitions in their lives. As identified within the literature review, the transition out of the family home, transition to a new academic environment and overarching transition to adulthood which is occurring in the lives of students can present multiple challenges. The findings of this research demonstrate that millennials transition to higher education should not be read as a singular transition, and that in order to understand how students experience the stages of separation, transition, and incorporation, the transitions must be read in conjunction to one another rather than in isolation.

9.6 Final Thoughts

The findings of this research demonstrate that, during the transition to university, millennials are using social media as a tool through to negotiate their interpersonal relationships with both their peers and the university institution. For young people who move away to attend university, living in halls of residence during the first year has become part of the 'package experience' of university. It is perhaps no surprise then that once the students in this study received their accommodation offer from their universities, they used social media to try and build connections with other students who would be living in the same halls of residence.

The findings of this research ultimately demonstrate the complexity of students experiences of the transition to university. In preparing for life at university, participants dealt with both the practical and emotional factors to have impacted the nature of their transition. Twentieth and twenty-first technological changes, most notably the development of social media platforms, have led to developments in how individuals negotiate their journey to higher education. In this chapter I have discussed how van Gennep's theory remains a valuable framework within which to describe and understand millennials transitions to higher education. Its utility is evident at a number of both individual and collective levels and in conclusion, these are briefly mapped.

The notion that rites of passage take place over three phases of separation, transition and incorporation allows a critical discussion of millennial's transition to higher education. For the students in this study, the process of separation from their previous status began in the weeks leading up to the physical relocation to university, signalling the impending reality that they were soon to be a first year university student. The transition phase was a phase which began prior to and extended beyond the student's geographical relocation to university. In particular, this began with the students using social media to begin their knowledge development of the university, and begin their process of developing social connections with fellow transitioning students. Their experience during this transition phase was one of complete changes to both the physical and social structures of their lives and was characterised by both excitement and nerves. During the phase of incorporation, the students adjusted to their new roles as university students, semi-independent adults, and managed the changes to their networks of social support which came with the transition. This chapter has demonstrated that while the experiences of millennials transitioning to university may be the same as previous generations, social media has developed the ways in which student negotiate the separation, transition and incorporation phases of the rites of passage.

Chapter Ten
Conclusion to the Research

10.1 Introduction

This thesis has explored the experiences of UK-based millennial undergraduate students as they transitioned to higher education and the findings presented are based on in-depth interviews which took place between the students 5th and 9th week of their autumn semester at university. The rationale for this study centred on the notion that as the transition to university in the twenty-first century is being undertaken by increasing numbers of students, it was necessary to build theory of student's rites of passage into higher education which takes into consideration the changes in societal structure. Therefore, within this research I sought to map and unpack some of the key elements which make up student transitions to higher education, and used these to develop a theory of the rites of passage of millennials as they transition to higher education. I begin this chapter by revisiting the research questions, before moving on to discuss the key findings of this research in relation to the broader implications it has for future research and practice in the field. Within this I discuss the usefulness of theoretically approaching the students in this research from a generational perspective, and in particular focus on the exact effect that the rise of social media communication technologies has had on their day-to-day lives. Further to this, I discuss the students interpersonal relationships during the period of transition, and the implications this has for the usefulness of approaching these relationships in the context of 'personal communities' (Pahl, 2000). Finally, I discuss the importance of taking a holistic approach to the study of undergraduate student transitions by recognising the simultaneous transitions students experience.

10.2 Revisiting the Research Questions

As an exploratory study, this research did not seek to find definitive answers to the research questions. Rather, the research questions were designed to provide the study with focus, and were useful in providing direction to begin exploring the experiences of millenials as they transition to

university. In this section I therefore revisit each of the research questions, assessing the extent to which how the key findings of the research answer the questions.

Research Question 1: What preparations do millennials make for the transition to university?

It is without doubt that multiple transitions make up a students' transition to university, predominantly the following: home to university; change in academic environments; transition from adolescence to adulthood; changes to the structure of personal communities and interpersonal relationships. What became apparent in this study is that, with the exception of change in academic environments, students undertake various preparations in order to successfully manage each strand of transition. These preparations were both practical and psychological in nature and there are variations between students who are organised weeks in advance and students who leave this process until the 'last minute'.

The transition out of the family home into student halls of residence is arguably one of the key aspects of the transition to university for students where geographical relocation is involved. As previous research has demonstrated, a successful transition to university is dependent on students being able to successfully negotiate the semi-independent nature of halls of residence. Therefore, it is not surprising that students undertake significant practical and emotional preparations in anticipation of their move. The fact that many students emotionally prepare themselves for the transition is a key finding of this study, and demonstrates that young people have a sophisticated understanding of the nature of the transition. Each of the students were aware that their transition to university would bring an onset of adult responsibilities, responsibilities which many of them had yet to begin managing. The importance of students undertaking these preparations should not be diminished, as they had a significant impact on the student's experiencing a successful transition. The findings of this research support the theoretical contribution offered by Eccles and Gootman (2002) who argued that young people during their transition to adulthood begin to forward think about their future, and undertake the necessary steps to pursue those plans. In making preparations for their transition to university, many of the students in this study were beginning to prepare themselves for the onset of adult responsibilities in a mature manner.

