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Abstract

Research has established a positive relationship between Facebook use and perceptions of social capital, a construct that describes the total resources – both potential and actual – available in one’s social network. However, the process through which social capital conversions occur is unclear. This study presents results from semi-structured interviews with 18 adult Facebook users (ages 25 to 55) about their Facebook use, focusing on how participants use the site to request and provide social support (associated with bonding social capital) and information (associated with bridging social capital). Findings describe how Facebook use facilitates interactions related to social capital and users’ beliefs about the potential negative outcomes of these interactions, providing insight into how users negotiate potential benefits and risks when making decisions about site use.

Keywords

computer-mediated communication, Facebook, information-seeking, privacy, self-disclosure, social capital, social media, social network sites, social support

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In recent years, the rapid and global adoption of social network sites (SNSs) by users and organizations has prompted scholars from a wide range of fields to explore how, why and to what end these sites are used. Facebook, the largest SNS, has more than 900 million members who access the site to fulfill a variety of motivations ranging from maintaining existing social relationships to forming new connections (Lenhart, 2009). When considering the set of features that define SNSs (Ellison and boyd, in press), it becomes clear that these sites are especially well-suited to enabling socially relevant interactions due to the communication practices they support and the identity information found in SNS profiles (Ellison et al., 2011a).

The relationship practices supported by SNSs offer individuals the opportunity to cultivate social capital, a concept that describes the benefits derived from interaction with one's social network (Bourdieu, 1985). Social capital is often delineated into two outcomes (Putnam, 2000): bonding social capital encompasses support-based resources often provided by one's closest friends and family, while bridging social capital speaks to informational and analytic diversity benefits more associated with weaker ties. Facebook has been positively linked to social capital outcomes (e.g. Burke et al., 2010, 2011; Ellison et al., 2007, 2011a), and Ellison et al. (2010) suggest this is due, in part, to the lowered transaction costs associated with interacting with both strong and weak ties through the site. For example, Facebook enables users to broadcast content through 'status updates', which may be sent to their entire network, while more directed forms of communication are available through Chat, private messages, Wall posts, or comments on Friends'¹ posts.

While the ability to broadcast messages and interact with others expedites sharing and communicating with hundreds of network members, these communicative shortcuts may have hidden costs for users. For example, requests for support (e.g. via a health-related disclosure) typically reveal personal information that may not be appropriate for all members of one's network. Furthermore, for those who wish to share, context collapse – the process by which individuals' many distinct audiences are flattened into a singular group (e.g. 'Friends') – may create tensions as users attempt to self-present in ways consistent with each of the various groups in their network (Lewis and West, 2009; Marwick and boyd, 2011; West et al., 2009). Similarly, the sensitive nature of many information-based requests, such as inquiries about a career change, may preclude broadcasting them through more public channels. This tension between revealing and concealing information illustrates the kinds of challenges users face as they attempt to develop strategies that maximize the social capital benefits of these social media tools while minimizing negative outcomes.

This manuscript presents findings from a qualitative study of 18 adult Facebook users regarding how they are using Facebook to access social capital benefits – and why they may choose *not* to engage via the site. We focus on adults because they comprise an increasingly larger proportion of SNS users, with recent data showing that half of all US adults (65 percent of internet users) have a profile on a SNS (Madden and Zickuhr, 2011) and 92 percent of adult SNS users are on Facebook (Hampton et al., 2011). Our analysis provides insight into user perceptions regarding the affordances and constraints of exchanging support and informational resources, which are important dimensions of social capital, through Facebook. Focusing on communication-based factors, such as

audience and channel affordances, we conclude with a discussion of social media's potential to address quotidian social and informational needs among a growing user base.

SNSs as a mechanism for social capital accrual

Social capital is a theoretical framework that considers the benefits individuals accrue from interactions with members of their social network (Bourdieu, 1985). Specifically, social capital can be defined as 'investment in social relations with expected returns in the marketplace' (Lin, 2001: 19); in other words, it describes how individuals' personal relationships provide access to informational and support-based resources. Social capital is typically divided into two categories: bonding social capital, which describes various types of physical, social and emotional support that individuals may provide to a network member, and bridging social capital, which includes the information-based resources that can be derived from diverse heterogeneous networks.

