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Josselyn Sheer
The Exploration of Young Adults'
Online and Offline Interpersonal
Relationships

ABSTRACT

The present study sought to learn about the ways in which young adults who are avid social networking site users (SNS) build and maintain interpersonal relationships given the ways in which social media shapes how young adults connect. This research explored how experiences via SNS such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Tinder played a role in one's online and offline relationships.

Inclusion criteria included being between the ages of 18 and 30, being an English speaker, logging onto SNS at least 10 times per day, and being able to speak in person or on the phone for one hour. With a sample of twelve young adults, the majority of participants identified as Caucasian, 9, and female, 9, with a mean age of 24.3.

The study concluded that the majority of participants' relationships with friends originated offline via in-person encounters. Offline relationships were strengthened due to online SNS activity due to SNS's ability to connect long distance friends and family members, post photos online that increased offline engagement, reinforce positive aspects of offline relationships, and deepen one's personal development offline. Participants also noted the ways in which SNS adversely impacted their relationships offline, including trust, embarrassment, and exclusion. The findings also showed a gender-specific pattern, revealing that all three male participants used SNS as a tool for developing businesses; the women never spoke about using

SNS to assist in the development of a business but, rather, spoke only about using it exclusively as a social environment and tool.

**THE EXPLORATION OF YOUNG ADULTS' ONLINE AND OFFLINE
INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS**

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2014

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to answer the following question: How do young adults who are avid social networking site (SNS) users build and maintain interpersonal relationships? I became curious about young adults' perceptions of the ways in which social networking sites play a role in their ability to build and maintain interpersonal relationships.

As young adults continue to increase the amount of time they spend on social media websites, it is important to explore their types of involvement in social media and their ability to create meaningful online or offline relationships. A national poll conducted by the Common Sense Media (2009) found that young adults log on to their favorite social media sites more than ten times per day. This gives evidence that a large part of "social and emotional development is occurring while on the Internet" (O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011, p. 800). Having worked with young adults in a clinical internship, it became evident to me that social media is changing and shaping how young individuals are connecting with one another. What sparked my interest during my first year clinical placement were the ways in which these SNS continually came up in conversation with a client population of young adults. I found that SNS would be casually mentioned throughout sessions.

One reason for conducting this study was to offer a deeper understanding of the experiences of young adults' SNS usage and their ability to initiate and maintain interpersonal relationships. As young adults continue to increase the amount of time spent on SNS they are

affected either positively or negatively, which may have some effect on their ability to create meaningful relationships. As a group, young adults make particularly heavy use of technology (Kolmes, 2012). Kolmes (2012) states that over the past several years “the practice and profession of psychology ha[s] been greatly influenced by digital culture and social media” (p. 606). Kolmes (2012) discusses clients who use SNS, stating that “young adults on social media sites are usually crafting identities for particular digital audiences” (p. 610). Thus it is important to examine how current technological shifts influence clinical social work practice, as SNS are becoming a standard means of interacting with others. It is imperative that clinicians gain a deeper understanding of how clients’ use and experience of SNS play a role in young adults’ offline and online relationships, and the building and maintenance of those relationships.

I conducted this study by interviewing a sample of twelve young adults, defined as men and women aged 18 through 30 (Correa & de Zúñiga, 2010) who were avid social networking site users. I defined an avid user as an individual who logs onto SNS at least ten times per day (Common Sense Media, 2009). At the beginning of the interview, I introduced myself to the participant, briefly described my study, and then continued to use my interview guide to collect data. I focused on social networking sites (SNS) as I have found that the majority of research on social media use has solely focused on social networking sites (Acar, 2008, Zywicki & Danowski, 2008). I defined SNS use as the consumption of digital media or Internet that provides a mechanism for communication, interaction, and connection through the virtual use of a user profile (Correa & de Zúñiga, 2010). Examples of SNS’s included Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and MySpace, but were not limited to these. I chose to utilize Self-Psychology, some of which includes self-love, self-esteem, including grandiosity and inadequacy, self-objects, and twinship (Keiffer, 2012). I believe that this theoretical lens has helped to make sense of the phenomenon

of online relationships and identity shaping and the ways it affects young adults. Interpersonal relationships will be defined as social associations, connections, or affiliations with two or more people (Jenkins-Guarnieri, 2013). Examples of this include friendships, romantic partnerships, and colleagues with whom there is a reciprocal relationship.

In order to begin a study of my own, it was crucial that I explore theoretical and empirical literature that helped shape my understanding of this topic, as well as recognize where there may be gaps.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The general investigation of this literature review will explore young adults' use of social networking sites (SNS) and their interpersonal relationships. I will use Self Psychology as a theoretical lens for my study, as I believe that this theory has helped to illustrate online and offline relationship building and maintenance. I seek to explore young adults' use of SNS, how they build and maintain interpersonal relationships, and their orientation of their own self-esteem.

Adolescent and Young Adult Development

Erik Erikson (1964) developed a psychosocial timeline that looked at the developmental life stages over the course of a person's life cycle (Berzoff, 2008). It is important to note that Erikson's developmental model is framed from a North American perspective; the stages of development vary from culture to culture and do not always align. Erikson (1964) theorized that the "ego itself is shaped and transformed, not only by biological and psychological forces but also by social forces" (Berzoff, 2008, p. 99). His theory suggested that people are constantly changing and evolving over the course of their entire lives. Erikson's Epigenetic Stages include Infancy, Early Childhood, Play Stage, School Age, Adolescence, Young Adulthood, Adulthood, and Old Age (Berzoff, 2008). For the purposes of this study, I will focus on adolescence and young adulthood.

Erikson (1964) states that during adolescence, there is a tension between identity and role confusion. There is a transition from childhood to adulthood where individuals are feeling more independent, questioning one's own identity, struggling with social interactions, and grappling with moral issues. This is a time when adolescents ask themselves who they are. Erikson (1964) suggests that adolescents must integrate a basic sense of trust, a strong sense of independence, competence, and control over one's life. During this stage, the most significant relationships are with peer groups. Individuals who receive reinforcement and validation during this stage will develop a strong sense of self. Erikson (1964) states that completing this stage leads to fidelity, which he described as "the ability to sustain loyalties freely pledged in spite of differences in values" (Berzoff, 2008, p. 112).

When individuals are in the young adulthood stage, there is a struggle and tension between intimacy and isolation (Berzoff, 2008). In order to achieve intimacy in relationships during this stage, one must have "mutuality, which requires the ability to lose oneself and find oneself in another without losing one's identity" (Berzoff, 2008, p. 112). When an individual's identity is not solid, his/her attempt at intimacy may lead to isolation and fear of a committed relationship, because "when identity is shaky, attempts at intimacy become desperate attempts at delineating the fuzzy outlines of identity by mutual narcissistic mirroring: to fall in love often means to fall into one's mirror image" (Berzoff, 2008, p. 112). Berzoff (2008) states, "for people whose identities are fragmented, rigid, or brittle, the capacity for real intimacy may be limited or impossible" (p. 113).

The virtue of this stage is love, which Erikson (1964) refers to as, "the strength of the ego" to be able to share identity with another individual while maintaining a separate self (p. 113). It is during this developmental stage that a young adult is eager to amalgamate their

identities with their peers. As the phenomena of SNS increases, the availability for individuals to share information about themselves increases dramatically, providing more opportunities for individuals to feel more connected to others. SNS offer an opportunity for young adults to instantly feel connected and supported by others.

History of Social Networking Sites

According to Boyd and Ellison (2008), the first recognizable social network site launched in 1997, and was called SixDegrees. The website allowed users to create an individual profile and list their friends. SixDegrees was the first SNS to combine lists of Friends from AIM, AOL Instant Messenger, ICQ, an instant messaging server, and Classmates.com, promoting itself as a tool to “help people connect with and send messages to others” (Boyd & Ellison, 2008).

Following this, AsianAvenue, BlackPlanet, and MiGente were created. These websites allowed users to identify Friends on their personal profiles. Shortly after, the next wave of SNS were created in 2001, beginning with Ryze, a website created to “help people leverage their business networks” (Boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 215). From here, LinkedIn and Friendster were produced in 2002 “as a social complement to Ryze” (p. 215), however, “in the end, Ryze never acquired mass popularity, LinkedIn became a powerful business service, and Friendster[‘s]...” popularity declined due to “technical difficulties, social collisions, and a rupture of trust between users and the site” (p. 216). From 2003 onward, a new term, “Yet Another Social Networking Services,” or YASNS, was coined by social software analysis Clay Shirky. During the year 2003, SNSs were launched to help “strangers connect based on shared interests,” “focus on business people...help activists meet...connect travelers to people with couches...join Christian churches with their members” and so on (p. 216). MySpace began in 2003; it was originally created to promote and advertise local musicians and bands. Soon after, MySpace added new features such as

personalizing pages and began attracting a larger demographic including “musicians/artists, teenagers, and the post-college urban social crowd” (p. 217). In 2004, Facebook was designed and targeted towards individuals connected to a college network, however it later expanded to include high school students, and then became “open” for anyone to join (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Realizing the power of social networking, Google implemented Google+ in 2011 that allowed users to video chat with online friends. The world of social networking is continuing to evolve. Judging from recent SNS developments, one could predict that SNS will continue to further expand.

Social Networking Site Usage and Interpersonal Relationships

Individuals today are experiencing a new type of interpersonal communication. As discussed by Bowker and Moorman (2011), there has been a recent shift away from traditional routes of communicating interpersonally to a more “digital approach to maintaining and establishing relationships” (Moorman & Bowker, 2011, p. 2). Epstein (1983) suggests that young adult “interpersonal connections are needed to foster and develop positive social skills and that reciprocal relations promote positive mental health and psychological adjustment” (Epstein, 1983, p. 153).

Adolescence and young adulthood are developmental periods in which social networks and cohesive groups of peers are forming. The development and maintenance of healthy interpersonal relationships, particularly in young adulthood are focused on peer relationships and intimate relationships. Given the developmental significance of identity development and establishing intimate friendships and dating relationships during young adulthood, it is important to consider the ways in which these interpersonal relationships develop.

Interpersonal relationships exist between two or more people who engage in social associations with one another (Cavazos, 2010). According to an article in *Time* magazine, “challenges in life may feel less daunting to people with close interpersonal relationships,” as those who have close emotional connections feel a sense of “safety and security that reduces stress” (Cavazos, 2010, p. 1). According to McKenna and Bargh (2000), in a recent poll of 1,000 Internet users, “64% said that ‘using an online Internet service is a necessity to me’” (D’Amico, 1998, p. 1). The drastic growth of the Internet has made it possible for individuals to connect with others and has inadvertently shaped the way in which individuals are connecting with one another. A large portion of social interaction is now taking place on the Internet, where people resort to interpersonal communication via the Internet as a “quick and easy way to maintain contact with family and friends who live far away” (McKenna & Bargh, 2000, p. 58).

Social Networking Sites and Online Relationships

There has been a dramatic shift and rise in the creation and usage of SNS. Generations today are experiencing a new wave of interpersonal communication that has transitioned to a more digital approach. There are hundreds of SNS that stretch back to 1978, however “current modern communication and interpersonal connectedness is now both fostered and mediated by the communicative tool itself: the computer” (Hoffman, 2008; Bowker & Moorman, 2011). Instead of a physical interaction with another individual, SNS make room for a “simulate[d]...real-time human interaction” (Bowker & Moorman, 2001, p. 2). Online and offline relationships currently coexist, however, “the role of social networking and its effects on young adults has largely been ignored in terms of the psychological implications and the impact on quality of relationships (Fisher, Sollie, & Morrow, 1986; Bowker & Moorman, 2001, p. 4).

For the purposes of my study, I will define a social network site as a web-based site that allows individuals to communicate, interact, and/or connect through the virtual use of a user profile (Correa & de Zúñiga, 2010). Examples of SNS's include Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and MySpace, but are not limited to these.

Self-Psychology

Self-Psychology is a useful theoretical lens to explore the phenomenon of online SNS use and young adults' offline interpersonal relationships. Self-Psychology explains the difficulties many people experience through their ability to self-regulate and the development of a solid sense of self. According to Heinz Kohut (1978), the structure of the self is made up of three distinct poles that enable the self to become cohesive. Kohut refers to these poles as aspects of development that exist within the self, each of which has their own needs (Flanagan, 2008). The three poles are the grandiose self, the idealized parent imago, and twinship. First, the grandiose self is the part of the self that needs "mirroring selfobjects in an effort to feel special and full of well-being" (Flanagan, 2008, p. 172), developed from mirroring selfobjects and empathic attunement. The idealized parent imago represents a child's need to see their caregiver(s) as idealized people, sources of power and security with whom to merge and feel a part of. Lastly, twinship is the need to feel that there are other individuals in the world who are similar to you, creating feelings of belonging and security (Flanagan, 2008). Selfobjects can be defined as "people or things outside of the self, vitally necessary to every individual as a source of mirroring, sources of perfection and grandeur to merge with, and as similar selves to feel at one with" (Flanagan, 2008, p. 171). According to Self-Psychology, selfobjects are needed to fulfill these functions throughout the life cycle and are called selfobjects because they function to give the self what it needs in order to become and remain cohesive.

Kohut also emphasizes the use of empathy, or what he called “vicarious introspection”(Flanagan, 2008, p. 168). His belief was that empathy was necessary for all human beings, helping a person feel heard and understood. Flanagan (2008) states, “repeated empathic failures are the roots of disturbance and thwarted growth” (p. 169). Additionally, Kohut spoke of four descriptive categories of disorders that refer to when a person’s self psychological needs are not met. The first category is called the understimulated self, which describes those individuals whose selfobjects were not able to mirror their grandiosity, and may often feel “empty, bored, listless, or apathetic (Flanagan, 2008, p. 181). The second category, the overstimulated self, occurs when an individual’s selfobjects are too strong, which makes it difficult for the self to learn how to soothe itself on its own. The fragmenting self “have not been related to as a whole by their selfobjects” (Flanagan, 2008, p. 182), and although they have received some attention, they present as mercurial. Lastly, the overburdened self feels unsupported as a result of unreliable selfobjects (Flanagan, 2008).