In addition to making preparations for the onset of semi-independence, the students also began to prepare themselves for changes in the structure of their social lives that geographically relocating to university would bring. Preparations between this students were also mixed, with some students choosing to spend more time at home in the weeks before their move, and other students choosing to spend more time with their friends. Regardless of their approach, this demonstrates that although students predominantly approach the transition to university with excitement, students are also aware that they will miss the current structure of their social lives at home. However, due to the prominent role that social media plays in the lives of the students, they were also aware that they would be able to maintain their relationships after the transition. This makes the millennial generation unique in that they are the first generation of students transitioning to university who are able to maintain a sophisticated level of contact with their parents, friends and peers after their geographical relocation to university. Technological advances such as Whatsapp, Snapchat, Facebook Messenger and Facetime allow perpetual connectivity.

Finally, this research revealed that very few students prepare for a change in academic environments before they transition to university despite the fact that previous research has highlighted that the change in academic environments for new undergraduate students can present new undergraduate students with a variety of challenges (Kember, 2001; Winn, 2002; Prescott and Simpson, 2004). Most notably, the students in this study dedicated their time to preparing themselves for the imminent changes to the structure of their personal communities that the transition to university would bring.

Tinto (1987) determined that in order for students to successfully adjust to university life they must adjust to both the academic and social spheres of the university. Within the current literature there is broad consensus that the transition to university is one which is challenging. The findings of this research reveal that the process of undertaking preparations prior to the physical geographical relocation to university can aid students greatly in their ability to adapt and meet the demands of university life. The students in this study had undertaken significant preparations for their life at university. It was these preparations that enabled them to begin separating themselves from their

lives at home, and also begin their psychological transition and incorporation into life at university. The practical and emotional preparations the students made can therefore be understood as rituals which enable students to successfully transition into higher education and adulthood.

Research Question 2: What role do parents play for students transitioning to university, and what support do they give?

There has been much previous research which has highlighted the significant role parents play in the provision of support for transitioning students. Students having good relationships with their parents can contribute to psychological wellbeing and adjustment at university (Berman and Sperling, 1991; Wintre and Yaffe, 2000), and most students have a tendency to describe their relationship with their parents positively (Kenny, 1987). This research highlighted that for many students, parents provide a significant amount of support prior to the physical transition, and continue to provide support once the initial transition out of the family home has taken place.

For many of the students who participated in this study, leaving home brought with it a perceived sense of freedom as their transition to university would bring with it a shift in their relationship with their parents which they so desired. As Eccles and Gootman (2002) identify, developing adolescents experience a shift in their relationships with their parents from subordination to one which reflects the maturing status of the adolescent. However, parents still continue to provide young people support as they transition into adulthood, but this can range from emotional to financial support (Zarrett and Eccles, 2006). For the students in this study, parents provided a mix of emotional and financial support for their children, dependent upon the needs and desires of their child. Most notable however was the provision of financial support that parents gave. The majority of the students in this research expressed appreciation for the financial support their parents had given them during the preparations for the student's transition to university. As recognised by Arnett (2000), during emerging adulthood, individual's lives are characterised by increasing autonomy and exploration of adult roles. This period also brings with it increasing responsibility for one's own decisions and financial well-being (Arnett, 1998; Shanahan, 2000). However, the

findings from this research suggest that, during the transition to university a student's increasing autonomy with regards to their responsibility for their own financial well-being could well be delayed. These findings echo with Goldschieder and Goldschieder (1999) who argued that the period of transition to university is characterised by semi-autonomy. The students were reliant on their parents for some things and not for others, and each student had a varying level of dependence on their parents through the period. While, this raises the question as to the extent to which transitioning students are dependent on their parents for financial support, within this research, this cannot be answered

It is without a doubt that parents play a critical role in both their child's transition to adulthood and transition to university. Research by Kenny (1987) found that the majority of first year university students describe their relationships in a positive manner, and the findings of this research concur with this interpretation. However, findings from this research indicate that there may be differences between male and female students with regards to their motivation and frequency of keeping in contact with their parents once they have transitioned to university. A limitation of this research is that it did not seek to compare to directly compare the experiences of male and female students, so the significance of this finding is unclear. More research in this area is therefore necessary in order to confirm whether there are in fact differences between male and female students and their parents during the transition to university. Further to this, student discussions on their communication with their parents predominantly centred on mums. It is not the aim of this research to speculate the personal circumstances of the personal students who took part in this research. However, an area of future research could possibly centre on who students maintain the most contact with, and reasons as to why that may be.

Previous research has demonstrated the importance of social support in a general context (e.g. House and Umberson, 1980; House, 1981). During the transition to university, whilst students inevitably have to undertake a negotiation of their support networks, it is evident that parents continue to play a significant role in the provision of social support. Many of the students in this study demonstrated a sophisticated awareness that their successful transition was in some part due

to the support their parents had given them, and knew that their parents were there to continue providing support if and when they needed it. The findings of this research therefore demonstrate that during the transition to university, and indeed adulthood, while the parent/child dynamic can be diverse and subject to change, it still continues to be important. In order for students to experience a successful transition to university, many students rely on the social support provided by their parents, demonstrating the important role they continue to play in their child's life.

Research Question 3: What role do social media platforms play, if any, in the process of millennial students making friends as university?

