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Beyond Cyberpessimism and Cyberoptimism: The Dual Nature of Social Network Site

Interaction

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A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Sociology

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in Sociology

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by

Jeremy Makely

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## ABSTRACT

Beyond Cyberpessimism and Cyberoptimism: The Dual Nature of Social Network Site

Interaction

by

Jeremy Makely

This thesis applies methodological and micro-sociological insights derived from the pioneering social psychologist Georg Simmel (1858-1918) to the contemporary social media platform, Facebook. In opposition to previously-reported one-sided, polarized analyses (i.e. either/or, pessimistic or optimistic), this study suggests a more nuanced judgment: interaction viewed as social exchange reveals that individuality is often promoted though can occasionally be hindered; while most exchanges are ill-suited for sustaining interpersonal value, they ironically facilitate enhanced trust; and finally, the unique structure of site-based exchange generally facilitates rather than undercuts constructive conflict.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Social network sites (SNSs) are the newest genus within the rapidly evolving family of online social interaction. SNSs are online services that enable personal users to generate a publicly or semi-publicly visible profile, establish a list of users with whom they share some connection (e.g. friends), and view as well as traverse the “friends list” of other users (Boyd and Ellison 2008). In 2010, it was estimated that 79% of American adults used the internet. Sixty-one percent of these adults used online social network sites (Pew Internet and American Life Project 2010).

Many empirical studies of SNSs focus on their effects on social capital (Beaudion 2008; Donath 2008; Ellison, Stanfield, and Lampe 2007; Valenzuela, Park, and Kee 2008; Vergeer and Pelzer 2009; Zywnica and Danowski 2008). Others (Boyd and Heer 2006; Tong, Van Der Heide, Langwell, and Walther 2008; Utz 2010; Walther, Van Der Heide, Hammel, and Shulman 2009) examine online formation and management of identity. Some (Acquisti and Gross 2006; Debatin, Lovejoy, Horn, and Hughes 2009; Hodge 2006) raise concerns about personal privacy. These inquiries are important, and a broad theoretical foundation would help to further SNS research. The theoretical perspectives applied thus far are too narrowly-focused or are driven by contextual hypotheses. Their trendiness reflects the fast evolving nature of this phenomenon. Further, most studies are one-sided and polarized: adhering to either a clearly optimistic *or* clearly pessimistic, almost prophetic, tenor (Beaudion 2008; Boyd and Heer 2006; Donath 2008; Ellison et al. 2007; Valenzuela et al. 2008; Vergeer and Pelzer 2009; Zywnica and Danowski 2008).

Classical German sociologist Georg Simmel's (1858-1918) dialectical method is well-suited for avoiding these polar interpretations. Its conceptual foundation in a dialectic of unified opposites ensures that one extreme does not prevail over the other. This thesis uses Simmel's dialectical style and microsociological theories of exchange, freedom, individuality, trust, and conflict to analyze SNS interaction.

SNSs have many implications and applications for social life. These sites – which are changing human interaction as rapidly as they evolve – constitute one of the most significant contemporary frontiers in the study of emerging social phenomena. Avoiding biased, polarized, theoretical paradigms is a first step towards establishing a more comprehensive understanding of the sociological nature of SNSs.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Widespread proliferation of internet access throughout the 1990s has led to the development of computer-supported social networks (CSSNs) (Putnam 2000; Wellman, Salaff, Dimitrova, Garton, Gulia, and Haythornthwaite 1996). Through asynchronous (e.g. e-mail) and synchronous (e.g. instant messaging) computer-mediated communication (CMC), members of virtual communities seek information and social support. Early CMC research focused on information exchange, social support, the size and composition of virtual communities, and the effects of limited social presence (i.e. the loss of face-to -face communication) (Wellman et al. 1996). Due to the speed, ease of use, and storage capacity of personal computers, CSSNs are well suited to the exchange of information. Such information exchange fosters loose online connections. Researchers refer to these as weak or “bridging” ties (Ellison et al. 2007). While weak ties are more prevalent, CSSNs can also facilitate stronger ties. People can participate in reciprocal, supportive emotional exchange through online support groups or keep in contact with geographically distant family members and friends (Wellman et al. 1996). CNNSs allow participants to amass and maintain unprecedented numbers of both weak and strong social ties, making feasible the accumulation of immense social networks or “supernets”(Donath 2008; Wellman et al. 1996).

While much of the early CMC scholarship had an optimistic tenor, some researchers worried about the rise of segregated online communities based on increasingly specific interest foci and the effects on individuals of their limited online social presence. Putnam forcefully articulated these concerns in his widely reviewed and publicized *Bowling Alone* (2000) sparking an ongoing debate between “cyberoptimists” and “cyberpessimists” (Valenzuela et al. 2009). He

feared that the loss of face-to-face communication, along with the Goffmanian-cues<sup>1</sup> that accompany it, might erode trustworthiness within CSSN's (Putnam 2000). CMC also threatens to "crowd out" face-to-face ties by displacing time that might otherwise be spent participating in offline social interaction. This erosion of trust and displacement of offline communication are viewed by him as potentially detrimental to strong social ties. Finally, Putnam argued that the ability of Internet users to narrowly circumscribe their communication around particular interest foci creates the risk that CSSNs will become increasingly specialized and segregated. This also poses a threat to bridging social ties<sup>2</sup>.

Much recent CSSN research has focused on testing or refuting Putnam's claims, with most of these studies focusing on social network sites (SNSs). Putnam implicitly assumed that a disproportionate amount of CMC takes place between strangers, and that strangers who do meet one another online based on shared interests are unlikely to develop a bond of trust. Though SNSs do allow individuals to meet strangers online – and this is often the articulated goal of such sites – they function primarily to support *existing offline* connections (Boyd and Ellison 2005; Lampe, Ellison, and Steinfield 2006). More often than not, SNS users search for people with whom they share some offline association rather than browsing for strangers with whom they share a common interest (Lampe et al. 2006). SNSs are useful for connecting with or learning more about both lesser-known and better-known contacts (Westerman, Van Der Heide, Klein,

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<sup>1</sup> Dramaturgical sociologist, Erving Goffman (1922-1982), observed and analyzed the expressive cues embedded in face-to-face interaction.

