



We orient to reality, including our relationships with each other, by comparing our views with those of others. Thereby, we build shared understandings of our surroundings. Online interaction provides a way to concretize and distribute these shared understandings through visual performances, as individuals use networked devices to share images, videos, and snippets of text in digital form. This dissertation comprises four empirical studies that examine what kinds of performances of interpersonal relationships take place in online settings, the concerns and efforts they entail, and the interpretations made of them. These practices and interpretations are then contrasted with the findings of a literature review covering the conceptualizations of mediated community in academic research, for suggestion of future directions for investigation of the creation of shared understandings of interpersonal relationships in online settings. From the findings of these studies, I argue that people engage in various creative but repetitive practices in their construction of shared understandings of interpersonal relationships in online settings. Online settings create a new interpretational frame and pose new challenges for the creation of shared understandings, but people engage in collaborative efforts to resolve these challenges. Moreover, extending the analysis to the intergroup level would broaden our understanding of social bonds in the networked settings of late modernity. Situated in the context of the ephemeral relationships of late modernity, these findings portray the performance of interpersonal relationships in online settings as a way to create shared understandings, continuity, and coherence for transient social bonds.



## CREATING SHARED UNDERSTANDINGS OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS IN ONLINE SETTINGS

VILMA LEHTINEN

Department of Social Research  
University of Helsinki  
Finland

# **CREATING SHARED UNDERSTANDINGS OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS IN ONLINE SETTINGS**

**Vilma Lehtinen**

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# ABSTRACT

Contemporary social scientists describe the current societal circumstances as the late modern era, which is characterized by an abundance of both options and uncertainties. Theorists sometimes associate these characteristics with the development of information and communication technologies (ICTs). Some argue that computer-mediated, networked interaction reinforces the fragmented conditions of late modernity. Others emphasize ICTs as the ultimate opportunity to participate in global networks of interaction. To contribute to the discussion on how the development of ICTs and the conditions of late modernity are intertwined, the discussion in this dissertation presumes that online interaction provides a way to create meaningfulness and continuity in late modern life.

The context of the research is the phenomenon of social network sites (SNSs): the vastly popular online services whose central feature is the public performance of connection. Building on the tenets of symbolic interactionism, I argue that the performance of connection creates shared understandings of individuals' interpersonal relationships. This dissertation examines what kinds of performances of interpersonal relationships take place in online settings, what kind of challenges people attribute to these performances and how they attempt to solve those challenges. The observed practices and interpretations are then contrasted with the results of a literature review covering the conceptualizations of mediated community in academic research, to suggest future directions in investigation of the creation of shared understandings of interpersonal relationships in online settings. The research problem is assessed through the use of qualitative methods, which permit the analysis of the expressions that the participants themselves used to describe the novel opportunities and challenges that online interaction offers for the performance of interpersonal relationships.

On the basis of the four individual studies included in this dissertation, I argue that 1) people engage in a variety of creative but repetitive practices of constructing shared understandings of interpersonal relationships in online settings, 2) SNSs create a new interpretational frame and impose new challenges for the creation of shared understandings, 3) people engage in collaborative efforts to resolve these challenges, and 4) extending the analysis to the intergroup level would broaden our understanding of social bonds in the networked settings of late modernity. These findings portray the performance of interpersonal relationships in online settings as creative and collaborative attempts to construct shared understandings, continuity, and coherence for transient social bonds.

# TIIVISTELMÄ

Sosiaalitieteelliset aikalaisanalyysit nimittävät vallitsevia yhteiskunnallisia olosuhteita myöhäismoderniksi aikakaudeksi, jota luonnehtivat sekä lisääntyneet valinnanmahdollisuudet että epävarmuus. Toisinaan sosiaalitieteilijät liittävät nämä myöhäismodernin aikakauden piirteet tietojä viestintäteknologioiden kehitykseen. Tietoverkkojen välittämä vuorovaikutus tarjoaa mahdollisuuden osallistua globaaleihin vuorovaikutusverkostoihin, mutta se myös voimistaa myöhäismodernia hajanaisuutta irrottamalla yksilöt välittömästä ympäristöstään. Tämä väitöskirja osallistuu keskusteluun myöhäismodernin hajanaisuuden ja tietojä viestintäteknologioiden yhteenkietoutumisesta lähtökohtanaan, että digitaalinen, verkottunut vuorovaikutus on keino rakentaa jatkuvuutta ja merkityksellisyyttä myöhäismoderneissa olosuhteissa.

Väitöskirja keskittyy internetin yhteisöpalveluihin, jotka saavuttivat laajan suosion 2000-luvun ensimmäisellä vuosikymmenellä. Näiden verkkopalveluiden keskeinen ominaisuus on mahdollisuus rakentaa esityksiä yksilöiden välisistä suhteista. Työn teoreettinen perusta on symbolisessa interaktionismissa, johon nojautuen näen ihmissuhteiden esitykset tapoina rakentaa jaettua ymmärrystä koskien näitä suhteita. Väitöskirja selvittää, minkälaisia esityksiä ihmissuhteistaan yksilöt rakentavat verkkovuorovaikutuksessa, mitä haasteita he näihin esityksiin liittävät sekä mitä tapoja heillä on ratkaista näitä haasteita. Havaitut käytännöt ja tulkinnat suhteutetaan verkkoyhteisön käsitettä tarkastelevan kirjallisuuskatsausartikkelin tuloksiin, tavoitteena tunnistaa aiemmin hyödyntämättömiä lähestymistapoja ihmissuhteiden esittämiseen verkkoympäristöissä. Näitä tutkimusongelmia työ lähestyy laadullisten menetelmien avulla. Tämä lähestymistapa tarjoaa mahdollisuuden analysoida ulottuvuuksia, joita osallistujat itse käyttävät kuvatessaan haasteita ja mahdollisuuksia, joita digitaalinen, verkottunut vuorovaikutus asettaa ihmissuhteiden esittämislle.

Väitöskirjaan sisältyvien tutkimusten pohjalta väitän, että 1) verkkoympäristöissäkin yksilöt toteuttavat luovia mutta samankaltaisina toistuvia käytänteitä, joilla he rakentavat ihmissuhteisiinsa liittyvää jaettua ymmärrystä, 2) yhteisöpalvelut luovat uuden tulkinnallisen kehyksen ja asettavat uusia haasteita jaetun ymmärryksen rakentamiselle, 3) yksilöillä on yhteistyöhön perustuvia keinoja ratkaista näitä haasteita ja 4) ihmissuhteiden esittämisen tarkastelu myös ryhmien välisenä ilmiönä laajentaisi käsitystämme sosiaalisista sidoksista myöhäismoderneissa, verkottuneissa yhteiskunnissa. Näiden tulosten valossa ihmissuhteiden esittäminen verkkoympäristöissä näyttäytyy luovana, yhteistyöhön perustuvana toimintana, joka rakentaa jaettua ymmärrystä, jatkuvuutta ja yhtenäisyyttä hajanaisiin sosiaalisiin suhteisiin.

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This dissertation is dedicated to Lumi the cat. She has helped in my academic efforts by providing me with more joy and relief than all the cats in the Internetz altogether.

Puotila, Helsinki, on May 18, 2014



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# LIST OF ORIGINAL PUBLICATIONS

This dissertation is based on the following publications:

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II Lehtinen, V., Näsänen, J., & Sarvas, R. (2009). "A little silly and empty-headed": Older adults' understandings of social networking sites. In *Proceedings of the 2009 British Computer Society Conference on Human-Computer Interaction*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: British Computer Society.

III Lampinen, A., Lehtinen, V., Lehmuskallio, A., & Tamminen, S. (2011). We're in it together: Interpersonal management of disclosure in social network services. In *CHI'11 Proceedings of the Annual Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. New York: ACM.

IV Lehtinen, V., Raita, E., Wahlström, M., Lampinen, A., & Peltonen, P. (submitted). More than fifty shades of mediated community – a literature review from an intergroup perspective. Submitted to *The Information Society*.

The publications are referred to in the text by the above Roman numerals. Publication I is reprinted with kind permission from editor Petri Saarikoski, and Publication III is reprinted with kind permission from the Association for Computing Machinery, Inc.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

Interpersonal relationships are the building blocks of societies. Pioneering scholars in symbolic interactionism, including Blumer (1969), Mead (1934), and Goffman (1959; 1967), have explored how these building blocks are brought into being in everyday interaction in a joint process with the people around us. We orient to reality, including our relationships with each other, by comparing our views with those of others. In that way, we accumulate shared understandings of our surroundings. According to the theoretical approach of symbolic interactionism, the function of shared understandings is to help us know how to react to others.

Knowing what others expect from us may serve to maintain the power relations between the participants of an interaction situation or make the situation smoother between equal participants. For example, from the viewpoint of symbolic interactionism, an interaction situation understood by the participants to be one between lovers provides them with shared expectations for mutual expression of affection. However, one of the participants may challenge this understanding – for instance, when not wanting to be considered romantically involved with another participant.

Shared understandings of interpersonal relationships, constructed through symbolic interaction, can be quite ephemeral, since language and gestures lack the material manifestations that could concretize and evoke an understanding after it has once been formed. To compensate for this deficiency, interpersonal relationships are often embedded in interaction rituals (Goffman, 1967; Collins, 2004). For instance, when two adults hold hands in public, this can be interpreted as a way of making others orient towards them as a couple (Collins, 2004). In this dissertation, these kinds of material manifestations are referred to as reifications of interpersonal relationships. They can function as a way of making “socially constructed” reality more tangible than it is through ephemeral words and gestures. Further reifications include totems that represent a tribe, “love bites” on a lover’s neck, or the names of the participants in a sailing party carved on the rocks at the seashore.

The historical and societal setting in which the studies contributing to this dissertation are positioned can be described as late modern. Contemporary social scientists such as Giddens (1991), Bauman (2003), Castells (2000), and Wellman (2001) associate late modernity with ephemeral and transient interpersonal relationships. They argue that ephemerality and uncertainty are not limited to fleeting moments of verbal interaction; rather, they characterize life in contemporary societies in general. While in the past, individuals were bound by a set of close ties of kinship and community, today they have more latitude to choose the people they want to connect with. Spencer and Pahl (2006) note that community can also be found in

networked societies, if we look for it in “personal communities,” a term that refers to the set of people whom particular individuals consider significant and meaningful to them. Freedom is not without its consequences, however. Individuals are condemned to search for continuity in the midst of an abundance of options and fragmented identities.