A central finding of this research relates to the students active use of Facebook prior to their physical transition to university both to develop their knowledge on the university and to search for fellow students who would be attending the same institution. In previous research student halls of residence have been long recognised as one of the primary places where first year undergraduate students start to develop their friendship networks at university (Christie et al, 2002). For previous generations of students, the process of starting to build their network of contacts in halls of residence would begin once they had made their physical relocation to university. The students in this study began to develop social connections with other students prior to their physical relocation to university using Facebook, and for many of these students, this made the process of making the physical transition to university easier. All of the students in this study used groups which been created for specific halls of residence to search for students who they would be living in close proximity to. While these relationships did not necessarily develop into friendships once they were at university, it allowed students to begin the process of socialising online with other students. However, while social media played a significant role, the opportunity for students to develop friendships at university was not limited to the use of social media and once at university, the students mainly built up their social connections and friendships through their halls of residence, and to a limited extent their courses and sports societies.

The cohort of students who participated in this research were at the forefront of technological advancements as they were growing up. It has been argued that the growth in internet mediated communication has dramatically altered the ways in which young people use media (Montgomery and Gottlieb-Robles, 2006). While the findings of this study demonstrate that young people have a strong relationship with technology and this has altered the ways in which they manage their interpersonal relationships, the findings of this study reveal that this relationship is one which is sophisticated. The students in this study were aware of the advantages and disadvantages of sustaining relationships using social media platforms, and adjusted their actions to ensure that they were able to maintain their close relationships accordingly. So while social media provides millennial students with the opportunity to begin building their social connections as university prior to their geographical relocation, the development of these relationship is still very much dependent on physical space and place.

Research Question 4: What role, if any, do social media platforms play in the sustaining of students relationship with their parents and friends from home once they have transitioned to university?

Facebook was used as a central medium by the students in their first few weeks to maintain contact with their friends from home, though the frequency of this contact slowly decreased in their first few weeks. It was common for the participants to engage in 'profile browsing' of their friends Facebook accounts to maintain knowledge of their lives, and following this, some students followed this up with another medium of communication to maintain in direct contact. A central finding of this research however is the difference in how students manage their friendships in comparison to their romantic relationships. Nearly all of the students in this study who were in a romantic relationship when they transitioned to university had made some form commitment and plan on how they would keep in touch with their partner. Previous research has suggested that during the transition to adulthood, individuals become more likely to place focus on their romantic relationships at the expense of friendships (Collins and Laursen, 2000, 2004). Given this previous research finding, it is perhaps not surprising that the students in this research placed more emphasis

and importance on ensuring the successful maintenance of their romantic relationships in comparison to their friendships.

There was a mix in the student cohort between the student who used Facebook as medium through which to maintain contact with their parents, and this was viewed both positively and negatively. For some of the female students, Facebook did not provide the opportunity engage in personal and meaningful interaction they wished to have with their mums. While there were two students who used only Facebook as a medium to maintain with their contact with their parents, other students recognised that Facebook provided their parents with an opportunity to gain information on their life at university, and for some, this was an invasion of the privacy and separation they wished to have from their parents. Due to the affordances of the platform, their parents were able to see aspects of their life at university which they were trying to 'hide'. Traditionally, secrecy is associated with having something to hide, something which is shameful or even bad (Bok, 1989). However, for adolescents, secrecy has particular importance in that it begins to facilitate the second individuation process, which is ultimately a developmental task which lies at the heart of adolescence (Blos, 1979; Erikson, 1959; Steinberg and Silverberg, 1986). It is also likely that individuals increase their skills with secrecy with increasing age and experience (Buhrmester, 1990). Thus it no surprise that upon transition to adulthood and university, students desire to keep secrets from their parents.

10.3 The Opportunities and Affordances of Social Media

The findings of this study demonstrate that the development of social media platforms has had a profound impact on the ways in which young people maintain their interpersonal relationships once they have transitioned to university. The frequency of this communication differs from students to student, but allows a variation in communicative activities to take place (i.e. one-to-one chat, group chat, sharing photos and videos). However, while it would appear that social media provides a positive opportunity for students to remain connected, it also can have negative effects due to the fact that social media has the opportunity to alter notions of privacy. For example, many of the students in this research commented that they were worried that their parents or partners would see

incriminating information about them on Facebook. The findings of this research suggest that while social media is a useful tool in enabling young people to maintain social connections, it should be used with care. The majority of the students in this study demonstrated a sophisticated awareness of the benefits and disadvantages to maintaining social connections using social media.

The findings of this study also demonstrate that social media can be useful in providing transitioning students with the opportunity to build social connections with other students prior to their physical geographical relocation to university. However, whilst it provides this opportunity, face-to-face contact remains most important in the development of social relationships. While all of the students in this study used social media to develop connections with other students in their halls of residence before they moved, the development of these relationships was still contextually dependent on place and space. The friendship connections that the students developed in the first weeks of university began within halls of residence, courses and societies, and the student's socialisation patterns were predominantly built around group events such as nights out. This demonstrates that while social media may have had a profound impact on how young people maintain their relationships, relationship development (particularly in its early stages) is still negotiated in and reliant upon face-to-face interaction.