Bonding social capital

Bonding social capital is often associated with homogeneous, dense networks and closer, intimate relationships. Granovetter (1973) defined the strength of a dyadic relationship as a combination of time spent together, emotional intensity, intimacy and reciprocal services; therefore, the highest levels of bonding social capital should be observed within individuals' inner circle of connections. As strong-tie relationships are typically defined by high levels of emotional closeness and trust, social support – including both emotional and physical forms – is a key construct of bonding social capital. Social support is foundational for close, intimate relationships (Weiss, 1974). While support may be provided from various network members, close friends are more likely to provide emotional aid and companionship than acquaintances (Wellman and Wortley, 1990).

The popularization of internet communication fora has reshaped the provision of social support, especially among those who interact online. In contrast to early research suggesting the internet socially isolates individuals and leads to decreased communication with strong ties, recent research has found that Americans who use the internet to connect with their local community provide and receive more support from neighbors than those who do not use these online services (Hampton et al., 2009). The internet may also be useful to individuals who are unable to receive support from offline sources: in a study of online cancer support groups, Turner et al. (2001) found that individuals were more likely to turn to online sources of support when they perceived the depth of online support to be high and the depth of offline support to be low.

Research suggests that some SNS behaviors are more closely associated with perceptions of social support than others. Vitak et al. (2011) found that specific Facebook behaviors, such as Friending a family member and responding to Friends' resource requests on the site, predicted perceptions of three types of social support: attachment – a sense of security and place; reliable alliance – the belief that there will always be people there to help; and guidance – the provision of support and advice during stressful times. Likewise, research by Ellison et al. (2011a) established a relationship between bonding

social capital and the number of perceived ‘actual friends’ in a Facebook user’s network.

The relationship between bonding social capital and Facebook use is complicated due to the often sensitive nature of support-based requests. This may account for why researchers have consistently found stronger effects when examining the relationship between Facebook and bridging social capital versus bonding social capital (e.g. Ellison et al., 2007, 2011a). That said, social support encompasses a wide variety of resources, including less sensitive topics such as someone asking for help with an upcoming move or offering congratulations for a major life accomplishment, and Facebook’s communication features allow users to broadcast requests for and provisions of support. For more intimate support requests, users are required to evaluate what information, if any, they are willing to reveal through the site, and what information they choose to keep private – or to share through private channels.

Given the above, more research is needed to understand the extent to which users perceive Facebook as an appropriate and effective tool for accessing and providing social support. For instance, if a necessary precondition for receiving support is a (potentially) intimate disclosure, does the prevalence of network-wide communication on SNSs (in which updates are broadcast to *all* ties on the system, both strong and weak) constitute a barrier to accessing the bonding social capital embedded in one’s network? While a positive relationship between Facebook use and bonding social capital has been established (Burke et al., 2010; Ellison et al., 2007, 2011a), more work is needed to understand how users navigate the tensions between disclosing and receiving social support and other bonding social capital benefits. Therefore:

RQ1: What are adult Facebook users’ perceptions of the site’s utility for exchanging support-based resources?

Bridging social capital

In contrast to bonding social capital, which is typically associated with strong tie relationships, Putnam (2000) suggests that bridging social capital arises among loosely connected individuals: the heterogeneous nature of these ties is better suited to information diffusion. Because of homophily preferences and communication patterns, weaker ties (such as friends of friends) are more likely to provide access to novel information and diverse perspectives than close relationships. As Granovetter (1973) has argued, the strength of weak and bridging ties is their ability to provide access to more diverse perspectives. Weak ties are especially useful when they bridge two or more networks (Burt, 2000); information will spread at a much slower rate across networks with few bridging ties. The extent to which individuals can mobilize the resources in their network is a key component of social capital and, in the case of bridging social capital, these resources are primarily in the form of external assets and information diffusion (Williams, 2006).

SNSs are particularly well suited to the maintenance of weak ties and thus the accumulation of bridging social capital. Donath (2007) suggests SNSs’ unique affordances – namely the low transaction costs associated with maintaining a large network of connections – support network growth, especially among weak ties, and

lead to the development of ‘social supernets’ that include more connections than could otherwise be maintained without technology. Further opportunities for creating bridging ties arise through SNS features which enable Friends of Friends to interact, such as through comments on a mutual Friend’s status update, and via SNS profile information which can help establish common ground (Ellison et al., 2010; Lampe et al., 2007).