Scholars have associated these conditions with the development of information and communication technologies. Giddens (1991), who wrote about late modern societies before the emergence of the Internet, considered mass media such as television to connect individuals across time and space but, simultaneously, disconnect them from their closest surroundings. Many social scientists, including Castells (2000) and Wellman (2001), later attributed similar characteristics to the Internet. They argue that interaction through computer networks is illustrative of the fragmentation of social connections in contemporary societies. As close-knit communities separate into individualized networks, online interaction provides opportunities to connect with others with similar interests and goals, to receive resources for variable needs, and to build coherent identities from fragmented elements. However, there is much debate among scholars of online interaction on whether the development of ICTs has produced beneficial or detrimental effects for individuals’ well-being and the functioning of society.

Studies that illustrate the beneficial effects of ICTs include McKenna and Bargh’s (1998) pioneering research on “de-marginalization.” The study showed that interacting with similar people online reduced social isolation for individuals with stigmatized identities. Ellison et al. (2006), for their part, were among the first to study the effects of social network site use, which they found to correlate with indicators of social capital (Ellison et al., 2006). Moreover, Boase et al. (2006) found that time spent online does not come at the expense of other forms of social interaction; rather, it adds to the total amount of interaction. Nevertheless, some claim that the prevalence of ICTs leads to increased detachment from face-to-face interaction, which has negative implications, such as increased loneliness (Kraut et al., 1998) and alienation (Turkle, 2011). As close-knit communities fragment, global networks of connection provide increasing opportunities for people to participate in individualized networks of support and, on the other hand, to escape the confines of their immediate surroundings.

To contribute to the discussion of how the development of ICTs and the conditions of late modernity are intertwined, this dissertation proceeds from the assumption that digital, networked interaction should be seen as a way of coping with the problems of late modernity rather than solely as the cause of these problems. I assume that the performance of interpersonal relationships online may function as a means of finding coherence in circumstances characterized by ephemerality. This assumption has implications for analyzing and finding solutions for problems such as alienation and feelings of meaninglessness. If we consider ICTs to have inevitable consequences, either detrimental or beneficial, we can find solutions only from the

development of technological systems. Instead, I trace the basis of concerns to the intersection between contemporary societal settings and the meaning of online interaction for the individuals living in them. Consequently, I focus on the practices of creating shared understandings of interpersonal relationships in online settings and on the interpretations that individuals living in late modern settings associate with these practices. In more specific terms, this dissertation examines what kinds of performances of interpersonal relationships take place in online settings, the concerns and efforts they entail, and the interpretations attributed to them. These practices and interpretations are then contrasted with the findings of a literature review covering the conceptualizations of mediated community in academic research, for suggestion of future directions for studies examining creation of shared understandings of interpersonal relationships in online settings.

In this dissertation, the concept of “online setting” refers to a context of human interaction that is characterized by the use of networked, digital computers. The term “setting” is used to escape from the idea of “online” and “offline” as separate spheres of interaction. Setting implies here both the backdrop and the stage for interaction. Neither can be separated from the other. For example, while a material manifestation of a relationship occurs in digital form, the shared understandings of it can be negotiated face to face. The combination of computer-mediated, networked interaction with immediate interaction, in all its variety, constitutes the setting that this research covers.

From the early days of bulletin board systems and newsgroups, digital and networked communication technologies have provided features enabling their users to represent the connections between individual users visually. Individual participants are associated with their nicknames or e-mail addresses, which are displayed together with the messages the participants send. Thus, each message thread or conversation concretizes in a visual form the interaction that the participants engage in together. During the last decade, online services that provide these features have proliferated, with social network sites (SNSs) and their “friend list” feature being the most pervasive example. As boyd (2008) demonstrates, in the digital, networked settings of online interaction, the reifications of connection are more persistent, replicable, scalable, or searchable than they were in the pre-Internet era. To reify connections persistently does not necessarily require much effort; online interaction is, in many cases, stored by default in a digital form as it occurs. Nor does replicating or scaling the content from one digital medium to another, without lessening the quality, require much effort. It follows from these properties of digital, networked interaction that the reifications of connection are more accessible in both temporal and spatial terms. In addition, they can then be easily searched for via the plethora of technologies developed for that purpose.

The majority of the research material consists of interview-set accounts that are connected to ethnographic observations of interaction via SNSs.

Instead of knowledge generalizable across population groups such as different cultures or generations, this research provides possible explanations for the different practices and interpretations beyond factors related to the individual. However, the dissertation examines a variety of SNSs, from different phases of the proliferation of the phenomenon, along with participants from different generations. This allows studying the practices and interpretations associated with the phenomenon of SNSs beyond a single site or a particular user group. In addition, Study IV extends the investigation beyond SNSs, to online settings in general. This leap provides an opportunity to consider the creation of shared understandings of interpersonal relationships in the wider scope of online interaction.

The dissertation begins by elucidating the analytical framework and concepts used. After the research problem is posed, I present the methodological choices employed in the four sub-studies included in this dissertation. On the basis of the findings from the sub-studies, I conclude that 1) people engage in various creative but repetitive practices of constructing shared understandings of interpersonal relationships in online settings, 2) features of SNSs create a new interpretational frame and impose new challenges for the creation of interpersonal relationships, 3) people engage in collaborative efforts to resolve these challenges, and 4) extending the analysis to the intergroup level would broaden our understanding of social bonds in the networked settings of late modernity.

Situated in the context of the ephemeral relationships of late modernity, these findings portray the performance of interpersonal relationships in online settings as a way to create shared understandings, continuity, and coherence for transient social bonds. They provide support for the view that we should not look for solutions or the causes of the problems associated with current societal conditions, such as loneliness or alienation, solely in the development of technical systems. This dissertation pinpoints diverse practices and interpretations related to interpersonal relationships and personal communities in online settings, and it identifies new perspectives that are currently lacking in the scholarly literature on this topic. I claim these findings to represent ways to cope with the ephemerality of interpersonal relationships in late modernity rather than to be evidence of collapsing community.

## **2 INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AS A SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED PHENOMENON**

In the material that follows, I first elaborate on the approach of symbolic interactionism as a way to conceive of interpersonal relationships as constructed in human interaction. Moreover, I consider the role of technologies in reifying the relationships through symbolic representations.

### **2.1 A SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONIST APPROACH TO INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS**

Other people's reactions sometimes seem so odd that we think they must see the world through totally different lenses. However, it seems likely that those people are not alone in wearing such lenses; rather, they share them with others holding the same kind of worldview. Social psychologists, especially those representing social constructionism, are interested in how people come to see the world in a particular way and how they jointly negotiate how the world should be seen (Burr, 2000). Symbolic interactionism is a branch of social constructionism that studies human interaction to discern how people use symbols (verbal or visual signs that refer to objects in the world) to build shared understandings of the world around us (Charon, 1995). Scholars of symbolic interactionism consider the outcomes of these negotiations to orient individuals' behavior: if things are perceived as real, they are real in their consequences (Blumer, 1969). Building on the framework of symbolic interactionism, this dissertation approaches interpersonal relationships as a socially constructed phenomenon.

For a particular interpersonal relationship, it might be hard to find an objective definition of whether it is an acquaintance, friendship, love affair, or hostile relationship. Instead, to build an understanding of the relationship, people need to interpret each other's actions. Individuals who are somehow involved in the relationship are most likely concerned about how that relationship is understood, because this can affect how others treat them and how others expect them to behave. Shared understandings of interpersonal relationships can even have implications on the societal level, since society as a whole is built upon interpersonal relationships. Interpersonal relationships are situated between individuals and societies, carrying consequences for both: they deeply constrain, enable, or motivate individuals' behavior, and societies would not exist without them. Interpersonal relationships also have large-scale societal consequences arising from their impact on health and well-being (Spencer & Pahl, 2006, 27–31).



Erving Goffman (1959; 1967) argued that, in order to influence others' actions, people strive to manage those impressions that other individuals form about the situation at hand. Goffman (1959) conceptualized this impression management as a performance. As in a theatrical drama, the participants produce a performance and expect others to act along. Such performances are not individual endeavors; rather, they are joint efforts that the participants engage in to create and maintain a shared understanding of a situation. In this dissertation, I use the concept of performance to refer to those instances of online interaction that I interpret as creating shared understandings of individuals' interpersonal relationships.

Goffman (1959) points out that individuals may produce performances on purpose, knowingly attempting to create a certain impression on others. On the other hand, said individuals might be fully convinced that their actions represent the world as it is (Goffman, 1959). The authenticity of a performance is a concern only if people question it. In that case, a shared understanding of a situation would be challenged. In this dissertation, I assume neither purposefulness nor inadvertence in the performances of interpersonal relationships online. Instead of individuals' intentions, the focus is on how people together create and interpret each other's performances.

The performance of interpersonal relationships always involves particular individuals of whom we have certain expectations, such as a romantic partner or a friend. Therefore, the performance is not functional if other participants do not share in it. Gaining a shared understanding helps individuals to base their acts on shared expectations – for example, those pertaining to their mutual relationship. One can be in love with another person without that person reciprocating, but being lovers is impossible in that case. On account of its inseparable association with particular individuals, the performance of interpersonal relationships differs from the performance of larger aggregates of people, such as communities or social categories. However, interpersonal relationships matter if we consider them the building blocks of large-scale societal structures, such as social classes, communities, and organizations. In that sense, performances of interpersonal relationships bridge individuals and social structures.

## **2.2 REIFICATION OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS**

Shared understandings of interpersonal relationships are ephemeral in the sense that they have to be repeatedly brought into being in interaction (Goffman, 1967). An everyday example of these efforts, provided by Goffman (1967), is the greetings exchanged when people meet. Greeting another person is a ritual-like practice that functions as a way of confirming that a relationship still exists. Without this, a shared understanding can easily

change into something else or the participants might forget how things used to be. As is noted above, interpersonal relationships are situations that rely heavily on acknowledgment by those involved. Therefore, constant reminders of their existence are important (Goffman, 1967). The durability of a shared understanding does not, however, depend solely on repeated practices. Understandings can also be reified through making of visual or otherwise material representations (Collins, 2004).