Banai, Mikulincer, and Shaver (2005) found that “unmet selfobject needs for mirroring and twinship seem to have contributed to low self-esteem, which in turn [contributes] to anxiety and depression” (p. 243). As seen through Self-Psychology, a healthy and cohesive self-structure is the outcome of normal development of the three poles. Banai, Mikulincer, and Shaver (2005) used an experimental design to examine some of Kohut's ideas about selfobject needs. In one study, they examined Kohut's (1977, 1984) claim that strong hunger for selfobjects and avoidance of selfobject needs in adulthood are the underlying determinants of low self-esteem and emotional maladjustment. Results showed that hunger for mirroring and twinship significantly contribute to forms of emotional maladjustment related to difficulties in maintaining self-esteem. They further argue that a sense of self-cohesion is achieved when

“people possess a stable, positively valued, and congruent set of qualities, ambitions, ideals, and values, and are able to accomplish their goals without being rejected or isolated from significant others and important reference groups” (p. 3). When one experiences difficulties in the development of a cohesive self, they may lack the capacity to maintain a steady level of self-esteem (Banai, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2005; Kohut & Wolf, 1978).

For the purposes of this study, I will focus on the grandiose self and twinship.

SNS Acting as a Mirror: The Grandiose Self

The first pole is the grandiose self, which needs “mirroring selfobjects in an effort to feel special and full of well-being” (Flanagan, p. 172). The grandiose self includes a person’s individual talents that get mirrored back to them and help to form the core of identity. With respect to the grandiose pole, Self-Psychology can provide a theoretically grounded framework for identifying how and why people use SNS. SNS offer a unique opportunity to have mirroring experiences as a way of validating one’s self. Some individuals strengthen their sense of self through SNS by selectively presenting a version of their self. SNS provide an ideal environment for the expression of the hoped-for ideal self (Mehdizadeh, 2010). For example, Gonzales and Hancock (2011) argue that “selective, online self-presentation affects attitudes about the self. Facebook profiles may provide sufficiently positive biased stimuli to counter the traditional effects of objective self-awareness (e.g., photos, autobiographical information), and instead prompt a positive change in self-esteem” (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011, p. 80). SNS provide a place for individuals to instantly receive self-verifying feedback that may promote feelings of acceptance and value by others. When an individual experiences feelings of acceptance and love from “friends” online, they may experience a rise in self-esteem.

Individuals with a grandiose self are “vibrant, full of confidence, hopeful, ambitious, and productive (Flanagan 2008, p. 172). However, as discussed by Banai, Mikulincer, and Shaver (2005), those who are hungry for mirroring experiences may be anxiously attached individuals, “afraid of rejection and abandonment because such negative interpersonal experiences exacerbate their sense of isolation and loneliness” (p. 253). These individuals may become more preoccupied with maintaining a “sense of connectedness and similarity to others than with maintaining an exhibitionistic, grandiose sense of self (Banai, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2005, p. 253). However, on the other hand, Banai, Mikulincer, and Shaver (2005) discuss that these individuals are afraid of rejection and abandonment because their negative interpersonal experiences undermine their sense of superiority and entitlement. That said, these individuals may be more preoccupied with “justifying their narcissism than with maintaining a sense of connectedness to others” (Banai, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2005, p. 253). When individuals do not receive self-verifying feedback, the opportunity to be mirrored may be rejected, possibly causing damage to the self (Cast & Burke 2002, p. 1047 as cited in Brown & Lohr 1987; Burke & Stets 1999; Ellison 1993).

Twinship

Twinship is experienced as sameness, likeness, and being known by another (Banai, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2005). One requires twinship in order to feel a sense of connection to others. According to Flanagan (2008), the pole of twinship refers to an individual’s need to experience and “feel that there are others in the world who are similar to oneself” (p. 176). When a person feels this sense of sameness, they are able to facilitate the development of empathy and social skills (Banai, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2005).

SNS provide young adults with an opportunity to have an experience of being known by others, utilizing SNS as a space to connect with others in a parallel way. Freedman, (1996) points out that teachers often times educate children on the concept of “same” before they teach the concept of “different.” He states that “cognitive development dictates that one acquire a sense of sameness prior to acquiring the ability to comprehend differences. Therefore, in order to affectively experience a sense of differentiation, it is first essential to have affectively experienced a sense of sameness” (Freedman, 1996, p. 108). SNS are a space where people can feel a sense of sameness with others, and where a mutual recognition and bond with others can be formed. For example, an individual may find an online group with other individuals who share a common interest, are of the same age, or live in the same community.

True-Self

People possess multiple senses of self. Both Goffman (1959) and Jung (1953) distinguished between an individual’s “public self, or persona, and the individual’s inner self,” which Higgins (1987) later developed into the “ideal, ought, and actual self-concepts” (Bargh, 2002, p. 34). Other than the actual self, Carl Rogers (1951) expanded this idea into what he called the true self. Rogers’ notion of the true self was informed by Jung’s (1953) “distinction between the unconscious self and its public mask, persona” (Bargh, 2002, p. 34). Bargh (2002) explains Roger’s concept of the true self as:

distinct from both the ideal self or possible selves on the one hand, and the actual self on the other, because Rogers (1951) viewed the true self of his clients as actually existing psychologically [i.e., a present, not a future version of self], but not fully expressed in social life [i.e., not the actual self] (p. 34).

Winnicott (1962) adopted this theory and introduced the true self and the false self. The true self, which he sometimes called the “real self” is used to describe a sense of self that is based on authentic experience, a “personal aliveness or feeling real” (Winnicott, 1962, p. 148).

The false self was described as a “defense designed to protect the true self by hiding it” (Blass, 2012, p. 1442), which often times presented as “polite and mannered in public” (Winnicott, 1962, p. 148). These aspects of the self may be kept hidden out of fear of rejection or isolation.

Connecting with others on SNS may allow individuals the opportunity to express their true self, aspects of themselves they may keep hidden from those living within their community. Perhaps it is also true that individuals use SNS to connect with others in an effort to keep aspects of their identity “hidden.” (Shaw & Grant 2002). SNS allows users to selectively present themselves through photos and posts that expose certain aspects of themselves, thus SNS may be appealing to individuals of all ages, especially young adults, due to the ability one has to selectively present desired aspects of one’s self.

Alternatively, Tosun (2012) states that relying solely on the Internet to meet social needs can be maladaptive because young adults will only feel comfortable presenting their “true self” online. The concept of “true self on the Net” has some implications for relationship formation and maintenance. Tosun states that the “true self” “involves one’s actually existing characteristics (like the actual self) but those characteristics are not fully expressed in social life (like the potential self)” (Tosun, 2012, p. 1511). As with past studies, I am curious how Tosun’s (2012) findings would translate to offline relationships.

Additionally, SNS may be a space for some individuals to express their false selves where there is an opportunity to be whoever they want to be, and project aspects of themselves that they feel may connect them to others. Tosun (2010) conducted a quantitative research methods study with a correlational design. For this study, researchers first examined 142 students’ motives for using Facebook using the “True self on the Net” questionnaire through a web-based survey. The “true self on the Net” questionnaire was measured through a 5-point

scale ranging from 1 (“does not agree at all”) to 5 (agrees completely.)” Then a web-based survey was made available for a one-month period. Tosun (2012) found that the main motive for Facebook use was “relationship maintenance” or “social searching” and to maintain long-distance relationships (Tosun, 2012). These results support the idea that participants use the Internet as a “social substitute” for interacting with others” (Tosun, 2012, p. 1511). However, another possible motive for Facebook use may be to keep regular contact with long-distance friends in between face-to-face contact.

Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons (2002) used a quantitative methodology and an experimental design in which multiple methods of research were involved. New York University students enrolled in an introductory psychology course participated in pairs in a face-to-face interview. Their task was to respond as quickly as possible to a series of questions. Findings suggest that when an individual’s “true self” is expressed online, people feel better about themselves when engaging with other users. Compared to face-to-face interactions, Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons (2002) found that people were better able to present aspects of their true self over the Internet and feel accepted by others. The study compared qualities of Internet communication to “face-to-face” communication. The researchers stated, “by its very nature, [Internet communication] facilitates the expression and effective communication of one’s true self to new acquaintances outside of one’s established social network, which leads to forming online relationships with them” (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002, p. 45.) Interestingly, it would appear that internet communication may enable self-disclosure because of its relatively anonymous nature, as it fosters the idealization of others in the absence of information (Bargh, McKenna & Fitzsimons, 2002; Derlega *et al.*, 1993; Murray *et al.*, 1996).

Like Tosun (2012), Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons (2002) believe that although being able to express one's true self on SNS is a positive thing, the researchers expressed concern at the fast pace in which virtual relationships move. While Tosun (2012) sees the idea that participants use the Internet as a social substitute for interacting with others, Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons (2002) believe that while the Internet "affords a panoply of interaction domains in which alternative forms to the self can be expressed, it is important to use caution with online relationships" and "take it slow" (p. 46). It is important to note that the study conducted by Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons (2002) discussed young adults' chatting online who did not know each other beforehand, therefore, they are cautioning specifically those who are socially anxious, "because they are the most highly motivated to find friends and romantic partners" (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002, p. 46). I believe that this study would be different had the participants known each other before they chatted online.

Strengths and Limitations of Literature

The current literature possesses many strengths and limitations. Strengths of the literature include its usage of the Facebook interface. While there are several other social media websites such as Tumblr and MySpace, Facebook is advantageous because of its popularity and increased uniformity (Gonzales, 2011, p. 82.) Given the popularity of SNS use, the studies above have a timely influence to the growing body of research directed towards SNS use. Another strength of the empirical literature is its chosen sample group. Lenhart (2009) states that "the predominant social networking users are young adults; three-quarters of adult Internet users under age 25 have a profile on a social networking site" (Lenhart, 2009, p. 2). However, it is important to consider generalizability of this sample group.

I have not found any qualitative studies in the current literature that look at the implications for SNS use and its link to real world relationships. Therefore, my study will provide more depth to the current research as real world relationships is one focus. All of the research that I have read uses college-aged participants for the sample, and the method is typically some sort of online survey. In addition, all of the studies took place in North America. There was little attention to cultural values when looking at the development of young adults, which is another limitation. Lastly, most of the studies that I have read are quantitative methods studies.

Statement of Implication

In sum, the literature above examined the following categories: Erikson's developmental model, SNS and its implications on self-esteem, loneliness and depression, and self-psychology theory. The literature above presents ample justification for my study. The effects that SNS have on young adults' are complex. The empirical literature that I have read thus far has been mostly quantitative data from the perspective of young adults, all of whom are undergraduate students (Acar, 2008; Tosun 2012; Shaw & Gant, 2012; Bargh *et al.*, 2002; Zywicki & Danowski, 2008; Tosun, 2012; Oldmeadow 2012; Lee, 2013). This has influenced my decision to develop a qualitative research methods study that allows me to explore a deeper understanding of SNS use and attitudes around relationship formation for those who use SNS.

Interestingly, because many studies were told from the perspective of young adults, participants were asked to disclose what grade level they were in, in addition to their age and gender. Few studies, however, required participants to disclose their race, culture, or ethnicity. This lack of reporting of diversity in the samples gives me reason to believe that perhaps the participant pool was not diverse.

My research question asks how young adults who are avid SNS users build and maintain interpersonal relationships. I hope to get a fuller, richer understanding of attitudes around relationship formation for those who use SNS. The next chapter will discuss the research project in extensive detail, examining the methodology by which the research was conducted, the sample population, and data analysis.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Research Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore how young adults who are avid social networking site (SNS) users build and maintain interpersonal relationships. I am curious about young adults' perceptions of the ways in which social networking sites play a role in their ability to build and maintain interpersonal relationships, both online and offline. Both Acar (2008) and Zywicka and Danowski (2008) found that SNS give users a sense of connectedness that they do not find offline. For my study, this raises the question of how online relationships translate to offline relationships, as neither Acar (2008) nor Zywicka and Danowski (2008) address a connection to offline relationships.

Research Question

The research question for this study was: *How do young adults who are avid social networking site users build and maintain interpersonal relationships?* Additionally, some sub-questions included: how are young adults utilizing social networking sites to create and maintain both online and offline connections with others? What are young adults sharing on SNS about themselves? How are young adults interacting with others both on and offline? How does SNS use help or hinder offline relationships?

Qualitative methods were chosen for a variety of reasons. First, the purpose of this study was to explore a deeper understanding of the experiences of young adults' SNS usage and their

ability to initiate and maintain interpersonal relationships. As young adults continue to increase the amount of time spent on SNS they are affected either positively or negatively, which may have some effect on their ability to create and/or maintain meaningful relationships. Utilizing qualitative methods to explore the complex effects that SNS have on young adults provides a broader understanding of this topic. Secondly, qualitative methods were chosen as most of the literature reviewed herein uses a quantitative research method. The empirical literature looked quantitatively at the way in which social networking usage impacted young adults. I have not found any qualitative studies in the current literature that look at the implications for SNS use and its link to offline relationships. Therefore, my study provided more depth to the current research as offline relationships is one focus. Most of the empirical literature that I have read thus far has been from the perspective of young adults, all of whom are undergraduate students (Acar, 2008; Tosun 2012; Shaw & Gant, 2012; Bargh *et al.*, 2002; Zywicki & Danowski, 2008; Oldmeadow, 2012; Lee, 2013). This influenced my decision to develop a qualitative research methods study that allowed me to explore a deeper understanding of attitudes around relationship formation for those who use social networking sites. I broadened the age range of my subjects so that my sample included 18 to 30 year olds who are current university students, past university students who had graduated, or were never university students and who were older than 18 years of age.