<sup>2</sup> Bridging social ties are those weak ties that link one to acquaintances who move in different social circles. These ties function for information exchange and diffusion amongst external assets (Putnam 2000:22-23).



and Walther 2008). The key word here is “known.” Thus, SNSs’ prime audience appears to refute Putnam’s implicit claims.

Responses to Putnam can be roughly divided in two: those focusing on social capital and those on interpersonal trust. Ellison et al. (2007) analyzed survey data in order to assess the effects of Facebook participation on three kinds of social capital. “Bridging social capital” refers to weak ties that are useful for information sharing. “Bonding social capital” refers to strong ties that provide emotional support and access to shared resources. Finally, “maintained social capital” refers to social capital that one retains despite life changes, (e.g. geographical movement) that might otherwise reduce one’s social capital. Facebook usage was found to be positively correlated with all three kinds of social capital, though directionality is unclear. This correlation likely reflects that participants primarily use Facebook to “maintain existing offline relationships or to solidify otherwise ephemeral, temporary acquaintanceships” (Ellison et al. 2007:1155). If true however, these findings challenge Putnam’s time displacement hypothesis, i.e. that by displacing time individuals might otherwise spend participating in offline social interaction, CSSNs necessarily precipitate decreased social capital. In another study, Valenzuela, Park, and Kee (2008) used survey data to test whether respondents’ intensity of Facebook use correlates with life satisfaction, social trust, civic engagement, or political participation. They found intensity of Facebook use to be positively associated with the first three measures of social capital, and the use of Facebook Groups to be positively associated with political participation (Valenzuela et al. 2008).

Vergeer and Pelzer (2009) examined the effects of Internet use on the maintenance of both online and offline social networks and respondents’ reported levels of social support and loneliness. Their findings appear to support a “rich get richer” hypothesis. Offline and online

social capital are positively associated, indicating that each supports or supplements rather than replaces the other. Zywicki and Danowski (2008) explicitly set out to test this social enhancement hypothesis, against a social compensation hypothesis, i.e. the “poor get richer.” They analyzed data pertaining to the popularity of Facebook users and found support for both hypotheses. Facebook participants who are more extroverted and have higher self-esteem are more popular both online and offline. On the other hand, Facebook users who are less sociable and have lower self-esteem are more popular online than offline. These findings considered as a whole appear to contradict Putnam’s hypothesis (2000:179) that time spent online is necessarily detrimental to social capital.

Another branch of CMC scholarship, responding to Putnam’s claim that lack of face-to-face communication in CSSNs erodes interpersonal trust, focuses on how interpersonal trust can actually be established online. Beaudoin (2008), for example, adapted a cognitive mediation model to analyze the causal mechanisms underlying the development of online interpersonal trust. He found that respondents’ motivation to build or maintain social resources, contacts, and interactions predicts their actual use of the Internet. Internet use, in turn, makes respondents more likely to report interpersonal trust. This finding underscores Internet’s capacity to assist in “the development of community, social interaction, and open debate” (Beaudoin 2008:562). The only variable impeding this positive effect is perceived information overload. However, perceptions of such overload become less likely with increased Internet use (Beaudoin 2008).

In another study, Donath (2008) used signaling theory<sup>3</sup> to assess SNSs' potential to increase interpersonal trust in CMC, and then suggested a rough set of guidelines for making SNSs more effective social tools. As in other online contexts, SNSs primarily support conventional signals which are not inherently reliable (Donath 2008; Lampe, Ellison, and Steinfield 2007). SNSs make deception easy. Users do not have to provide accurate information. However, SNSs are better suited than other CSSN formats for supporting honest or reliable conventional signals (Ellison et al. 2007) because these sites presumably increase trustworthiness by making users aware of the fact that their friends, family, and colleagues are scrutinizing their self-presentations (Donath 2008). Lampe et al. (2007) similarly asserted that the shared social network aspect of Facebook helps to verify identity claims. The visibility of friendship networks and likelihood that users will meet offline also ensure reliability by making deception more costly (Lampe et al. 2007). In short, SNSs, a form of CSSN not yet prevalent when Putnam writes his critique, foster interpersonal trust by supporting and reinforcing reliable conventional signals.

Though SNSs and their effects appear generally immune to Putnam's critique, these sites are not immune to all criticism. For example, SNSs *do* lack the offline, face-to-face communication that Putnam is concerned about. Because the self-presentation of identity by SNS users takes place primarily through social network profiles (SNPs) (Liu 2008; Marwick 2005), the *fixity* of SNPs creates conflict between user self-presentation strategies and their decontextualized audience (Donath and Boyd 2004; Marwick 2005). Boyd and Heer

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<sup>3</sup> Signaling theory, initially developed in biology and economics, posits that we cannot directly observe much of what we want to know about others. Instead, we must rely on signals that indicate the presence of certain hidden qualities (Donath 2008).

characterized this conflict as one of a “dilemma of collapsed contexts and unknown audiences” (2006:4). Their basic argument was that in the offline world people usually alter their self-presentations based on context, i.e. with respect to place and audience (Boyd and Heer 2006). For instance, the way in which an individual presents herself to friends at the bar on Saturday night is likely different from the way she presents herself to her in-laws at church the next morning. However, SNSs do not allow for this kind of social flexibility (Boyd 2004). SNS links are usually decontextualized. There is often no distinction made between close friends, family, colleagues, or near strangers (Donath and Boyd 2004).