Examples of self-made visualizations of social relationships can be found from long before the days of digital media. For instance, Collins (2004) interprets love bites as group (in this case, "pair") emblems that construct a social bond and maintain it outside physical encounters. In this case, the skin is the medium. Durkheim's (1912/1964) views of totems as group emblems illustrate the need to reify social relationships in visual objects in order to maintain a shared idea of the relationship. Benedict Anderson provides yet another example. In his classic book, *Imagined Communities*, Anderson (1991) illustrates how print media have supported the creation of national identities. He claims that the development of print media from books to newspapers contributed to the creation of the idea of nationality, necessary for ensuring that one country could stand as an entity against another. To Anderson, nationality, as is any community, is imagined. It is defined and kept alive through stories printed in hand-held media, such as pamphlets and newspapers.

Similarly to imagined communities of nationality, the personal communities that Spencer and Pahl (2006) described are seldom, if ever, directly observable in physical contexts. Individuals may not be conscious of personal communities without purposeful reflection; however, individuals use them as reference points to define their identity through shared memories and social comparison (Spencer & Pahl, 2006). Building on the tenets of symbolic interactionism, I conclude that individuals construct shared understandings of their personal communities in interaction. These shared understandings are expected to delineate the ways in which a personal community is relied on as a source of identity and social support.

In the cases described above, the building of shared understandings is always mediated. This dissertation shares the assumption that mediated representations of interpersonal relationships could support their symbolic construction; indeed, it is through them that shared understandings of interpersonal relationships are constructed. These understandings may or may not result in positive sentiments of belonging or loyalty to a group. However, shared understandings orient the way people perceive their interpersonal relationships and delineate how people act towards each other.

The ways of reifying interpersonal relationships in mediated settings have varied as technologies have changed. Different technologies can be expected to impose different challenges for the performance of interpersonal relationships and demand different skills for impression management. While swinging doors drew boundaries for interaction between restaurant staff and

guests in Goffman's research, in online contexts individuals attempt to adjust their privacy settings in order to control the accessibility of the content they share. Comparing the face-to-face settings Goffman studied to online settings, Pinch (2010) argues that computer-mediated interaction does not follow different rules only because it is mediated through a technology. Rather, the particular form of mediation determines how participants in the interaction situation are accessible to each other. For Pinch, the distinctiveness of computer-mediated interaction stems from the digital traces that the participants in online performances leave behind, making them co-present in ways that differ from those seen in face-to-face settings. boyd's (2008) account of persistence, scalability, replicability, and searchability as the distinctive features of online interaction can be considered to describe a similar alteration of co-presence.

Pinch (2010) and boyd (2008) remind us about the material side of interaction, which is easily left implicit in studies that focus on online interaction. Often, online services are treated merely as passive platforms on which interaction occurs. In this dissertation, the presumption is that the technological choices made in the design of online services matter. For example, many online services support mediated interaction: publishing photos and interacting with others through computer networks is made easy. At the same time, these choices limit the ways in which those actions can be performed. In Hutchby's (2001) words, certain technologies "suggest" certain possible forms of use. These suggestions, which Gibson (1979) conceptualized as affordances, contribute to how technologies are interpreted in any given socio-cultural context. Some symbolic interactionists (e.g., Clarke, 2005; Vannini, 2009) have propounded similar views. They have included material actors in their analyses of how shared understandings are constructed in interaction. Performances are joint efforts in which material objects may take part just as readily (Vannini, 2009). For example, automated sharing of content online may challenge individual efforts to manage impressions (Silfverberg et al., 2011).

This dissertation focuses more on practices and interpretations, less on the agency of technology, in its analysis of creation of shared understandings. Nevertheless, for assessment of the particularities of the online settings studied in this work, they need to be situated in their technological, historical, and societal context. Therefore, the following section of the dissertation illustrates the development of the various online settings of reifying interpersonal relationships.

### **3 REIFYING INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS IN ONLINE SETTINGS**

In Studies I–III, the research material is associated with a context of online interaction that gained vast popularity in the first decade of the 2000s: social network sites. The studies included in this dissertation, however, span various SNSs as much as different points in time. Moreover, Study IV extends the analysis to scholarly definitions of online community in general. To position the variety of online settings covered in this dissertation within a wider technological, historical, and societal context, this section depicts the development of different forms of reification of interpersonal relationships online. The story begins with the early settings of online interaction and continues with the development of SNSs. Finally, I discuss SNSs as a context of performing interpersonal relationships.

#### **3.1 EARLY SETTINGS OF REIFYING CONNECTIONS THROUGH COMPUTER NETWORKS**

The Internet is a network of networks, and both academic and everyday discourse closely associate it with human interaction in contemporary societies. However, computer-mediated interaction pre-dates computer networks, for the first electronic messages were sent between users of a single mainframe computer (Partridge, 2008). In his account of the history of the Internet, Naughton (2000) describes a personal experience during his university years in the 1960s. Typically, students queued for an individual turn to run their own programs on a machine guarded by a full-time operator. One reclusive group of students, however, used an older, time-shared mainframe computer.

This group of students used the old machine without supervision, sometimes several people simultaneously, who sent messages to each other through it. These students seemed to form a secret society and used a language that outsiders could not understand. Naughton recalls that when the university decided to get rid of the time-share computer, the group of dedicated users kept physical pieces of it as keepsakes. In the terminology of today, Naughton interprets the group as having formed a new kind of intellectual community. In Durkheim's terms, the machine itself, and the messages sent through it, could be interpreted as functioning as totems that connected the individuals as a community. Resembling the secret societies described by Naughton (2000), in the national setting of this dissertation, Finland, technology students at universities, as did teenagers in pilot schools and computer clubs, experimented with the possibilities of using time-shared computers for human interaction in the 1960s and 1970s (Saarikoski, 2009).

In her account of the societal, technical, and political origins of the Internet, Abbate (1999) describes how, around the same time, engineers began to develop technical solutions for connecting computers to each other. The original purpose was to share computing power, the most famous example being the ARPANET. It was part of a research program, funded by the US Department of Defense, whose aim was to connect the mainframe computers of major US universities. However, the network soon became popular more as a site for mediated interaction than for resource sharing. Abbate argues that electronic mail was crucial for creating a sense of community among the participating research organizations. In addition to sending messages to each other, members could subscribe to e-mail lists and newsgroups centered on various topics and discuss shared interests. Abbate (1999) describes these forums as virtual communities of interest whose members shared a common identity.

E-mail, newsgroups, and further forms of mediated interaction also flourished in other computer networks, created at universities that could not afford to participate in the ARPANET project. Outside universities, hobbyists developed their own networks of personal computers. Bulletin board systems (or BBSes) are a prime example of early online communities outside institutional contexts. With a personal microcomputer, a modem, and a telephone line, one could connect to another microcomputer, which functioned as a server. Users of computers connected to the same server could see the content sent by the others and submit their own content to the server. In Finland too, BBS hobbyists began to form online communities outside institutional networks in the 1980s (Saarikoski, 2009). While Finnish hobbyists adopted BBS use from abroad, Internet Relay Chat (IRC) was developed locally, by a Finnish IT student in 1988, and soon became globally popular.

These virtual communities of interest gathered to collaborate, though also to debate issues and compete, with fellow computer enthusiasts. Here, the status of a totem, as a public performance of connection, could be attributed to BBSes, e-mail lists, newsgroups, and other forms of text-based online interaction (such as IRC). Pioneering ethnographic studies of online interaction (e.g., Baym, 1995; 2000; Cherny, 2000; Danet, 2005) provide illustrative examples of the practices of publicly articulating connections in these settings. Baym and Cherny showed that the conventions of language use constructed shared notions of community among the members of the online forums they studied. Danet took a more visual approach, illustrating that the creation of ASCII art on a text-based IRC channel was used to achieve a sense of community among the members of the channel.

The Internet was formed when the scattered networks of computers were connected together. This occurred through a multiphase technological, political, and economic process over the course of the 1970s and '80s. These international developments were linked quite literally with the history of the Internet in Finland in 1988, when networks maintained by Finnish

universities became connected to the Internet along with those of other Nordic universities (Ahonen, 2008). In 1990, the Internet had already grown into a network with several hundred thousand computers and probably millions of users. Its two-decade-old backbone, the ARPANET, was replaced with a more effective government-owned network, which was replaced, in turn, by commercial service providers. The 1990s saw the widespread privatization and commercialization of the Internet. The mainstream popularity of the Internet, however, necessitated the development of an interface that attracted a wider audience than just computer enthusiasts: the World Wide Web (WWW) and the graphical browser. For accessing the Internet, knowledge of command lines was no longer needed. Moreover, commercial operators began to market network connections for consumers. In addition to text-based systems, graphical platforms burgeoned. (Abbate, 1999)

These developments were accompanied by the proliferation of leisure-oriented uses. While the pioneers of online interaction continued to communicate in text-based settings, the majority of Internet-users gathered to interact on graphical platforms (Paasonen, 2010). The proliferation of commercial operators and graphical browsers in Finland was aligned with the international developments in the first half of the 1990s (Ahonen, 2008). One of the most popular settings for online interaction, for example, was a chat forum provided by a commercial radio channel (Östman, 2009). In her account of these transitions, Paasonen (2010) notes how the casual use contradicted the pioneers' visions of new possibilities for democratic participation and the construction of community. Paasonen argues that this division is reflected in academic research into the topic. Scholars focused on niche settings, such as identity play in text-based online environments (Turkle, 1995), at the expense of more widespread and mundane forms of online interaction (Paasonen, 2010). Nevertheless, the ease of generating content and interacting with content generated by others through a graphical Web browser was reflected in the developments of online interaction in the following decade.

