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Exploring gender issues within social capital and Facebook use: a qualitative approach

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ABSTRACT

The research aimed to explore the role of the social networking site Facebook in the creation and maintenance of social capital for young men and women. The study took a qualitative approach to discover individual's personal experiences; semi-structured interviews were used to collect data and the method of data analysis was thematic analysis. Six participants were interviewed for the research, three males and three females. From the interviews four themes were discovered: strength of relationships, convenient communication, gendered Facebook use and observable vs. unobservable use. Facebook was found to initiate and maintain bridging capital whilst also maintaining bonding capital, particularly for individuals not in physical contact with close relationships. Gendered behaviours on Facebook were also discovered and discussed as well as a possible link between observable and unobservable behaviours and active and passive engagement with Facebook. Limitations and suggestions for future research are discussed within.

KEY WORDS:	FACEBOOK	SOCIAL CAPITAL	GENDER	ACTIVE CONTRIBUTIONS	OBSERVABLE BEHAVIOUR

Introduction

Online Networks

There is a wealth of research to understand the effects of online technology on individuals and societies. One area of focus is the relationships or networks that people develop, maintain and transfer online. Online networks have been defined as an 'internet-based environment that requires membership for participation' whereby membership helps to facilitate the production of relationships with other individuals 'through which resources can be mobilised' (Notley, 2009; p. 1209). There are many different types of online networks with different purposes that can be private or public, small or large, commercial or non-commercial (Notley, 2009), academic or social (Ünlüsoy et al, 2013). Online social networking sites (SNS) particularly have received great attention due to their importance in understanding their social and psychological impacts on individuals.

Boyd and Ellison (2007) describe social networking sites as 'web-based services' that allow individuals to do a number of things such as create a 'public or semi-public profile' online, create a list of other users 'with whom they share a connection' and to browse their list of users and those constructed by other users in the system (p.211). Farrell & Fudge (2013) defined SNSs as a domain where people can interact according to specific areas of interest.

Lenhart et al (2010) suggested that young adults spend a lot of time online communicating with peers and Madden and Zickuhr (2011, cited in Cook et al, 2013) found that 83% of emerging adults aged 18 to 29 had used a SNS during their lifetime. SNS provide an area for young individuals to explore their peer culture, show and seek affection, affirmation, and acceptance and to give and receive feedback on digitally constructed 'profiles' (Larsen, 2007). Studies have found links between SNS use and disclosure of personal information, risky behaviour, privacy issues and sexual harassment and victimisation (Livingstone, 2008; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2008). Although SNS use has been linked with increased risk online, the attitudes and behaviour of teenagers and how they use SNS is argued to play a role in this risk (Senguptaa & Chaudhuri, 2011; Staksrud et al, 2013). Despite negative findings, recent research highlights the positives of online networks; SNS have been found to be linked to both formal and informal learning. Ünlüsoy et al (2013) point to how SNS can provide young adults with opportunities to connect and share information with other users, and to create and learn. However, a large proportion of SNS research is of a quantitative survey-based nature and is susceptible to responder and social desirability biases and therefore can suffer lower validity.

Social Capital

There is an abundance of social capital research from a range of theoretical perspectives, so much so, that social capital has been coined an 'elastic term' having a variety of meanings in numerous fields (Adler & Kwon, 2002). Bourdieu (1986) first described social capital as the resources that accrue from social structure and how they could cause social inequality. Coleman's (1988) more community-based approach described it as a resource that was developed within the relations between individuals and did not exist intrinsically within them. This notion was reiterated by Putnam (1995) who referred to social capital as 'features of social organisations such as networks, norms and trust' that assist co-ordinated and co-operative action.