Researcher Bias

Social media is directly influencing and changing the various fields of communication. It is important to be aware of my biases as I conduct interviews with young adults, for I believe that social media affects individuals when it comes to relationships. The interview questions must not project my bias or dispose participants toward any given responses or outcomes. In

order to reduce bias, my interview questions have been reviewed and approved by my Research Advisor and Smith College School for Social Work Institutional Review Board (See Appendix F for HSR approval letter). In order to improve accuracy, it will be helpful to use member checking. During interviews, I will summarize and paraphrase participant responses to check for accuracy.

Sample

The sample population included 12 young adults aged 18 to 30 living in New York City. As noted earlier and as used by other researchers in the field, an avid user is described as one who logs on to SNS at least 10 times per day (Correa & de Zúñiga, 2010). Additionally, inclusion criteria included those able to communicate in English, and those who were willing to speak via telephone or in person for approximately one hour.

Demographic questions were used to gather information about participants' age, gender, race, sexual orientation, level of education, where they reside, annual income and household income, employment status, and relationship status. This demographic information was used to describe the sample pool (See Appendix D for Demographic Information Form).

Recruitment

Participants were recruited through two avenues. First, I posted flyers in Manhattan, New York and Brooklyn, New York. I went door to door and posted my flyer in local coffee shops and public libraries. Specifically I went to several different locations of the New York and Brooklyn Public Library systems such as the Andrew Heiskell Braille and Talking Book Library, the Donnell Library Center, and the Elmer Holmes Bobst Library, all of which are located in Manhattan or in Brooklyn, New York. In Manhattan I posted my flyer in coffee shops, stores, and public libraries that were located around NYU and Columbia. I also went to coffee shops,

stores, and public libraries located around Pratt Institute, University Hospital of Brooklyn, Long Island University Brooklyn Campus, St. Joseph's College, and Brooklyn Law School, all of which are located in Brooklyn, New York. My second strategy was to post recruitment information on social networking sites, such as Facebook. The recruitment resources instructed interested participants to call or email me.

Previous studies have conducted quantitative studies via nonprobability, purposive sampling (Acar, 2008; Tosun 2012; Shaw & Gant, 2012; Bargh *et al.*, 2002; Zywicki & Danowski, 2008; Oldmeadow, 2012; Lee, 2013). Lenhart (2009) stated that contacting participants via nonprobability, purposive sampling was important because “the predominant social networking users are young adults; three-quarters of adult Internet users under age 25 have a profile on a social networking site” (p. 2). Therefore, this study used a non-probability, purposive sampling technique.

Informed Consent Procedures

Upon expressing interest in the study, each participant received information about the study via email or US mail that included an Information Sheet which explained the study, the time commitment, eligibility criteria, participants’ rights, and confidentiality (See Appendix B for Information Sheet). In order to protect the confidentiality of participants, each participant was required to read and agree to the terms outlined in the Informed Consent Form (See Appendix C for Informed Consent Form). The participant and I went over the Informed Consent together where I had the opportunity to answer any questions s/he had. The participant was then required to sign the Informed Consent with a wet signature and send it back to me. The Informed Consent Forms will be kept in a locked file cabinet for three years so that participant names are kept separate from any data. Demographic forms will also be kept in a locked file cabinet for three

years, separate from the signed informed consent forms. All data will be destroyed after three years as per federal regulations, or kept until no longer needed at which point it will be destroyed.

Risks/Benefits of Participation

Because this study explored personal topics about individual's friendships and relationships, it was possible that participants would become uncomfortable or distressed when talking about online and offline relationships. Participants were given a list of resources including local New York City community agencies and private practitioners before the interview began.

Participants may have benefited from participating in this study by being able to vocalize, share, and reflect on their experiences with friendships and relationships online and offline, which they may never have had the opportunity to share before. Additionally, participants were given a chance to reflect on their motivations for using SNS, and perhaps compare and contrast their online and offline interactions, which could feel validating when someone recognizes their online interactions as legitimate relationships and forms of communication.

Data Collection

The data for this study was collected between January 21, 2014 and February 23, 2014 using semi-structured in-person or telephone interviews. Interviews consisted of open-ended questions first inquiring about social networking stage usage and online relationships. Participants were then asked about information they share offline and offline friendships and relationships. Lastly, participants were asked about their perceptions of whether or not they think their online SNS use is connected to their life offline (See Appendix E for Interview Questions).

The interviews were conducted in a public setting of the participant's choosing, such as a coffee shop or a library, or via telephone. Data was collected via audiotape using a recording device. Additionally, during in-person interviews, hand-written notes were used to record nonverbal body language or other information that appeared to be important.

Descriptive statistics, including measures of central tendency, were used to describe the demographic information. Thematic analysis has been used to analyze the qualitative data by looking for common themes in order to uncover similarities and differences in participant responses. In order to build validity and protect confidentiality of participants, I will use direct quotes from my participants and amalgamate my data.

CHAPTER IV

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore how young adults who are avid social networking site users build and maintain interpersonal relationships. In addition, this research explored how these cumulative experiences, via both social networking sites and other online experiences on SNS such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Tinder played a role in one's ability to build and maintain offline interpersonal relationships.

This chapter contains findings from twelve interviews that were conducted with young adults ages 20 through 28 who live in New York City and who log onto social networking sites at least ten times per day. To protect confidentiality, all participants were assigned fictitious names for the purposes of this paper. Interviews were conducted both in-person and over the phone, were then fully transcribed, and subsequently coded using thematic analysis. Demographic information was collected before the start of each interview. The interview consisted of seven open-ended questions focused on social networking site usage and online and offline friendships/relationships. Specific information was then gathered about (a) what participants like to do on social networking sites and what they share about themselves, (b) if participants feel that what they share about themselves offline is similar to what they share online, and (c) if participants believe their offline friendships or relationships have ever strengthened or suffered because of their online friendships or relationships.

Demographic Data

A total of twelve interviews were conducted and analyzed. All twelve participants completed the demographic questionnaire. All of the study participants reside in New York City, which was part of the inclusion criteria. Participants range in age from 20 to 28 years with the mean age being 24.3 years. Nine participants identified as White, two identified as African American/Black, and one identified as Asian. The participants in this study used two different terms to describe their sexual orientation: eight identified as straight and four identified as heterosexual. A plurality of participants, five, stated that their highest level of education was a 4-year college degree; four listed 'some college,' two listed a Master's degree, and one listed 'professional degree. Four participants listed their employment as 'student only,' four stated that they work full-time, one stated that s/he is unemployed, one participant listed that he is self-employed, and two participants stated that they are part-time employees. Again, a plurality, five, stated that they live with roommates, three stated that they live with their parents/caregivers, two said that they live alone, one stated that s/he lives in a friend's mother's apartment for discounted rent, and one said that s/he lives with his/her partner. The participants were evenly divided between those who were currently in an intimate relationship and those who were not. Individual and household annual income ranged widely among participants. Five participants listed their annual income as being between 0-\$20,000, two participants listed \$20,000-\$30,000, three participants listed \$30,000-\$40,000, and two participants listed \$50,000-\$75,000. With regard to household income, two participants listed less than \$10,000, two participants listed \$20,000-\$40,000, one participant listed \$60,000-\$80,000, one listed \$100,000-\$150,000, and six listed \$150,000+.

Participants were asked how often they go on SNS. Answers ranged widely, the minimum being 10 times per day and the maximum being over 100 times. Participants were then asked how long they stayed on line each time they log on. Again, a range of answers was collected from "less than five minutes" to "30-45 minutes." Participants were asked how long, on an average day, they are on line. Answers ranged from "1 hour" to "10-12 hours." Table 1, below, represents participants' answers to these questions about SNS usage.

Table 1: Participant SNS Usage

Participant	How many times do you go online each day?	How long do you stay online?	How long are you online per day?
01 21 y.o. female named "Margaret"	10	10-15 minutes	2 hours
02 26 y.o. female named "Lindsay"	~10	10 minutes	2 hours
03 20 y.o. female named "Alexa"	10	5-10 minutes	An hour or so
04 24 y.o. named "Ben"	10ish	5ish minutes	3+ hours
05 23 y.o. female named "Laura"	10	10-15 minutes	1 hour
06 26 y.o. female named "Melissa"	10+	10-40 minutes	1-1.5 hours
07 28 y.o. female named "Amanda"	15+	10 minutes	1 hour
08 25 y.o. male named "Andrew"	Over 100	30-45 minutes	10-12 hours

09	20	Less than 5 minutes	1-2 hours
25 y.o. female named "Katherine"			
10	20	20 minutes	8 hours
24 y.o. male named "John"			
11	I'm online most of the day for my job, but I would say 15+ times	30 minutes	10 hours
22 y.o. female named "Rachel"			
12	25	5 minutes	1.5 hours
26 y.o. female named "Ana"			

As represented in Table 2 below, the number of times participants logged onto SNS per day reflected by the median accounts as 12.5. Participants were then asked how long they stayed on line each time they log on. Again, a range of answers was reported, and the median number of minutes was 11.25. Participants were also asked how long, on an average day, they are online. The median was 1.75.

Table 2: Participant SNS Usage – Median

Participant	Median: How many times do you go online each day?	Median: How long do you stay online?	Median: How long are you online per day?
Participants 1-12	12.5 times/day	11.25 minutes	1.75 hours

As represented in Table 3 below, the most common amount of time participants logged onto SNS per day was 10 times for 5 minutes. Additionally, the mode for the average amount of time spent online each day was 1 hour.

Table 3: Participant SNS Usage – Mode

Participant	Mode: How many times do you go online each day?	Mode: How long do you stay online?	Mode: How long are you online per day?
Participants 1-12	10 times/day	5 minutes	1 hour

Interestingly, four participants did not accurately calculate how long they were online per day. This speaks to their inaccurate assessment of how much time they spend online each day; most participants understood whether they log onto SNS often or infrequently, however, there was a lack of understanding about the precise amount of aggregate time they spent online per day. For instance, one participant stated that he logs on to SNS 100+ times per day for 30-40 minute intervals; this calculates to a total time spent online of 50 hours per day which is clearly not possible. Yet, in his interview, this participant stated that he leaves SNS such as Facebook open on his computer all day. Some of the participants did not accurately assess the connection between the number of times per day that they log on and the length of time they spend online each time they log on with the total time they spend online each day.

There were outliers that skewed the data, particularly the data for the number of times each day that the participants went online. There was a large gap between the number of times the majority of the participants, eleven, went online each day when compared to participant 08. While the majority of participants listed that they went online each day 10, 15, 20, and 25 times per day, participant 08, Andrew, the outlier, listed that he went online "over 100" times per day. Additionally, when asked to list how long participants went on SNS per day, the majority of participants, nine, stated 1-2 hours. Participant 08, Andrew, was also an outlier when it came to

the total amount of time each day he spent on SNS; he listed that he went online 10-12 hours per day while the majority of participants listed that they are online anywhere from 1-3 hours. The data for two other participants, John and Rachel, clustered together; they listed that they went online for 8 hours (John) and 10 hours (Rachel) per day. These three participants stood out as outliers; Table 2 and Table 3 represent the median and mode of participant SNS usage.

Three Tiers of Relationships

Though my research question sought to explore how young adults use SNS to build and maintain friendships and relationships, it was evident from the data that the way in which participants did so was very dependent on with whom specifically the participant was engaging. The way in which participants used SNS to build and maintain interpersonal relationships – the how and why of their SNS usage – depended entirely on which of the three different relationship groups those relationships fell into; the parameters that define these groups emerged from the interview responses and were consistent across participants. The data showed that the degree to which SNS are, or are not, important as a means of engagement depended entirely upon the relationship group to which the participant assigned their friend, family member, or acquaintance.

All of the participants tiered their relationships, whether they were offline or online relationships, into three distinct groups. Membership in a group was determined by (a) the way in which the participants engaged with a person, (b) the frequency with which the participants engaged with that person, and (c) what participants shared with this person. Every participant had a very clear understanding of which people in their social sphere they assigned to which group. The three groups that emerged from the data were as followed: (a) close friends and family members (“first tier”), (b) second-tier friends and family, friends and family participants

engage with periodically via in-person contacts, telephone, and text or chatting, (“second tier”), and (c) people participants are curious about but do not actively engage with on a periodic basis and may not actively engage with at all (“third tier”). This tiering of relationships was a common theme among all participants and framed the substance of their responses.

The first tier, the close friends and family members, was defined by the participants in the course of their interviews as comprising of those people with whom participants engaged nearly every day, in most cases multiple times a day. The way in which the participants engaged with these people was a core part of the parameters for this group; participants were all very clear that they engaged with this group primarily through means other than SNS. Participants engaged with these first tier friends and family through one-to-one conversations that were conducted via any or all of three different means: (a) in-person, face-to face conversations, (b) telephone conversations or (c) texting or chatting. The public nature of a SNS forum was not the primary way in which the participants engaged with this first group but was, at most, a secondary means of engagement. The participants, consistently and seemingly without reservation, shared deeply held feelings and concerns with these first tier relationships. Laura described the parameters of her friendships. She stated:

In-person I talk about hard times and good times, etc., and I tell my close friends everything that’s happening in my life, like relationship issues and ups, or family [stuff], or just like anything, grades, school work, etc. And I wouldn’t share that online.

Laura added that if she shared these things online, she would feel like people who she "do[esn't] know very well [might] console [her]."

The second tier relationships were described by participants as those friends or family members who do not live near the participants or who, if they do live nearby, they do not engage with on a daily basis. The participants do engage with these people periodically via in-person

contacts, telephone, and text or chatting, but not on a regular basis and certainly not on a daily basis. These relationships are important to the participants but their engagement with this group is primarily through SNS. The participants did not reflexively share deeply held feelings with this group although there might be occasions where some are shared. Margaret stated:

I feel like Facebook is for people that [I] might not be as close with, like to keep in touch with, like...a lot of my best friends, I'm just gonna text them or well be like talking on the phone, but on Facebook, I feel like it's not as intimate to like Facebook message someone, so like, I use it to keep up with people I might not talk to everyday or like [I] might talk to once a month or once every few weeks.