### **3.2 THE MOVE FROM ONLINE COMMUNITIES TO SOCIAL NETWORK SITES**

In the first decade of the 2000s, the number of people using the Internet rose dramatically, as did the capacity and speed of the network. Flourishing in parallel were new kinds of online services, ones that allowed Internet-users to participate in creating content online through a browser, without having to acquire specific skills. To draw a separation from the past, Tim O'Reilly and Dale Dougherty referred to the new technologies of online interaction as "Web 2.0" when they needed a name for a seminar covering the new consumer-created media (Bulik Snyder, 2006). Moreover, in contrast to the

static Web sites of the 1990s, the new Web sites of the 2000s are characterized by the ability to comment on or share content created by others. These actions create a connection between the content provider and those who interact with the content. It is probably the apparent ability to support human interaction that earned this new kind of online services another umbrella term, “social media.”

As a platform for sharing content and interacting with the content others share, SNSs encapsulate the features associated with the buzzword “Web 2.0” or “social media.” boyd and Ellison (2007) provided a definition for the concept of a social network site and a timeline of the development of the phenomenon. According to them, SNSs usually have registered users with a personal profile, identified by their name or nickname, along with a photo of themselves. These profiles are then connected to other profiles – for example, through a “friend list” on each profile – reflecting those users who have mutually agreed to be included on each other’s lists. Similar features could be identified from previous settings as well. In addition to the aforementioned browser-based chats, static Web sites often had “guest books” in which visitors could add their comments. Furthermore, sites focusing on a particular topic were often connected to each other in a “web ring,” and lists of links were frequently created to denote connections to related or friends’ pages. Forms of online interaction with earlier origins, such as e-mail, are still widely used, although younger generations have adopted SNSs at the expense of declining use of e-mail (Official Statistics of Finland, 2010; Brenner, 2013).

boyd and Ellison (2007) trace the history of SNSs back to the late 1990s but date their immense growth to the first years of the 2000s, when similar services mushroomed around the globe and existing sites were given social networking features. These included Vkontakte, in Russia, and Orkut, in Brazil, with millions of users, along with a small community site restricted to students at Harvard University: Facebook. Meanwhile in Finland, the service associated with Study I (IRC-Galleria) became one of the most popular Web sites in Finland, especially among teenagers (TNS Metrix, 2007). Its users did not span generations, as Facebook did comparatively soon after its launch; the registered users with profiles on the site were mostly teenagers (Tikka, 2009). However, in a parallel to Facebook, IRC-Galleria started out as a service designed for and by a small group of users. In the early 2000s, a group of users of the text-based IRC designed IRC-Galleria to discover what other people on IRC channels looked like by connecting their chat nicknames (nicks) to profile photos.

In late 2006, when the interviews for Study I were conducted, interaction in IRC-Galleria shared many of the characteristics seen with SNSs as defined by boyd and Ellison (2007) and Ellison and boyd (2013). For example, members were given their own profile page, on which they could share photos. Furthermore, the option of commenting on photos on other members’ profile pages, or on group discussion boards on the site, made

IRC-Galleria a possible medium for interaction. However, at the time of Study I, IRC-Galleria also differed from the international SNSs used as exemplars for boyd and Ellison's 2007 definition, the primary difference being that IRC-Galleria did not have public friend lists to articulate connections between members' profiles. Therefore, the content that people shared on the site could not be restricted on the basis of such a list. Instead, it was visible to every registered member. Although IRC-Galleria did not have public friend lists at the time of the study, links to other profiles could be detected from the comments other users left, because comments are always preceded by a user nick. However, the lack of a friend list probably made the meaning of articulating connections online even more visible, as participants appropriated the site for this purpose even without such a feature. Aptly, Ellison and boyd (2013) later argued that public friend lists have now lost their centrality as a defining feature of SNSs, having been replaced with other ways of articulating connections, such as tagging and commenting.

The history of SNSs in Finland can be considered aligned, to some extent, with international trends. In addition to IRC-Galleria, international SNSs such as MySpace and Facebook entered use especially by the younger generations in Finland (Official Statistics of Finland, 2009). Facebook opened its Finland network in 2007, and Facebook had entered widespread use in Finland by 2009 (Official Statistics of Finland, 2010). In 2010, nearly half (42%) of Finnish citizens aged 16 to 74 had registered for an SNS (Official Statistics of Finland, 2010). By 2012, 49% of people in the latter group had followed some SNS in the past three months (Official Statistics of Finland, 2012). Internationally, a similar trend is observable in, for example, the sharply increasing popularity of SNSs in the United States, as illustrated by Brenner (2012).

The two other sites associated with the studies for this dissertation represent more typical SNSs. The possibility of restricting content was important for the participants in Study II, who had not used any SNSs before the study. Therefore, for that study we used a site that offered the option of restricting the content that one shared (Netlog) – for example, limiting sharing to only those on one's friend list. The service was a characteristic example of an SNS as defined by boyd & Ellison (2007). Registered members had their own profiles, where they could add content and from which they could compile create a friend list with links to others' profiles. When Study II was conducted, in late 2007, SNSs had already become an international phenomenon. In Finland, Facebook had launched its local network, although the user interface was still not available in Finnish, and young adults were the most prominent group to adopt the services for everyday use early on (Official Statistics of Finland, 2010; Jones & Fox, 2009). It was because the participants in our study preferred using a service in their native language that we used Netlog, which had a Finnish user interface. Although the site originated in Belgium, it had a Finnish-language interface before other international SNSs did. Study III focused on an international SNS that is



often referred to as the prototype for SNSs: Facebook. The participants were also reflective of typical users of the site when the study was conducted (during the 2009–2010 academic year): young adults at institutions of higher education (Official Statistics of Finland, 2010; 2012; Tikka, 2009; Brenner, 2012).

### **3.3 A LOOK BEYOND TECHNICAL FEATURES AND ACADEMIC CONCEPTS**

Over the decade-long history of SNSs, some services once trendy have lost their users while others have been redesigned into something barely recognizable. Accordingly, Ellison and boyd (2013) have been subsequently obliged to revise their definition in view of the rapid changes in the socio-technical landscape of Internet use. For example, they argue that personal profiles have lost their centrality relative to “feeds,” aggregated updates of online actions and shared content of other users. Moreover, in the original definition that boyd and Ellison (2007) provided for SNSs, friend lists were the main way of performing interpersonal connections. In their revised definition of an SNS, Ellison and boyd (2013) argue that friend lists have lost their significance in the face of various other options by which connections can be made visible. For example, links to other profiles can be created also when someone comments on content provided by another user or is tagged in a photo or comment. These actions are aggregated into a feed in which the connections can become visible.

As Paasonen (2010) notes, the concepts used to describe online interaction vary with trends in academic research just as much. Moreover, those concepts tend to be dominated by Anglo-American research contexts, with neglect for national particularities (Paasonen, 2009). The concept of an online (or virtual) community blossomed with “Web 1.0” but appears to have given way to concepts associated with Web 2.0, such as that of the SNS. Baym (2010), for example, identifies a transition from “place”-bound online communities towards networks of interpersonal links and situates this transition in the first decade of the millennium. Wellman and Gulia’s (1999) views of online networks as social networks (rather than communities) were prescient in the sense that they criticized the concept of community altogether, advocating the study of online interaction as networks that span online and offline settings. Peculiarly, in the Finnish language there is still an explicit “community” aspect of the term used to refer to social network sites.

Since the terms used to describe particular forms of online interaction tend to be amenable to trends and because the features of individual sites may change even during a single study, academic research struggles to capture the phenomena of interest in creation of new technological features and academic concepts related to them. This struggle is essential also if one is to bring those features and concepts into discussion alongside broader

phenomena of interaction in online settings, as was the goal with Study IV. As Ellison and boyd (2013) point out, the phenomenon of SNSs is as much about new practices of social interaction as it is about technological change. In the next section of the work, I elaborate on the features of SNSs that constrain, encourage, and support these practices and on the interpretations related to them.

### **3.4 SOCIAL NETWORK SITES AND PERFORMANCES OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS**

Ellison and boyd (2013, 155) state that the connections on an SNS represent a social network, “a collection of social relations of varying strengths and importance.” boyd and Ellison (2007) and Ellison and boyd (2013) argue that the centrality of the representations of social networks distinguishes SNSs from earlier-origin forms of online interaction, such as online discussion forums or personal homepages. boyd and her colleagues have used the concepts of “public display” (Donath & boyd, 2004) and “articulation” (boyd & Ellison, 2007) of connection to refer to this characteristic. In the aforementioned cases, displays and articulation refer to static representations. boyd and Ellison (2007) and Ellison and boyd (2013) refrain from using the idea of networking, since it would imply “actively seeking connections.” Instead, they emphasize “SNS” as a noun that refers to an online platform.

However, in this dissertation, “display” and “articulation” are understood in a dynamic way that implies making rather than having a connection. They are approached as ways of constructing shared understandings of interpersonal relationships, rather than as fixed states. This approach stems from the tenets of symbolic interactionism, according to which both the seeking of new interpersonal relationships and the maintenance of existing ones require constant renewal and mutual acknowledgment. To emphasize this approach, and to connect the phenomenon of SNS to the conceptual background provided by Goffman (1959), the concept of a performance is used to refer to displays of connection.

boyd (2008) showed that “public displays of connection” had three functions for the teenage users of SNSs whom she studied in her dissertation. First, they functioned as “address books” for connecting to the wider social network when needed. Second, they functioned as a way of delineating who could view what content, since people in a friend list are typically given more access to profile content. Finally, they “signalized” status and identity by denoting the social network of an individual, therefore describing the individual as well. Friend lists still exist on SNSs and are most probably used for the two former purposes, but, as Ellison and boyd (2013) point out, other ways of displaying connections may have replaced the latter function. Nevertheless, boyd and Ellison’s (2007) and Ellison and boyd’s (2013)

definitions provide useful support for situating the sites covered in this research in the socio-technical transitions that occurred during the first decade of the millennium. Whether social networks are represented in friend lists, as links in feeds, or in comments beneath a photo, the distinctive feature of SNSs is that they support performances of connection. In the dissertation project, I set out to explore how individuals take advantage of this feature and how they interpret it as a way of creating shared understandings of interpersonal relationships.