Similarly, social capital has been referred to as 'embedded resources' (Lin, 2001) or as the 'goodwill' that is stimulated within social relations (Adler & Kwon, 2002). Social capital has essentially been described as a multi-dimensional construct including many aspects such as civic and political participation, life satisfaction and social trust (Burt, 2005; Coleman, 1988; Lin, 2001; Putnam, 2000; Valenzuela et al, 2009). Each definition of social capital has common ground in that they 'all focus on people's relations with each other and utilising these relations for certain purposes' (Vergeer and Pelzer ,2009; p.191). However, each definition is rooted within a scholar's theoretical perspective and therefore will inform the type of research that is conducted.

The challenge is to try to conceptualise the dimensions of social capital into an academic structure (Valenzuela et al, 2009). Putnam (2000) emphasised two forms: bonding capital which is described as being embedded in 'emotionally close and tightly knit relationships' such as those with family and close friends. Bridging social capital on the other hand, is referred to as the 'weak ties' between a diverse range of individuals that may open the door to a range of perspectives and groups, who may provide useful resources such as information and advice (Burke et al, 2011; Ellison et al, 2007; Stefanone et al, 2012). Burke et al (2011) feel that bridging and bonding capital are not mutually exclusive, but instead are different dimensions of the resources in social networks (p.572). Scheufele and Shah (2000) outlined three dimensions of their own: interpersonal, intrapersonal and behavioural; whilst Wellman et al (2001) built upon Putnam's (1994) findings and developed three different dimensions: network capital, participatory capital and community commitment. Social capital has been linked to an assortment of results including increases in community commitment, career advancement, organisational success, better public health, increased self-esteem and life satisfaction (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Boneham & Sixsmith, 2006; Helliwell & Putnam, 2004; Steinfield et al, 2008). Within this study the focus will be on Putnam's definitions of bonding and bridging capital and how they are constructed.

Social Capital and Facebook

Within the current study, the focus will be on one particular SNS, Facebook, as it was recently found to be the most popular social network site with a likely 800 million users (eBizMBA, 2013). As recently stated by Ellison et al (2014, in press) previous literature has recognised a significant relationship between use of the Facebook and increased social capital. Valenzuela et al (2009) reported a positive relationship between the intensity of Facebook use, Facebook group use and students' social trust, life satisfaction and civic and political participation. However, they acknowledged the relationship although significant was not large, and that previous research indicated factors such as personality, life experience and socialisation could play a role.

Donath and Boyd (2004) theorised that online social networks may not increase the number of strong ties an individual has, rather their weak ties may increase due the suitability of SNS to maintain these links cheaply and easily (p.80). Facebook has been found to be strongly associated with bridging social capital (Ellison et al, 2007), due to the features of the site that facilitate users to broadcast information about themselves and to engage in a form of 'social surveillance' where they track the activities of their Facebook 'Friends' (Steinfield et al, 2008). In contrast, other

research has suggested that Facebook is associated with bonding capital and maintaining existing offline relationships as individuals bring their offline networks online and use SNS to re-establish old relationships rather than meeting new people (Ellison et al, 2007; Ofcom, 2008).

Ellison et al (2011) acknowledge the ambiguity of research on the specific behaviour of individuals on SNS sites like Facebook. They realise that Facebook supports a wide variety of potential connections, including those who share pre-existing connections to those who are complete strangers. Their findings suggest that users differentiate between their actual friends and their 'Facebook Friends'; the latter indicating those who may not be close friends but who could provide useful resources. This ambiguity in literature highlights the need for more investigation into how individuals use Facebook and how this affects their social capital.

Although Facebook use has been linked with both types of social capital, scholars have found a strong relationship between social capital and active contributions to the site (Burke et al, 2010) rather than passive browsing of user's information. This finding suggests that those users who have the capacity and inclination to actively engage in certain activities on SNS may be more likely to accrue social capital (Ellison et al, 2011).

