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CONNECTIONS

After setting up their profile, users' second task after creating a social media account is probably connecting with other users. From friends to followers, social media is, for many people, largely about publicly connecting with each other.

It gives ordinary people access to potentially huge audiences –for free and at the click of few buttons. But is it all really that easy? And how real are our audiences? How much work do we have to put into building our connections – and what price do we pay to access them? The critical point is to weigh up the benefits and drawbacks of being able to connect to so many different people in one particular place.

CASE STUDY: THE ICE BUCKET CHALLENGE

The 'ice bucket challenge' is often described as one of social media's greatest successes. It began with a silly prank, but it raised a serious amount of money for a worthy cause. While it is genuinely difficult to carry out accurate historical research on social media services,¹ it seems that an ice bucket challenge existed on Facebook for some time before it became so very popular.² The format was there from the start – a video posted to Facebook of someone stating that they have accepted the challenge, and then getting a bucket of ice poured over

their head. After some shrieking, the victim calls on some of their social media connections to do the same within 24 hours or donate to a particular charity as a forfeit.

It only became associated with the disease known as Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (also known as Lou Gehrig's Disease) when Chris Kennedy, from Sarasota, Florida, was given the challenge by a friend.³ He selected the Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis Association as his charity of choice and nominated a relative of his, whose partner was suffering from the disease, to take the challenge. From there it spread through his extended family and friends, but also through supporters of the ALS Association, many of whom put in a huge effort to spread the challenge through their personal networks. The Association itself reportedly began seeing an unusual surge in donations by the end of July, and before long the challenge was being issued to all manner of celebrities, including Mark Zuckerberg.

While some analysts have argued that not everyone who made a video donated, I think this misses the point. The logic of the challenges is that the people 'called out' in the video must dunk themselves within 24 hours or donate as a forfeit. If you're too busy to make a video, or afraid of ice-cold water, you can get out of it by simply opening your wallet. That's the premise of the challenge. So really, if you actually did pour a bucket of ice over yourself, you shouldn't have to donate. But, of course, that isn't what happened.

It seems that the 'feel-good' quality of videos spreading through social media connections meant that the logic of the forfeit was forgotten as the phenomenon took off. People who dunked themselves donated money, and, more than likely, lots of people who weren't challenged at all donated money too.

By the beginning of September 2014, over 17 million videos related to the ice bucket challenge had been posted to Facebook, which had apparently been viewed by more than 440 million people.⁴ Of course, as the summer drew to an end, and the idea of soaking oneself in ice-cold water became less appealing, this dropped off drastically. However, the phenomenon resulted in the Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis Association receiving over \$100 million in additional

funding, which was put towards research which ultimately found a breakthrough⁵ in the study of the disease. This does not include many other charities who also raised significant amounts of money. As a result, the ice bucket challenge became the blueprint for countless more 'challenges', where many other charities and causes would also seek to harness the power of social media connections.

BONDING AND BRIDGING

But outside of such cultural phenomena, what do we gain from adding people on social media, some of whom we probably don't know very well? The answer to these questions means talking about resources and support.

One of social media's most highly cited research papers was published at Michigan State University in 2007. In this study,⁶ Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe were interested in how using Facebook might interact with users' psychological well-being, specifically in a concept called 'social capital'. This refers to the observation that as we know more or less people, we gain or lose valuable information and opportunities. Social scientists generally work on the basis of there being two types of social capital: bonding and bridging. The former refers to the type of resources one gains from close relationships, such as family and best friends: people who would do literally anything for you. And the latter refers to the type of things gained from casual acquaintances: people who might give you information, but probably not emotional support. As such, while bonding social capital is much more valuable than bridging, generally speaking we have fewer connections that produce the former than the latter.

The researchers asked participants several questions regarding their Facebook behaviours, such as how many Facebook friends they had and how many minutes they thought they had spent on Facebook in the last month. But they were also asked whether or not they agreed with attitude statements like 'I am proud to tell people I'm on Facebook', 'I feel out of touch when I haven't logged onto Facebook for a while' and 'I would be sorry if Facebook shut down'. Collated

together, participants' responses to all these items were used as a measure of the 'intensity' of their Facebook usage.

What Ellison and colleagues found was that this 'Facebook usage intensity' was strongly associated with both creating and maintaining bridging social capital. However, it was only weakly associated with bonding social capital. So, for example, you might have met someone once a few years ago and added them on Facebook but have no real desire to ever meet them again. Then one day, they post a social media update with job advertisement you're interested in. This is the kind of resource that you wouldn't have if you didn't have that Facebook connection. But, on the other hand, with regards to creating deeper, more meaningful relationships, this paper doesn't show that being connected on Facebook is much use.