Recent research in this area has replaced global measures of site use (such as time on site) with more nuanced measures in order to identify specific SNS activities which are predictive of Williams’ (2006) bridging social capital measure, which captures elements such as feeling connected to a larger group and having contact with a broad range of people. For instance, Ellison et al. (2011a) found that total network size (i.e. number of Facebook Friends) was unrelated to perceptions of bridging social capital, while the number of total Friends they considered to be ‘actual friends’ was significant, suggesting that not all Facebook Friends are the same and some connections may provide little or no meaningful relational benefits. Similarly, using server-level data from the site, Burke et al. (2011) found that directed communication positively predicted bridging social capital, whereas updates broadcast to one’s entire network and passive consumption of content did not. Recent research by Yoder and Stutzman (2011) supports this finding; when looking at a number of Facebook communication behaviors (status updates, Chat, direct messages, and Wall posts), only Wall posts were significantly related to bridging social capital. The authors suggest that the semi-public, directed and interactive nature of Wall posts serve to signal the relationship to the recipient’s network and may increase feelings of inclusion and connectedness – key components of bridging social capital.

Based on the above and drawing on Granovetter’s (1973) work on the ‘strength of weak ties’, we expect Facebook users will turn to their Friend network for information-based needs, especially when they feel their strong ties are unable to help. Recent research found that 45 percent of SNS users have asked their network questions via status updates (Yang et al., 2011). Research by Morris et al. (2010) found that trust plays a significant role in users’ decisions to ask questions through Facebook; people tend to trust responses from Friends more than from strangers. Furthermore, they found that people preferred asking questions on Facebook (as opposed to a search engine) because it provided additional opportunities to connect socially with their network.

Information-based needs, such as when one wants advice about an upcoming purchase or cannot find the answer to a question through other channels, would be best served through public disclosures on SNSs because they reach one’s entire network and consequently maximize the chances of receiving a useful response. Furthermore, weak ties, who may be better equipped to provide an individual with information, are also most likely connected to the individual through fewer channels (Haythornthwaite, 2005); thus, SNSs may be the only channel available for accessing some of these more distant connections.

At the same time, inherent tensions exist in using SNSs for information-seeking purposes, as any disclosure may potentially result in relinquishing privacy or squandering the scarce attention of one’s network. The benefits associated with broadcasting resource requests to a large and diverse network are mirrored by challenges introduced by this

diverse network, specifically the different professional and personal subgroups it may contain. For example, selectively self-presenting to different audiences (Goffman, 1959) becomes more difficult when SNS-related context collapse occurs (boyd, 2008; Marwick and boyd, 2011): when disclosures cannot be selectively distributed to different audiences, users may choose to self-censor posts so that only the most banal content is shared with their network (Hogan, 2010). Similarly, users may be unwilling to ask questions about a sensitive topic, such as seeking new employment, when their network contains current coworkers. This concern may inhibit users' willingness to respond as well, at least through public channels: Morris et al. (2010) found that people were unlikely to respond to questions posted to Facebook about private topics because they thought status updates were too public for those kinds of discussions. Finally, users may be reluctant to bore or alienate network members by broadcasting questions that are only relevant to a subset of their Friends. Therefore:

RQ2: What are adult Facebook users' perceptions of the site's utility for exchanging informational resources?

Method

Data collection

Between November 2009 and January 2010, we interviewed 18 American adults aged 25–55 with active accounts on Facebook. We employed qualitative methods to obtain deeper insight into their perceptions and understandings (Berger and Luckman, 1980) and to create a rich dataset derived from users' personal experiences (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Using an inductive approach, we developed a protocol based on scholarship on online self-presentation, social capital and SNS use. Our interview protocol probed users' general attitudes toward Facebook, focusing on issues of resource mobilization in addition to how they used specific communication features to interact with others on the site. Examples of questions in the protocol include, 'Are you more likely to turn to your Facebook Friends when you need advice or do a search on the Internet?' 'What kinds of questions, if any, do you ask through Facebook?' and 'Have you used Facebook to get social support from your friends?'