10.4 Approaching and Understanding Transitions

This study placed focus on gaining an in-depth understanding of millennial student transitions to higher education in the age of social media. Previous research in the field (e.g. Pittman and Richmond, 2008) suggested that the transition to university is traditionally characterised by multiple changes and transitional periods, including but not limited to: changes in living arrangements and academic environments, changes to friendship networks, and a requirement for increased responsibility for both their personal and academic lives. Therefore, at the beginning of this research I made the decision to explore each of these changes in connection to one another. As the research progressed, it became clear that young people transitioning to university experience and attempt to deal with these changes simultaneously, and in each strand of change their narratives

suggested that they were in between two states, and therefore in a period of transition. This led me to conceptualise the period as being characterised by simultaneous transitions..

The findings revealed that the transition to university begins weeks before the physical relocation, during which time students undertake both practical and emotional preparations. The experiences of the students in this research chimed with the findings of previous studies whereby student attempt to integrate themselves within both the academic and social spheres of university life (Tinto, 1987). While there was a general sense of excitement across the interview cohort, some student did experience problems once they had transitioned to university in developing their social connections and managing the academic demands of university life. Ultimately this research demonstrates that the transition to university for young people is a complex process. Rituals such as psychological and emotional preparations can help students to successfully negotiate the transitionary period.

10.5 Personal Communities: Student's Negotiation of their Support Networks

This research raises some interesting questions with regards to the conceptualisation of personal communities. As Spencer and Pahl conclude:

> Although we have evidence to show that there is some blurring of boundaries between friends and family, it is important to remember that personal communities vary widely in the extent to which family and friends play distinct or overlapping roles. At one extreme there are highly specialized personal communities with a clear demarcation of roles, so people interact with friends and family in very different ways. By contrast, at the other extreme there are highly suffused communities with some family members and friends that play similar roles. Between these two extremes are cases where friends exclusively play certain roles, or cases where it is family members who fulfil certain functions, while others may be shared.

(2004: 215)

Taking this into consideration, we can assess that transitioning students personal communities have a clear demarcation of roles. The students' narratives in this study demonstrated the distinct difference for young people between their parents and friends, with each playing a 'traditional' role in the lives of the students. While it is possible that the parent/child relationship can experience a shift in its functionality (i.e. the parent/child relationships has the potential to develop into friendship) it is likely that this process occurs (if at all) once young people have matured and developed into adults themselves. Regardless of this, personal communities remain a useful concept to broadly explore the relationships that are important to people at any given time, without ascribing expectations on these relationships. This is similar in approach to Spencer and Pahl who approached the concept in their research in the following manner:

> Rather than beginning with assumptions about the relative significance of family or
>
> non-family, we set about identifying and exploring the set of active and significant ties
>
> in which people were embedded

(2004: 204)

By approaching students interpersonal relationships with an open mind, I was able to ascertain in this study that during the transition to university, parents and friends do in fact play distinct roles, and each provide the 'traditional' support expected during this time. Ultimately young people's relationships with those around them are incredibly complex, and the transition to university has the potential to being a significant amount of changes to these relationships. By broadly using the concept of 'personal communities', in this research I was able to explore the students close and important interpersonal relationships without predetermined ideas and notions about the nature of these relationships. During the transition to university both parents and friends are important in the provision of social support. For the students in this study to experience a successful transition, they required social support from both and a negotiation of both of these networks was necessary. Both of these relationships therefore play fundamentally important roles for transitioning students.

10.6 Methodological Limitations of the Research and Lessons

The data collection methods used for this research were designed to generate an insight into the experiences of millenials as they transition to university, relying on the students narratives of their transitional period. Given this, there were a number of limitations of this research project. This section provides a discussion of these limitations, which may have implications on the validity of the research.

Participant Criteria

As discussed in Chapter Five, a rigid participant criterion was chosen for this research. As the literature review chapters demonstrate, undergraduate students experiences of the transition to university are dependent on a number of complexities, including but not limited to: the age students are when they enter higher education; and the geographical location of home. In order to be able to view the cohort as a somewhat homogenous group, the criteria were decided upon and enforced during participant recruitment. Therefore, this does have implications for the applicability of the findings outside of students who fit outside of the participant criteria. Most notably therefore, the experiences of international students, mature students and commuter students have not been represented in this research.

Sampling

The samples of students used in the study were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling, and were not a representative sample of the population from which they came. This is always a consideration when conducting research with a large population to potentially sample from. Unless participants come from a finite student population there is no way to achieve true representativeness. However, this research does not attempt to generalise about all transitioning students, but to use the rich and deep data which arose from the interviews to provide a picture of UK-based students experiences of the transition to university. The sample of students used in this research is also relatively small with thirty-four interviews, but it is possible that the results which were obtained are broadly generalisable to similar students in the UK.

Timing of the Interviews

A key aspect of this research centred on discussion of participants preparations for life at university prior their relocation. The participants of this study were interviewed between the fifth and eighth week of the Autumn semester of their first year at university. Participants had therefore given retrospective accounts about their pre-transition preparations. The time chosen timing of these interviews could affect the generalizability, validity and applicability of the data gathered. It is possible that interviewing students retrospectively about their pre-transition preparations may have an impact/effect on the answer they gave.

Reliance on Students Narratives

As this research wished to place focus on the experiences of the students, interviews were only conducted with students and not with their wider personal communities. This has implications for reliability of the data as is it solely reliant on the student's narratives. Therefore, the key findings with regards to the role that parents played in the students transitions and their narratives of their use of social media to maintain contact with their personal communities could be called into question. However, many research projects rely on one-perspective narratives, and given the fact that the students in this research study all had broadly similar experiences, we can view their narratives as being representative of the truth.