The third tier consisted of everybody else in the participants' social sphere and was described as being those people with whom they engage only through SNS and even then, only in the most passive way, i.e. this group is the "everyone" who can see the participants' SNS profiles. This third tier of relationship included people about whom participants appeared to be curious however, they are not people with whom they actively engaged on even a periodic basis and they may not actively engage with them at all. These are people with whom the participants may have had an in-person relationship at some prior point in their life, e.g., camp or school friends, or are people who they have met perhaps briefly more recently, and about whom they remain curious.

It was clear from the data that three tiers of relationships were all created outside of the general purpose SNS such as Facebook and Twitter. The only relationships that were started and then also actively nurtured on SNS were those that were formed by using a SNS that was specifically intended to introduce strangers to each other for the purpose of building personal and or intimate relationships — a dating SNS. Eleven out of the twelve participants did not use a purpose-driven dating SNS, but, rather, described their SNS activity as taking place on general-purpose SNS. These eleven participants all described their relationships with online friends as

having originated offline via in-person encounters, however brief. An example of this can be seen in the responses of one participant, Alexa, who described a time when she had briefly met a boy in a class and how, after this brief encounter with him, she mustered up the courage to talk to him online.

If online and I just met somebody I don't really know, I don't have the courage to really talk to them in person so instead I'll just talk to them online and then that turns into... friendship.

The How and Why of SNS Usage

The first part of the interview consisted of questions that were focused on eliciting from the participants a broad picture view of the way in which they use SNS. The major theme found during this section of the interview was that participants use SNS, generally, to keep in touch with family members and friends. Participants do this by (a) sharing and reading personal information online, (b) using SNS as a social calendar to track events, and (c) networking for business or professional purposes.

Keeping in Touch with Family and Friends

The opening questions in the interview focused both on motivations for using SNS and on how the participants engaged with SNS. At the start of each interview, the participants were told that the research would focus on their use of social networking sites, which was described to them as any web site that enables users to create public profiles and form relationships with other users such as web sites, online forums, chat rooms, or other online social spaces. Each participant was provided with examples of different SNS; examples included Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and MySpace. It is worth noting that dating SNS were not listed as SNS examples; rather, only general purpose SNS were given as examples. Participants were informed that, for the purposes of this study, SNS usage was defined as the consumption of digital media or

Internet that provides a mechanism for communication, interaction, and connection through the virtual use of a user profile (Correa & de Zúñiga, 2010). To determine their motivation for using SNS, the participants were asked why they liked SNS. To discern how they engaged with SNS, they were asked what they did on them, with whom they engaged on SNS, and what they shared on SNS.

The main theme that emerged from this section of the interview was that participants were motivated to use SNS by the desire to connect with family and friends. However, this connecting activity was always framed within the three-tier structure of these tiers of relationships. All of the participants stated that they do not use SNS as the primary way to stay connected with first-tier friends. The majority of participants, seven, stated that they enjoy using social networking sites because it allows them to keep in touch with friends and family who live near them and who they may, or may not, see frequently, and also with friends and family who do not live close by, i.e., their second tier friends and family. SNS usage was oriented towards staying in touch with the broadest number of people but doing so by not sharing feelings or ideas that were held any deeper than superficially — "a mile wide and an inch deep" accurately described both the reason why and the manner in which eleven out of twelve participants used SNS.

Sharing and Reading Personal Information

As seen by the data, participants stay in touch both by sharing certain personal information and by reading others' personal information. There were several different ways participants share information about themselves each of which seemed to be entirely dependent on which SNS the participant was referencing. These included posting statuses, posting photos, creating events, "accepting" or "denying" an event invitation, and posting an article or video. All

twelve participants spoke about sharing information about certain aspects of their personal lives and sharing personal and professional views about life. All twelve participants engaged in sharing photos and sharing links to articles via SNS. Participants' sharing of photos and articles was most often done so without including any editorial comment about the photos or articles and, as such, was a nonverbal way of sharing specific information about themselves.

The information that the participants most frequently stated that they shared via SNS included information about what they are doing, such as an upcoming vacation or trip they are either currently on or have recently completed, having attended a party, what they are reading, or what they are watching on TV or online. As Amanda stated:

Recently I've been exaggerating a lot about going away, like I'm going to Trinidad to visit my mother in two weeks, so every day I like count down online and say like 'I can't wait for the beach life,' like maybe I'm being too much but I am so excited.

Additionally, participants spoke about watching videos and articles online. For instance, Andrew stated, "sometimes, people share cool, funny hilarious news articles or something that I want to read, so I just leave [the SNS] open on my computer the whole day.

Participants also stay in touch by reading other people's newsfeeds, invitations, and scrolling through photos. Laura, a twenty-three year old woman stated:

As I've gotten older, I've found that it is a really great way to keep in touch with older friends, keep up with what people are doing, you know, sharing articles, sharing photos. It's just a really convenient way to reach a lot of people at once.

Eleven out of twelve participants reported that when they log onto social networking sites, they typically scroll through their newsfeeds, browse pictures, like statuses, and read articles that other people post. Margaret described this activity:

I like to scroll through my newsfeed and see what's going on...see if... one of my close friends posted a new profile picture. I sometimes like...or comment on something that's really funny, sometimes I'll look people's pictures of their album if they look cool.

While all participants stated that they maintain connectivity with friends and family both by posting information about themselves and by reading information posted by others on SNS, they all placed these behaviors and activities within the framework of the three tiers of relationships. All participants talked about keeping in touch with friends and family members whom they do not see on a regular basis – the second and third tier relationships —and either did not mention or did not emphasize using SNS to maintain connections to close friends and family, i.e., the first tier relationship group. For example, Amanda emphasized how SNS have allowed her extended family in the U.S. and in Trinidad to have a platform on which they can communicate for free:

Whatsapp is another messaging app where you can text but it's really easy for me because I talk to family in Trinidad...you can send free texts, pictures, and voice notes, and it's the same with BBM. So I like to keep in touch with my family in Trinidad. And BBM and Whatsapp are very popular in Trinidad. So I adapted to that because that's what they usually use, those particular apps. Cousins and direct family members are over there... But my mother recently moved back so I talk to her through OkHello, so that's like Google talk- you can video chat with up to 4 people. So I talk to my mother in Trinidad and then 3 of my sisters all in one, and it's like a big group chat. I love it, like I was on it last night with two of my home girls. Instead of being on the phone and texting, you can actually be seeing their face and stuff, like it's more intimate. You see your friend and see their facial expressions and I like to see them, see what's going on.

Laura also described using SNS to stay in touch with second tier relationships:

I have family members who don't live close by but talking online is so much easier [than calling], like we probably should be talking on the phone but we'll message [on Facebook] that way if we don't have time or if we don't want to have a long conversation, we don't have to.

Social Calendar

The data showed that the participants used SNS as a way of organizing events and keeping track of social gatherings. A SNS user has the ability to create an event by means of inviting people to an offline activity. Creating the event not only allows the individual to invite friends, but it also provides a way for the invitees to RSVP, for invitees to post messages and for

them to send the invitation to the event to other people. By sending an invitation out on SNS, specifically on Facebook, participants were able to reach a large pool of people in a short period of time. Additionally, the majority of participants, seven, shared that if they are not creating events, then they look for and respond to events that they are invited to. This acts as a way for individuals to create and keep track of their social life. As Ben stated:

The most I have used it for has been for...making events for concerts I've done in school, and just keeping on top of things, you know. Just to keep track of things that are going on in my life.

Additionally, Ana explained:

[I would]...post a status about it...my friend's wedding, if someone gets engaged, I'll share something about that.

Professional Networking

The data showed that professional networking is another significant theme in the way in which participants engaged with SNS but, most interestingly, the data revealed a notable gender distinction amongst the participants. The data showed differences in how women and men use SNS, a question not central nor initially contemplated by my research question, but which sheds important light on how SNS are used to build and maintain relationships. All of the three male participants stated that they used SNS either exclusively or very frequently to develop their business or careers while none of the nine women mentioned using SNS to further their businesses or careers. The women spoke only about using SNS exclusively as a social environment and tool. One participant, Ben, explained that his usage of SNS is exclusively for further developing business relationships:

When projects I am working on become closer to fruition.... I will create more to get [people] together...For example, when I am working on my documentary, ... I'll post the link and then a little blurb [online,] and then a call for feedback...asking for advice or feedback or connections or something like that. Like I was using LinkedIn the other day doing some research trying to find some media watch dog organization, so I used

LinkedIn to find out who worked there, then [I used] Facebook to find out who their mutual friends were, and then [I used] it to connect with them from there.

Ben went on to explain how he strategically uses SNS to move his career forward. Ben, a filmmaker, discusses how it is important to be thoughtful and strategic about his online presence:

I've been trying to be strategic about [what I share about myself online] because at some point in the next year or so once the movie I am making comes out, I'm going to have to be more active on it than I have been...when you're making a documentary, you get a lot of requests — you get a lot of people asking to tell their own story, people have tips for you, so having that space online where people can connect with you and contact you is really, really important. Especially if you're trying to build an audience where people can support you financially over time, that's really important. So if that ends up being something that I want to do which is still pretty up in the air, um, it's a really cool opportunity, I just don't know if it's my thing yet. Um, but then I'll have more of a... it's just kind of like an experiment, like I'll be building a character online. If I have an active... especially humorous online persona...especially for my documentary if I'm trying to go around and find other people's stories... it makes me seem more approachable.

Ben noted that he also uses LinkedIn but only for business purposes:

I was using LinkedIn the other day doing some research trying to find some media watch dog organization so I used LinkedIn to find out who worked there, FB to find out who their mutual friends were, and then using it to connect with them from there. So I think of it a lot as young friends dicking around (laughs), haha I don't know. It's an easy fast connection to where people are.

Andrew, who works in commercial real estate, stated:

A lot of times, I use [LinkedIn] not necessarily to market a product or a service but in my world, commercial real estate and dealing with a lot of investors and developers, it's good to network around. And the good thing about LinkedIn is... I can see how many connections I have and share with someone else, so then I'll like introduce myself and be like, 'Hey y'know, I know you know Jeremy or whatever... and we've known each other since we were 5 years old.'" So then you know we'd like meet up for a beer or something, get to know one another, see if there's something we can work on together, but yeah, other than that... though, that's really it.

Lastly, John who works in social media explained:

I use LinkedIn...I look for jobs [and]...as a place to have a professional profile and presence on the Internet because, like, you have to.

Sharing Online—Parameters

The next portion of the interview focused on what people were sharing about themselves on social networking sites. The main themes that emerged from this portion of the interviews included (a) privacy and safety, (b) sharing of activities, and (c) sharing of photos. If participants needed probing, they were asked if they typically share positive information about themselves, negative information, professional information, personal information, and/or things that are truthful about themselves. Generally, the data showed that participants do not use SNS to share deeply held feelings but rather, use SNS to share information about activities and/or photos of events that do not reveal deeply held feelings and that can be reasonably described to be public, and that are upbeat, e.g., a party or a vacation.

Privacy and Safety

Apart from SNS such as the dating site Tinder, which was used by only one participant, and where the purpose of the SNS is to communicate with individuals who the users do not know offline, every other participant said that they did not share deeply held feelings on SNS. Regardless of where participants were posting, and regardless of what group of friends would see their post, eleven participants claimed to not put information about their most deeply held feelings or photos of highly emotional events on SNS platforms; they expressed concern for their personal, emotional privacy and also did not want to publicly reveal any weaknesses or vulnerabilities.

It is evident from the data that the participants would not share information about any hardships they are facing, or any negative thoughts that they may be having, or any very personal sad feelings that they may be experiencing. The eleven participants reported that they felt they could not share emotions online that would expose their vulnerability. As Alexa stated:

I think it really exposes your vulnerability and I don't like that...I don't want everyone to know that I'm sad or going through a tough time, I can't describe it.... I don't want their sympathies... I can't really put my finger on it... I might feel weak, yeah.

And as Andrew explained:

I would never post a status like, 'Hey guys what do I do?' I would never publicly announce it or even allude to it, because then the question that would swirl through other peoples' minds would be, 'Oh, Andrew is going through something...' and no, no, no, no. no, I wouldn't do that...I wouldn't want anyone to perceive me as overly sensitive or emotional, because it could make me look weak and you can't do that in the world that I'm in. And also, I just feel that it's no one's business. I don't see the point in sharing that to random people on Facebook who you haven't spoken to in years.

Similarly, Ana stated, "I try not to make my statuses about my feelings and my thoughts."

Participants did express that they would share certain limited information about feelings of sadness around certain life events, such as the death of a grandparent — an event that can be viewed as a public event and for which feelings of sadness are viewed as expected and normal.

Andrew, who was very clear about his refusal to post information about his feelings, noted that

Once I posted when my grandmother passed away, yeah, that's it. Like I'd post a photo of that person and I'd say like, rest in peace, or something like that. And then you get comments, condolences...you do it because you want to see who your real friends are...ya know...like you really get to see who is present and like who is actually like taking a look at what you have to say.

Participants were also very concerned about their safety; they did not reveal their contact information, as they did not want anyone to be able to physically find them. Participants did not share any information about themselves that could identify their location a stranger.

The one participant, Katherine, who used dating SNS, when talking about her Tinder usage, described very different SNS practices than she used on general purpose SNS such as Facebook and Twitter. Katherine was the only participant who initiated and engaged in conversations with individuals she did not know originally offline and she did this exclusively on the dating SNS. The only mention of Facebook was: " Okay so I'm gonna talk to Tinder... I

don't go on FB a lot, at all." Interestingly, the participant chose not to talk about the other SNS she had listed on her demographic sheet, which included Facebook, LinkedIn, Tinder, and OkCupid. The participant clarified that she typically goes on Tinder twenty times per day for about twenty minute intervals, and exclusively uses dating sites such as Tinder. This participant made it clear that she enjoys Tinder because the conversations are able to go "in a more honest place." The participant shared a sense of comfort and enjoyment while engaging with others on Tinder, yet never made mention of her exchanges with individuals on non-dating-SNS. One may imply that while Tinder and other dating SNS allowed Katherine an opportunity to open up to men and be "free to...be honest," perhaps other SNS did not afford Katherine this opportunity. Katherine's interactions were solely based on the chat function of Tinder, which allows individuals to speak to one another if they like each other's Tinder profiles. Katherine shared,

On Tinder...you get to speak to a lot of people and it's kind of an open environment because you're not friends with them [offline] and you feel like more comfortable to say whatever you want to say... so the conversations can go in a more honest place. And I think that really contributes to um, self-development. I really think that my online relationships on Tinder have benefited my personal development, maybe emotionally, intellectually, because again, you're in an environment where you can feel... free to, um, be honest? And let the conversation go wherever it goes, you can talk about ideas, you're able to talk to a bunch of different personalities in a span of a month say, so that's actually been a really beneficial experience for me.