Boyd (2006) illustrated this point with a comment from a Friendster user. When she asked this user about a particular network link the woman replied, “She’s not my friend – she’s just my Friendster” (2006:1). The term Friendster does not mean the same thing as friend because online networks cover a broad range of relationships. Until recently, SNSs did not allow users to show select portions of their profiles and networks to specified links (Donath and Boyd 2004). Given the fixity of SNPs, or the presumption by SNSs that each user has a single authentic identity, and the collapsed context of exposed, articulated public networks, online self-presentation can therefore often be a nerve-racking ordeal (Boyd and Heer 2006; Marwick 2005). In response, however, Facebook has evolved a means for present-day users to manage different networks and restrict the personal content available to each. So, while Facebook profiles are still fixed, the site avoids some of the problematic conflict between self-presentation and decontextualised networks.

Moreover, despite the relative fixity of SNPs there are diverse and nuanced avenues for interpersonal impression formation on SNSs. According to Utz (2010), interpersonal impressions of SNSs users are generated in three distinct ways: self-generated through SNPs, generated by

network links (i.e. friends), or system generated (i.e. based on information given by the SNS, such as number of friends) (Tong et al. 2008; Utz 2010; Walther et al. 2009). Liu (2008) examined self-generated impressions, systematically analyzing SNPs as “taste performances” via both cultural semiotics theory and principal components analysis. He found that taste differences across various demographic groups of Myspace users are aesthetic rather than socioeconomic in nature, and these taste statements primarily express cultural prestige and differentiation from peers.

Walther et al. (2009) performed two social experiments (first on perceived extraversion, and the second on physical attractiveness of Facebook users) to test whether self-generated or other-generated impressions are more trustworthy. Assuming that perceivers place greater credibility on information about personal characteristics when that information cannot be manipulated by the person who it describes (Walther et al. 2009), other-generated information ought to outweigh self-generated information with respect to SNS user impressions. This assumption was confirmed in both experiments, though other-generated information is more important for perceived physical attractiveness than for extraversion.<sup>4</sup> Tong et al. (2008) also performed a social experiment and examined the effect of Facebook users’ network sizes (i.e. total numbers of friends) – a system-generated impression – on perceptions of social attractiveness. They found a curvilinear relationship between number of friends and perceptions of social attractiveness. Social attractiveness peaks at 300 friends. Too few friends made

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<sup>4</sup> This is likely due to the fact that physical attractiveness has a higher degree of social desirability than extraversion. Perceivers may be more interested in corroborating claims of physical attractiveness because there is more at stake (Walther et al. 2009).

Facebook users seem unpopular, whereas too many friends made them appear desperate (Tong et al. 2008).

SNSs also raise concrete privacy concerns, and this fact this fact generates significant empirical interest. Many users are aware neither of the security risks involved in SNS interaction nor their SNPs are public availability (Acquisti and Gross 2006; Debatin, Lovejoy, Horn, and Hughes 2009). Users of sites such as Friendster, Tribe, and Facebook rarely change their permeable preset privacy settings (Acquisti and Gross 2005), and this can have very real consequences. A potential exists for undesirable intrusion and abuses such as hacking, identity theft, stalking, and child molestation. Websites such as [wiredsafety.org](http://wiredsafety.org) and [staysafeonline.org](http://staysafeonline.org) seek to educate users about such risks and how they can modify their initial privacy settings.

Aside from these more obvious dangers, SNSs may also pose a threat to civil liberties through monitoring, surveillance, and reporting of constitutionally protected speech and action (Hodge 2006:95-96). Moreover, judges, lawyers, and administrators not familiar with the ins and outs of SNSs (Hodge 2006) may be unprepared to defend the openness of SNS exchanges and protect Fourth Amendment rights.

Existing research on SNSs is indeed divided into two camps. Refutations of Putnam's pessimistic claims are persuasive, emergent problems related to online identity formation are being remedied by site redesigns, and privacy issues may someday be alleviated by user education campaigns, for example. Yet, cyberoptimism is still not entirely supported by the data. Neither does a more comprehensive sociological understanding arise from a mere summing of optimistic and pessimistic claims.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS

Understanding can only be achieved through the employment of a dialectical, theoretical paradigm less prone to uni-polar thinking. In what follows, the author applies Simmel's microsociological theory and his characteristic dialectical method to illustrate a more integrated, nuanced, and dualistic approach.

Simmel uses diametrically opposed categories to examine the structure of social forms. Dialectics can be polar dimensions of apparent unities, syntheses of opposites, or midpoints between opposites. They are often seen as varying inversely (Levine 1971).

The author employs a Simmelian conceptualization of social exchange to analyze the opposing, logically-interdependent forces at work in SNS exchanges. This method is used to examine how freedom, individuality, interpersonal value, trust, and conflict are facilitated and hindered within SNS exchanges.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

#### Value and Social Exchange

Simmel's exchange paradigm is highly relevant. While he acknowledged that *every* human interaction can be understood as a kind of exchange, his definition is more limiting. Exchange – a form of sociation with unique properties – is the *sacrifice* of value in return for value (Simmel 1971 [1907]). The value of an object arises from its scarcity. Scarcity refers to the rarity of an object as a function of the amount of effort involved in producing or obtaining it. Simmel posited that “it is exchange alone that makes scarcity a factor in value” (Simmel 1971 [1907]:62). This is true because the relative scarcity of an object affects the individual's subjective desire for it. According to Simmel's scheme then, exchange both presumes and establishes a sacrifice of scarcity value in return for scarcity value. Furthermore, because each party subjectively desires other's object more – in that each is willing to sacrifice something to obtain the other's object – the total value is greater after the exchange than before (Simmel 1971 [1907]).

Because every interaction that takes place on SNSs is a kind of exchange, the concepts of bridging, bonding, and maintaining social capital provide a useful supplement for a Simmelian analysis of SNS interaction. Recall that bridging social capital is the weak ties between acquaintances; bonding social capital denotes the strong ties among family and friends; and maintained social capital refers to the preservation of both bridging and bonding ties (Ellison et al. 2007).