## **4 THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND APPROACH**

### **4.1 THE RESEARCH PROBLEM**

In this dissertation, I explore how shared understandings of interpersonal relationships are created in online settings; what kinds of experiences, skills, and efforts are needed in these pursuits; and how they are situated in the more general discussion of online community. The phenomenon of SNSs is used here as an example in detailed analysis of the practices of constructing shared understandings of interpersonal relationships online and the interpretations that the participants give both to these practices and to the phenomenon of SNSs in general. The fourth study is a review of the conceptualizations of mediated community in academic discussion, which I contrast against the findings from the other three studies to point out future directions for studies of creating shared understandings of interpersonal relationships in online settings.

### **4.2 METHODS OF STUDYING MEANING-MAKING**

A qualitative, exploratory approach was chosen for this research firstly because, at the time the first study was conducted (in late 2006), SNSs and the associated public articulation of connections were a novel trend and a qualitative approach without predefined operationalizations is often considered a useful approach for studying novel phenomena (Silverman, 2000; David & Sutton, 2011). Secondly, the focus is on the interpretations that people associate with the articulation of interpersonal relationships online rather than on examination of any objective effect of technology use. These interpretations are, then, analyzed via a theoretical framework proceeding from symbolic interactionism and the concept of personal communities. Analysis of interpretations is, in a sense, also applied in Study IV, which covers the conceptualizations of mediated community in academic literature. In this case, the research material was scholarly literature, from which we identified different interpretations associated with forms of online interaction.

This section of the thesis elaborates on the methodological viewpoints upon which the work is based and on the ethics concerns that the relevant methods may entail. Section 4.4 summarizes how these methodological choices were implemented in each sub-study. Studies I–III employ methods that allow the identification of participants' interpretations of the phenomenon. Instead of the researcher imposing a theoretical model on these interpretations, a grounded approach is taken to assessment of the

topic. The developers of this approach, Strauss and Corbin (1990), consider research to be an iterative process. The phases of generating research material and the identification of overarching themes from the material may alternate. Likewise, individual methods of gathering research material may inform each other.

#### **4.2.1 SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS AND OBSERVATIONS OF ONLINE BEHAVIOR**

To study the meanings that people give to a phenomenon within a specific socio-cultural setting, one must allow people to speak in their own words instead of forcing them to choose from among options developed by the researcher. Semi-structured interviews leave open the option of raising issues that may have been left out of an initial interview structure. On the basis of the issues identified in the interviews, the interview structure can then be modified for their assessment in more detail (Flick, 2002). For this dissertation, semi-structured interviews with both individual participants and groups were used to ascertain how participants interpreted the phenomena in question. The subjective interpretations that our participants provided are assumed to represent shared ways of comprehending the issues discussed. Individuals may not, however, attach the same interpretations to the phenomenon, and an individual may also display contradictory interpretations.

Observations of online behavior were another lens for pinpointing issues relevant for the research problem that might have been neglected in the structuring of the interview questions. The observation method employed in this research had many similarities with participatory observation. I registered for the services during the studies myself, since otherwise much of the content on the site would have been inaccessible. Moreover, in some cases I interacted with the participants through the services. Most importantly, using the service provided personal insight into what the participants had experienced, which I then discussed with the interviewees. The observations were conducted both iteratively and in parallel with the interviews. The participants demonstrated and explained their actions on the site or commented on examples of online actions. Thereby, the observations were not completely detached from interviewees' accounts of them. Instead, the researcher formed interpretations of her observations alongside the interviewees. Study IV differs from the other three studies included in this dissertation in that it employs scholarly literature about online interaction as the research material. The study expands the scope from the performance of interpersonal relationships to academic discourse on the broader topic of online interaction. Regardless of the difference in the research material, Study IV too employs a qualitative approach.

#### 4.2.2 GROUNDED ANALYSIS

The methods of analysis used in this dissertation should permit the construction of an understanding of a topic for which no ready-made frames of analysis exist. This is why I employ a grounded approach. The research approach is an appropriation of the principles of grounded theory as defined by Strauss and Corbin (1990). Aligning themselves with the central tenet of grounded theory, they argue that forcing research material into theoretical models is not always the best way of finding solutions to research problems. This is especially true with novel phenomena and when it is important to understand how study participants themselves make sense of the phenomenon in question.

Proponents of grounded theory argue for an inductive model of analysis in which the arguments are “grounded” in the research material. The researcher categorizes the material to find themes that provide a comprehensive illustration of the issues that contribute to the problem at hand. This is done through a process of “constant comparison” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), in which the researcher performs iterations both between gathering and thematizing the material and between different levels of abstraction within the material. The present study can also be described as employing an iterative process of analysis, since the observations and interviews informed each other and the findings were formed by organization of the research material into themes.

Strauss and Corbin (1990) admit that previous theories and research can be useful in interpreting research material and in contributing to scientific discussion, as long as their use in certain contexts is well defined and grounded in the research material. In the case of this dissertation, previous theories are employed as the dissertation builds on the theoretical basis of symbolic interactionism. Moreover, the viewpoints and concepts that stem from previous research on public articulations of connection are used as interpretative aids as the work moves from descriptive organization of the material to more abstract levels of conceptualization. The claims based on the analysis are, therefore, researcher interpretation, made through intertwining of empirical findings with a particular theoretical perspective. As Clarke (2005) reminds us, grounded analysis still does not capture reality *per se*; it is always framed by the researcher’s background and interests.

As in Studies I–III, the research material in Study IV can be categorized by theme through examination of similarities and differences between instances of interest. Unlike with the completely grounded approach used in the other three studies, in Study IV we employed a categorization system that we built via synthesis of earlier overviews of the topic. From the research material, we first identified instances that fit one or more of the categories in the system. If unable to slot in an instance under any of the categories outlined in our framework, we formed a new category to incorporate the instance in question. Furthermore, we used theories on social identity, group

processes, and intergroup relations to assess the conceptualizations of mediated community we had identified in the review.

## **4.3 ETHICS CONCERNS AND THE POSITION OF THE RESEARCHER**

### **4.3.1 PRIVATE AND PUBLIC SPACE IN ONLINE SETTINGS**

A central issue related to the ethics of studying online interaction (see, for example, Markham & Baym, 2009; Boellstorff et al., 2012; Markham & Buchanan, 2012) has been the notion of public and private space. When studying human behavior in physical settings, ethnographers often consider observations in public places ethically sustainable (Sveningsson Elm, 2009; Boellstorff et al., 2012). This assumption of a clearly defined public space open to inquiry can already be questioned in the case of physical settings, since people's views on the openness of a space may differ. In online contexts, this question is further highlighted, because the boundaries of openness are digital instead of physical. Sveningsson Elm (2009) suggests that these digital boundaries could be conceived of involving as a continuum from public to private. The level of openness depends on the constraints imposed on accessibility, such as the need to register and have a password. These constraints can be imposed both by the service and by individual users. Social network sites are a prime example of semi-public services: registration is typically needed before one can access most of the content.

Sveningsson Elm (2009), however, challenges attempts to predefine the level of openness of a particular online environment or its content. She points out that the researcher should not presume openness without considering what openness means for those studied. The study participants may consider their online interaction neither "private" nor "public." Instead, participants are often more concerned about what content is revealed and to whom – i.e., how information "flows." In order to respect participants' expectations of the flow of information shared online, the researcher needs to pay attention to the searchability of online content. For example, if a member of IRC-Galleria has provided a caption for a photo, the caption and the member profile related to it can be found with the search function provided by the site. Consequently, captions for photos were anonymized in presentation of the findings of Study I.

### **4.3.2 CONTEXTUAL INTEGRITY**

Nissenbaum (2010) refers to the consideration of participants' notions of openness as "contextual integrity." The researcher needs to acknowledge online interaction as a context that is intertwined with other modes of interaction, taking into account its persistence, replicability, scalability, and

searchability. Most importantly, the researcher must consider how participants have managed the boundaries of openness for the content they have shared – for example, by ensuring that they cannot be identified if someone enters excerpts from the research material in a search engine. Nevertheless, it is impossible to predict all of the implications that research may have for the lives of its subjects. For example, someday search engines may be capable of identifying study participants by means of parameters that would currently be considered anonymized research material, such as a photo of a participant's hand.

Regardless of these limitations, there is much the researcher can do to affect the impact that a study has on its subjects. Informing participants about the study, and obtaining consent for their voluntary participation, is an institutionalized practice in studies involving human subjects, and informed consent was gained from the participants interviewed for this dissertation. In the case of minors, the parents or guardians signed the consent forms. For the observational material that was gathered separately from the interview data, consent forms were not used. Nevertheless, all excerpts from the research material were anonymized if their content was usable in search parameters at the time the study was conducted.

Obtaining informed consent does not, however, ensure that a study is ethically sustainable (Boellstorff et al., 2012). Contextual integrity is needed, to minimize the potential harm caused to participants. For example, the research material for this dissertation includes accounts of personal issues that the participants had not even shared in their close relationships. Consequently, these accounts were not used in quotes in the publications. Nissenbaum's views on contextual integrity are in line with current thinking on the ethics of using online content as research material (e.g., Boellstorff et al., 2012; Markham & Buchanan, 2012; Markham & Baym, 2009). Instead of providing rules to follow when one is studying online behavior, these authors emphasize the importance of a careful and respectful attitude towards participants and the researcher's responsibility to benefit those who provide material for the study in question.

### **4.3.3 BENEFITING THE PARTICIPANTS**

In addition to minimizing the harm a study causes its participants, Boellstorff et al. (2012) assert that researchers should consider the benefits that they could offer participants. The efforts of participants are necessary for the researcher's production of findings to publish and thereby make a living. Material compensation, such as vouchers, is just one form of benefit that a researcher could offer participants in return. Boellstorff and colleagues state that the experiences of participants during research are just as crucial. In this research, my co-authors and I aimed to make the whole process a pleasant experience for the participants, starting by choosing convenient locations for the interviews and finally ensuring that they did not continue to receive e-



mail from the service that they were asked to use during the study. The latter came about from a lesson we learned while conducting Study II.