In order to access a diverse range of users, we recruited participants through a series of Facebook ads that were shown to US-based site users in three age categories (25–35, 36–45, 46–55). Users who clicked on the ad were directed to a brief screener survey, where they were asked to provide demographic information as well as an email address if they wanted to be considered for a 45-minute phone interview on their use of Facebook. We received 31 survey responses: from this group, 16 responded to our request to set up an interview and 13 participated in an interview. Following completion of this round of interviews, and having not yet reached saturation, we employed snowball sampling to recruit five additional interview participants.

Our final sample contained 11 women and 7 men from 11 states. On average, participants were 44 years old (median = 43; age range: 27–55); 72 percent were White. Facebook membership varied, with eight users reporting one year or less on the site,

eight reporting one to three years, and two reporting more than three years. Users' self-reported number of Facebook Friends ranged from 25 to 700. All interview participants received a \$15 Amazon.com gift certificate.

Data analysis

Phone interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed by an undergraduate research assistant, and checked by the researchers to ensure accuracy. Analysis was conducted by the researchers in an iterative coding process using Atlas.ti (a qualitative analysis software program), whereby data from each of the participants were used to refine theoretical categories as they emerged (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 333). Textual microanalysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1998: 98), consisting of line-by-line coding of each transcript, was conducted to look for common themes across the corpus. Both factual (e.g. 'use frequency', 'friends quantity') and referential (e.g. 'lowered barriers', 'maintaining ties') codes were included. During the analysis, several codes were removed or collapsed due to redundancy, while others were broken into multiple codes to account for conceptual distinctions. When needed, multiple codes were applied to the same unit, which allowed for a clearer understanding of the relationships between different codes.

Once the interviews were coded, the first author constructed a 'meta-matrix' to summarize responses to questions related to each of the research questions (Miles and Huberman, 1994: 178). The matrix listed each of the interviewees across one axis and the relevant interview prompts (e.g. 'Have you ever used Facebook to get emotional support?'; 'Have you ever used Facebook to get information from your friends?') along the other. All names were changed in the matrices (and in the presentation of findings) to protect participants' identities. By creating meta-matrices, we were able to identify patterns emerging across subjects, check for representativeness of themes across all participants, and more clearly recognize deviant cases.

Findings

Facebook and social support

Our first research question focused on assessing users' perceptions of Facebook's utility for exchanging social support, a key component of bonding social capital. As suggested by previous research, this was a common practice on the site among our participants. In response to questions about engaging in or witnessing social support exchanges on Facebook, all 18 participants reported engaging in or seeing Friends engage in this behavior. Below, we describe how participants balanced the tensions between a desire to provide and receive support and concerns about making personal disclosures in a public space.

The broadcasting affordance emerged as a salient theme for our participants when they discussed receiving and providing social support through the site. Many participants noted that features such as status updates made it 'easier' to exchange support-related messages with their Friend network, including both prompts for and provisions of social support. This convenience was perceived as being especially beneficial to those who

were dealing with a significant event such as a death in the family or an illness, or cases in which users wanted to quickly and efficiently broadcast information without the effort required by individual phone calls or emails. For instance, Felicia (55, White), described using Facebook to share information about a surgery she recently had, noting that it was much easier to post a status update than write multiple emails to different friends. She said that receiving messages like 'hang in there' and 'you're doing great!' through Facebook were meaningful to her, especially when she was having a 'not-so-good day':

[The responses] actually make you feel better because you know somebody at least cares enough to respond. And the variety of responses, they didn't come just from friends and family, they came from political people and people that have genuine cares and concerns, and so it's nice.

This comment illustrates one way in which the communicative affordances of Facebook enable provisions of social support: the site lowers barriers to signaling support needs to one's network and provides simple methods (e.g. commenting on a status update) through which individuals of varying closeness can respond to the request. Felicia noted that provisions of support were not limited to just strong ties, but a wide spectrum of friends and acquaintances. Other participants said they received emotional support from people outside of their normal support network; in these cases, the individuals providing support often shared similar life experiences. For example, Monique (28, African-American) was active in a military wives group because she said she garnered social support from the other members' comments and because the group allowed her to 'vent', while Kevin (34, White) described using a group he and his fellow classmates created to support each other – both academically and emotionally – as they completed graduate school. These examples suggest that, for some users, Facebook's features may be transforming the ways individuals access social support from their network by expanding the range of people who provide support to include weaker ties. Similar to Turner et al.'s (2001) findings about cancer listserv participants, Facebook provided Monique with a way to find similar others through the 'Groups' feature. Even though she had no preexisting relationship with the women with whom she interacted, she noted that the shared experiences of the group enabled meaningful exchanges (such as 'venting' about shared frustrations that close friends without military partners might not understand).