So, to go back to the ice bucket challenge – you probably won't call out someone with whom you only have a bridging social capital kind of relationship. You might like their video, and they might like yours, but you will probably reserve your nominations for the sort of people with whom you have a bonding social capital kind of relationship.

Interestingly, these associations were only found with regards to Facebook usage intensity – they were not found with regards to internet use. You have to be interacting with people online – for example, on social media like Facebook – to accumulate social capital. As such, it is pretty easy to see how Facebook is very useful to the type of person that Ellison and her team were surveying. It allows college students to cheaply maintain friendships with their high school friends back home, and it also allows them to connect with new classmates – all in all, a very neat psychological tool.

But is it always this simple? And have things changed since 2007? A more recent paper⁷ by researchers at the University of the West of England is revealing in this regard. These researchers were also interested in social capital, but in relation to the newer social media service, Snapchat. Like Ellison and her team in 2007, in 2016 Piwek and Joinson carried out a survey of users. However, they noted that the 'transient nature' of Snapchat presents certain methodological difficulties. Bear in mind that the whole point of Snapchat is that its

images are supposed to vanish once viewed by the intended recipient. So how do you study that?

Consequently, unlike in the study mentioned earlier, where participants were asked about their overall Facebook usage, in this study participants were asked to focus on the most recent Snap that they had received. In other respects, Piwek and Joinson carried out a similar study to Ellison and co-workers. It also used a college student population, and they adapted the 'Facebook intensity scale' to measure the intensity of Snapchat usage, using largely identical questions. This adaptation of measures across studies is useful as it allows us to validly compare their results.

Strikingly, in direct contrast to Ellison's Facebook study, Piwek and Johnson found that Snapchat usage was associated with bonding social capital, but less so with bridging social capital. In other words, Snapchat seems to be most useful in the context of deep and meaningful relationships, rather than casual acquaintances. The authors suggest that this is due to a number of factors. For one thing, they note that their participants reported using Snapchat to communicate with a small number of friends – certainly a far smaller number than one would expect on Facebook. For another, Piwek and Joinson also suggest that Snapchat offers a more intimate and more private conversational setting than does Facebook. Hence, once again, we can see that different social media services can offer different psychological experiences to their users in how they connect with each other.

As an aside, this study was carried out before the Snapchat 'Snapstreak' feature became popular. In the new version of Snapchat launched in March 2016,⁸ if users sent each other Snaps every day, they were rewarded with a fire symbol beside their friend's name, and a number representing the amount of days they kept this interaction going. Consequently, with this sort of 'gamification' of its social media service, Snapchat encouraged the development of close friendships that would create this kind of bonding social capital. But how many people can you actually keep this level of interaction up with? Let me tell you a curious tale about groups of gorillas and the size of their skulls.

CLIQUEES AND CONTEXTS

The quantity of people we connect with on social media brings us to one of the more famous concepts in evolutionary psychology. In 1992, anthropologist Robin Dunbar wrote an influential paper⁹ on brain sizes in humanity's nearest relatives. The purpose of this study was to examine the possibility of a correlation between the size of primates' neocortexes and the size of their social groups. Remarkably, Dunbar showed that, indeed, primates like lemurs do have both smaller brains and smaller social groups than, for example, gorillas, who have both bigger brains and bigger social groups. This is known as the 'social brain hypothesis' and while it is not a watertight law – it isn't accurate for orangutans, for example, who seem to live in smaller groups than their brain size would imply – it stands to reason that one might extrapolate from this trend to ourselves. How big should human social groups be, given the size of our brains? According to Dunbar, the answer seems to be around 150. Admittedly this is an average, for what he termed our 'egocentric social network', but it did become henceforth known as 'Dunbar's number'.

The idea of natural human social group sizes is an interesting finding for psychology generally, but even more so for social media research, which became very interested in the 150 number. However, in later work, Dunbar showed how human networks also include a 'sympathy group' of about 15 individuals, as well as a 'support clique' of five individuals. The larger group is defined as the sort of people you would describe as close friends, who you would contact at least once a month, whereas the smaller group are those who you would rely on for emotional support. So it is a simplification to talk about 'Dunbar's number' on social media connections, as if there is only one – there are two more that we should be looking for too.