In addition, researchers can help participants by increasing public awareness of their perspectives (Boellstorff et al., 2012). This does not mean that the researcher should act as an altruistic hero who “gives a voice to” oppressed groups (Clarke, 2005). Researchers always interpret a certain topic through the gauze of their own backgrounds and current positions. This implies that researchers need to reflect on their own research, since identifying the standpoints from which they approach the research problem contributes to the benefits they can offer the participants (Markham, 2009). Researchers should aim to balance their own position with the positions of their study’s participants. The ideal is to build interpretations of the phenomenon at hand with the participants while still acknowledging that researchers are positioned in their own academic setting, which guides the interpretations in a certain direction.

My own position as a researcher partly overlaps with the positions that the participants in Studies I–III represent, for we all live in a late modern setting. To a large extent, however, the participants represented social groups other than my own. Before conducting Study I, I had not used IRC-Galleria myself and had aligned myself with the mainstream discourse of the site being a teenage phenomenon. The participants in Study II also represented a different generation from my own. However, in Study III the participants were close to my own position: they were university students who used a widely popular, international SNS. The social groups represented in the studies need not have been chosen on the basis of age; for example, socio-economic difference could have been used instead. Age was chosen because there are distinct generational differences related to the adoption of SNSs (Official Statistics of Finland, 2010; Brenner, 2013). Therefore, the assumption was that different generations would provide varied standpoints on the topic.

In late 2006, when the interviews for Study I were conducted, the participants represented a teenage social group the members of which had been publicly condemned for sharing explicit photos of themselves online. The study of this social group provided a first glimpse into practices that only later became widespread among other generations. However, the reason for studying this group was not my prescience of the future mainstream popularity of SNSs. Instead, the initial motivation was to provide empirical accounts of the controversial phenomenon of minors sharing personal content online. The controversy seemed to subside when adults began to use Facebook, and then the focus turned to a group that typically did not use these services: older adults. Studies I and II were both motivated by the desire to understand the perspectives of social groups that are often mentioned in public discussion of Internet use but represent people whose own accounts were rarely represented. Furthermore, studying older adults’

understandings of SNSs provided another perspective on a phenomenon that was an integral part of the life of the younger generation.

The participants in Study III were young adults. Academic research has widely acknowledged the concerns and viewpoints of this group of users (Bell et al., 2013), to which the vast majority of SNS-users belonged at the time of Study III (Brenner, 2013; Official Statistics of Finland, 2010). Accordingly, Study III did not benefit the participants by analyzing the topic from an underrepresented perspective; rather, its purpose was to broaden scholarly discussions explaining both the popularity and the controversies of SNS use in terms of the individual. Throughout this dissertation, the aim is to challenge public discourses that attribute the use of SNSs to the age or other characteristics of the individual.

## **4.4 THE SUB-STUDIES**

The dissertation is composed of four publications that illuminate, from different perspectives, the construction of shared understandings of interpersonal relationships online. This section covers the research questions of each study and the methodological choices, including those as to participants and timing, that were employed to address these questions. The findings of the individual sub-studies are presented in more detail in Chapter 5.

### **4.4.1 STUDY I: RITUAL PERFORMANCES OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS ONLINE**

Study I explored the practices through which interpersonal relationships are brought into being in mediated interaction. These practices are approached as ritual performances, pointing to the creative, but widespread and repetitive, ways of creating shared understandings of interpersonal relationships. To capture these practices, Study I was situated in the context of one of the most popular sites for online interaction in Finland at the time of the research, IRC-Galleria. The interviews were conducted in late 2006, approximately a year before Facebook opened its Finland-oriented network. Accordingly, the participants in the study, 13 Finnish teenagers and young adults aged 12 to 25, could be considered pioneers in the use of online services that became mainstream only a few years later.

I conclude that when Study I was conducted, IRC-Galleria provided an example of the phenomenon of SNSs, since the performance of connections was a prominent social practice on the site. Consequently, Study I provided a window into the phenomenon of SNSs, a phenomenon that was gaining momentum at the time. Because of the novelty of the phenomenon then and the study's aim of understanding the phenomenon from the viewpoint of users, the study applied a grounded approach to the research material. The

material was generated by means of semi-structured interviews and participant observation. This analysis then oriented the study towards collecting further observational material from the site in 2009. Using a theoretical framework of ritual performances, these two sets of research materials were combined to identify the practices the participants engaged in and the meanings they associated with these practices.

#### **4.4.2 STUDY II: OLDER ADULTS' UNDERSTANDINGS OF SOCIAL NETWORK SITES**

The first academic studies of SNSs emphasized the role of the sites in maintaining existing social ties (e.g., Ellison et al., 2006; boyd & Ellison, 2007), and Study I had identified the ritual performance of interpersonal relationships as a prevalent practice on SNSs. The first study had also illuminated the research problem from the viewpoint of SNSs' pioneers, and the perspectives of late adopters were expected to be equally illustrative – however, from the perspective of those who did not consider SNSs a meaningful part of their lives. The baby boomer generation (i.e., the large cohorts born in industrial countries shortly after World War II) was conspicuously absent from these sites, although the baby boomers were habitual users of the Internet for other purposes, such as online banking (Official Statistics of Finland, 2010). In order to explain the absence of the baby boomers from SNSs, Study II explored how the phenomenon appeared from their perspective. Consequently, Study II focused on how our participants' interpretations of the phenomenon of SNSs fit their interpretations of their close interpersonal relationships. The study was conducted as a part of a market research project. It was funded by a media company that had an interest in gaining insight into this “target group” to inform the design of commercially successful media products. The interests of the sponsor did not, however, limit the view that the study offered of the research problem.

None of the participants had used any SNS before the study, so we encouraged them to try out a service to provide a common experience and a concrete technology to be discussed during the study. The participants were two groups of four friends aged 55 to 68 from southern Finland. We selected people who knew each other beforehand, because we wanted to study how an SNS is adopted in an existing social network rather than how new relationships and networks are created. We were “friends” of the participants on the service, so as to observe the content they published. From these observations it can be concluded that the majority of the participants did not use the service regularly. Nonetheless, the intervention period provided the participants with experience of an SNS in a real-life context, which formed a good basis for the discussions in the interviews that followed. We interviewed the participants before and after the period in which they used Netlog and held focus-group sessions before introducing the service.

The research methods were chosen so as to address our participants' interpretations of the phenomenon of SNSs and how these views were reflected in their conceptualizations of interpersonal relationships. The interviews were semi-structured, and visual probes and the participants' experiences of the SNS were used as prompts for discussion. The first interview addressed the use of communication technologies and the strength and content of participants' social relationships. The second interview focused on how, when, and why they used the Netlog service. In addition, we conducted focus-group sessions with both groups after the trial. The groups discussed how they understood concepts related to the SNS phenomenon, such as communities, blogs, friends, and guest books. We strove to avoid imposing predefined conceptualizations of the phenomenon on the participants' accounts. The focus groups further allowed the participants to bring up relevant issues for comment that the researchers might have missed. They also provided us with a window into the process through which the participants constructed their views on the issue, since the participants had not previously discussed many of the subjects in a group setting. As in Study I, the analysis employed a grounded approach. In this study, there were two authors to thematize the material. Therefore, we could first work separately on the material and then compare and contrast our findings, to form the final themes and raise their level of abstraction.

#### **4.4.3 STUDY III: INTERPERSONAL MANAGEMENT OF DISCLOSURE ON SOCIAL NETWORK SITES**

To address in detail the efforts that the performance of interpersonal relationships online entails, we conducted a study that approached the sharing of content on SNSs as a collaborative endeavor. On SNSs, people can share content pertaining to others without their prior knowledge or consent. In Study III, we examined the concerns that this may evoke and possible solutions addressing these concerns. Study III is the only study covered in this dissertation that addresses a widely studied example epitomizing the SNS and its most prevalent user group. The participants were young adults from an institution of higher education who primarily used Facebook, the most popular SNS at the time. The interviews were conducted over the course of the 2009–2010 academic year, when the service had reached this pioneer population in Finland. As in Study I, the setting allowed us to study the views of those who already had personal experience of the phenomenon.

We first interviewed the participants individually, to investigate their experiences of trying to manage privacy and publicness online. Second, focus groups were used to trigger debate on the controversies surrounding disclosure on SNSs, since these readily remain implicit in one-on-one interviews. Similarly to those in Study II, the focus groups allowed observation of the process through which shared views on the topic were negotiated. Again, we utilized earlier research to provide our analysis with

loose interpretive anchors. Nevertheless, we open-coded the research material to identify the concerns raised by the participants and extend the categorizations done in previous studies.

#### **4.4.4 STUDY IV: CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF MEDIATED COMMUNITY IN SCHOLARLY LITERATURE**

Studies I–III investigated new ways of creating shared understandings of interpersonal relationships through the phenomenon of SNSs, the concerns entailed, and collaborative efforts to resolve these concerns. Study IV differs from those three studies in that the aim was to make sense of the phenomenon of SNSs via assessment of how the concept of mediated community is used in academic publications and an intergroup perspective’s potential to broaden scholarly understanding of online interaction. We chose to focus on the concept of mediated community, because the concepts of “online” and “virtual” community are often used in academic publications to refer to different forms of online interaction. Furthermore, these concepts also cover the early years of online interaction, whereas the concept of an SNS only appeared in the literature during the first decade of the 2000s.

We expected that addressing academic conceptualizations of mediated community from an intergroup perspective in particular would provide more insight into the formation and maintenance of social bonds in online settings. This expectation stemmed from social psychological theories on the importance of group identification and intergroup relationships as a basis for human conduct. For example, we felt that the intergroup perspective was a good candidate for opening up the dynamics of ingroup formation, intergroup comparisons being essential to the construction of ingroup identities (Tajfel, 1978).

The research materials in a literature review differ from those in an interview-based study. Naturally, interview material is usually generated for the purposes of a study, whereas the material in a literature review is selected from existing literature. Nevertheless, Study IV also employs a qualitative method. The study is a systematic review of 77 articles in academic journals in the fields of social science and communication studies, selected to cover the main streams of discussion of mediated community today. Building on recent overviews of the topic and their categorizations of approaches to mediated communities, we provide our own framework for identifying conceptualizations of mediated community from the scholarly literature. These conceptualizations are then positioned in the proposed framework in line with the various approaches we claim they represent. The instances that did not fit the initial categorization system were analyzed with a grounded approach, and then the initial scheme was modified to incorporate them. Furthermore, we assess the approaches identified in the review with the support of theories on social identity and intergroup relations.