Participants noted that broadcasting updates to their network (or, in some cases, to others with shared affiliations) was beneficial for conveying support-based needs due to the ease of sharing with a wide variety of connections. However, participants identified a number of barriers to broadcasting these kinds of messages, especially as they related to the content and timing of support-related disclosures through the site. Some participants felt broadcasting messages complicated the process of receiving feedback, due to concerns that responses to Facebook messages may not be 'genuine'. For example, Genie (39, White) said she often saw her Friends ask for and receive offers of both physical and emotional support; she, on the other hand, was hesitant to publicly request support from her network and expressed concerns about how such a request would be perceived. She said if she experienced a significant event such as a death in the family,

she would wait to post about it on Facebook because she would not want to appear 'needy' or have people 'feel sorry for her'. For Genie, these concerns outweighed the potential benefits of sharing a request for support. Other participants did not express these concerns and noted that, in similar situations, they had used Facebook to quickly disseminate information such as an ill family member's medical status.

Genie's concerns about the authenticity of supportive messages posted on Facebook were reflected in comments from other participants. While most participants stated that even lightweight forms of support, such as 'liking' a status update or writing a quick Wall post, benefited the recipient, a few said they viewed Facebook-provided support as less meaningful than support provided through other directed, one-on-one communication channels – even if the message was the same. For example, Nancy (36, White) said:

I think [posting a support request] on a public forum has this sense of 'I'm trying to elicit some sympathy or some empathy here', and so it might feel a little less sincere if I got comments. But if I emailed someone specifically to tell them, 'hey, I'm having a rough time, I need somebody to talk to' ... and then I get a response, I think that would be a lot more meaningful than just posting it for everyone.

Another participant (Rachel, 51, White) said the authenticity of Facebook responses depends on the responder's relationship to the poster; she believed relational closeness helps one determine how meaningful a given message is, a perspective that aligns with research linking social support provisions with close connections (Weiss, 1974).

Another barrier to publicly broadcasting social support needs mentioned by participants relates to the limitations of computer-mediated communication (CMC). As many researchers have noted (e.g. Walther, 1992), CMC occurs in a reduced-cues environment in which non-verbal cues such as facial expressions that might provide important contextual information are absent. Some participants commented on the lack of contextual cues by describing problems related to ambiguous messages on the site and how they looked for cues when determining how – and if – they should respond. Talking about how he decides whether to follow up on a Facebook Friend's status update with an offer of emotional support, Peter (27, Latino) said he considers his relationship to the person and the content of the message:

If it's just a frustration like, 'oh I've had a bad day' ... [and] the person hasn't called to talk about it, I assume that it's not necessarily serious. If it's someone that I'm really close to and they post about a family member that is dying or something, I'll use Facebook as a cue to call that person and make sure they're okay.

In the above case, Peter mentions a phone call as a possible response to a public update from a close friend, highlighting the fact that Facebook messages may prompt responses via other media among closer ties; for weaker ties, these channel shifts may not be available or appropriate. Another participant (Tom, 55, White) agreed that while support through Facebook is 'better than nothing', he preferred phone calls when offering a friend support. Mary (55, White) also echoed this idea, saying, 'I'd rather call them. A little more personal to me, hearing their voice.'

In short, our participants found that Facebook's communicative affordances – and specifically the ability to broadcast messages to their entire network – made the process of exchanging social support with members of their networks more efficient, but highlighted a number of concerns related to sending these messages through a semi-public channel. In some cases, the authenticity of a response or the motivation behind it was unclear. Participants considered multiple factors when determining whether to use Facebook to exchange social support messages, such as the content and timing of the message and the relationship between the support requester and provider. Participants noted that in some situations, such as more serious requests or among more intimate ties, a private channel was preferred over the more public Facebook-enabled interactions.