Sharing of Activities

Another theme that the data shows is that participants tend to share a status on SNS about activities in which they engage and do so by either describing the activity in words or by posting a photo. Three participants shared that if they are on vacation or doing something exceptionally fun, they will either share a status or share a picture of the experience via social networking sites. For example, Ana explained activities in which she would be engaged that she would share on SNS platforms. She stated:

If I'm on a vacation or doing something exceptionally fun, or [if I'm] at a really good restaurant or a birthday. I mostly share like fun things I am doing, like if I'm at a concert or like a sports event I'll post a status about it.

Sharing of Photos

SNS has moved beyond the written word and has, in many ways, revolutionized the way in which individuals communicate with one another. Most SNS include the ability to share pictures and other forms of nonverbal content. Eleven participants spoke about how they enjoyed sharing photos on SNS. By sharing a photo, individuals are able to project any image of themselves or the event or activity depicted in the photo they want and to create an identity of their choosing. Sharing of photos is a nonverbal way of sharing an activity with second and third tier friends. For example, Rachel stated:

If I take a picture with a friend, I'll post it to Facebook or Instagram. I think in that way, I'm sharing parts of my life with people I'm friends with.

One participant, Lindsey, took it as an artistic endeavor, but she also created an online persona of being an artistic person; she noted that she uses social networking platforms such as Instagram as an "artistic tool to experiment with different ways of portraying objects." She explained that her Instagram posts are based on "external inspiration" and are a form of artistic expression. Lindsay stated:

I started using [Instagram] really frequently...I use it as an artistic tool to experiment with different ways of portraying objects. So I go on it, I am sometimes interested to see what other people put up, my boyfriend uses it for artistic purposes also, so I look at that, but, there could be days where I put up 3 Instagrams...I don't put on anyway, it's based on external inspiration. And I never use it as an instant thing, which I guess might be the point (laughs), but I usually, I take a bunch of photos on my phone, and then when I'm on the subway or have a lot of down time I use a different app and I edit them, and then I Instagram them, and then once I have reception or whatever I'll post them. So, yeah, so yeah and, um, I guess I don't really use it for updates on other peoples' lives, but more of as an artistic tool.

The curating of an online persona is tied to this theme of sharing photos. It is a nonverbal way for the participants to tell other people what they want them to know about themselves and, if they do it with a certain goal in mind, as some of them indicated that they do, then they are able to create a certain persona online. By the very nature of what participants posted online, they present a certain side of themselves. All participants curated their personality via photos in that they chose what they wanted to share. Laura shared,

I still like to have my info private. I think I share links that are interesting because that's not really about me, you know. Information wise, I guess I would tend to share good news? I'll share positive news about myself. I don't know why? Maybe it's because... I don't think it's a 'I want people to think I'm better off than I am' type thing, but I don't want people to contact me about sad news...? That's something I'd rather process by myself or with close friends who I reach out to and tell. So it tends to be positive news. Maybe if I'm out of commission for a while traveling or if I'm going to be really busy... so yeah.

Online and Offline Sharing – A Disconnect in Perspective

Interestingly, there is a strong disconnect between how people view what they share online and how they view what they share offline. Some participants felt that what they share — including the persona that is projected by their carefully curated photos — was the same both online and offline but when pressed for the details of what they share online and offline they contradicted themselves, stating that there was a difference between what they share online and what they share offline. For example, John first stated, "My online life is really like a digital reflection of my offline life." Later in the interview, however, he shared,

When I'm in-person [with my friends] I will discuss more actual things about my life, [like] my job, a girl I'm interested in. I'm not going to discuss that in an online public forum. Like I would say that my interactions with close friends online are much more fleeting, like if we're commenting on a piece of content or something...it's less like about real emotion and feeling. I would say my interactions and discussions with people online are less about human relationships and more about pieces of content or you know, politics. And my discussions with people offline are more about like human relationships and nuances and intricacies of life, interpersonal relationships and feelings.

It was not possible to determine if the participants were simply not responding truthfully to the interview questions or if they were not aware as to how different the information they share online versus offline is. The responses, however, were clear in that the participants, when engaged online, did not share tribulations, feelings of sadness, and any source of vulnerability, but that they do share these feelings with first tier friends offline either in face-to-face encounters or via text or chats. There is a clear disconnect between what participants reported their sharing online and offline versus what they actually share.

Online and Offline Relationships—Differences in Engagement

The second part of the interview focused on the types of friendships and relationships participants have offline. It was in this part of the interview that the parameters of the three relationship groups can be seen most clearly as they were strongly articulated by the participants when explaining the differences between their online and offline relationships.

All of the participants tiered their relationships, whether they were offline or online, into three distinct groups. Membership in a group was determined by (a) the way in which the participants engaged with a person, (b) the frequency with which they engaged with the person, and (c) what participants shared with this person. Every participant had a very clear understanding of which people in their social sphere they assigned to which group. The three groups that emerged from the data are, as noted previously, (a) those people with whom participants engaged nearly every day, in most cases multiple times a day, ("first tier"), (b) friends and family that participants engage with periodically via in-person contacts, telephone, and text or chatting, but not on a regular basis and certainly not on a daily basis, ("second tier"), and (c) people participants are curious about but do not actively engage with on a periodic basis

and may not actively engage with at all ("third tier"), and was the context within all of the participants framed their ??? responses???

Three Tiers –Parameters of Engagement

Eleven out of twelve participants explained that their circle of friend's offline was the same as their circle of friends online. The term "friend" online seems to be used as a very loose term by participants, one that encompasses friends, both old and new, and acquaintances. That said, when participants referenced second and/or third tier friends as well as first tier friends, they made it clear that these friendships existed both online and offline. However, participants made it clear that although they are friends and acquaintances with individuals offline, they do not regularly engage with them offline. Aside from Katherine, who used dating SNS exclusively, all of the other participants asserted that their offline friends were also online friends.

As noted previously, the first tier relationships were made up of close friends and family members with whom participants engage on a daily basis and with whom they share their most deeply held feelings. Participants engage with the first tier group through one-to-one conversations that were conducted via any or all of three different means: (a) in-person, face-to face conversations, (b) telephone conversations or (c) texting or chatting. The public nature of a SNS forum was not the primary way in which the participants engaged with this first group but was, rather, at best, a secondary means of communicating and connecting with these individuals. For example, Rachel discussed how she communicates with first tier friends via text. She explained:

My closest friends, I really don't interact with them and my boyfriend on Facebook because we are kind of like, always texting and whatever so it is almost unnecessary to talk on Facebook.

Additionally, Laura discussed spending time with friends in person regularly:

I talk to people in my immediate friend group [online], sometimes because we both happen to be on Facebook...But I see those [immediate friends] on a daily basis...like my best friends who I am in law school with.

The second tier group was made up of friends or family members who do not live near the participants or who, if they do live nearby, they do not engage with on a daily basis. The participants connect with these individuals intermittently via in-person contacts, telephone, and text or chatting, but not consistently and not daily. These relationships are important to the participants but their engagement with this group is primarily through SNS. The participants do not reflexively share deeply held feelings with this group, as they would with first tier relationships, although there might be occasions when some are shared.

Lastly, the third tier consisted of everybody else in the participants' social sphere and was described as being people with whom participants engage only through SNS and even then, only in the most passive way, i.e. this group is the "everyone" who can see the participants' SNS profiles and whose information the participants will review passively. This third tier of relationship includes people who participants appear to be curious about however, they are not people with whom they actively engage in person with on even a periodic basis and they may not actively engage with them at all.

All participants also classified their friends and family as being in certain, specific social groups. For example, many referred to "camp friends" and "friends from college." While some of the people in those social groups were first tier friends or family members, the majority of them were second or third tier friends. These social groups demonstrate the way in which participants divided and categorized the people in their world; someone can be a first tier friend and also be a camp friend. There was evident overlap in the tiering and the categorized grouping of friends and family members.

Participants were asked to speak about their offline relationships. When asked to share what their relationships were like offline, "tell me about your offline relationships, " it became evident that participants needed clarification and more specificity around what the question was actually getting at. Participants made mention of boyfriends, family members, such as siblings and cousins, and childhood networks. Andrew stated that he enjoys going to "bars, restaurants, clubs...Broadway shows sometimes, sports games, everything..." with his friends when offline. Similarly, other participants explained that they enjoy "city activities," such as walking around Manhattan and Brooklyn, shopping, and dancing. Rachel stated:

I have friends that I know from camp and friends from college and high school and I interact with all of them in different ways. I see friends on the weekends and get meals with them, I text friends, I will visit my family since they don't live in New York, catching up over meals and whatever. And I have a boyfriend and I'll see him and generally do activities with him to catch up and stuff.

Offline Friends — Same as Online Friends

The data showed that, with the notable exception of Katherine who uses dating SNS, all of the participant's relationships offline similar to with their relationships online. However, although these friendships appeared to be the same online as they were offline, it is evident that the degree to which they hang out with these friends varies. The major theme found was that the majority of the participants, eleven, described their friendships as being the same online as they were offline, i.e. first tier friends were first tier both online and offline, second tier were second tier friends both online and offline, third tier were third tier on and offline. For example, John stated that:

I would say...my online life is really like a digital reflection of my offline life. There are definitely some people who I only interact with online, I have a few...But for the most part, my close friends online are my close friends in real life, and my acquaintances online are my acquaintances in real life.

The majority of participants stated that their offline first tier friends were also their friends on SNS, the exception being Katherine who used dating SNS, and two male participants who used SNS for business connections. Several other participants discussed friends from childhood with whom they do not speak on a regular basis, i.e., second tier friends offline, but with whom they are friends with on SNS, particularly Facebook.

The one participant who uses dating SNS, Katherine, stated that "none of her friends" online are people she engages with offline. Katherine stated, "[on Tinder, I'm] talking to people that I have never met and don't know in-person ... so they're strangers, no one I know." Two of the participants, both male, who used SNS for business, said that there were limited situations in which they would engage with a stranger for business purposes and to build their professional networks. For example, Andrew stated:

I won't randomly message someone I don't know unless I'm in need of something. Like when my girlfriend was looking for a job, I would go through my Facebook to see where these people were working or I'd go on LinkedIn and then go on Facebook, and then I'd send [someone] a message and be like, 'Hey can you do me a favor? If I emailed you my girlfriend's resume, think you could push it to HR or something?'

Sharing: Online and Offline

Within this second section of the interview, participants were asked about whether they think how they act and what they share offline is similar to how they act and what they share online. With the exception of the participant who used dating SNS, the data consistently showed that the content of what was shared with each relationship tier offline was different than what it was online. All participants stated that they communicated deeply held feelings and more detailed information about their lives to their first tier friends but did so in forums other than SNS. The majority of participants felt that their offline first tier, and sometimes second tier, friendships and relationships were safe places where participants could disclose triumphs,

tribulations, and frustrations and that, as noted previously, they would not share such information online. Ben, a filmmaker stated:

Offline I would tell someone, 'Oh hey I've been learning a lot about journalism, I've been learning a lot about film distribution, production, the world of documentary,' and I'll reflect on other conversations I've had with other people... that's stuff I most definitely would not be sharing on say, my Facebook status.

When asked why he does not share these types of things online, Ben stated, "I don't know, I just don't use it for that. I use [SNS] to keep track of things that are going on in my life... it's bec[ome] a real practical thing."

Differently, Katherine, who talked about using dating sites primarily, added that she feels that the information she shared online is similar to information she shares offline:

They're similar because... so I guess things that I would share and talk about with close friends would include hobbies and plans for the future and activities and ideas, and those are things I have shared with someone online.

Interestingly and consistent with the data, Katherine's sharing of hobbies and activities are not deeply held feelings. This again shows that things shared on a public forum on SNS appear to be less deeply held, personal feelings and more surface level feelings and thoughts.

Online Dating: An Outliner

Only one participant, Katherine, the woman who used dating SNS, talked about the ways in which online relationships have strengthened not only her relationships offline, but her own personal growth. She stated:

I really think that my online relationships on Tinder have benefited my personal development, maybe emotionally, intellectually, because [on Tinder], you're in an environment where you can feel... free to, um, be honest? And let the conversation go wherever it goes, you can talk about ideas, you're able to talk to a bunch of different personalities in a span of a month say, so that's actually been a really beneficial experience for me... And on Tinder, you can engage in more philosophical conversations and you can say things that are very honest because you haven't met this person in person, so you can share deep ideas, and these things, um, I guess develop your personality more. I think anytime you can engage with someone new and have

meaningful, deep conversations grow you as a person. Like it just grows your person in general on an intellectual and emotional level and I definitely think that translates to your offline relationships.

When asked why she feels this way, Katherine stated, “because you’re not friends with them and you feel like more comfortable to say whatever you want to say... so the conversations can go in a more honest place.”

Online and Offline Relationships

The third and final phase of the interview was meant to connect the first two sections of the interview. Participants were asked questions regarding their offline friendships and relationships, and whether they perceive those relationships to either strengthen or suffer due to their online relationships.

Reinforcing Previously-Existing Offline Relationships

The majority of participants stated that SNS acted as a reinforcement for a relationship that already existed offline. SNS seemed to be a way to maintain or emphasize underlining friendships. One participant, Laura stated

I think because [SNS] allow for us to communicate more when [we're] not together, it reinforces my friendships with people I'm already [close] with... but I wouldn't say it made it what it wasn't, you know? It just allows for a different way to communicate...like it reinforce[s] what we already had established in-person. My online friendships definitely allow for me to have... a certain amount of maintenance with my friends.