SNSs are a new medium for bridging and bonding exchange. These sites involve the exchange of information through bridging ties and facilitate the exchange of resources and



emotional support through bonding ties. SNS exchange occurs through immense networks unprecedented in size, or supernets (Donath 2008). On Facebook, exchanges occur hundreds of millions of times a day across millions of interconnected supernets (“Facebook Statistics” 2011).

### Freedom and Individuality

The preceding conceptualization of SNS based exchange is crucial for understanding individuality and freedom. Individuality and freedom were for Simmel interdependent concepts. Individuality is based in freedom, and freedom is in turn “limited by individuality” (Simmel 1971 [1908]:253). This is so because freedom of choice is necessary for individualization, though even under conditions of absolute freedom of choice it is constrained by “the unambiguously determined expression of an unalterable kind of personality” (Simmel 1971:270). This unalterable personality is equivalent to qualitative individuality or “the uniqueness of the individual’s being” (Simmel 1971 [1908]:269). Within SNSs, freedom of choice is a function of the quantity, quality, and openness of the exchanges within which users participate. Openness refers to the degree to which participants’ sharing of information is forthcoming, and the visibility or accessibility of this information. Thus, potential for individualization within SNSs depends on the quantity, quality, and openness of these exchanges.

Simmel identified two forms of individuality and two corresponding forms of freedom. Each form of individuality emerges from its freedom correlate. He arrived at these meanings via an historical comparison between the eighteenth-and nineteenth-centuries. The freedom characteristic of the eighteenth century is determined by the “universal demand which the individual uses to cover his manifold grievances and self-assertions against society” (Simmel 1971 [1908]:218). Those who desire this freedom “extol the free competition of individual interests as the natural order of things” (Simmel 1971 [1908]:218). This is the kind of freedom

that the French and American revolutionaries fought for. This freedom implies a negative liberty: liberty is freedom *from* social or political restraint. This individualism is also equivalent in nature and “based on the notion of the natural equality of individuals” (Simmel 1971 [1908]:219); one that involves the “sense of freedom and the responsibility for oneself that comes from a broad and fluid social environment” (Simmel 1971 [1908]:271).

Simmel explained that as soon as individuals are “sufficiently strengthened by the feeling of equality and universality” (1971 [1908]:222) they begin to seek out inequality. Liberated from restraint, individuals then become free *to* distinguish themselves from one another (Simmel 1971 [1908]). Thus, out of eighteenth century liberty comes a new form of freedom and with it a “new individualism” (Simmel 1950 [1908]:81). The individuality characteristic of the nineteenth century bases itself on the *qualitative* differentiation of unique individuals. “Each individual is called or destined to realize his own incomparable image” (Simmel 1950 [1908]:81). What matters is no longer that the individual is liberated from constraint, but that he or she is “a particular and irreplaceable individual” (Simmel 1971 [1908]:223). This is an individuality based in qualitative concrete egoism rather than abstract merely quantitative equality (Simmel 1950 [1908]).

Both forms of freedom and individuality – those signified by the eighteenth-and nineteenth-century respectively – are key to understanding the possibilities enabled through SNSs. Liberty presumes the openness of exchanges. This openness can simultaneously promote and hinder liberty and its correlate form of individuality. SNSs potentially create a new forum for civic engagement, political participation, and the democratic expression of individual responsibility based in a facilitating individual freedom and legal/political equality. These sites can “connect activists with similar goals and create awareness about critical issues” across

bridging supernets (Valenzuela, Prak, and Kee 2008:879). For instance, Myspace users mobilized a national protest for immigration reform in 2006, and a 20,000 member strong Facebook group can be credited with delaying the introduction of a government-led copyright reform bill in 2008. Perhaps the best recent example of the power of SNSs to organize and mobilize political protest is the popular uprising that ousted Hosni Mubarak from office in Egypt in January and February of 2011. Wael Ghonim, head of Google marketing operations in the Middle East, helped launch these anti-governmental demonstrations through a Facebook page. The “disparate collection of forces” of which “no individual or group with a high public profile has come to be seen as the leader of” (Parker and Al Zohairy 2011:1) would likely not have so easily organized and mobilized if it were not for Facebook.

It’s not surprising that Valenzuela, Park, and Kee (2008) found intensity of Facebook usage to be positively correlated with the user’s civic engagement, and membership in Facebook groups to be positively associated with political participation. Thus, the openness of SNS exchanges – whether between individuals or groups – advances an equalitarianism that sustains liberty and the free expression of individual interests.

The freedom to distinguish one’s self and an individuality of qualitative incomparability are also based in the quantity and quality of SNS exchanges. Simmel posited that such “individuality in being and action generally increases to the degree that the social circle encompassing the individual expands” (1971 [1908]:252). This correlation holds because as social groups expand they permit more differentiation: “accompanying such a differentiation of social groups, there arise a need and an inclination to reach out beyond the original... boundaries of the group” (Simmel 1971 [1908]:253). This need signifies a replacement of the individual’s centripetal orientation towards conformity with his or her original group with a “centrifugal

tendency that forms bridges with other groups” (Simmel 1971 [1908]:253). This incomparability or uniqueness of each user and his or her freedom to express this uniqueness ought then to be positively correlated with the quantity of exchanges he or she participates in and the size of his or her network. Indeed, because SNSs support enormous bridging supernets, these sites should have the capacity to facilitate greater individualization. The centrifugal reaching-out of a user beyond one’s original friend and family group to a larger more diverse network of bridging ties consisting of acquaintances and friends of friends occurs through myriad information exchanges. In addition to increasing the quantity of exchanges, this entails an increase in qualitatively unique informational and cultural offerings. Such offerings boost the user’s “chances of developing the distinctiveness, the uniqueness, the sufficiency of existence of his inner life and his intellectual, aesthetic, and practical productivity” (Simmel 1971 [1908]:273-274). Moreover, SNSs save user’s time, and time saved is time that can be spent on other egoistic pursuits.