## 5 FINDINGS

Below, I describe four themes that illustrate the practices and interpretations of the performances of interpersonal relationships in online settings. These are 1) the ways in which performances are enacted in practice; 2) how interpretations associated with close interpersonal relationships delineate interpretations associated with performances; 3) performances as a collective endeavor; and 4) new understandings that an intergroup perspective could provide for the analysis of personal communities in the digital, networked settings of late modernity. The themes emerge from the findings from the four studies described above, incorporating elements from each study.

### 5.1 PRACTICES OF REIFYING THE EPHEMERAL

The findings from Study I show that performances of connection are not only a technical feature of SNSs; they are also a ritual practice. In Study I, we identify the variety of ways that IRC-Galleria can be used for performances of connection. Paradoxically, the lack of public friend lists highlights the centrality of the public performance of connection, with the users of the site being forced to create other ways of displaying their relationships. In our view, the pioneer users of SNSs – i.e., teenagers in the first decade of the 2000s – created shared understandings of their interpersonal relationships through creative but widespread and repetitive practices. We considered these practices rituals, in the sense applied by Tambiah (1985): sequences of words and acts that are repetitions of certain patterns and which follow culturally shared conventions. In addition to a personal identity, these rituals are used to perform interpersonal relationships in a visual-textual, digital form.

Observational research alone would have failed to explain why members of IRC-Galleria established and joined groups within the context of the site or published seemingly cryptic photos and comments. The details of dedicating content to others would have also remained hidden without the interviews. The interviews allowed us to discuss the meaning of these practices for the participants, who explained that they seldom functioned as a means of exchanging information. Instead, the participants described their communication as “pointless.” This kind of “pointless” communication can be considered a ritual, since it is repetitive and follows certain conventions in a similar way to ritual interaction in face-to-face contexts. For instance, in face-to-face encounters the act of greeting is a ritual performance of an interpersonal relationship (Goffman, 1967), and as individuals greet each other, they reconstruct their relationship by acknowledging that they know one another.

In online interaction, these ritual performances become reified. Interpersonal relationships become visible in a form that is more concrete than the spoken words and fleeting shared moments of face-to-face interaction, and consequently we viewed these forms of “pointless” interaction as important ways of constructing interpersonal relationships. In summary, Study I detailed the practices of constructing shared understandings of interpersonal relationships online, including inside jokes, dedication of content, and “pointless” interaction. These findings show that individuals engage in ritual performances that reify their interpersonal relationships when sharing content online. Without these performances, the interpersonal relationships would exist only in intangible memories or when repeated in speech. In that sense, they are comparable to group emblems that construct and represent the relationships shared by the participants in the interaction (Durkheim (1912/1965)).

I consider SNSs to highlight the continuity that performances of connection provide for interpersonal relationships. From the qualities boyd (2008a) associates with SNSs – persistence, scalability, replicability, and searchability – it follows that such performances online are not static totems or emblems; rather, the totems and emblems created online gain permanence as people share them. They can be scaled across devices, copied from one device to another, and accessed from the profiles of individuals. In earlier forms of online interaction, performances of connection were scattered among posts to online forums or chat messages, and personal Web pages simply presented one person’s definition of personal community, without the contribution of others.

On the other hand, in the context of SNSs, the possibility of modifying the performances in accordance with the demands of various situations is emphasized. The relative ease of modifying digital content allows users to reflect rapid changes in relationships and turn to those relationships needed in a particular situation. Furthermore, although privacy concerns and sociopolitical divisions delineate the potential of performances, unknown audiences may observe them (boyd, 2008a) by “stalking” the content and even purposefully disseminating it, as we found in Study I. Shared understandings of interpersonal relationships constructed through online performances can, in principle, be challenged. However, we found no evidence of this in Study I. The reason may be that individuals who disagree with definitions constructed by others do not want to risk losing face by challenging shared understandings, which was a concern we identified in Study III.

## 5.2 CONFLICTING INTERPRETATIONS OF ONLINE SETTINGS AND INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

While the use of SNSs burgeoned among younger generations in the first decade of the 2000s, the large cohort of baby boomers remained a minority on these sites (Jones & Fox, 2009; Official Statistics of Finland, 2010), and scholarly interest in the use of SNSs by baby boomers remained low (Bell et al, 2013). In consequence, knowledge of the use of ICTs in social interaction was potentially biased towards the younger population. Study II went some way toward correcting this bias by investigating how a less prominent user group understood the phenomenon of SNSs.

The older adults in Study II were experienced in using ICT at work, but they found no reason to construct shared understandings of interpersonal relationships through their performance online. In light of our findings, we interpreted the performance of interpersonal relationships online to be incompatible with the older adults' view of the essence of interpersonal relationships: for them, privacy and trust defined a meaningful relationship. One of the themes we identified in Study II is appreciation of a common "frame" for interaction. Here we used Goffman's (1974) concept to explain the mismatch between participants' conceptions of the phenomenon of SNSs and the elements they value in interpersonal relationships. In a long friendship, ways of friendly behavior are negotiated and learned. In other words, a common frame for interaction is constructed. Our view is that it is difficult for older adults to construct this kind of frame in mediated communication, since they are often unaware of or reluctant to comply with the frames of interaction defined by the younger generations who dominate interaction on the sites. Younger generations need to find, and indeed have found, ways of reifying transient, ephemeral social bonds by publicly performing them – yet without destroying the privacy and trust in the relationship. For younger generations, whose interaction has often been mediated to some extent throughout many relationships, there has also been time to build a common frame for interaction in mediated contexts.

In the five years since the study, baby boomers have adopted SNSs to almost the same degree as young adults (Official Statistics of Finland, 2012; Zickuhr & Madden, 2012). Nevertheless, surveys suggest that older adults use SNSs differently than young adults: while young adults report using SNSs to keep up with friends, older adults are interested in being connected with their family (Zickuhr & Madden, 2012). Our study focused on experiences and expectations of close friendships and found that these conflict with older adults' interpretations of SNSs. For older adults, SNSs may still diverge from the very idea of a suitable setting for creating shared understandings of one's closest interpersonal relationships. However, older adults may have found SNSs to be a way to keep up with the younger members of their families, who can be considered to belong to the mobile generation of "Millennials" (Howe & Strauss, 2000) and "digital natives" (Tapscott, 1998).



### **5.3 INTERPERSONAL CONSIDERATION OF SHARED UNDERSTANDINGS**

In Study I, we failed to identify confrontations arising from conflicting views of how an interpersonal relationship should be constructed online. However, I take the symbolic interactionist view that the construction of shared understandings is always an ongoing negotiation. Individuals have, in principle, many options for contributing to each other's performances online – for example, by commenting on profiles or tagging photos or comments. In Study III, we discovered that users of SNSs are attentive to the fact that they may contribute to each other's self-representations. For the purpose of this dissertation, I use the findings of Study III to argue that similar considerations are associated with representations of interpersonal relationships.

In Study III, our participants believed that users of SNSs knew, or at least presumed that they knew, how others would like to be presented online and that they are attentive to these expectations. However, the participants were concerned about their ability to conform to these expectations and that of others. Being considerate in mediated contexts, where multiple audiences are likely to be present, is a challenge, because people may have conflicting understandings of how others would like to be presented. It is my view that performances of interpersonal relationships involve collaboration to an even greater degree than do self-representations, since the performances always refer to more than one person. Therefore, performances of interpersonal relationships online can be expected to raise similar concerns over how to live up to the expectations of considerateness.

Despite the concern of users of SNSs over accidental blunders when publishing content, SNSs are highly popular platforms for online interaction. When one compares the findings of Study III with those of Study II, it seems that young adults share older adults' concerns about potential social blunders online. The findings of Study III showed that the public performance of interpersonal relationships is not without problems but sharing on SNSs involves concerns about blunders that may compromise often implicit expectations of what should and should not be shared. Sometimes general rules of disclosure are explicitly negotiated, or permission can be asked to share content. Typically, however, these shared rules of disclosure may never be negotiated or even discussed explicitly; instead, individuals rely on the mental strategy of trusting others. We argued in Study III that these strategies are to allow others to save face. In Goffman's (1959) conceptualization, face-saving is typically a collaborative effort in which the participants in an interaction situation aim to support the performances put on by others. Violating others' trust calls into question not only the boundaries the others were trying to regulate but also one's own reputation. I consider performances of interpersonal relationships similar team

performance in which participants aim to construct a shared understanding of the situation.

Our initial view was that confidence in others living up to mutual expectations of trustworthiness is the individual-level, preventive mental strategy that made the use of SNSs feasible in the first place. We found that, in the event of a blunder, playing down the seriousness of the matter was a further mental strategy to save face. In addition, we identified behavioral strategies for managing concerns over disclosure. Deciding not to publish content, negotiating general rules of disclosure, choosing different services or sharing different content for different audiences, using different wordings to limit the audience, and even controlling offline behavior are examples of practices that the participants engaged in.

Moreover, we discovered that individuals often expected that different audiences, typically different social circles, such as friends and family, would perceive a performance in contradictory ways. In these cases, the response was often to use different services to target different audiences, or to adjust privacy settings to include/exclude different audiences. However, some of our participants considered these efforts too burdensome and ineffective. When this was the case, we identified practices comparable to those found in Study I, such as the use of wording, tone, and inside jokes as a way to manage dispersed audiences. In Study III we also discovered that people can control their offline behavior in ways that support the performances they want to give online.

We also identified practices intended to correct blunders once they had occurred. For example, people can ask others to remove content if it compromises their understanding of the situation, or they can collaboratively frame the content as a joke, a trifling version of reality, as Goffman (1974) would put it. However, the problem of corrective actions is that they may exaggerate the blunder, if they reveal that “something was going on.” They may also compromise the value of “authenticity”: face-saving activities should not be too deliberate, so as not to reveal the fragility of the performances. Moreover, if sharing is based on trust in others, correcting others’ actions or asking them to perform a correction undermines their efforts to live up to expectations. I conclude that, compared to older generations, young adults have more detailed practices for deciding whether content can be published, and where. Furthermore, in the terminology of Goffman (1974), the young adult participants assumed that a common frame for interaction had been formed. It seems that the practices described above give them the confidence to perform their relationships online. On the basis of Study III, I conclude that detailed practices for creating team performances of interpersonal relationships online, without compromising the ideals of trust and privacy, are essential for creating continuity in the fleeting relationships of late modernity.