Gender and Social Capital

Despite all the literature, there are those who criticise social capital theory and research on several levels (see Bebbington, 2007). Observers have raised concerns about the worrying inattention to gender issues within social capital debates. Molyneux (2002) points to how gender is both 'present and absent in troubling ways'. She acknowledges that gender relations are commonly neglected within social capital research however, when gender relations are recognised, they are often blighted by assumptions about women and gender roles (Molyneux, 2002; p.177). This seems particularly disconcerting when feminists argue that social capital and related policies rely heavily upon the unpaid labour of women in informal networks of care within the family and community (Edwards, 2004; Ganapati, 2012; Healy et al, 2007; Lowndes, 2004; Molyneux, 2002). Therefore, there is a need to investigate gender issues more closely within social capital construction in online networks.

Gender and SNSs

Within SNS literature there are very inconclusive findings as to whether gender and SNS are linked in any particular way. Ellison et al (2007) found no significant interactions between gender and Facebook use in predicting social capital and Valenzuela et al (2009) similarly, found that gender did not affect associations between Facebook use and social capital variables. On the other hand, other researchers found gender to be significantly linked with SNS use and concluded that women were more likely to use SNS than men (Hargittai, 2007). Due to the inconsistencies within the limited literature, regarding gender and SNS use, there is a clear need to investigate the relationship in more detail using more qualitative methods. The majority of SNS research has used quantitative data collection methods such as online surveys distributed via email (Ellison et al, 2007, 2011; Valenzuela et al, 2009; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2008) and questionnaires delivered via the telephone (Vergeer & Pelzer, 2009). Due to the lack of qualitative methods used

within previous SNS and social capital literature, a more qualitative method of data collection and analysis will be used.

Through reading the previous literature the main objective of the research was established to investigate the role of social networking sites (SNS) in the creation of social capital for young men and women. The research aimed to discover the particular role that Facebook plays in young men and women's social capital. The following research questions were formed:

> **RQ1**: Does Facebook help young individuals to create or maintain social capital?
> **RQ2**: If so, how does Facebook facilitate this?

Due to a large proportion of the previous literature ignoring gender issues within social capital, the following research question was derived:

> **RQ3**: Will there be any difference in social capital creation between young men and women?

As a further extension of the idea of active contributions to social networking sites (Burke et al, 2010), the following research question was also developed:

> **RQ4**: To explore the passive and active contributions to Facebook in relation to the production of young men and women's' social capital.

Methodology:

Design

The study took a qualitative approach to investigation using qualitative data collection and data analysis techniques. The strengths of qualitative research are realised when research needs to examine certain complexities or processes in depth and when experimental or quantitative research cannot be done due to technicalities or ethical reasons (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Human behaviour is significantly influenced by the settings in which it occurs and so qualitative research seeks to understand human phenomena in its natural or 'real world' setting (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). There is an assumption that qualitative researchers must actively look, listen and engage in the research setting to discover the different perspectives and experiences of individuals (Miller & Crabtree, 1999). Thus, qualitative research aims to collect data that is as rich as possible so as to allow the researcher to address the research questions and to examine the phenomena (Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2010). Due the social nature of SNS and social capital it was necessary to undertake a qualitative methodology to try and understand each individual's personal experience and perceptions of using Facebook.

Although there is previous qualitative research on SNS and social capital it differs greatly to the current study. Different data collection methods were used; the research covered one single SNS rather than a range of SNS and a different age range were studied (Lenhart et al, 2010; Livingstone, 2008). Therefore, the current study provides a different method of qualitative investigation into SNS, gender and social capital.

Participants

Six participants were recruited, three male and three female; they were all university students aged between 18 and 22. The research used an opportunity sample to recruit participants and so several participants were known to the researcher as they were easily accessible and approachable. Known individuals to the researcher were asked if they wanted to contribute to the study and were able to choose either to partake in the study or refuse. When they agreed to partake in the study, they were briefed and asked to sign a consent form and then the study was able to commence.

Data collection

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews as they allow for a more flexible approach to discuss topics of interest with individuals (Noor, 2008). Qualitative researchers have an understanding that the deeper perspectives of individuals, such as thoughts, feelings, beliefs and values, are better captured by face-to-face interaction (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). The semi-structured nature allows individuals to speak quite openly while still maintaining some degree of structure to ensure the collection of relevant data (Noor, 2008).