Qualitative individualization is also promoted by SNS group functions. The average Facebook user is connected to eighty community pages, groups, and events (“Facebook Statistics” 2011). SNS groups are oriented towards and chosen based on the incomparable interests of each user. Each user amasses a *unique matrix* of these bridging associations. Because SNS groups can entail little involvement, the user’s freedom to pursue his or her particular interests is unfettered by the requirements of any one association. In this way, like the “web of group affiliations” that Simmel discussed, the objective structure of the SNS “provides a framework within which an individual’s non-interchangeable and singular characteristics may develop and find expression” (Simmel 1955 [1908]:150).

This is not the entire story, however. Though individualization is enabled by the vastness of an online social network and can enhance possibilities for association available to each user,

this very abundance of bridging exchanges might in turn pose a threat to individuality. How is this so? The SNS user may lose a sense of personal identity, and such identity or ego is the very foundation upon which the individuality and incomparability of one's SNS associations and exchanges rests. A vast quantity of bridging exchanges is insufficient by itself for fostering a sense of personal identity and might even prove antagonistic to and threaten to overwhelm one's ego (Beaudoin 2008).

Simmel's very conceptualization of society appears to provide grounds for this concern. It is not the case that "only through society is human life endowed with reality" (Simmel 1971 [1908]:127). Nor is it the case that society is "a mere abstract concept by means of which the observer draws the realities, which are individual human beings, into a whole" (Simmel 1971 [1908]:127). For Simmel, society was more than the sum of its parts, and the individual is more than a flesh and bone instantiation of societal forces. An individual's interests are partly a function of that individual, partly a function of his or her social world, and partly a function of the interrelation between that individual's particular interests and those social forces. Society for Simmel was constituted through the interaction of individuals and their particular interests as well as by emergent properties that arise in human interaction. It is not possible to trace these emergent properties back to any particular individual or relation. These properties in turn act on individuals. Therefore, society is partly a function of the individual, just as the individual is partly a function of society (Simmel 1950 [1908]).

This point can be illustrated with an analogy. Using an eyedropper a scientist combines forty unique chemicals into one beaker. He uses exactly one droplet of each. The chemical compound in the beaker has new properties that are different from any of the forty original components. This compound is much like the individual's social world. Now the scientist adds a

droplet of this compound to each of the forty unique chemicals. These individual chemicals having been affected by their interactions with the compound are much like individuals with respect to the social world. Of course, because the individual is always already born into a social world, the analogy does not hold but is merely hypothetical.

Let us now return to our earlier discussion. If an individual is overwhelmed by social input – as may be the case in SNS bridging supernets – this may threaten his or her “sense of individuality” (Simmel 1971 [1908]:262). By “individuality” Simmel was here referring to one’s ego, or sense of personal identity grounding that individual and remaining relatively constant through bridging exchanges (Simmel 1971[1908]). Ego is that part of an individual least affected by supra-individual input. Should an individual become overwhelmed by the profusion of bridging exchanges to which he or she is party within the SNS supernet, it stands to reason that he or she might experience an identity crisis.

An example illustrates the intuitive appeal of this claim. Mandy is an average Facebook user. She has 130 friends, is connected to 80 group pages, and participates in about 100 exchanges each month (“Facebook Statistics” 2011). This plethora of exchanges within her diverse network of acquaintances splits her attention among many interest groups, and she begins to lose sight of her core self-concept. Who is she? It is true that Mandy’s unique matrix of groups and exchanges can enable qualitative individuality, but Mandy is more than this matrix. Mandy’s identity crisis results from a conflict between the demands of her bridging supernet, and her ego. The same matrix which affords Mandy the freedom to construct and express her incomparability also threatens to engulf her identity. How can Mandy apportion this essential part of herself off? How can she protect her ego from this bridging matrix?

A Simmelian answer does not entail a withdrawal into psychological inwardness or introversion. In fact, a solution involves even more exchange but of a bonding rather than bridging type. One's personal identity or ego does not arise without external input. Recall the analogy with the forty chemicals. Each unique chemical contributes to the compound and the compound in turn adds to each chemical. It becomes difficult, if not impossible, to determine what properties are entirely peculiar to each chemical because each is affected by the compound. An individual is similar. Every individual contributes one's uniqueness to his or her social world and is in turn affected by that social world. One cannot require for personal identity a complete lack of social input, though most of ego's input is less socially mediated, and a unique role is played by bonding exchanges. Bonding exchanges involve different quantities and qualities, and the participants who contribute are fewer and the exchanges involved are more meaningful. While it is true that identity is partly formed from without via one's unique matrix of centrifugal bridging, it is also formed from within through a centripetal process of bonding (Simmel 1971 [1908]). Simmel argued:

Thus, although commitment to a narrower circle is genuinely less conducive to the strength of individuality as such than it is in the most general realm possible, it is still psychologically significant that in a very large cultural community, belonging to a family promotes individuation. The lone individual cannot save himself from the totality: only by surrendering a part of his absolute ego to a few others, joining himself in with them, can he preserve his sense of individuality... (1971 [1908]:262)

Thus SNS users *can* preserve personal identity, enabled by exchanging resources and emotional support with family and close friends. Bonding ties are the user's most immediate associations. These relationships, unlike bridging associations, are not shared in common with a mass of

others. Bonding exchanges are more intimate and therefore these exchanges are more meaningful. The individual's identity *can* develop in close association with his or her family and friends. Because these ties remind the individual of his or her more immediate self, that part, i.e. the ego or personal identity, remains constant and unaffected by so many bridging exchanges.

These online bonding networks demand more involvement and attention from the individual, requiring that one surrender more one's self to the group and are therefore more constraining (Simmel 1955 [1908]). Typically, "the larger circle encourages individual freedom, the smaller one restricts it" (Simmel 1971 [1908]:269). Nonetheless, the key Simmelian insight is this: these narrower bonding circles buffer the individual's ego against the barrage of input coming from the bridging supernet.

Recall that individuality is enabled by freedom and that freedom is in turn limited by a definite individuality. The vastness of the bridging supernet is an unbridled freedom that promotes individualization. However, if this freedom is not constrained somehow, the user's ego – an aspect of his or her individuality – can be swallowed up. Ultimately, this freedom is constrained because the user is only as free as his or her unique ego allows, and this ego is buffered by bonding exchanges.