Facebook and information-seeking

Because bridging social capital is associated with large, heterogeneous networks that provide access to diverse people and information (Burt, 2000; Putnam, 2000), our second research question focused on users' perceptions of Facebook's utility for mining informational resources from their network. Our data suggest using Facebook for this purpose was very common, and many participants noted the benefits of broadcasting requests to their entire network in order to solve an information-based problem and described the diversity of their Facebook network as a strength. At the same time, participants identified numerous challenges or limitations to using Facebook to find information or seek advice, which sometimes limited their use of Facebook for this purpose.

The ability to broadcast requests to their entire network was seen as a primary benefit of the site. The removal of temporal and geographical constraints paired with access to an often diverse network of individuals aided several participants in accessing informational resources via the site. A number of participants mentioned this affordance: for example, Rachel said, 'There's a network out there; you might as well tap the resources. There's a lot of knowledge and experience out there that no one person could ever have, so if you can share it, so much the better.' Similarly, Cathy (41, White) said, 'Surely somebody out of the 350 people [in my network] would have an answer to something I needed, or know where to direct me to find it.' These two statements directly speak to participants' perceptions about the benefits of having a platform through which they could quickly and easily distribute content to a large group of loosely connected ties.

These benefits were not limited to information, but also included other, more tangible information exchanges. Felicia used Facebook to track down an 'elusive' book and explained the benefits of the broadcasting model:

Using the Wall to post comments is quicker and [updating your] status is easier to do than to try to go through email. And you get probably more people than you would if you got email, because it's usually everyone on your list ...

She described an incident in which a geographically distant Facebook Friend, who owned a book she could not find locally, saw her Facebook update requesting the book and mailed it to her. Other participants spoke of using Facebook to get technical (e.g. how to configure software), networking (e.g. job leads) and advice-based (e.g. name

suggestions for a new kitten) questions. In each case, participants said they received responses from a wide range of people, and that the responses often arrived very shortly after posting the initial question, highlighting the convenience of using Facebook over other means of communication when trying to get questions answered quickly.

Beyond citing Facebook's technical features in facilitating information distribution, participants also described another benefit of the site stemming from the composition of their Facebook Friend network: the fact that there was a preexisting relationship in place. For example, when Monique had questions about what medicine to give her daughter, she said she preferred posting the question to Facebook as opposed to using a search engine

because a lot of people deal with similar things. So especially with kids, they know exactly what to give a child and what not to. When you Google it, they just give you a list of medicines. You don't know if the medicine works or not. You talk to somebody else who has a child and know that they gave it to their child.

Echoing findings by Morris et al. (2010), the authenticity and shared experience embodied in advice from a known connection outweighed the less personal information Monique would have obtained from a Google search. Other participants echoed this sentiment. For instance, John (36, White) said he would rather post questions to Facebook than use a service such as Yahoo! Answers because he trusted his Friends to provide 'serious' responses. In his experience with Yahoo! Answers, he said responses were hit-or-miss: 'Sometimes you get a bunch of teenagers just making wisecracks, other times you get somebody who's a real expert on whatever you're asking about.'

While the relationship between users and their networks can lead to more trustworthy and personalized advice, network composition may also create a barrier to employing Facebook for information-based needs. With most types of questions, having a highly heterogeneous network should increase the likelihood of receiving a response, while networks that are too dense may preclude access to novel information (Granovetter, 1973) because members have similar knowledge bases. John, who said he had about 50 Facebook Friends, identified this pattern when he noted that his ability to use Facebook for questions was limited to topics in which his Friends were knowledgeable: 'Most of my [Facebook] Friends are nurses, so I can get nursing advice from them, whereas if I have a question about a car or something, most of my Facebook Friends are clueless.' In this case, a smaller and more homogeneous network limited his ability to exploit the informational benefits of Facebook.

While having a smaller network on the site may diminish users' ability to access new information and ideas, users may be purposefully limiting Friend connections due to privacy concerns, constituting another barrier to using Facebook for information needs. Nancy was acutely aware of this dilemma: she kept her Friend count very low (30) and rarely made any disclosures through the site, describing herself as 'a very private person'. When asked whether her reluctance to share personal information online limited the site's usefulness to her, she responded, 'Yes, definitely. I don't get as much out of Facebook as I think a lot of people that I know do.' For Nancy, the risks associated with sharing personal information on Facebook outweighed the potential benefits to sharing

information through the site, even when her potential audience was limited to close friends.