Centrality of Facebook Within the Discussions

An element of this research was to investigate the use of social media by the students to maintain contact with their personal communities after the physical transition to university. Discussion predominantly centred around their use of Facebook. While this could be because they mainly utilised Facebook as a social media medium, it could also because they got caught up in merely discussing the site. Therefore, while discussions centred predominantly centred on Facebook, it cannot be assumed that this was the sole platform students used to maintain contact with their personal communities.

10.7 Contribution to Knowledge

This research sought to explore UK-based first year transitions to university, and students' use of social media to negotiate their support networks through this period. While the subject of transitions to university is well-researched, nonetheless this study contributes to the body of knowledge in existence in a number of ways.

Much of the research into first year transitions to university has predominantly come from North America. While there are a number of studies which have utilised a UK-based sample, these have tended to focus more on student's academic integration into university life, the effect of gender and other diversity variables on the transitional experience, and on the creation of specific university cultures. Much of this research has also been quantitative in nature. As this utilised a UK-based sample and undertook a qualitative approach, it therefore contributes to this under-studied area within the literature. In addition to this, research goes some ways towards supporting previous arguments made by DeAndrea (2012) and Ellison et al (2007) that social media can be used by transitioning students to aid and perhaps ease the transitional period.

The experiences of the participants of this study suggest that social media is increasingly becoming an important and instrumental tool in aiding student to begin developing their social support networks prior to the transition to university, and renegotiate and maintain their existing support networks from their home environment. The central research finding of this research, and therefore contribution to knowledge, lies in the application of van Gennep's rites of passage to this research. As Chapter Nine demonstrated, social media has evolved the ways in which millennial students negotiate their interpersonal relationships during the transitional period to university, which in turns affects how they experiences the stages of separation, transition and incorporation. To date, the most prominent and critically acclaimed application of van Gennep's rites of passage to student transitions comes from Tinto. However, as demonstrated throughout the discussion chapter, while Tinto's application of the theory is not only culturally but academically significant, it differs from the main purpose of this study in that its main focus is to produce a theory of student departure by

emphasising the importance of social and academic integration, and the institutional commitment of undergraduate students. This research differs in that it did not seek to produce such a theory on student academic and social integration into the university system, not did it wish to focus on student's educational and institutional commitment. Instead, it sought to understand how millennials experience the period of separation, transition, and incorporation, with particular focus on how social media has altered how students experience these stages.

10.8 Suggestions for Further Research

There are a number of areas within this study which could be expanded upon in further research. These include:

- University engagement with students prior to the physical transition to university: an exploration of how universities use social media from a university perspective

- Support in the first few weeks of university: research into the potential of university departments to use social media to support students through the transitionary period and their first few week at university

- How useful is social media as a tool for student union representatives to engage with undergraduate students?

- A longitudinal student of student's experiences of university, from choosing which university to attend through to graduation

- A longitudinal study of student friendships and the effects of such relationships being sustained by social media communications throughout life at university

- An exploration of student transitions to university from the perspective of parents: what fears and worries they have, whether they see their children as being ready to make the transition, how they perceive them as adults, and the effects of them leaving for university on family life at home

10.9 Final Thoughts

This thesis has built on previous research of undergraduate student transition to higher education by exploring how the experiences of millennials transitioning to university differs, or indeed is the same, as previous generations of students. In particular, the thesis has focused on arguing that the infiltration of social media into everyday life has altered the ways in which students manage their personal communities during the transitionary period. The central theme throughout this research has been that the transition to university is one which is complex and requires some skill and thought for students to be able to successfully navigate the transition. The findings demonstrate that social media is a key tool with which student begin to develop their social connections prior to the physical relocation, and that the transitionary period is unique for each student.

For students making the transition to university, a successful transition is not dependent on the successful renegotiation or management of one set of relationships. Instead, as this thesis has demonstrated, parents, friends at home, and friends at university all play a central role in a student's experience of the transition to university. As this research has demonstrated, the personal communities of undergraduate students are made up of a network of components. Further to this, the transition to university cannot be read as a singular transition. For young people the transition to university results is multiplex. Transitioning student have to manage multiple transitions and multiple relationships. This results in a complex web of negotiations which students have to work their way through.

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Appendix A Diary Template

Briefly describe how you use social media

Do you think that friendships can be sustained using social media, and why?

Why did you choose to come to university?

What have been the main challenges you have experienced at university?

Did you make and preparations before you came to university?

Have you joined any sports or societies?

How have you found your course so far?

Appendix B Research Site Information

Keele University

Keele University (officially known as the University of Keele) is located approximately 3 miles from Newcastle-under-Lyme, Staffordshire, England. Keele has approximately 10,000 registered students, comprised of approximately 8,000 undergraduate and 2,000 postgraduate students. In 2014, 2015 and 2016, Keele was ranked 1st for student satisfaction in the National Student Survey (NSS). Keele has five student halls of residence on the campus which provide accommodation for approximately 70% of students.

Manchester Metropolitan University

Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) is located in Manchester, England. MMU has approximately 32,000 registered students comprising of 26,000 undergraduate and 6,000 postgraduate students. MMU comprises of 2 campuses: All Saints Campus and Cheshire Campus. MMU has seven student halls of residence and four partner student halls of residence.