Simmel's notion of qualitative individuality has two bases and both are derived from nineteenth century individualism and contribute to distinct kinds of incomparability. One is the kind of incomparability that inheres in one's unique ego and one's most immediate interests and closest bonds. The other is a kind of incomparability that inheres in the individual's unique matrix of bridging ties. Each type of incomparability characterizes a unique form of individuality.



While incomparability can be understood in two distinct ways, the concept of individuality *cannot* be similarly divided. Again, recall the chemical analogy. The final stage consists in forty absolutely unique chemicals. Nevertheless, because each chemical is the result of a combination of original and compound properties, and this combination results in a new set of properties, it is impossible to tell which properties are intrinsic to the original chemicals. So, while there are two distinct kinds of incomparability, it is not the case that there are two correlate forms of individuality. This is because it is not possible to tell what individuality results from bridging exchanges and what results from bonding exchanges. One's ego is more determined by bonding exchanges than by bridging and one's matrix of associations is more determined by bridging exchanges. Nevertheless, neither ego nor matrix is entirely unaffected by the form of exchange that is more closely associated with the other. Like each of the resulting chemicals, individuality is an indivisible mix of ego and matrix and therefore remains a singular concept.

Individuality is often promoted and occasionally hindered by online social network exchanges, be these bridging or bonding exchanges. The dual nature of the freedom offered by the quantity and quality of SNS exchanges – which provide users with limitless opportunities for the exercise of freedom and expression of individual – sometimes but certainly not always involves threats to liberty and compromised personal identity.

### Interpersonal Value

Simmel's value theory is embedded within his larger discussion of exchange. Recall that exchange is merely the offering up of value in order to obtain value. He argued that scarcity is necessary for value to exist, and that the combination of need or enjoyment along with scarcity is sufficient for value. Scarcity can only be overcome by expending energy or "giving up objects already possessed in order to make whatever items an individual most desires less scarce for

him” (Simmel 1971 [1907]:62). Simmel’s insistence on scarcity value, however, led him to neglect an alternative avenue for value formation.

Sentimental attachment to an object or especially to another person is a relation that seems to conflict with the scarcity principle in the formation of value. Attachment arises from closeness, proximity, and familiarity rather than scarcity or distance. Hence, closeness *can* also generate value, though this involves a less rational more affective derivation.

It is not entirely correct that Simmel ignored closeness as an avenue for value formation. When his value theory was economically-oriented, it did not seem applicable to interpersonal value. However, Simmel *did* discuss closeness in his account of sentimental interest, and his notion of sentimental interest is directly analogous to interpersonal value. Simmel wrote:

The deepest sentimental interest attaches itself, on the one hand, to the person whom we constantly have before our eyes, and, on the other hand, to the person from whom we are separated by vast, unbridgeable distance with as much agitation as unappeased yearning. (1971 [1908]:268)

This more complete conceptualization of value is based on his analysis of the “union of closeness and remoteness involved in every human relationship” (Simmel 1971 [1908]:143). All personal relations can be analyzed according to this scheme. Perceived commonality generates interpersonal value amongst close group members. Simmel posited that “the relation with organically connected persons is based on the similarity of just those specific traits which differentiate them from the merely universal” (1971 [1908]:146). This commonality is “specific and incomparable with respect to all those on the outside” (Simmel 1971 [1908]:143). It functions to unify group members. This phenomenon is evident in Simmel’s discussion of families. By sharing so much of one’s personality and interests with his or her family the

individual “opposes himself in the broader mass, as it were, to the remaining whole” (Simmel 1971 [1908]:262). This opposition to the whole involves a simultaneous bonding with those closest to the individual. Simmel contended that, on the other hand, “to the extent to which the similarities assume a universal nature, the warmth of the connection based on them will acquire an element of coolness” (1971 [1908]:147). Thus, it is only commonalities unique to a given close relation that generate interpersonal value.

SNS relations are characterized by a union of closeness and remoteness. Most exchanges on these sites occur between bridging ties, i.e. friends of friends, colleagues, or acquaintances. This acquaintanceship entails a “lack of really intimate relations” (Simmel 1950 [1908]:320). What one knows of an acquaintance is only that which the acquaintance presents to the broader mass. Even the phrase “well acquainted,” only refers to a degree of knowledge regarding what is “significant for that aspect of him which is turned toward others” (Simmel 1950 [1908]:320). Being well acquainted does not imply having intimate knowledge, or knowledge about what is essential to the other’s identity. Within SNSs those personal aspects of the acquaintance thought to be relevant for online social exchanges are largely predetermined.

Recall that the self-presentation of self-identity by SNS users takes place primarily through social network profiles (SNPs) (Liu 2008; Marwick 2005). SNPs are fixed and the audience of the user’s online social network is often decontextualized (Donath and Boyd 2004; Marwick 2005). The user’s bridging ties are determined by the very categories found in the SNP template. Along with those aspects which site administrators feel are relevant, users can also gather indirect knowledge about an acquaintance by examining information generated by the site or other network links, such as number of friends (Tong, Van Der Heide, Langwell, and Walther 2008; Utz 2010; Walther, Van Der Heide, Hamel, and Shulman 2009).

Overall a user knows relatively little about his or her bridging ties, and this lack of knowledge at least slightly distances the user from others. The user is neither close to nor entirely removed from his or her online acquaintances. The user shares – in common with his or her bridging ties – only that generic information that the fixed template allows. Because these commonalities between bridging partners are assumed to be non-exclusive, they fail to generate intimacy and interpersonal value. While such value inheres in relations characterized by extreme closeness or extreme remoteness “a relative coolness, a lesser stimulation of consciousness, befits the person who is neither quite near to us nor unreachably far from us” (Simmel 1971 [1908]:268). The majority of SNS relations by this logic appear then to be poorly suited for the production and maintenance of interpersonal value.