Participants noted an additional barrier related to their network composition: the presence of certain individuals or groups within their Friend network led them to sometimes censor updates or use alternative channels for requesting information. Peter, a college instructor who said he had Friended some of his students and his faculty advisor, said he was hesitant to use the site for information-based purposes because the types of questions he would want to ask were about people who were part of his Friend network:

Most of the advice-seeking things that I would have are on things like family or relationships or work ... and all of those people are also on there. In that way, I do think Facebook is limiting and I wouldn't want to bring up any of those kinds of situations.

Peter noted that one of the ways in which he dealt with this barrier was to use the site's 'Friend Lists' feature, which allowed him to 'hide' an update from specific individuals or groups of Friends. Alternatively, he said he would reach out to specific individuals through alternative channels, such as text messages or phone calls. Several other participants said they preferred interacting through more private channels – both within Facebook and elsewhere – when the topic was sensitive, because they did not think it was appropriate to share some kinds of information with their entire network. For example, David (48, Latino) spoke about moving conversations from public channels, such as the Wall, to more private channels (e.g. private messages) when giving a Facebook Friend personal advice.

To summarize, participants identified both benefits and barriers to using Facebook for information-seeking purposes, a key construct of bridging social capital. The ability to quickly access one's network through the site's communication features, as well as the embedded level of trust associated with a network of known others, encouraged many participants to use Facebook to seek advice and information. At the same time, however, network constraints and concerns about audience and privacy limited some participants' ability to fully utilize the site for mobilizing these information-based resources.

Discussion

This study examines users' perceptions of Facebook as a platform for the exchange of social and information-based resources in order to extend previous work documenting a relationship between Facebook use and perceptions of social capital. Because social capital is, at its core, derived from *interactions* with one's network, SNSs appear to be a valuable channel for supporting informational and support-based exchanges. Broadly speaking, our participants fell into one of two categories: those who engaged with their network to request and offer various resources and those who refrained from doing so. More specifically, our findings suggest that while SNS users are cognizant of, and in many cases embrace, the opportunities these sites provide for network mobilization, they also recognize and are constrained by potential risks associated with broadcasting information to a wide and often diverse audience. The broadcasting nature of many SNS exchanges featured prominently in participants' comments. Participants also described

various strategies they employed to minimize risks, such as employing advanced privacy settings and restricting access to individual posts, so they could actively participate on the site.

Although previous research has used survey and server-level data to identify specific behaviors that are more likely to result in social capital gains (Burke et al., 2011; Ellison et al., 2011a; Yoder and Stutzman, 2011), our qualitative data allow us to more closely consider how participants are using the site, what they perceive as the advantages and disadvantages of these activities, and their impressions related to the various kinds of interactions facilitated by the site. In our interviews, participants described Facebook's ability to lower barriers to interaction with members of their Friend network through activities such as commenting on Friends' posts, sharing information through public updates and sending private messages.

Although social support is traditionally associated with interaction with one's closest connections (Weiss, 1974), many participants employed Facebook as a mechanism through which to request social support from their entire network because of the ease of widely distributing messages or providing quick messages to Friends who needed support. However, some participants questioned the authenticity of support provided solely through the site *because* of the ease with which a user could post a short comment or 'like' a post. For those who share these feelings, Facebook may best serve as a facilitator of support through alternative channels. Drawing from Haythornthwaite's (2005) concept of media multiplexity, it is more likely that close ties interact through a greater quantity of communication channels. In other words, while Facebook may provide an outlet through which weak ties can offer support, strong ties may be more likely to use information posted on Facebook to initiate interaction through a more private channel, such as a phone call or face-to-face meeting. Interactions that are prompted by information on the site but occur through other channels are not well measured in extant studies using server-level or survey data, but were discussed by participants, and we believe they are a rich topic for future research.