Similar to Laura, John talked about SNS as being an additive to a friendship that already existed.

He also spoke about acquaintances with whom he might not even be in touch with if it were not for SNS. He explained:

I would say for my close friends, our friendships are strengthened by our online relationships, because um, it's like another channel to interact and stay in touch and our in-person interactions are different than our online interactions, so it's additive, and you're getting more substance in the way. And with my acquaintances, I don't know... I am in touch with them more than I would be if we weren't friends online. So that keeps a

certain sense of continuity that wouldn't be there if I was only seeing them once a month or not often.

Ways in Which In-Person Relationships Suffer because of Online Relationships

Participants were also asked if they believe that their in-person friendships and relationships had ever suffered because of their online friendships and relationships.

The themes found from this section included (a) feeling lied to, (b) feeling embarrassed by a photo, and (c) feeling excluded from a photo's posting.

Trust

The data showed that five participants experienced feeling as though their offline relationships had suffered because of their online relationship. The major theme here was participants feeling that they had been lied to by family members or friends. A second way participants expressed that their offline relationships suffered because of their online relationships was by discovering that someone's offline persona is different from the way they portray themselves online.

Two participants shared experiences where intimate partners were being untruthful with them, and they found out through social networking sites. Melissa, a heterosexual woman shared:

When I was in my early 20's, if I was dating a person and we were on the rocks, I might be messaging an older boyfriend and then get back together with the current boyfriend, and he might see those messages... I would see a significant other doing something inappropriate on Facebook, like messaging another girl or seeing pictures of a weekend where he said he was doing something else (laughs).

When Melissa was asked why she felt this type of experience with "a significant other" made her relationship suffer, Melissa stated, "well it was rampant... it caused so much conflict between [us]... I became the victim in the situation." Ana spoke similarly to Melissa with regard to a time she discovered an ex-partner being dishonest to her. She stated:

I once discovered that someone I was dating was dating someone else through his Facebook. Our relationship ended shortly after (laughs), so that really made our relationship... it also made my mental health suffer greatly.

A third participant, Alexa, described a time when she felt that she had been lied to online by a friend; she spoke of an instance when a friend told her that she was busy but then posted statuses online about what she was doing at that moment, causing Alexa to feel betrayed and lied to. She stated:

In person, [a] person can say, "I'm busy," but then online they might be like...posting stuff... you can get much more information about what someone's doing online than you can in-person. Like they can be telling you one thing and then posting something else, so that can be contradictory.

Similarly, Amanda spoke about a time when she felt that a friend was ignoring her because she had not heard from him/her in some time, causing her to feel concerned about her friend's whereabouts. Amanda was originally reflecting on ways that SNS allow her and her "girlfriends to...cheer each other up by saying 'C'mon girl you can do it' or 'you look good.' Your friends are your biggest cheerleaders." She then quickly transitioned, however, and stated:

The crazy thing is, like the way things are today, sometimes you won't hear from a friend for a little bit because we're so busy or they're ignoring you...but then later, you [may]...see a picture of them post a picture up on Instagram.

Interestingly and different from Alexa, Amanda felt that seeing a post from a friend online after having not heard from them offline felt reassuring. She stated, "[I think] to myself, 'okay good, maybe they were going through something so I will give them time, but at least I know they're alive'."

The second way that participants described they felt lied to or betrayed was by discovering that someone's offline persona is different from the way they portray themselves online. Only two participants described this phenomenon but it was an important event for each of them. Both participants, however, explained that the impact did not influence the friendship in

a permanent, long- term way but rather, was more of a fleeting feeling. Not one participant stated that the impact was anything other than temporary, or that being lied to changed their relationship permanently. As Amanda put it, "[those types of] situations...put a little bump in our relationship, that's it."

Feeling Embarrassed by a Photo or Status Online

The data also revealed that four participants experienced feeling as though their offline relationships suffered because of a photo that had been posted of them that they either did not approve of, or wanted taken down due to feelings of embarrassment or shame. Two of these Participants spoke about posting photos on Facebook of a group of people and having one of the individuals in the photo become angry that the photo is publicly posted on a social networking site. These two participants also talked about being upset by photos of them that other people had posted and of feeling embarrassed by how they looked; they felt that they had been disrespected. Both participants spoke about this occurring on Facebook. Ana shared:

Sometimes a friend will be like, 'Take that picture down!' and I get annoyed with them because it's like 'who cares.' Then they make you like crop their arm out of the picture or something. It doesn't cause a lasting effect but it's just annoying in that moment...I think they don't want to look bad online... like I know for me... I always try to like look so happy in all my pictures and always being active and always uploading the most fun things. I don't know, I think she just felt upset.

Additionally, Margaret shared:

I have definitely posted an ugly picture of a friend [online] that my friend did not like and [made them get] upset, like posting ugly pictures of friends, or like [posting] a picture of them throwing up [when they are] drunk. In the moment for a few hours, maybe, our relationship suffered.

Three participants spoke about times when they got "upset" or experienced ruptures in their offline relationships due to online posts that were about them and which felt embarrassing; these three participants explained that the rupture was short-lived, making no mention of

temporary problems with trust in the relationship. Amanda spoke about a time when a friend felt embarrassed by a status she posted on her Facebook that offended one of her close friends. She stated that although the long-term effect on the offline friendship was minimal, it was still a noteworthy rupture. Amanda stated:

[I once shared] an inside joke [online], but the other person might be offended by you making that public and sharing it with people, even though they don't know the joke. So that's a situation I've been in where it put a little bump in our relationship.

Feeling Excluded

Another theme that showed from the data was the feeling of exclusion in the context of friend groups. One participant, Ben, talked about seeing a picture posted online from a group of friends just to learn that he was not invited to the outing. He stated that relationships have suffered in the past by means of "people posting pictures of them doing things with other people at events that uh, I wasn't invited to." When asked why this would impact his relationships Ben stated, "well, I felt not thought of and excluded, you know."

Ways in Which In-Person Relationships Strengthen Because of Online Relationships

Participants were also asked if they believe that their in-person friendships and relationships were ever strengthened because of their online friendships and relationships. The themes found from the data included (a) connection with long distance friends and family, (b) group photos posted online that resulted in increased offline engagement, (c) reinforcement of important positive aspects of relationships and (d) personal development.

Connection with Long Distance Friends

Several participants stated that keeping up with family members and friends who did not live close by or who were abroad was a major consideration in their use of SNS. The data revealed that SNS allows for people to keep in touch when travelling or living overseas or for

friends to stay connected when one moves far away. Ben referenced this ability to stay connected to friends abroad. He shared:

Well, when people are away abroad, it allows for some capacity of connection. It's definitely not the same as in-person but uh, it allows for continued conversation over distance. Like when I was abroad, and now for my more long distance-y friendships.

Similarly, Amanda explained, "I love BBM because I talk to my cousin from Trinidad a lot and I need to be plugged into her life. I like sharing pictures and videos and BBM allows us the ability to do that." Additionally, Andrew reflected that SNS allow him the ability to "talk to [his] cousins who are overseas."

Group Photos Posted Online – Increasing Connectivity Offline

Many participants referred to times when photos were posted online and how they improved the participant's offline relationships. Margaret shared an experience she had involving a group of friends "she hadn't seen in awhile" but with whom she spent New Years Eve. She stated,

[The next day], I posted a lot of group shots and then like everyone [got] to liking and commenting on the picture. [We would] like [the picture] and then other people and their friends from college and other random people we grew up with [would] like [the picture], and then we [would start] talking in our group text and [be] like- Oh my God, we got so many likes, that's so funny... and then we made plans to get together after New Years again, and that definitely brought us closer.

Similarly, Andrew shared how photos posted online seem to allow the ability to reminisce with friends about old memories when hanging out in person. He stated:

Pictures definitely strengthen my relationships offline... you're capturing that moment in time and then you go back 5 months later when you're together and laugh your ass off, it's definitely impactful and positive.

Rachel spoke about feeling as though photos posted on SNS allowed her to feel closer to her boyfriend's extended family and to her parents. She stated:

Sometimes I'll share a photo [online] and my boyfriend's aunt will comment like "So good to see you!"... and she's foreign and older so she'll like 'share' photo's that I post and share it with her friends and be like 'look at my nephew and his girlfriend,' and I think that in a way brings us closer when we're together...She's [able to] stay updated on our lives and same with my parents. And sometimes I'll share something on Facebook or Instagram about a common shared experience and those people will like it out of the blue and it'll remind you like, 'wow this is bringing us together because we have this shared experience that we're talking about in a way through this site.'

Personal Development

Katherine shared that her conversations shared online with men she is interested in dating positively impact her relationships offline. Katherine stated:

I really think that my online relationships on Tinder have benefited my personal development, maybe emotionally, intellectually, because you're in an environment where you can feel... free to, um, be honest? And let the conversation go wherever it goes, you can talk about ideas, you're able to talk to a bunch of different personalities in a span of a month say, so that's actually been a really beneficial experience for me.

Katherine continued:

I guess on Tinder you can engage in more philosophical conversations and you can say things that are very honest because you haven't met this person in-person so you can share deep ideas, and these things, um, I guess develop your personality more.

She described enjoying conversations online that were "more philosophical" for the impact that those conversations might have on her and the way in which "that translates to your offline relationships". Katherine was the only participant who expressed feeling as though her online conversations and identity impacted her personal development offline.

Summary

The findings show that the way in which participants used SNS to build and maintain interpersonal relationships depended entirely on whether those relationships fell into one of three different relationship groups, the parameters of which emerged from the interview responses and which were consistent across participants. This tiering of relationships into first, second, and third tiers was a common theme among all participants and was the framework within which

their responses were placed. The data showed that these three tiers of relationships were all created outside of SNS. It was discovered that the majority of participants described their relationships with friends as having originated offline via in-person encounters, however brief. The findings also showed a pattern that was gender-specific; the data showed that while all of the men use SNS as a tool for developing businesses the women never spoke about the using SNS to assist in the development of a business but, rather, spoke only about using it exclusively as a social environment and tool.

Further reflection on the findings discussed in this section will be covered in more detail in the final Discussion chapter. Additionally, examination of these results as they apply to earlier research and Self Psychology will be covered in more depth. The strengths and limitations of the study, and implications for future studies, will also be discussed in greater detail in the Discussion chapter.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore how young adults who are avid users of social networking sites (SNS) build and maintain interpersonal relationships. I became curious about young adults' perceptions of the ways in which social networking sites play a role in their ability to build and maintain interpersonal relationships during my first year field clinical internship, when I worked with adolescents and young adults. It became clear to me that social media was shaping the way young adults connect, as this repeatedly came up in sessions. The perspectives of the twelve, New York City-based young adults in this study were gathered during telephone interviews and in-person interviews; the study was designed to elicit in-depth information about participants' experiences with relationships both online and offline. The findings in this study provide valuable information, and suggest avenues for further investigation from a sample of young adults, who make particularly heavy use of technology (Kolmes, 2012).

This chapter will discuss the findings of this study in greater detail in order to connect the study's findings with current literature and the theoretical information presented in the literature review. This chapter will also include a brief discussion of the study's limitations and strengths; it will conclude with future implications of this study for social work practitioners and researchers.

The Extent To Which Participants Felt That SNS Impacted Their Offline Relationships Positively

The principal focus of this study was an exploration of the ways in which participants felt that SNS played a role in their offline relationships. Participants were asked if they believe their in-person friendships and relationships were ever strengthened because of their online friendships and relationships. The data revealed that participants felt their offline relationships were strengthened because of SNS, specifically due to SNS's ability to (a) allow for connection with long distance friends and family, (b) allow them to increase their offline engagement by posting photos online, (c) reinforce positive aspects of offline relationships and (d) deepen personal development offline by engaging in stimulating conversations online.

Connection with Long Distance Friends

One major finding from this study was that the majority of participants, seven, shared the feeling that SNS allowed them to remain connected and keep in touch with friends and family members who lived overseas or who lived in the U.S. but not near the participant. This finding is strongly supported by McKenna and Barghs (2000) who stated that in a recent poll of 1,000 young adult Internet users, interpersonal communication via the Internet was thought of as a “quick and easy way to maintain contact with family and friends who live far away” (p. 58). Participants shared that SNS allowed for convenience and that its ability to reach friends and family members overseas was a major reason why they used SNS. Additionally, Acar (2008) stated “the more people communicated with network members, the better they [felt],” resulting in “reduced stress and increased emotional support” (p. 67). Although the data from this study did not reveal specifically an increase in emotional support, the data did show that participants

felt a strong sense of connection to those they were speaking to via SNS, particularly family members.

SNS's Reinforcement of Positive Aspects of Offline Relationships

Many study participants believed that that SNS reinforced their offline relationships; the majority of participants, seven, stated that SNS was a platform that helped them maintain offline relationships. This connectedness allowed them to maintain a sense of stability with friends living abroad. Two participants did, however, note that while SNS helped them to maintain offline relationships, it did not change the nature of those offline relationships. Four participants who had first or second tier friends or family members abroad or living far from New York felt that SNS enabled them to keep up with the lives of loved ones. Both Acar (2008) and Zywicki and Danowski (2008) found that SNS give users a sense of connectedness that they do not find offline. While the results of my study do not support this argument, it does in fact show that SNS allow the maintenance and enhancement of long-term, distant friendships and relationships by providing a free way to communicate with these people. Other than the cost of the device and an Internet connection or a data package, a SNS is, in comparison to telephonic communication, free. Unlike a telephone call for which the caller, and sometimes the recipient, is charged a per minute fee in addition to equipment and periodic service charges, each SNS contact event with an overseas friend or family member is free.