The core issue here is how our apparent neurological limits are improved by the affordances of social media. Does social media allow us to be more time-efficient with our connections? Recently, Dunbar has tackled this issue head on in a 2016 paper with two surveys of several thousand UK adults.¹⁰

Dunbar did indeed find that most of his participant's personal social networks contained roughly 150 individuals, and, within that, many did indeed have a sympathy group of about 15 individuals, as well as a support clique of about five. But what is rather striking is that these numbers were largely unaffected by how many social media connections participants had. In other words, connecting with lots of people did not help social media users gain more close friendships – the sympathy groups and support cliques stayed roughly the same size.

As such, Dunbar shows that, despite the fact that social media makes it easier to connect with lots of people, that doesn't mean we can therefore gain more emotional support. Meaningfully connecting with people still takes time.

Notably, while there doesn't seem to be much research combining the 'social capital' concept mentioned previously with Dunbar's numbers, these findings do seem to make sense together: social media may help you increase the quantity of your connections, but not necessarily the quality. One last thing that Dunbar points out is worth noting here. Social media services allow us to gather our connections in the one place, but they don't generally let us organise them into a hierarchy of importance of the kind he is interested in.

But perhaps we might not want to do that publicly. In bygone days on Myspace, users agonised over which of their connections to put in their 'Top 8' group of people they wanted to visibly list on their profile as friends. That leads us to another aspect of connecting with lots of people on social media. Psychology is not only interested in how we cope with this *neurologically*, but also how we manage it *socially*.

A potential drawback of social media is that users might want to segment their connections into different groups. For example, you may not have any problem with being connected to your boss on LinkedIn but might feel differently if they sent you a Facebook Friend request. Keeping walls between our social media connections like this is a fairly normal desire, but it is a pretty difficult one to achieve. In practice, these walls don't hold, because, as Marwick and boyd say, 'context collapse' occurs between them.¹¹

Their 2010 paper involved an interesting methodology: asking Twitter users, on Twitter, about who their tweets were written for. That's a critical problem with communicating on social media: despite having lots of connections, we don't really have much certainty about who is paying attention to us at any given time. As such, Marwick and boyd use the concept of the *imagined audience*. Even in everyday conversations, we cannot be exactly sure of how our message will be relayed, or who is listening in on us, but this issue is intensified on social media. When you think about how many of your Twitter followers might be online, who they might retweet to, and under what searches you might appear in, you really have difficulty in imagining who is actually reading your tweets.

Marwick and boyd's survey participants gave some interesting answers to questions about who they were tweeting for. Harking back to Chapter 2 and our talk about identities, it is interesting that several participants stated that their tweets were written for an audience that you might not have considered: they said they were writing for themselves. As Marwick and boyd put it, "consciously speaking to an audience is perceived as inauthentic". Perhaps this was more of a feature of Twitter in 2010, but it is still curious that the first person some social media users trying to connect with is themselves.

Other Twitter users, especially those with large numbers of followers, thought about their audience in terms of fans, as a community, as broadcasting or as consistent political messaging. But even in those contexts, and also users with fewer followers, a common theme emerged: not being able to segment audiences and hence having to aim for a 'lowest common denominator' sort of message – safe, bland and inoffensive.

Marwick and boyd interpreted their survey responses as reflecting either one of two tactics to negotiate these problems. On one hand, some Twitter users simply avoided discussing certain topics altogether – they self-censored for fear of possibly insulting some of their followers. And on the other hand, some Twitter users try to balance their more professional tweets with updates with more personal information. In other words, Twitter users try to avoid annoying their

imagined audiences by appearing more human and more relatable. This latter tactic is interesting as it harks back, yet again, to the ongoing difficulty we have on social media in trying to appear authentic. Hence, what Marwick and boyd's paper shows is that while we know that social media services, such as Twitter, create many new opportunities for connection, they also create new tensions and indeed, conflicts.

CONNECTIONS AND CONFLICT

Reflecting on our social media connections as a whole, it is interesting to think about the inter-relationships between them. Besides being our own friends, some of our connections may be connected to each other, some may harass us and some may stay quiet altogether. What do we know about the psychology of them?

For example, when talking about social media in the context of children and parenting, a common fear is the risk of cyberbullying. While previous research focussed on individual and psychological factors associated with this type of aggression, few have examined more social and structural factors. In other words, can we explain why someone is a cyberbully entirely because of their personality, age or gender, or should we also examine their position within the cliques and friendship groups of their school? In that light, a study¹² on how aggressive schoolchildren have unique positions within their social networks is worth teasing out. This paper is noteworthy as it demonstrates the importance of a distinction made in Chapter 1. Because they were interested in social networks *per se*, and in actual fact did not explicitly treat any online services, you could argue that I should not include it in a book on social media at all! But it is very revealing of how little we understand of the psychology of social media connections.