Appendix C Interview Schedule

- Use of social media on a daily basis?

  o Explore the following in probing questions:

    - Contact with friends

    - Parents and extended family on social media

    - How has this changed over time

- Support from parents during the transition to university

  o Explore the following in probing questions:

    - Financial/ emotional support

    - Pre/ post physical transition

- Experience of the transition to adulthood

  o Explore the following in probing questions:

    - Negotiation of independence

    - Relationship with parents/ changes to this relationship

- Choice of higher education

  o Explore the following in probing questions:

    - Choice of university

    - Choice of halls of residence

    - Influences on these decisions

- Life at University

  o Explore the following in probing questions

    - Problems experience

    - Relationship with parents/ friends at home

Appendix D Confirmation of Ethical Approval from Keele University

Dear Maria,

Re: Friendship formations in the internet generation: New undergraduate student use of social media in their transition to university life

Thank you for submitting your application for review. I am pleased to inform you that your application has been approved by the Ethics Review Panel. The following documents have been reviewed and approved by the panel as follows:

Document	Version	Date
Summary of Proposal	1.1	23/01/14
Letters of Invitation	1.1	23/01/14
Information Sheets	1.1	23/01/14
Consent Forms	1.1	23/01/14
Interview Schedule	1.0	23/10/13
Online Survey	1.0	23/10/13

The panel also notes that approval from Manchester Metropolitan University is still outstanding and so fieldwork at this location cannot take place till this is gained.

If the fieldwork goes beyond the date stated in your application, you must notify the Ethical Review Panel via the ERP administrator at uso.erps@keele.ac.uk stating ERP1 in the subject line of the e-mail.

If there are any other amendments to your study you must submit an 'application to amend study' form to the ERP administrator stating ERP1 in the subject line of the e-mail. This form is available via http://www.keele.ac.uk/researchsupport/researchethics/

If you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact me via the ERP administrator on uso.erps@keele.ac.uk stating ERP1 in the subject line of the e-mail.

Yours sincerely

Heidy

pp

Dr Jackie Waterfield

Chair – Ethical Review Panel

Appendix E Confirmation of Ethical Approval from Manchester Metropolitan University

From: Maria Wain [m.j.wain@keele.ac.uk]
Sent: 25 February 2014 14:19
To: Julie Scott Jones
Subject: Interviews, MMU students and Ethics

Dear Julie,

Following a conversation with Sandra Laws I have been directed to email yourself regarding a query with ethical approval.

I am a PhD student at Keele University and my research project entails the study of undergraduate student transitions and the use of social media (see attached file for more detail). As well as using Keele University undergraduate students as a research cohort, I am proposing to use a second university as an additional case study.

Having indicated to Keele Ethics Review Panel that I wish to involve participants from Manchester Metropolitan University, they have asked me to confirm whether you as an institution are happy to accept Keele's ethical considerations in regards to approaching and interviewing potential participants? Or, would I need to submit for ethical approval with your own ethics committee to interview MMU undergraduate students?

I hope you will be able to advise on this matter.

I look forward to your response.

Maria

Julie Scott Jones <J.Scott@mmu.ac.uk>   26/02/2014
to me

Dear Maria

You would need to seek ethical approval from our AEC, which meets next on the 13th March. To do this you need to send me your Keele ethics documents and all related forms, ie, information sheet, consent forms etc.
best wishes
Julie

Dr Julie Scott Jones
MMU Q-Step Centre Coordinator
Principal Lecturer in Sociology
Manchester Metropolitan University | 403 Geoffrey Manton Building|
Rosamond Street West | M15 6LL | T: 0161247 3003

Office Hours: Monday 12-1 | Tuesday 10-11

Maria Wain <m.j.wain@keele.ac.uk>   27/02/2014
to Julie

Dear Julie,

Thank you for your response. Attached are all my Keele ethics documents, as well as the letter of confirmation of ethical approval from Keele.

Many Thanks

Julie Scott Jones <J.Scott@mmu.ac.uk>   23/03/2014
to me

Dear Maria

I am happy to accept Keele's ethical approval for this and to confirm that your submission to the Keele ethics committee also complies with MMU's ethical framework. Interesting looking work; good luck with your research.
best wishes
Julie

Dr Julie Scott Jones
MMU Q-Step Centre Coordinator
Principal Lecturer in Sociology
Manchester Metropolitan University | 403 Geoffrey Manton Building|
Rosamond Street West | M15 6LL | T: 0161247 3003

Office Hours: Monday 12-1 | Tuesday 10-11

Appendix F Information Sheet for Interview

Information Sheet for Observation and Interview

Study Title: Friendship Formations in the Internet Generation: New undergraduate student use of social media in the transition to university life

Aims of the Research
The research will examine how first year undergraduate students use social media to facilitate their friendship ties. The aim of the research is to;
- Investigate and assess the extent to which online social networking services provide a suitable environment through which friendships ties can be fully developed
- To explore the changes which take place in an individual's life during their initial transition to university, and explore this in the context of the formation of friendships
- To identify and explore the challenges faced when individuals use online social networking services to portray their identity to their current and growing personal communities

Invitation
You are being invited to take part in the research study Friendship Formations in the Internet Generation: New undergraduate student use of social media in the transition to university life. This project is being undertaken by Maria Wain (PhD Candidate).