Personal Development

All twelve study participants supported the major findings of Zywicki and Danowski (2008) who stated that “affiliation can provide Internet users with pleasure from mental stimulation, heightened self-esteem from praise, an opportunity to compare one’s self to others to gain more self knowledge, and can also provide social support” (p. 8). While all of the

participants in this study indicated that SNS played a positive role in their lives, and thus impacted their lives offline and strengthened their offline relationships, one participant in particular, Katherine, who used dating SNS exclusively, shared that SNS deepened her personal growth and development offline. Katherine was the only participant who expressed feeling as though the conversations she had on Tinder positively impacted her personal growth and development offline. Katherine's experience receiving validation can be applied to the self-psychology term, twinship, defined as "the need to feel that there are other individuals in the world who are similar to you, creating feelings of belonging and security" (Flanagan, 2008, p. ???). This supports the notion that one's online identity reflects his or her offline identity. The connection between these two identities confirms Zywica and Danowski's (2008) data, which states that SNS plays a constructive role in young adults' personal development.

The Extent To Which Participants Felt That SNS Impacted Their Offline Relationships Negatively

In addition to the ways in which SNS played a role in strengthening offline relationships, some participants noted that there were several ways in which SNS adversely impacted their efforts to build and/or maintain offline relationships. The major themes revealed in this section that impacted participants' offline relationships included (a) betrayal, (b) embarrassment, and (c) exclusion.

Betrayal

Trust was a major theme that five participants referenced. Two participants who described being in long-term, intimate relationships described how SNS usage led to their relationships ending permanently upon their discovering that their partners were cheating on them. Additionally, both participants described that without SNS, they would not have known at

that time that their boyfriends were involved with other women. Neither participant defined what "cheating" meant to them, however both women made it clear that their relationships significantly changed and then ended soon after they discovered their boyfriend speaking to, in one case, another girl and to, in the other case, an ex-girlfriend. Cravens *et al.*, (2013) conducted a study with the purpose of exploring Facebook infidelity behaviors from the perspective of individuals who were impacted by their partners' infidelity behavior. The study focused specifically on the role that social networking sites have in regards to relationship betrayal, where participants (N = 90) shared stories about cheating, betrayal, and trust. While two participants briefly spoke about discovering their partner's infidelity on a SNS, neither participant discussed early warning signs of cheating, unlike Cravens *et al.*, (2013). Cravens *et al.*, (2013) stated that participants in his study discussed verbal and nonverbal cues indicated by their partner and the possibility of infidelity. These warning signs included "gut feelings...that something was amiss with their partner or in their relationship," "changes in behavior, and suspicious or secretive behavior" (p. 80). With this additional means of communication and socializing via SNS comes an extra responsibility for potential self-restraint. SNS users are at risk for discovering information online that they might otherwise not have exposure to, regardless of what SNS they are using. Not only does information online add to one's everyday knowledge, it also exposes behavior that would otherwise not be uncovered easily. It is evident that SNS allow young adults an ability to track their partner's loyalty and communication.

Embarrassment

The data also revealed four participants who experienced short-term ruptures with offline friends due to photos that were posted of them on a SNS. Participants explained that they had either not known their friend was posting the photo or that they disapproved of the photo,

particularly because they did not approve of the way in which they looked. Interestingly, as discussed by Haferkamp *et al.*, (2012), "online profiles perfectly accommodate...a need for self-display, by offering the opportunity to consciously create, adapt, and edit one's self presentation" (p. 96). Because these participants described feeling as though the posted picture of them came as a surprise, they lost their ability to control the way in which they presented themselves, which then caused them to experience feelings of shame, disapproval, and embarrassment. Because SNS appear to be controlled environments, when a disruption occurs, it may be viewed more harshly than offline. It is notable that the participants in this study strived to avoid situations online where their ability to selectively present themselves would be interrupted.

Exclusion

Lastly, another theme that was revealed from the data was the feeling of exclusion in the context of friend groups; participants described seeing a picture on a SNS of a group of friends and feeling left out and not thought of after learning that they had not been invited to the outing. A study conducted by Filipkowski (2011) examined the ways in which exclusion on social networking platform is associated with negative outcomes such as "lowered self-feelings [and] aggression" (p. 1). Findings showed that ostracism on SNS caused psychological distress. Further research must be conducted to support this study and the ways in which exclusion online translates to self esteem offline.

In another recent study conducted by Hebl *et al.*, (2012) examined race-based discrimination via SNS, and the ways in which individuals are excluded from social communities online. Findings showed that "people whose physical features are viewed as more stereotypical of their group are particularly vulnerable to exclusion from meaningful social connections with others outside their group(p. 1334). In many ways, these interesting findings align with the

results from this study. Though Hebl *et als.*, (2012) study focused on a different demographic pool of participants than this study, it is evident that SNS have the ability to accentuate a person's feelings of exclusion by means of pictures and statuses posted. SNS expose users to offline experiences, thus resembling real life.

Gender Differences

The data revealed a distinct and noteworthy gender difference among participants. Out of the twelve participants in the study, three identified as male. All of the male participants identified as heterosexual. All of the male participants revealed that they use SNS as a way to develop a business or a career; none of the nine participants who identified as female spoke about using how SNS supports them in cultivating their businesses or careers.

While reviewing the literature on SNS usage, there was not an abundance of prior research on the difference in gender and SNS usage. While the small sample of this study makes knowing if the patterns were just a random occurrence, it is still an interesting pattern that suggests the need for further study. In a study conducted by Muscanell and Guadagno (2012), 238 undergraduate students completed an online survey in order to assess gender and personality of SNS users. Results revealed that men were "more likely to network for careers online" while women were more geared towards "activities that facilitate relationship maintenance" (p. 111). Consistent with the results from my study, this gender difference, as discussed by Muscanell and Guadagno (2012) may be "explained by gender role expectations," that men "ought to be more adventurous [while]...women have been found to be more interpersonal and relationship oriented online" (p. 111). It is possible that men who are more adventurous take risks and network professionally online in an exploratory manner. Additionally, this study showed that women were hesitant to disclose personal information about their identities online and "may be

more likely [to] interact with individuals they already know and trust offline" (p. 111). This is also in line with the data revealed from my study, as eight out of the nine female participants stated that they would not share vulnerable information such as personal information about themselves or emotional events and feelings regarding it.

In a mixed methods study conducted by Haferkamp *et al.*, (2012), the motives of both male and female SNS users were assessed. The results showed that men used SNS for information seeking and professional networking while on the contrary, women's motives were driven by "a more hedonistic perspective of personal enjoyment and self-presentation." Interestingly and yet again, these results are in line with what was elicited from my study.

Self-Psychology: Grandiose Self

As discussed in the literature review, the first pole of self-psychology is known as the grandiose self, when a person's talents get mirrored back to them and help to form the core of identity. Individuals who have a developed grandiose self are "vibrant, full of confidence, hopeful, ambitious, and productive (Flanagan, 2008, p. 172). The grandiose self can be seen through participants posting of activities, events, and accomplishments that they feel positive about, such as something they have purchased or a vacation they are taking. Participants reported that when they log onto social networking sites, they typically scroll through their newsfeeds, browse pictures, like statuses, and read articles that other people post.

Self-psychology is a relevant theoretical lens to explore the relationships of young adults both online and offline. Interestingly, the majority of participants expressed that they typically log on to SNS and scroll through their newsfeeds. As discussed in the literature review, selfobjects are defined as "people or things outside of the self, vitally necessary to every individual as a source of mirroring, sources of perfection and grandeur to merge with, and as

similar selves to feel at one with” (Flanagan, 2008, p. 171). Specifically, when participants scrolled and browsed through friend's newsfeeds online, they were able to receive a sense of mirroring online, thus giving the self what it needs in order to become and remain cohesive, validating one's sense of self, and experiencing a sense of sameness, alikeness, and being known by another (Banai, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2005).

Interestingly, participants stayed away from sharing any vulnerabilities online, such as deeply held feelings and/or photos of highly emotional events, specifically because of their concerns around publicly revealing feelings of vulnerability, weakness, or sadness. Therefore, participants avoided opportunities they perceived would not receive mirroring or self-verifying feedback, such as comments or likes on photos. In other words, vulnerability only plays a positive role when the person believes that there will be an opportunity for twinship. According to Cast and Burke (2002), when individuals do not receive validating feedback, the opportunity to be mirrored may be rejected, possibly causing damage to the self (Cast & Burke, 2002, p. 1047 as cited in Brown & Lohr, 1987; Burke & Stets, 1999; Ellison, 1993). There are expectations that come with every online revelation, expanding the fact that SNS users can manipulate and control the way in which they perceive information and also the way the information reflects a selectively presented self. Although my study does not directly support Cast and Burke's (2002) claim, it does support a clear link that SNS users avoid opportunities that they perceive will not provide a chance for validation or mirroring.

Self-Psychology: Twinship

Twinship, or the need to feel that there are other individuals in the world who are similar to you, creating feelings of belonging and security (Flanagan, 2008), is in line with the results found in this study. SNS are a space where people can feel a sense of sameness with others. In

many ways, the act of liking a post or photo on a SNS displays twinship; when a user posts a status or photo on a SNS and other users begin to interact, there is an immediate sense of relation that is created and experienced by both parties. By making a connection, the status or photo is oftentimes validated and an exchange between users may begin. Participants stated that upon logging on to a SNS, they would immediately begin browsing their newsfeeds, specifically their friends' updates such as photos and statuses. One participant stated that every time a close friend posted a new photo or status, she would either like it or comment on the photo or status. Another participant explained that by liking something online, it acted as a nonverbal way of acknowledging her friend's new photo, and acting as a form of validation for her friend.

True Self

SNS allows users to selectively present themselves through photos and posts that expose certain aspects of themselves. The data showed, very clearly, that participants did not share information about any hardships they are facing, any negative thoughts that they may be having, or any very personal sad feelings that they may be experiencing, but rather, only shared information online regarding positive activities such as a vacation taken or an accomplishment. While Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons (2002) found that when compared to face-to-face interactions, online users were better able to present aspects of their true self over the Internet and feel accepted by others, the opposite was found in this study; participants were more willing to present all aspects of themselves offline than they were able to online. Again, this is because participants seemed to bypass opportunities online where one's self worth is in danger of being misinterpreted. Simply put, one's reputation is constantly under scrutiny, both on and offline. While SNS users have the ability to control what they post online, they cannot control the ways in which others will interpret their post and the ways in which they will be mirrored by other

users. Gonzalez and Hancock (2011) examined the ways in which Facebook users selectively present themselves online. Facebook and other SNS allow users an opportunity to share information about the self in an asynchronous manner while "carefully selecting what aspects they would like to emphasize" (p. 80). Results from this study are in line with "selective self-presentation" as discussed by Gonzalez and Hancock (2011). The study goes on to discuss the ways in which digital self-presentations improve self-esteem. More research is needed to learn about the effects of selectively presenting oneself on SNS.

Study Limitations and Strengths

There are several limitations to the design and implementation of this research, the most significant of which was its small sample size (n=12) and consequently, the findings in this research are not generalizable to a larger population. In addition, its applicability to a larger population is limited by the demographic profile of the participants; as has been true in other studies in this area of research, the entire sample identified as heterosexual and well educated.

There was also a lack of racial diversity in the study. The majority of the participants, nine, identified as White, two identified as African American/Black, and one identified as Asian. While reviewing the literature on this topic, few studies obliged participants to disclose their racial identity. There were, however, two notable studies (Zywica & Danowski, 2008; Oldmeadow, 2012) in which the participants represented a diverse range of ethnicities, including those who identified as white, Asian, Hispanic/Latino, African American, Indian/South Asian, and "other", yet more than half of the participants in each of the studies identified as white/Caucasian.

According to World Population (2014) 44 percent of New York City's population was white, 25.5 percent were African/American/Black, and 12.7 percent were of Asian decent.

Hispanics of any race represented about 28.6 percent of New York City's population in year. The demographic profile of the twelve participants in this study is similar to the demographic profile of the NYC area.

A major practical limitation to this research included the broad questions and language used in the questions participants were asked. The questions that I developed for my interview were questions that were very open-ended with the intention of allowing the participant to do the leading. However, because some of my questions were so open-ended, I found that participant's were not clear as to what I was asking about. In these cases, I used my prompts to be more specific. Particular questions required expansion, which at times led to differences in the interview process between participants. One example refers to when participants were asked "what are your offline relationships like?" It quickly became evident that this question required clarification and more specificity for some participants. Another example of this refers to when participants were asked to talk about the connection they felt between their online and offline relationships. Again, this question required clarification for some of the participants, leading to asking additional, scripted interview prompts to the participant. It is valuable to recognize that these variations from one participant to the next may have impacted my results.

Another limitation is the undefined meaning of "logging on to SNS." It is evident from the data that when participants were asked how many times they went online per day, how long they stayed online per day, and how many hours they were online per day, participants had very different perceptions of what it meant to be logged on to a SNS. For example, the one participant who discussed logging on to SNS 100+ times per day for 30-40 minute interval clearly miscalculated his average, as his total amount of time on SNS per day was 50 hours per day, an amount that is clearly not feasible. In this case, the participant did explain that s/he "leaves it

[SNS] open all the time," so perhaps his/her definition of "logging on" to SNS was merely just looking at a SNS that was always open on the computer screen. Other participants, however, spoke of periodically checking their favorite SNS throughout the day, which meant that they would log on and off several times a day. This loose definition of logging on was a significant limitation to this study.

Another limitation to the study was that there seemed to be several missed opportunities to follow up on statements that the participants made. For instance, when participants spoke of how they used SNS to keep in touch with loved ones, perhaps that response should have been followed by a question asking the participant how seeing their friend or family member in person was impacted from that moment forward. Follow-up questions could have also included several that asked how online relationships were impacted by their newfound connectedness offline. In hindsight, there were several occasions when more information about the participant's experiences and/or feelings could have been explored, thus revealing more qualitative data.