In this study, Festl and Quandt carried out what might be termed a fairly standard social science methodology in an educational context – they gave German high school students a questionnaire to fill in. Like many such research projects, they asked participants questions about

their individual characteristics, such as their age, gender, personality traits, how much they used computers and whether or not they were involved in cyberbullying. More unusually, they also asked structural questions, such as asking students to list their best friends. This information allowed the researchers to understand the social network of the school, revealing cliques of friendships, relative levels of popularity and reciprocal relationships. In other words, some students were on a lot more best friends lists than others were.

More crucially, this structural data revealed many interesting findings with regard to cyberbullying. Beyond the individual factors, such as female adolescents being more likely to be the victims of cyberbullying than males, the structural factors revealed some unexpected findings. While both perpetrators and victims of cyberbullying were found to be, in general, less popular than their fellow classmates, this did not hold true for another important category. Those students who had experienced both being the perpetrator and as well as the victim of cyberbullying were highly popular among their classmates. In other words, children who had been a cyberbully, but had also suffered cyberbullying themselves, were more popular than children who had only been cyberbullies, or only been victims.

Fascinatingly, Festl and Quandt also say that, while not statistically significant, it seems that these 'perpetrator/victims' showed a curious pattern of connection within the social network as a whole. A visual representation of the participants' structural relationships revealed that perpetrator/victims were often found to be links between different cliques, rather than central to any clique. This position seems to give them a certain amount of influence over distinct groups, but also vulnerable to being attacked by either. As such, when we examined how aggression like cyberbullying occurs online, it seems that we have a lot yet to learn about the psychology of social media connections. Festl and Quandt conclude rather bluntly that, without taking these kinds of structural factors into account, explanations for online aggression like cyberbullying will remain insufficient.

However, this is in reference to social connections where there is some level of actual interaction. You would be forgiven for thinking

that there is nothing interesting happening in our social media connections where there are is no interaction at all. But there is, and the research here is quite revealing of the psychology of these services: welcome to the wonderful world of FOMO. An early paper on this topic by Przybylski and colleagues continues to set the agenda here, as it developed a questionnaire to measure ‘fear of missing out’, and tested it over three studies.¹³ The final version of this scale included such items as “When I go on vacation, I continue to keep tabs on what my friends are doing”. Przybylski and colleagues were interested in understanding how fear of missing out correlated with other psychological issues, namely its motivational, emotional and behavioural associations. What they found was that FOMO is primarily experienced by young people, and by young men more than young women. It is also associated with not being psychologically satisfied in a number of areas, including personal autonomy, relatedness and competence. In other words, if you feel like you lack independence, closeness to other people and general capability, you are probably at risk of experiencing FOMO when you go on social media. Again, doesn’t this strike you as being similar to the deeper challenge of social media: the struggle to be authentic?

Hence, it would probably be a good idea to think twice before we post content on social media – even if it is positive or jolly, we have no idea how it may make our connections feel. In particular, those people who are struggling to find their place in the world may find our apparently perfect lives difficult to stomach. But we will be talking more about updates in the next chapter.

SUMMARY

In this chapter we saw how social media connections can be valuable, though not in the most straightforward manner. While the ice bucket challenge supports the core social media value that connecting with people is a good thing, in personal circumstances, things are more complex. We saw that Facebook helped college students create and maintain connections with acquaintances – but wasn’t much help for

closer relationships. Yet the opposite was true with Snapchat, which is better for maintaining close friendships than associates. You have to pick your social media service to suit your relationships.

Regarding our connections as a whole, we discussed ‘Dunbar’s number’, which suggested a neurological limit to the size of our social groups. Not only was it reflected in our social media connections, but so were the sympathy group and the support clique – indicating that we are only able to emotionally connect with a certain number of people, whether online or not.

Furthermore, we have the issue of context collapse – not wanting everyone to see every update we post, but having no idea who is paying attention. So we only share updates that won’t offend anyone, or balance with personal revelations, in order to appear more relatable to our ‘imagined audience’.

We also considered the friction that can occur between our connections. Notably, perpetrators and victims of cyberbullying do not seem to be popular within their schoolyard social networks, but perpetrator/victims seem to be particularly socially influential. Finally, we muse about that quiet spot in our social media connections, those people who do not interact, and how we might try to avoid giving them the ‘fear of missing out’, by being careful about what we put in our updates.