Before you decide whether or not you wish to take part, it is important for you to understand why this research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read this information carefully and discuss it with colleagues, friends or relatives if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is unclear or if you would like more information.

Why have I been chosen?
Candidates for interview based on their current experience of being a first year undergraduate university student who regularly use social media. You will have also expressed interest to take part in this study via the Facebook and Twitter accounts set up by the researcher to advertise this study.

Do I have to take part?
You are free to decide whether you wish to take part or not. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to sign two consent forms, one is for you to keep and the other is for our records. You are free to withdraw from this study at any time without giving reasons.

What will happen if I take part?
If you decide to take part, you will then be asked to participate in an observation of your social media use, alongside a one-to-one interview. You will be asked several questions relating to how you use social media as a means of communication, and how you feel this has impacted on your social life at university. The interview will be recorded so that what you say is accurately recorded and the researcher will also take some written notes. The recording will later be transcribed, for which you can request a copy of the transcript. The interview will take up to one hour. You should be aware that if you choose to discuss your social media contacts, you could be violating their right to privacy. However, if the researcher should see information from non-participants of the study, this information will remain confidential, and will not be used in the study.

If I take part, what do I have to do?
If you take part arrangements for the interviews and observations will be made at a suitable time and place for your convenience.

What are the benefits (if any) of taking part?
It is expected that findings from this study will contribute to developing a better understanding of how social media networking sites can be used to aid individuals in transitional periods during their lifetime.

What are the risks (if any) of taking part?
It is anticipated that the social media sites (Facebook, Twitter) which were created to advertise the research could fall victim to trolling. If this happens, you are advised in the first instance to contact the researcher and report this to them. You are also advised to use the safety procedures the websites have in place (i.e. block/ delete/ report) to deal with this eventuality. You are also reminded that you can withdraw from this study at any time.

How will information about me be used?
The recorded interview will be transcribed for analysis and the data will be used to answer questions posed in a PhD thesis. This information will not be retained for use in future studies. The main aim for the research is to develop understanding of social media usage in the process of making friends, and any other information disclosed will remain confidential. I do however have to work within the confines of current legalisation over such matters as privacy and confidentiality, data protection and human rights and so offers of confidentiality may sometimes be overridden by law. For example, in circumstances whereby I am made aware of future criminal activity, abuse either to yourself or another (i.e. child or sexual abuse) or suicidal tendencies I must pass this information to the relevant authorities.

Who will have access to information about me?
Information collected during the interviews will be accessible by the principal investigator (Maria Wain).
- Electronic data will be stored securely on a password protected computer.
- The level of identifiability will be based upon individual participants preference based upon the consent given (e.g. anonymous, full identifiable). If you select to remain anonymous the researcher will protect your identity as a participant by ensuring that you remain unidentifiable in the research. As stated above, the only people who will have access to the personal information you discuss in this study is Maria Wain. The information you provide will not be disclosed to any third party. When discussed in the research you will be given a pseudonym (a false name) so that you remain unidentifiable.
- In accordance with Keele University guidelines, the data from this study will be retained by the principal investigator, Maria Wain, for at least five years after which time it will be securely disposed of.

Who is funding and organising the research?
The research is based at Keele University. It is being funded by Keele University.

What if there is a problem?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study or if you experience any problems, you may wish to speak to the researcher or their supervisor who will do their best to answer your questions. You should contact the researcher Maria Wain, Email: m.j.wain@keele.ac.uk, Address:

Maria Wain
PhD Candidate
School of Sociology and Criminology
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Claus Moser Research Centre
Keele University
ST5 5BG

Alternatively, if you do not wish to contact the researcher you may contact the supervisor of the researcher's work, Dr. Mark Featherstone, Email: m.a.featherstone@keele.ac.uk ; Tel (01782) 734179, Address:

Dr. Mark Featherstone
CBC0.014
School of Sociology and Criminology,
Keele University,
ST5 5BG

If you remain unhappy about the research and/or wish to raise a complaint about any aspect of the way that you have been approached or treated during the course of the study please write to Nicola Leighton who is the University's contact for complaints regarding research at the following address:-

Nicola Leighton
Research Governance Officer
Research & Enterprise Services
Dorothy Hodgkin Building
Keele University
ST5 5BG
E-mail: n.leighton@uso.keele.ac.uk
Tel: 01782 733306

Appendix G Information Sheet for Reflective Diary

Information Sheet for Reflective Diary

Study Title: Friendship Formations in the Internet Generation: New undergraduate student use of social media in the transition to university life

Aims of the Research

The research will examine how first year undergraduate students use social media to facilitate their friendship ties. The aim of the research is to;

- Investigate and assess the extent to which online social networking services provide a suitable environment through which friendships ties can be fully developed
- To explore the changes which take place in an individual's life during their initial transition to university, and explore this in the context of the formation of friendships
- To identify and explore the challenges faced when individuals use online social networking services to portray their identity to their current and growing personal communities

Invitation

You are being invited to take part in the research study Friendship Formations in the Internet Generation: New undergraduate student use of social media in the transition to university life. This project is being undertaken by Maria Wain (PhD Candidate).

Before you decide whether or not you wish to take part, it is important for you to understand why this research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read this information carefully and discuss it with colleagues, friends or relatives if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is unclear or if you would like more information.

Why have I been chosen?

You will have expressed interest in taking part in this study via the Facebook and Twitter accounts set up by the researcher to advertise this study.