An interview guide outlining the main topic areas and questions was used to help the conversation flow and direct it towards relevant material. This format was chosen due to its flexibility in allowing the interviewer to respond accordingly to any issues that may arise within the course of the interview (King & Horrocks, 2010). The interview guide can be found in the appendices (appendix 1). The topic areas were informed by the previous literature on social capital and SNS use. The interviews ran between 40 to 60 minutes, as the conversation was allowed to flow until a natural conclusion. During the interviews a recording device was used to capture the data so that it could be transcribed into a script to be analysed at a later stage.

Data analysis

The transcribed interviews were analysed using the qualitative method of thematic analysis. There is no clear agreement of what thematic analysis actually is or how you carry it out. It has been suggested that it is a method that identifies and reports patterns within data called themes, and can often go further to interpret these themes and parts of the given topic (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). There is no set definition of what a theme is, however as King and Horrocks (2010) suggest, there are a few guidelines that can help; the word 'theme' does imply that an issue needs to be repeatedly raised to count as a theme and that themes must be distinct from each other. King and Horrocks (2010) agree with Braun and Clarke (2006) that the researcher is explicitly involved within the research and with how it is carried out. The researcher makes decisions on what is included or rejected as a theme, and also makes a decision on how the individual's words are interpreted suggesting that research cannot be fully objective.

Willig (2013) describes several approaches that qualitative researchers can take towards knowledge production. The realist approach suggests that knowledge generation comes from real social processes that can be identified and studied. It proposes that an individual's reality can be ascertained from discovering their lived experience, behaviour and thoughts and so takes people's accounts at face value (p.15). On the other hand, the social constructionist approach focuses on the

construction rather than production of knowledge and how people construct their realities through the use of language. They feel that discourse constructs reality and so are interested in how people say things rather than what is said (p.17-18).

Thematic analysis was chosen for its accessible and flexible approach to analysing data. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that thematic analysis is flexible in the sense that it is not strictly tied to an epistemology, but rather it can be used within a range of theoretical frameworks. They argue that it can be used in either a realist approach or constructionist approach, and it can also be used within a 'contextualist' approach and stand between the two extremes of realism and constructionism. For the research the two approaches were considered for their value, however a middle ground or 'contextualist' perspective was taken, which lent more towards the realist approach as the research focused on individuals lived experience of Facebook use.

There is no consensus of how thematic analysis should be carried out, however most theorists agree there are several stages. Firstly, you should read through and familiarise yourself with the data to create descriptive codes, the basic codes to organise data. The next level of coding should involve more interpretation of the data and some generation of themes. Finally, you should define and improve the overarching themes to produce the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006; King & Horrocks, 2010; Langdridge, 2004).

Ethical considerations

The ethical guidelines set down by the British Psychological Society (2009) were consulted and adhered to within this research. As the study involved participants who were all over the age of 18 there was no reason to consult a gate keeper. The sample was an opportunity sample of university students rather than from any particular organisation thus, they were able to decide for themselves whether to participate or not. A consent form was provided before any interviews took place to allow participants to decide and acknowledge their consent to take part (see appendix 2). Furthermore, an information sheet was distributed beforehand to brief the participants on the aims of the study, describe the procedure and highlight their rights to withdraw and to anonymity; this was so all the participants understand the nature of the study and that no deception had taken place (see appendix 3). To allow for anonymity all participants were asked to come up with a pseudonym to replace their own name within the project write-up.

After the interview, a debrief sheet was handed out to thank the participants and to describe the next steps of the study (see appendix 4). They were reminded that they could obtain a copy of the finished project and there was also contact information for a helpline if they felt a need to discuss any issues raised within the research. This was only a precaution, as the material discussed within the interview should not have caused any more harm or stress than experienced in normal everyday life. An ethics approval form was submitted for ethics approval before the research was carried out; this is attached in the appendices (see appendix 5).