Participants' comments regarding the effect of network size and composition on their disclosures reveal a complicated relationship between network characteristics and site usage behaviors. Unsurprisingly, many participants noted the benefits of having access to a diverse network of individuals, especially when they were seeking advice or information. These comments are consistent with research in both offline (Granovetter, 1973) and online (Donath, 2007) settings that argue that having a large network of weak ties is better suited to gaining access to new or hard-to-find information. Users were cognizant of the benefits associated with a wider, more diverse Friend network and the ease with which they could 'tap' the resources of this network by utilizing communication features that reached their network (e.g. status updates) and beyond (e.g. Group messages).

However, participants also described how network composition – and specifically the presence of multiple audiences within their network – acted as a barrier to interaction. Many of these comments reflect the concept of 'context collapse' (boyd, 2008; Marwick and boyd, 2011), which refers to the flattening of multiple audiences into one group. At the time of data collection, content posted through public features such as status updates was distributed to users' entire network by default, and while advanced features were available for tailoring messages to specific audiences, using these features required an

additional investment of time and knowledge. Therefore, the simplest method for addressing concerns about sharing content with one's entire network may be not contributing, either by refusing to post content or by only sharing content deemed appropriate for *everyone* in their network (Hogan, 2010). Future research should explore how new features, including Facebook's Smart Lists and Google Plus's Circles, help users address context collapse-related concerns by simplifying the process of tailoring messages to specific audiences.

As has been argued previously (Ellison et al., 2011b), choosing *not* to interact with one's network on a SNS is one strategy available to users who wish to control access to their disclosures or otherwise maintain their privacy. However, when considering the relationship between SNS use and social capital, it is clear that some degree of interaction is required to mobilize one's social capital: in other words, those who do not ask for help are less likely to receive it. Therefore, the privacy concerns voiced by participants may constitute a significant barrier to accessing social capital via Facebook-enabled interactions. Conversely, employing alternative strategies, such as limiting Friends on the site to a smaller, more homogeneous network comprised of fewer network sub-groups, also creates barriers to receiving novel information, as network members are more likely to have redundant information.

Conclusion

This study examines the extent to which adult Facebook users see the site as a useful channel for accessing the social support and informational resources embedded in their social networks and their practices for doing so, with an emphasis on their perceptions regarding the benefits and barriers of these activities. While previous research has established a positive relationship between Facebook use and social capital (Burke et al., 2011; Ellison et al., 2007, 2011a), our findings provide insight into how and why these social capital conversions may take place, as well as some of the challenges that must be overcome in order to fully take advantage of the site's affordances. The qualitative findings presented here shed light into some of the ways in which adult Facebook users may balance privacy concerns with a desire to engage with and benefit from interactions with their network, and we are hopeful that this research will support the development of new theories of computer-mediated communication, relational maintenance and impression management. This study may be especially useful to those researchers working to extend theories that are grounded in offline-based interactions, such as Communication Privacy Management Theory (Petronio, 2002), by offering insight into how the social and technical features of online communication technologies are shaping the ways people reveal and conceal information about the self.

As this study is limited in its ability to generalize findings beyond those studied due to our use of a small, non-representative sample, future research should explore the barriers to sharing resource requests and provisions identified by our participants, especially those related to privacy concerns and site-based privacy settings, and consider possible social or technical interventions to address these concerns. For instance, several participants' comments reflected low Facebook literacy – a lack of knowledge of how to use the site's privacy and audience maintenance features – which may lead

to less engagement with the site or negative outcomes, such as inadvertently broadcasting a message intended to be private. Working to educate users about site features may help mitigate many of these concerns, especially among older users, who are likely to have less knowledge of and experience with SNSs. Furthermore, while no obvious differences across gender or age were observed in this small sample, larger, more representative studies should empirically test the relationship between demographic variables and the behaviors and perceptions we describe here. Methods such as surveys and experiments would allow researchers to probe the findings presented here and more precisely describe the ways in which average Facebook users are engaging – or choosing to not engage – with the site and the relationship between engagement and resource provisions via the site.

To conclude, we believe online tools such as social network sites provide users with a powerful context for accessing the resources inherent in their social networks, and the data shared here illustrate the complex nature of these transactions, as well as the relationships that govern them. Researchers should continue to examine how users engage with others and benefit from their use as both the site and its user base evolve in future years.

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Note

1. In line with previous research (e.g. Ellison et al., 2011a), we distinguish between ‘friends’, a term describing individuals with whom one has an established relationship, and ‘Friends’, the formal connection between two users within the Facebook system.

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