Yet, SNSs *do in fact* also support bonding relations. These relations are more likely to generate interpersonal value because the commonalities shared with close friends and family are exclusive. In bonding relations the union of closeness and remoteness is more a function of geographical and temporal distance than the extent of one’s knowledge about the other. Indeed most bonding exchanges on SNSs do take place between friends and family who are geographically distant from one another as people use SNSs to maintain bonding ties that might otherwise suffer from such distance (Ellison et al. 2007:11550). Friends and family who are geographically close may use SNSs when they do not have enough time for face-to-face interaction. An intermediate distance inherent in SNS bonding relations applies to the sphere of interpersonal value. Here the warmth that might otherwise characterize the associations between close friends and family members is cooled by distance, be that distance geographic or relational. However, such distance is not vast enough to rouse sentimental interest. If the adage “absence makes the heart grow fonder” is true, SNS bonding relations are unlikely to warm hearts. Like

bridging relations, SNS bonding relations are poorly suited for the production and maintenance of intensely experienced interpersonal value.

### Trust

The particular union of closeness and remoteness that inheres in online bridging relations also has implications for trust. Simmel posited that trust or confidence “is one of the most important forces within society” and signifies an “intermediate between knowledge and ignorance about a man” (1950 [1908]:318). He reasoned that “the person who knows completely need not trust; while the person who knows nothing can, on no rational grounds, afford even confidence” (1950 [1908]:318). Given the SNS typical user’s limited knowledge about his or her acquaintances, bridging relations are exactly the kind of associations in which trust ought to be measurable. The nature of the online bridging relation determines the “quanta of knowledge and ignorance necessary for confidence” (Simmel 1950 [1908]:319). Bridging participants need only know “*that* and no more about their partner which they *have* to know for the sake of the relationship they wish to enter” (Simmel 1950 [1908]:319). Presumably, the knowledge necessary in order for trust to inhere in any SNS bridging exchange is that information which is required by the SNP.

Valenzuela, Park, and Kee (2008) found that the intensity of Facebook use is positively associated with social trust. This may be because as stated earlier SNSs increase trustworthiness by making users aware of the fact that their friends, family, and colleagues are scrutinizing their self-presentations (Donath 2008; Ellison et al. 2007), and this scrutinization makes deception more costly than beneficial. Lampe et al. (2007) agreed that the shared social network aspect of Facebook helps to verify identity claims, and that the visibility of friendship networks and the likelihood that users will meet offline, also ensure reliability by making deception more costly

(Lampe et al. 2007). Given the extent of the knowledge the typical user has about his or her close friends and family, trust is not really in doubt in SNS bonding relations; and, even in bridging relations, SNSs appear relatively well-suited to support high levels of interpersonal trust. This is because the amount of knowledge required for trust is as Simmel pointed out relative to the relation, and site formatting helps to produce the amount needed for SNS relations.

### Conflict

Simmel is widely regarded to be one of the most eminent classical analysts of conflict. His analysis of conflict establishes its positive sociological character. The common view of conflict as a wholly negative or dissociating phenomenon Simmel (1955 [1908]) argued is naïve. He further asserted that conflict, “one of the most vivid interactions... must be considered as sociation,” and that only “the mere indifference of two or more individuals or groups” can constitute dissociation proper (1955 [1908]:13-14). Many analysts mistakenly view conflict as solely antithetical to unity (Simmel 1955 [1908]) and consequently ignore the relation. They fail to recognize conflict as an integrative and catalytic.

Simmel understood however that unity is not attained exclusively through harmony but rather through a combination of harmony and discord (1955 [1908]). Like cooperation, conflict is a ubiquitous and powerful aspect of all social life. Simmel argued that the principles of conflict and unification each “attain... full sociological meaning and effect only through the other” (1955 [1908]:35). If conflict itself, which is “designed to resolve divergent dualisms,” (Simmel 1955 [1908]:13) were a wholly negative or dissociating force then all social groupings from marriages to societies would fracture into dissociated individual units. Simmel contended that “there probably exists no social unit in which convergent and divergent currents among its members are not inseparably interwoven” (1955 [1908]:15). He asserted that not only is “pure

unification” empirically nonexistent, such a unification “could show no real life process” (1955 [1908]:15). In other words, conflict is essential for social change, development, and growth.

The uniqueness of the relation between conflict and unification amongst SNS users results from three distinct aspects of these sites: the lack of face-to-face interaction characteristic of online exchanges; the decontextualised nature of SNPs; and the facilitation of asynchronous communication.

By shielding users from the embarrassment, the pained facial expressions of their opponents, and affording them the ability to conceal their own affective expressions, SNSs greatly reduce the discomfort that would otherwise inhere in face-to-face conflict. Because users are likely to say things that they would feel too awkward to say in person, reduction in discomfort can have both constructive and destructive outcomes. On the one hand, such conflict can open up new lines of discourse that at least address if not resolve festering issues. On the other hand, if devoid of norms of civility typically inherent in face-to-face interaction, conflict is more likely to be incendiary, perhaps even vicious. Such conflict could then lead to irreconcilability.

The fixity of SNPs enhances the possibility of conflict between the user’s self-presentation strategies and the decontextualized reception audience of an online social network (Donath and Boyd 2004; Marwick 2005). Creating a “dilemma of collapsed contexts and unknown audiences” (Boyd and Heer 2006:4), the online world starkly contrasts with the offline where persons usually contextualize their self-presentations in relation to place and audience (Boyd and Heer 2006). Yet, SNSs are relatively socially flexible (Boyd 2004). The decontextualized nature of SNPs means that persons on one’s network occasionally see content

that was neither directed towards them nor meant for them to know. This can produce unintended conflicts that again can catalyze either growth and change, or destruction.