The Researcher

The researcher was a female, 21 year old psychology student who saw herself as a fairly passive Facebook user who rarely engages with posting material on Facebook, but rather browses the newsfeed.

Analysis and Discussion

Through the process of thematic analysis, the researcher read through and immersed themself within the data and identified several themes throughout the interviews, each with several smaller issues which were discussed within the theme.

Strength of relationships

During the course of the interviews each individual made a distinction between the types of relationships they maintained on Facebook; strong relationships and those that were not as strong. The strong relationships were mainly between close friends and family:

> *Harriet: …I really only speak to like my close friends, my mum, my sister and some of the family… (L.76)*

The interviewees seemed to distinguish their strong and close relationships because of the amount of offline contact they shared outside of Facebook:

> *John: …it would mostly be close groups, the ones I still see face-to-face […] I don't really engage with people that I don't see face-to-face… (L.53-54)*

There seemed to be a general consensus among interviewees that the majority of people that they had on their Facebook friends list were perceived to be 'acquaintances' (John, L.120) rather than actual friends:

> *Lazarus: … probably five per cent of my friends on Facebook are actually friends … (L.261)*

This demonstrates Putnam's (2000) bonding and bridging capital, as the tightly knit and more emotionally close relationships are between family and close friends whilst bridging capital refers to the weaker ties found between a variety of individuals.

Within the interviews a link seemed to form between those individuals who lived away from home and who were not in physical contact with their close relationships using Facebook for maintaining bonding capital:

> *Anne: … yeah so family and friends that I don't see any more from home… (L.15-16)*

It appeared that for the interviewees who lived away from home, Facebook was perceived to be one of the 'only' (Harriet, L.61) ways to communicate with their close relatives and friends easily and for free. Whilst for some of the other interviewees, they would have rather just 'text' (Rach, L.63) their close friends or met them 'face-to-face' (James, L.102) than use Facebook. This indicates a variation in Facebook preference between the participants that depended on their particular situation.

From the issues discussed it is clear that interviewees made a distinction between close relationships and weaker ties that were more like acquaintances. The interviewees perceived Facebook to help supplement contact with their existing close relationships and they distinguished their close relationships by the amount of offline and face-to-face contact they shared with them. The closer the relationship the more time they spent offline with them. The weaker ties or acquaintances were not contacted as much and were only occasionally seen outside of Facebook. This

supports a previous finding that users differentiate between their actual friends and 'Facebook friends' (Ellison et al, 2011) and additionally lends support to idea that Facebook facilitates the maintenance of bonding capital as people move their existing networks online (Ellison et al, 2007).

Both male and female interviewees explained how Facebook was used for university and group work purposes with fellow students:

Rach: … yeah I use it for university when we're doing all the group work… (L.238)

The interviewees explained how they used Facebook to ask for 'help' (Lazarus, L.43) from individuals on their university course, illustrating how they used Facebook to gain resources from their acquaintances and weaker ties. This shows how Facebook was used as a tool to create and maintain bridging capital which supports previous literature (Ellison et al, 2007). Furthermore, it sheds light on previous inconclusive findings surrounding gender, SNS use and social capital (Ellison et al, 2007, Valenzuela et al, 2009) by proposing that within this sample there were no differences between males and females when using Facebook for communication and social capital purposes.

Convenient communication

A prominent theme within each of the interviews was how Facebook was a 'convenient' (Lazarus, L.16) method of communication. Facebook was described as being accessible and portable due to the range of technologies used to access it:

> *Lazarus: …it's at your fingertips […] you know it's on your phone, it's on your laptop, it's on your computer… (L.130-131)*

It was also described as being an easy form of communication because it is free and instant:

> *Harriet: …it is just an easy way to contact and speak to people, like when you want an instant answer… (L.147-148)*

> *Rach: …you can keep in contact without having to pay… (L.251-252)*

There was also a suggestion that Facebook was an 'effortless' (Harriet, L.173) and 'flexible' (Anne, L. 133) form of communication:

> *Lazarus: …on Facebook it's laid out like a conversation so you can [ ] read back on your old messages… (L.163-164)*

Additionally Facebook made communication with people easier as it overcame the barrier of distance and physical contact between people and maintained the contact:

> *Anne: …because you're kind of conversation […] doesn't have to end when you like, when you're not seeing them… so it kind of keeps things going… (L.129-131)*

The applications such as group conversations on Facebook messenger and the Groups section were found to be useful and used for their convenience:

> *Rach: …it's easy to make groups and communicate over them instead of having to meet up all the time. (L.12-13)*

From the discussions presented here the theme of convenient communication was drawn as each of the matters raised describes how Facebook made communication with other people easier and more convenient for each of the interviewees. This convenience made it possible for the interviewees to easily maintain relationships with people that they see physically and also with those who were not physically present. It appears that those close relationships and, in particular, weaker ties could be contacted easily and maintained via Facebook, suggesting Facebook's role in the preservation of both bonding and bridging capital. It became apparent that when wanting to contact a number of people, the applications on Facebook such as The Groups and Facebook Messenger made it easier and more convenient to contact everyone without having to physically seek them all out. This supports Donath and Boyd's (2004) suggestion that SNS maintain ties easily and cheaply (p.80) and therefore indicates why Facebook has been found to be strongly associated with bridging capital (Ellison et al, 2007). Facebook helps to maintain social capital because the technology is designed to be convenient to do this even when there is no physical contact between individuals.

Gendered Facebook use

Throughout the interviews it became apparent that the use of Facebook was varied among the interviewees; there were similarities and differences in what Facebook was used for and between the genders. There was a similarity between male and female participants about the use of Facebook for entertainment purposes. All the male interviewees expressed how they used Facebook to watch 'funny videos' (John, L. 26) and for a 'laugh' (Lazarus, L.315):

> *James: … yeah I'll post a joke now and again (L.81-82)*

Additionally, some female interviewees also expressed how they watched funny videos as they were 'entertaining' (Harriet, L.17). One participant perceived herself as more of a 'guy user' (Anne, L.390) of Facebook suggesting that she distinguished between how males and females used Facebook. It seems as though she had identified herself with certain behaviours which she perceived to be associated more with male users.

The female interviewees discussed how they used Facebook for 'educational' (Harriet, L.37) purposes and how they subscribed to 'make-up channels' (Anne, L.29) and other pages which gave 'advice' (Harriet, L.43) on beauty and health issues. These behaviours were not shown by the male interviewees again suggesting a distinction between male and female use as these behaviours were more typically feminine behaviours on Facebook. Previous literature has suggested that the media promotes such ideals of femininity, which include preoccupations with beauty consumption, clothes and make-up (Coy, 2009; Levin & Kilbourne, 2008; Papadopoulos, 2010) indicating why such behaviours were expressed by the female participants.

The interviewees expressed a unanimous perception that female users of Facebook were more likely to 'post pictures' (Anne, L.372) of 'themselves' (James, L.390) to seek 'attention' (Rach, L.155), which male users were less likely to do:

> *Anne: …girls are definitely more in to […] updating everyone (L.368-369)*

This shows that the interviewees expressed a perception of gendered identity use within Facebook; both the male and female participants made this observation through browsing their own newsfeeds. Their perception challenges the previous assumption that females are more likely to use Facebook for person-to-person communication (Hargittai, 2007).