Do I have to take part?

You are free to decide whether you wish to take part or not. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to sign two consent forms, one is for you to keep and the other is for our records. You are free to withdraw from this study at any time without giving reasons.

What will happen if I take part?

If you decide to take part, you will be asked to keep a reflective 2 day diary of your social media use. Once this has been completed, you will be asked if you wish to take part in the next stage of this study. You should be aware that if you choose to discuss your social media contacts, you could be violating their right to privacy. However, if the researcher should see information from non-participants of the study, this information will remain confidential, and will not be used in the study.

What are the benefits (if any) of taking part?

It is expected that findings from this study will contribute to developing a better understanding of how social media networking sites can be used to aid individuals in transitional periods during their lifetime.

What are the risks (if any) of taking part?

It is anticipated that the social media sites (Facebook, Twitter) which were created to advertise the research could fall victim to trolling. If this happens, you are advised in the first instance to contact the researcher and report this to them. You are also advised to use the safety procedures the websites have in place (i.e. block/ delete/ report) to deal with this eventuality. You are also reminded that you can withdraw from this study at any time.

How will information about me be used?

The recorded interview will be transcribed for analysis and the data will be used to answer questions posed in a PhD thesis. This information will not be retained for use in future studies. The main aim for the research is to develop understanding of social media usage in the process of making friends, and any other information disclosed will remain confidential. I do however have to work within the confines of current legalisation over such matters as privacy and confidentiality, data protection and human rights and so offers of confidentiality may sometimes be overridden by law. For example, in circumstances whereby I am made aware of future criminal activity, abuse either to yourself or another (i.e. child or sexual abuse) or suicidal tendencies I must pass this information to the relevant authorities.

Who will have access to information about me?

Information collected during the interviews will be accessible by the principal investigator (Maria Wain).

- Electronic data will be stored securely on a password protected computer.
- The level of identifiability will be based upon individual participants preference based upon the consent given (e.g. anonymous, full identifiable). If you select to remain anonymous the researcher will protect your identity as a participant by ensuring that you remain unidentifiable in the research. As stated above, the only people who will have access to the personal information you discuss in this study is Maria Wain. The information you provide will not be disclosed to any third party. When discussed in the research you will be given a pseudonym (a false name) so that you remain unidentifiable
- In accordance with Keele University guidelines, the data from this study will be retained by the principal investigator, Maria Wain, for at least five years after which time it will be securely disposed of.

Who is funding and organising the research?

The research is based at Keele University. It is being funded by Keele University.

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If you have a concern about any aspect of this study or if you experience any problems, you may wish to speak to the researcher or their supervisor who will do their best to answer your questions. You should contact the researcher Maria Wain, Email: m.j.wain@keele.ac.uk, Address:

Maria Wain
PhD Candidate
School of Sociology and Criminology
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Claus Moser Research Centre
Keele University
ST5 5BG

Alternatively, if you do not wish to contact the researcher you may contact the supervisor of the researcher's work, Dr. Mark Featherstone, Email: m.a.featherstone@keele.ac.uk ; Tel (01782) 734179, Address:

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CBC0.014
School of Sociology and Criminology,
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ST5 5BG

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Research & Enterprise Services
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Keele University
ST5 5BG
E-mail: n.leighton@uso.keele.ac.uk
Tel: 01782 733306

Appendix H Consent Form for Interview

SCHOOL OF SOCIOLOGY AND CRIMINOLOGY

CONSENT FORM – INTERVIEW

Title of Project: Friendship Formations in the Internet Generation: New undergraduate student use of social media in the transition to university life

Name and contact details of Principal Investigator: Maria Wain, Email; m.j.wain@keele.ac.uk

Please tick box if you agree with the statement

1 I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the chance to ask questions. ☐

2 I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can stop participating in the research at any time. ☐

3 I agree to take part in this study. ☐

4 I understand that data collected about me during this study will be made anonymous before it is submitted for publication. ☐

5 I agree to the interview being audio recorded ☐

6 I understand that if I choose to discuss my social media contacts, I could be violating their right to privacy. However, if the researcher should see information from non-participants of the study, this information will remain confidential, and will not be used in the study ☐

_____   _____   _____
Name of participant   Date   Signature

_____   _____   _____
Researcher   Date   Signature

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Appendix I Consent Form for Reflective Diary

Keele University SCHOOL OF SOCIOLOGY AND CRIMINOLOGY

CONSENT FORM – REFLECTIVE DIARY

Title of Project: Friendship Formations in the Internet Generation: New undergraduate student use of social media in the transition to university life

Name and contact details of Principal Investigator: Maria Wain, Email; m.j.wain@keele.ac.uk

Please tick box if you agree with the statement

1 I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the chance to ask questions. ☐

2 I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can stop participating in the research at any time. ☐

3 I agree to take part in this study. ☐

4 I understand that data collected about me during this study will be made anonymous before it is submitted for publication. ☐

5 I agree to participate in keeping a 2 day reflective diary of my social media use ☐

6 I agree to be contacted for interview and observation ☐

7 I understand that if I choose to discuss my social media contacts, I could be violating their right to privacy. However, if the researcher should see information from non-participants of the study, this information will remain confidential, and will not be used in the study ☐

_____   _____   _____
Name of participant   Date   Signature

_____   _____   _____
Researcher   Date   Signature