Much communication between SNS users is asynchronous and permits opponents added response time. This has two opposing consequences. First, responses are more likely to be thorough, reasonable, and better articulated, and ideally better arguments can advance understanding and prompt quicker resolutions. On the other hand, having more time to devise responses implies more time to sharpen one's words with the intention of inflicting maximum damage. Paired with a lack of face-to-face constraints it is not difficult to see how SNSs may escalate and exacerbate conflicts.

Conflict overall is a constructive form of sociation, and even an abundance of antagonism facilitated by SNSs' lack of face-to-face constraints, decontextualised SNPs, and asynchronous communication "cannot be separated from the unity of the sociological structure" (Simmel 1955 [1908]:18). Such "negative and dualistic elements play an entirely positive role in this more comprehensive picture, despite the destruction they may work on particular elements" (Simmel 1955 [1908]:17). Conflict amongst SNS users can function overall both as an integrative force *and* as a pressure release valve. Integration within SNSs can take place in a number of ways through various groupings of network links; some groupings being more homogenous or heterogeneous than others. For example, political disagreements have prompted the creation of numerous Facebook groups. The solidarity within these groups is a function of their opposition to certain positions or even direction opposition to other Facebook groups. The Facebook page that helped launch the 2011 popular revolt in Egypt was anti-governmental and anti-Mubarak. The otherwise "disparate collection of forces" (Parker and Al Zohairy 2011:1) mobilized by this



page shared their opposition in common. Similar allegiances can form on smaller scales between other kinds of network links or groups.

Integration can also occur through a process of conflict resolution. Two elements that share nothing with each other, not even opposition, cannot integrate. Thus, any sociation whatsoever is potentially more constructive than no sociation at all. However, a process of conflict resolution involves new relations. The unique nature of the distances between SNS links – though unlikely to create interpersonal value – has fruitful possibilities for mediating and arbitrating conflict. SNSs make identifying and enlisting disinterested third parties in conflict resolution easier. These sites offer a greater quantity of potential mediators who are relationally close enough to become involved but distant enough to remain objective.

While SNS conflict has the capacity to spark even greater offline conflict, it can also function as a pressure release valve. For instance, participants of politically minded Facebook groups find a forum for argument that can channel an inborn propensity for conflict. Simmel (1955 [1908]) posits that every social being has a naturally occurring hostility drive. This drive signifies a psychologically instinctive need for conflict beyond satisfaction of objective interests: a psychological need for “conflict for the sake of conflict” (Simmel 1955 [1908]:34). By offering a new medium for “antagonist games,” SNSs allow users to expend hostile energy that could otherwise have more detrimental expressions (Simmel 1955 [1908]).

Less abstractly, as easily as online protest can stoke the fires of offline revolt (as in the case of Egypt) such protest can just as easily extinguish them. Online protests can satisfy the need for remonstrance without producing offline results. A protest that begins as a Facebook group is in danger of dying as a Facebook group if participants feel that they have contributed enough simply by joining the group and posting a message in solidarity. Add to this possibility

the fact that hundreds of thousands of opposition group pages compete for user attention on Facebook. SNSs, as pressure release valves, might even have the unintended consequence of letting the steam out of developing protest movements.

By exposing users to a mass of heterogeneous viewpoints while relieving them of face-to-face constraints, SNSs make conflict more likely. Yet, by providing a variety of disinterested third party network links, possibilities for allegiance formation SNSs, and functioning for the release of tension, these sites can also dampen conflict and make resolution more likely. Overall, the dynamism characteristic of SNS relations facilitates constructive conflict. Irreconcilability is only a minor threat in a world where “defriending” is the genuine outer limit of conflict.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

When SNS interaction is viewed as social exchange one can see that individuality is often promoted and occasionally hindered by online social network exchanges, be these bridging or bonding exchanges. The dual nature of the freedom offered by the quantity and quality of SNS exchanges – which provide users with limitless opportunities for the exercise of freedom and expression of individuality – sometimes involves threats to liberty and compromised personal identity. The more nuanced perspective presented above avoids an overly optimistic or pessimistic interpretation.

Employing the Simmelian concept of scarcity value, supplemented by the idea of value arising from sentimental interest – in order to examine define and examine interpersonal value with respect to SNSs – it becomes evident that the bridging and bonding exchanges characteristic of these sites are ill-suited for the production and maintenance of interpersonal value. This conclusion contrasts sharply with those optimistic responses to Putnam's (2000) concerns that portray of SNSs as unparalleled producers of social capital.

On the other hand, SNS bridging and bonding exchanges are particularly well-suited to supporting interpersonal trust. Given the extent of the knowledge that the user has about his or her close friends and family, trust is easily sustained by bonding relations. Because the amount of knowledge required for trust is as Simmel pointed out relative to the relation, site formatting helps to support the trust needed for SNS bridging relations by providing sufficient information about other users.

By exposing users to a mass of heterogeneous viewpoints while relieving them of face-to-face constraints, SNSs may catalyze conflict. However, by providing a variety of disinterested

third party network links, possibilities for allegiance formation SNSs, and functioning for the release of tension, these sites can also facilitate integration and conflict resolution. Overall, the dynamism characteristic of SNS relations supports constructive conflict. Again, the depth of this analysis owes to the avoidance of polar interpretations.

For sociologists, a comprehensive understanding of the SNS, a highly relevant and dynamic medium for social interaction, is imperative. Such an understanding begins with the creative use of a dualistic theoretical paradigm such as Simmel's. Yet, this thesis barely scratches the surface. Simmel is just one of many classical theorists to be counted. Our theory need not be new just because a social phenomenon is. SNS analysis can benefit from a continued survey of classical sources.

This study is limited by its purely theoretical approach. However, the issues it raises can prompt future empirical investigations. Presently there is a shortage of research regarding the different ways people use SNSs. SNSs support a number of applications. Little is known about which applications are more popular with which groups and how people might use SNSs creatively or innovatively. Simmel's theory offers some insights here. A Simmelian approach tells us for instance that constructive conflict is hypothetically supported by SNSs and interpersonal value is not. Further research can test theory based hypotheses like these and establish the empirical nature of such concepts.

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