## **5.4 AN INTERGROUP PERSPECTIVE ON PERSONAL COMMUNITIES**

The three studies presented above approach the phenomenon of SNSs on the interpersonal level. The findings of Study IV are used here to assess how extending the analysis to the intergroup level would broaden understanding of the creation of shared understandings of interpersonal relationships online. Academic debate and empirical investigation surrounding the concept of mediated community centers on the question of how the development of ICTs intertwines with shifting forms of social interaction. For example, the conceptualizations of mediated community that Study IV identified from academic research resemble the characteristics that Delanty (2003) associates with community in the late modern era. Instead of place-bound, shared destinies, community is identified in networks of shared interests, norms and practices, and sentiments of belonging.

Moreover, the characteristics that scholarly literature attributes to mediated community resemble those that Spencer and Pahl (2006) and Wellman (2001) associate with personal communities and individualized networks. The same conditions of late modernity can be considered to delimit both mediated and immediate social connections. Furthermore, as Spencer and Pahl observed, personal communities are often imagined to an extent comparable to the imagined national communities of Anderson (1991), for, although a person knows everyone in his or her personal community personally, the whole community is rarely simultaneously present. Therefore, I consider the findings of Study IV, which elaborate on the concept of mediated community, to provide a useful handle on interpersonal relationships in late modernity also.

We deemed the conceptualizations of mediated community identified in the publications of our review to represent various approaches to the concept; for example, mediated community might be a sense of community, shared interests and support, practices, norms, symbolic construction, networks, or aggregations of people interacting online. While the conceptualizations of mediated community identified in Study IV acknowledge boundaries as a constitutive element of communities, they still seem to focus on the ingroup perspective at the expense of relationships between communities. However, Study IV argues that current approaches have the potential to be extended to the intergroup level.

In Study IV, we identified three themes with the potential to contribute to an intergroup perspective. Firstly, outgroups are instrumental in the formation of a shared sense of community. Secondly, the interaction most consequential for the formation of communities occurs at the boundaries that separate communities. Finally, intergroup relations delineate the symbolic construction of communities. For example, we found that approaches that conceptualize mediated community as shared norms mention intergroup boundaries as a crucial element of mediated community.

The boundaries of a community are constituted by their negotiation in interaction or by exclusion of those who do not follow the norms of the community. Community is not just cohesive bonds among members but also the actions that differentiate an ingroup from an outgroup. This implies that, if one is to capture the meanings of online performances for personal communities, the evolution of those performances should be understood in terms of intergroup relations.

An intergroup approach would also shed light on the topical issue of how shared understandings of conflictual relationships are constructed online. Lisa Nakamura's (2009) work, for example, demonstrates how the racialization of labor occurs in the context of World of Warcraft, a massively multiplayer online role-playing game. Nakamura describes how fan-produced videos frame Asian players as unwelcomed player-workers who play the game to exchange their in-game property for currency to be spent outside the game. On the other hand, scholars (e.g., Hasler & Amichai-Hamburger, 2013) have identified the potential of online interaction for realizing the principles of Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis, in which interaction between members of different groups leads to improved intergroup relations. Further studies acknowledging an intergroup perspective on the online performances of interpersonal relationships would pinpoint the significance of group identification in the construction of shared understandings of interpersonal relationships and personal communities.

Studies I–III illustrate that the creation of shared understandings of interpersonal relationships involves joint efforts. Study IV suggests that personal communities should be considered in the context of other personal communities and inter-community boundaries beyond which the resources shared within a social network may not flow. A focus on how participants' membership of differing social groups – and negotiations about who is allowed to belong to a certain personal community – could illuminate how intergroup relations delineate the formation and maintenance of personal communities. Furthermore, the contributions of outsiders to the maintenance of a personal community would provide detail on the dynamics of their formation. While interpersonal relationships are transient and embedded in social networks of individual choice, a personal community may still be formed and maintained through comparisons to the connections left outside its boundaries. I argue that, if the contribution of individuals outside personal communities were acknowledged, scholarly literature could address the dynamics of personal communities in more detail. In mediated contexts such as SNSs, the creation of shared understandings of personal communities through intergroup comparisons may become accentuated as different communities and individualized networks become co-present in new ways.

## **6 DISCUSSION**

### **6.1 LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH AND AVENUES FOR FURTHER STUDY**

As Baym (2009) argues, participants may provide invaluable insights into the phenomena studied, but the researcher needs to put the findings in context. Researchers should acknowledge the context of their study, to permit comparison with studies in different contexts (Baym, 2009). The most obvious dimensions that delimit the context of this research are its cultural setting, the generations the participants represent, and the particular online platform involved.

Studies I–III focus on the national context of Finland, thus representing a comparatively individualistic cultural setting (Hofstede, 2001) wherein citizens' use of ICTs is widespread (Official Statistics of Finland, 2012). Cho (2010) shows that individualistic and collectivist cultures differ markedly in how interpersonal relationships and SNS use intertwine. According to her, in collectivist cultures people are added to a friend list if they share membership of a group, while in individualistic cultures a personal encounter is more typical justification for “friending” another individual. Since this dissertation did not capture differences between individualistic and collectivist cultures, further work could examine whether the level of individualization in a certain cultural setting contributes to differences in the ways of constructing shared understandings of interpersonal relationships.

Within the analytical framework employed in this research, the scope of the research could be extended to include the most recent developments of symbolic interactionism and involve the agency of technology in the analysis. Methodological and theoretical approaches that emphasize the role of technologies and other material actors in the phenomena studied, such as situational analysis (Clarke, 2005), could be employed for further investigation of the role SNSs play as ways to cope with the ephemeral relationships of late modernity. The phenomenon of SNSs is not just an interpersonal but also a technological, economic, societal, and political affair. In addition to the agency of technologies, scholars (e.g., van Dijck & Nieborg, 2009; Karppi, 2014; Coleman, 2013) have investigated the agency of commercial actors in shaping interaction online. Hardware, software, and the infrastructure provided by commercial actors delineate actions in online settings (Paasonen, 2010). Likewise, providers of SNSs modify the services in accordance with the demands of their customers. A focus on commercial actors linked to SNSs would broaden the picture of the factors contributing to the creation of shared understandings in online settings.

As has been discussed in Section 3, SNSs are not the first online platform, or stage, on which individuals have engaged in public performances of

interpersonal relationships. I dare to predict that they are not the last either. From the findings of this research, it cannot be predicted how future online settings will be used to create shared understandings of interpersonal relationships. Comparing the findings of this research with those of future studies that investigate the topic in other online settings than SNSs could prove fruitful, with the current definitions of SNSs providing a baseline for comparison with future developments. If scholars are to have any hope of applying the findings to today's media environment, let alone tomorrow's, the distinctive characteristics that digital, networked settings of interaction provide – persistence, scalability, replicability, and searchability – should be considered, regardless of the next buzzword of mediated interaction. These features have implications for how shared understandings of interpersonal relationships are created and interpreted, how problems related to them are managed, and how they are conceptualized. Moreover, regardless of the actual features and user populations of an online service, the interpretations given to it at any particular point in time may have an effect on how it will be used, as Study II suggests.

Although the services covered in this research can be characterized as representing the phenomenon of SNSs, they are also used for purposes other than performances of interpersonal relationships. Studies of SNS use have identified a plethora of motivations for displaying connections online, including the ability to reflect on friendship (Schwanda Sosik et al., 2012), display status (Donath & boyd, 2004), and “maintain a record of relations” (boyd, 2008). This dissertation has provided a perspective that was previously lacking, or at least tied the threads together, to explain the contribution of SNSs to late modern settings. However, this perspective does not exclude other explanations of the contributions of SNSs. Instead, the present research provides one possible explanation, one that emphasizes both the actions of individuals who interpret new technologies and the significance of interpersonal relationships for those actions.

## **6.2 CONCLUSIONS**

In late modernity, individuals no longer derive the sense of continuity from place-bound, close-knit communities that they once did. Instead, people attempt to find coherence in their lives “from scratch,” choosing their lifestyle, profession, values, electric tin openers, etc. from a myriad of options. The contribution of SNSs to interpersonal relationships in late modernity lies not only in the opportunity to establish connections spanning diverse physical locations; they also provide an opportunity to reify fragmented relationships through visual performances of connection. It is the contention of this dissertation that in online settings, ways to perform interpersonal relationships can be identified just as well, along with the challenges associated with them.

I consider the practices identified in Study I, including “pointless” comments in online profiles, dedication of content, and groups that share inside jokes, to be ritual performances that create shared understandings of interpersonal relationships. Therefore, online performances should not be seen solely as individuals’ pursuit of attention and acceptance. In Study II, we found that older adults’ aversion to using SNSs stemmed from concern about accidental social blunders that could call into question their understanding of close interpersonal relationships. Study III demonstrated that joint efforts are indeed needed if the players are to avoid conflicts around the construction of shared understandings online. Individuals engage in various practices – individual and collective, mental and behavioral, and preventive and corrective – to support their performances. Because of the importance of other people’s contributions to the construction of shared understandings of social bonds, personal communities should probably be called interpersonal communities. Moreover, as Study IV shows, the analysis could even be extended to the intergroup level. I argue that approaching personal communities as communities that evolve as a result of intergroup comparisons would broaden scholarly understanding of the dynamics of social bonds in the networked settings of late modernity.

On the surface, the creation of shared understandings of interpersonal relationships in this context may appear to be shallow chit-chat, unable to realize the utopian vision of the Internet as a global village. These pursuits may even immerse individuals in mediated interaction at the expense of reciprocal face-to-face interaction. Contrary to these views, the findings from the present research depict the interactions in question as creative and collaborative attempts to escape the ephemerality of late modernity.

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