The qualitative interview data suggests that both the male and female participants were equally likely to use Facebook, which contests previous suggestions that only females are more likely to engage in social networking sites (Hargittai, 2007). Furthermore, it could be interpreted that both the male and female participants were actually engaging in a form of bridging capital. By participating in entertainment behaviours and browsing the content, such as posted videos and funny pictures, they were gaining forms of information and resources from the posted content which was shared on their newsfeed by their Facebook acquaintances. Thus they are indirectly consuming information which they are receiving from their weaker ties and acquaintances. This indicates that both the male and female interviewees were using Facebook in a similar way to build upon and use their bridging capital. This sheds light on the previous ambiguity of gender issues within social capital and Facebook (Ellison et al, 2007; Valenzuela, 2009) and demonstrates that there are similarities and differences within gendered social capital use. This would need to be studied further with quantitative survey methods to identify certain relationships and test whether this finding could be applicable to the wider population.

Observable vs. Unobservable use

A final theme was how Facebook could be used either in a way that was observable to other people on Facebook such as: writing comments, posting pictures, tagging people and liking material that others had posted. Or instead, how it could be used in an unobservable way such as: browsing the newsfeed, reading comments, looking at pictures or videos people have posted and private messaging people.

Some interviewees felt they used Facebook for more private and personal communication and they did not intend for others to see them using Facebook:

> *Lazarus: …if I want to have a conversation with someone I'd do it privately in their inbox […] so that no one else can see it… (L.36-37)*

On the other hand, some expressed how they used Facebook quite publicly when they felt a need to express themselves or share their 'views' (James, L.63):

> *Harriet: …I actively engage a lot… especially with things I feel strongly about… (L.36)*

The participants all perceived that a lot of individuals who used Facebook were trying to look for 'attention' (John L.192), were 'showing off' (Lazarus, L.169) and using Facebook as a space for 'personal glorification' (Harriet, L.196):

> *Anne: …it's definitely become… a big kind of platform for people to… like say 'oh look what I'm doing, look at this… (L.449-450)*

Some interviewees suggested people used Facebook in this way because they wanted to 'feel included and involved' (James, L.404-405) and there seemed a need to feel some sort of 'recognition' (Anne, L.347) for material that they posted on Facebook. It was also discussed how certain users posted material such as pictures of themselves, 'selfies', (John, L.192) to see how many 'likes' (Rach, L.149) they could get. Some interviewees perceived this behaviour on Facebook as rather 'egotistical' (Lazarus, L.169) and 'materialistic' (Harriet, L.160) due to the 'guaranteed' 'audience' (James, L.87) that Facebook affords. From these perceptions it would appear that some participants do not feel Facebook is a medium for this kind of public expression.

Amongst the interviewees a link between passive and active engagement with Facebook and unobservable and observable behaviours seemed to emerge. It appeared that passive engagement with Facebook constituted mainly unobservable behaviours such as browsing the newsfeed, whilst active engagement seemed to coincide with observable behaviours such as posting statuses and commenting on material that people had posted. These behaviours are observable in the sense that they elicit 'notifications' (Lazarus, L.235) which are sent to all their Facebook friends and come up on the newsfeed so that people can see what they have done on Facebook.

When considering the interviewees' opinions, it would appear that rather than aiming to create social capital by communicating with close friends, these observable behaviours instead promote personal glorification, which they felt was a growing 'trend' (John, L.277) on Facebook. This idea challenges previous suggestions that those who are inclined to actively engage in Facebook will be more likely to accumulate social capital (Ellison et al, 2011) and challenges the previously found relationship between active contributions to Facebook and social capital (Burke et al, 2010). However, it could be argued that active engagement with Facebook could also comprise of spending large amounts of time communicating with others via the messenger service, which would therefore contribute to social capital maintenance. This idea is rather ambiguous, suggesting it could be affected by several other factors such as personality, peer pressure or socialisation (Valenzuela et al, 2009), thus it requires further investigation.

Conclusions

In line with RQ1 and RQ2, Facebook was perceived to initiate bridging capital and to be well suited and convenient to maintaining a network of acquaintances. Furthermore, it was also perceived to be suited to maintaining existing close relationships and bonding capital, particularly when physical contact was not possible. Within the research it was discovered that, in answer to RQ3, there were certain gendered issues within Facebook behaviour; similarities and differences were observed between male and female participants. Finally, a link between observable and unobservable behaviours and passive and active engagement with Facebook became apparent within the interviews. This relationship ties in with the investigation of RQ4 and suggests that observable behaviours paralleled with active engagement, whilst unobservable behaviours consisted more of passive engagement. As the research only focused on the perspective of six individuals, it must be acknowledged that the findings will be limited in their generalisability to the wider population.

Miller and Glassner (2011) discuss how different scholars feel that interviews produce different things; some argue they produce truths, others feel they replicate 'cultural tales' whilst others still feel they produce narratives of the social world (p.132). Gobo (2011) recognises the move towards more observational and ethnographic methods as they observe behaviours which are more stable than attitudes or opinions which are what interviews aim to explore. Furthermore, as findings were co-constructed between the researcher and participants there would have been the opportunity for underlying agendas to develop and a different dynamic would have been created between the researcher and participants. It must also be taken into consideration that through the interviews there were some cases of researcher-led bias as some questions were potentially leading questions and particularly directed the line of thought.

Future research should focus on investigating the relationship between gender, social capital and SNS use. It should be researched whether there are any Facebook behaviours which are particularly male or female such as entertainment, communication and posting material on Facebook. Research should use quantitative survey methods to test whether the current research findings can be applied to the wider population. It could then be investigated whether there is a relationship between general use of Facebook and social capital use for males and females. This would allow social networking sites to design their websites so that both males and females would be able to interactive with them equally.

In addition, as the research study could only briefly examine the tenuous relationship between observable/unobservable behaviour and active/passive contributions to Facebook, future research should focus on examining this link more closely using quantitative survey measures. If research observed this link, certain other factors may be identified which could be involved within the relationship. If such factors were examined they could help social networking sites to understand how people use their websites and how they may adapt them to become more efficiently suited to society's needs.

Reflexive analysis

Willig (2013) describes two types of reflexivity: personal and epistemological. Personal reflexivity involves reflecting on how we as researchers affect the outcome of research including our interests, values and wider aims and how the research may affect us as people. Epistemological reflexivity refers to critically examining the research process and underlying assumptions and values it reveals. I will discuss my reflexivity in terms of these two types.

The topic of research stemmed from my own experiences of being a Facebook user, I would class myself as a more passive user and I wondered whether this was the case with other individuals. I became aware that because of my position as a Facebook user this informed what I wanted to discover, how I carried out my research and the questions I asked. Initially I thought Facebook would have been a neglected area of research; however I was surprised by the wealth and variety of Facebook research, so I had to narrow down my focus.

During the research process I had to grapple with the philosophical debate between realism and constructionism and try to place myself within these perspectives. I realised the value of each theory and agreed with both ideas. I saw the value in how

language and discourse can construct and inform our social world and processes, however I wanted to understand and recognise people's experiences as this is hardly ever achieved in quantitative research. I had to decide that my research must lie along the continuum between the two extremes, however due to my research aim and questions it was more practical to swing towards a more realist approach. The debate stems from the fundamental question of whether we should be positivist as psychology tries to be objective; however we can never really truly be objective if we take a theoretical perspective because we will be informed by our assumptions and beliefs about the world, therefore it can be argued that there will always be subjectivity in research.

In terms of the research process, I was aware of potential power relations within the interviews which could have caused interviewees to feel uncomfortable or to alter their answers to please me; this is known as social desirability bias. I tackled this by trying to make interviewees feel as comfortable as possible by allowing them to choose where to sit, discussing any issues, building a good rapport and by explaining the importance of their honest perspective. I sometimes found it difficult to create this relaxed environment as I realised that it was not just a conversation I was having with these participants, but in fact I had an underlying agenda to the conversation because I wanted to produce data for my report. When I looked back over my transcripts I realised that in some places I had used quite leading questions when I had wanted to press for an answer. However, I felt that as I progressed I made improvements to my interview techniques and was able to ask better open-ended questions allowing for more open and detailed answers and avoided more leading questions.

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