There are also numerous strengths in this study. This is a relevant, timely study. Social networking sites have proven to be an integral part of young adults' lives. This research provided an opportunity for young adults to think about the way in which social networking sites play a role in their current relationships. Because logging on to social networking sites has become an everyday habit for all of the participants, this study allowed for an open dialogue to express feelings that are not always spoken of or externalized. As a result, a variety of participants shared that they began to think about their relationship with SNS as a result of participating in this study. This study has yielded significant and timely results, particularly for clinicians with who work with young adults. It is imperative that clinicians continue or begin to deepen their understanding of how their clients', specifically those who are young adults, use and experiences

online potentially play a role in their offline relationships. The results from this study show that young adults feel as though SNS impacts offline relationships both positively and negatively, however, the data shows that when SNS impact relationships negatively, it is typically temporary and does not always harm the relationship long-term. However, in the case where participants found out their partners were being unfaithful to them in their relationship, the relationship ended, therefore impacting it long-term. Overall, the vast majority of participants shared that SNS allow them to feel connected to offline friends, near or far. This is relevant to clinical social work because SNS may be a supportive avenue for young adults to stay connected to loved ones in their lives. As a clinician, it would be valuable to learn specifically about the ways in which a client felt supported through SNS in order to encourage further connections and explore more specific ways about how clients feel supported through these online connections. A potential goal for treatment would be for the client to begin to connect their online experiences to their offline friendships and relationships in hopes of developing a more cohesive self.

However, results also showed that SNS can be harmful to some offline relationships. As a clinician, it would be important to learn about the client's experiences online and the ways in which they impacted them offline. Gaining a richer understanding of the ways in which those experiences translated to offline experiences would be valuable, as the goal of therapy would be to uncover the specific ways in which the client's negative experiences were damaging to their relationships. This may lead to goals around strengthening problem solving, communication, and relationship building skills.

Additionally, examining the way in which young adults who are avid social networking site users build and maintain interpersonal relationships is valuable to the social work profession because it is important to have knowledge around the ways in which clinical social work practice

continues to be influenced by technology advancements. For example, a clinician might begin to interpret the ways in which a client who is an avid SNS user identifies online, whether what they are representing is an accurate portrayal of themselves or not, and how that impacts his or her offline identity. While beginning formulation and assessment for a client who is an avid SNS user, the clinician may want to learn about the client's childhood, examining self-psychology's three poles, grandiosity, idealized parent images, and twinship. Because self psychology proposes that the development of the self is central to all developmental processes, it would be crucial that the clinician learn about who the client's self objects were as a child and currently. Throughout treatment, a positive self object transference may develop between the client and clinician. For example, the clinician may provide mirroring to a client who, perhaps, has never received mirroring, in order for him/her to build a missing structural part of the self. The clinician's attunement and empathy towards the client will allow for this transference to develop (Flanagan, 2008).

Implications and Conclusions

Implications of this study include the need for more research about the connection between online identities and offline identities from young adults' perspectives. The world of social networking is continuing to evolve. Judging from recent SNS developments, one could predict that SNS will continue to further expand. While studies exploring specific aspects of social networking sites and interpersonal relationships exist, it is critical that future researchers explore the cumulative and long-term impacts that these online interpersonal relationships have on other areas of young adults' lives. Though this study cannot be generalized, further studies should consider expanding the sample size to universalize the data, and to see if the trends found in this study are typical for a larger group of young adults.

Additionally, it became very clear from the data that there was a broad range of SNS and that many of these websites differed quite drastically from one another. The term *SNS clumps* together websites such as Facebook, Instagram, Google plus, and Tinder, four websites that are very different from one another. Though they each share common elements of users creating a profile and chatting with others on the site, they differ quite drastically in terms of how and why someone might use them. For instance, while Facebook allows users to post unlimited information, photos, and videos, Tinder only allows a user to post a maximum of five pictures and a "bio" consisting of a sentence or short phrase. Tinder also actively encourage the user to connect with strangers while Facebook makes suggestions of connecting users with other people they may know through friends. The research findings of this study strongly suggest that when investigating SNS usage, dating websites should be categorized as a separate, specific type of SNS.

There is precedent in the research literature for circumscribing the sample. In Acar's (2008) study of 451 undergraduate students, "a total of 24 people, who either claimed to have no membership to any OSNS (online social networking site) or be the members of some other OSNS except Facebook (e.g., Friendster, Hi5, Orkut, Xanga, Multiply, Xuqua, AOL, LiveJournal, BlackPlanet, MSN Spaces) were dropped from the sample and not included in further data analysis" (p. 71). This was because Acar's (2008) hypotheses and research questions were only related to Facebook usage. By eliminating of OSNS and other OSNS, Acar's study was more specific. In hindsight, had the design of this study put Tinder into a category separate from SNS such as Facebook and Twitter, and sought to recruit participants who actively used dating sites, the findings would possibly have been more detailed. The

research question would have been addressed more broadly and as a result revealed more nuance.

Social networking sites have had a tremendous impact on the way in which people of all ages connect with one another. It is enlightening to identify the ways in which these twelve young adults build and maintain offline relationships, and the role that SNS play in that maintenance. This study sheds light on a subject matter that will continue to evolve in ways that are unknown. Through the interview process, young adults were able to consider the role that their SNS usage has played in their maintenance of interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, young adults provided their insight and opinions about a platform that they constantly use yet rarely discuss. This study offers insight into an area of connection, interpersonal relationships, both online and offline, exploring more deeply what young adults share about themselves on SNS and how they maintain relationships with others.

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Appendix A: Flyer

Volunteers Needed for Research Study

Looking for young adults who are avid social networking site users to talk about social networking site use and online and offline friendships/relationships

More specifically:

- How often you go online and which social networking sites you visit
- How you communicate with others online
- How you build and maintain friendships and relationships both online and offline



To participate, you must:

- Be 18-30 years of age
- Live in NYC
- Log onto social networking sites at least 10 times/day
- Be able to communicate in English
- Be able to meet in person or talk on the telephone for approximately 1 hour

To learn more, contact the researcher of this study, Josselyn.

Appendix B: Study Research Information Sheet

Project Title:

The Exploration of Young Adults' Online and Offline Interpersonal Relationships

Invitation:

My name is Josselyn Sheer and I am a Master of Social Work student at Smith College School for Social Work. You are being asked to take part in a research study about your social networking site usage, and whether or not you view your friendships and relationships as being connected to your social networking site usage. I am looking for young adults who are avid social networking site users. I'd like to learn more about how you build and maintain relationships, how often you go online, what sites you visit, and your perceptions of the ways in which your social networking site usage plays a role in your ability to build and maintain online and offline relationships.

Time Commitment:

In this study, you will be asked to meet with me ONCE for 60 minutes and answer questions about your social networking site usage.

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

I am looking for:

In order to participate, you must be 18-30 years of age, live in NYC, log onto social networking sites at least 10/day, be able to communicate in English, and be willing to meet in person or talk on the phone for one hour. If you decide to participate, you must read and fill out an informed consent form.

Participants' Rights:

You may decide to withdraw your participation in the research study at any time. You have the right to ask that any data you have supplied to that point be withdrawn/destroyed. You have the right to omit or refuse to answer or respond to any question that is asked if you. If you have any questions as a result of reading this information sheet, please ask the researcher before the study begins.

Confidentiality:

Confidentiality is assured. All names and identifying information will be protected.

For Further Information:

Please contact Josselyn at XXX-XXX-XXXX or Jsheer@smith.edu.

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

School for social work
Consent to Participate in a Research Study
Smith College SSW • Northampton, MA



.....
Title of Study: The Exploration of Young Adults' Online and Offline Interpersonal Relationships

Investigator(s): Josselyn Sheer
Smith College School for Social Work
XXX-XXX-XXXX

.....
Introduction

- You are being asked to take part in a research study about your social networking site usage, and whether or not you view your friendships and relationships as being connected to your social networking site usage.
- I ask that you read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Purpose of Study

- The purpose of this study is to explore young adults' social networking site usage and whether or not you view your friendships and relationships as being connected to your social networking site usage.
- This study is being conducted as a thesis requirement for my master's in social work degree.
- Ultimately, this research may be published or presented at professional conferences.

Inclusion Criteria

- You were selected as a possible participant because you are 18-30 years old, live in New York City, are English speaking, log onto social networking sites at least 10 times per day, and are willing to meet in person or talk on the phone for approximately one hour.

Description of the Study Procedures

- If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to meet with me in a place convenient for you (i.e. public library; coffee shop) to complete an interview. You will also be asked to fill out a demographic form. You may also choose to speak with me via telephone to conduct the interview. If you choose to meet in person, we will meet one time, and the

interview will take approximately 60 minutes. If you choose to speak via telephone, we will speak one time, and the interview will take approximately 60 minutes. I will ask you a series of questions about your Social Networking Site use and your friendships/relationships.

Risks/Discomforts of Being in this Study

- The study has the following risks. It is possible that you may become uncomfortable or distressed when talking about online and offline relationships. Because this study is voluntary, you can decide to end your participation by March 31, 2014. You will also have the option of passing or choosing to not answer a question at any time during the interview. At the end of this form, you will find a list of resources should you wish to access any support services/resources. I will also go over the risks and benefits of participating in this study before the interview begins.

Benefits of Being in the Study

- This study will allow you to think about and talk through ways in which you use social networking sites. More specifically, you will have a chance to reflect on your motivations for using social networking sites, and perhaps compare and contrast your online and offline interactions. By sharing your stories, you will provide information on an important topic that requires more information from young adults' perspectives. If you desire, you may receive the results to my study, and thus hear other young adults' perceptions, perhaps providing more validation for your experiences.

Confidentiality

- The records of this study will be kept strictly confidential and in a secure location. After I transcribe my tape-recorded interviews, I will destroy the tape recordings. Transcriptions will be given codes and kept in a password protected computer document.
- Informed Consent Forms will be kept in a locked file cabinet for three years so that your name is kept separate from any data.
- The demographic form that you fill out will be kept in a locked file cabinet for three years separate from your signed informed consent form. Only your participant code will be on the demographic form so that it will not be connected to your signed consent.

Payments

- You will not receive any financial payment for your participation.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw

- The decision to participate in this study is voluntary and entirely up to you. You have the right to not answer any question, as well as to withdraw completely at any point during the study. If you choose to withdraw, I will not use any of your information collected for this study. You can withdraw up until March 31, 2014. If you choose to withdraw from this study, you would contact me either by telephone or email.

Right to Ask Questions and Report Concerns

- You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me, Josselyn Sheer, at Jsheer@smith.edu or by telephone at XXX-XXX-XXXX. If you like, a summary of the results of the study will be sent to you. If you have any other concerns about your rights as a research participant, or if you have any problems as a result of your participation, you may contact the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Committee at (413) 585-7974.

Consent

- Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep, along with any other printed materials deemed necessary by the study researcher.

.....
 Name of Participant (print): _____
 Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____
 Signature of Researcher(s): Josselyn Sheer Date: _____

.....
 [if using audio or video recording, use next section for signatures:

1. I agree to be [audio] taped for this interview:

Name of Participant (print): _____
 Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____
 Signature of Researcher(s): Josselyn Sheer Date: _____

2. I agree to be interviewed, but I do not want the interview to be taped:

Name of Participant (print): _____
 Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____
 Signature of Researcher(s): Josselyn Sheer Date: _____

Resources

1. Kings County Hospital Center's Behavioral Health Center: Therapy on a sliding scale from \$15-20 a session. 718-245-2727.
2. Psychology Today Therapists who focus on relationship issues. Located in Brooklyn, NY: <http://www.jbfcs.org/programs-services/counseling-services/list-programs/#.Upj5c5F92Gk>
3. Psychology Today Therapists who specialize in addiction. Located in Brooklyn, NY: http://therapists.psychologytoday.com/rms/prof_results.php?spec=4andcity=Brooklynandstate=NY
4. Counseling Services at Jewish Board of Family Services (JBFCS): <http://www.jbfcs.org/programs-services/counseling-services/list-programs/#.Upj5c5F92Gk>
5. Theravive Therapists who focus on addiction treatment. Located in Manhattan, NY: <http://www.theravive.com/therapy/addiction-treatment-manhattan-ny>

Appendix D: Demographic Information

1. What is your age?

2. What is your gender?

____ Female ____ Male ____ Transgender

3. What is your race?

____ American Indian/Alaska Indian; ____ Asian; ____ Black/African American;

____ Hispanic/Latino; ____ Native American; ____ Hawaiian or other Pacific

Islander; ____ White; ____ Multiracial (please specify); ____ Other (please specify)

4. What is your sexual orientation?

5. What is your highest level of education?

____ Some highschool; ____ Highschool; ____ GED or equivalent; ____ Some college;

____ 4-year college degree; ____ Master's degree; ____ Doctoral degree;

____ Professional Degree

6. Who do you live with?

____ Parents/caregivers; ____ Alone; ____ Roommates; ____ Other (please specify);

____ Partner

7. What is your annual income? _

____ \$0 - \$20,000; ____ \$20,000 - \$30,000; ____ \$30,000 - \$40,000;

____ \$50,000 - \$75,000; ____ \$75,000 - \$100,000; ____ \$100,000 - \$150,000;

____ \$150,000 +

8. What is your annual household income?

____ Less than \$10,000 ; ____ \$10,000 - \$19,999; ____ \$20,000- \$40,000;

____ \$40,000 - \$60,000; ____ \$60,000 - \$80,000; ____ \$80,000 - \$100,000;

____ \$100,000 - \$150,000; ____ \$150,000 +

9. What is your employment status?

____ Full time; ____ Part time; ____ Student only; ____ Unemployed; ____ Self-

employed; ____ Stay at home parent; _____ Other (please specify)

10. What is your relationship status?

____ Single; ____ Married; ____ In a relationship; ____ Divorced;

____ Widow/widower; ____ Separated

11. Approximately or on average, how many times do you go online each day?

12. What social networking sites do you go on? List all:

13. How long do you usually stay online each time you log on?

14. Overall **on average** per day, how long are you online?

Appendix E: Interview Questions

“After reading a lot of literature on this topic, it has become clear to me that social media has become a tremendous part of young adults’ lives. I’m specifically interested in the use of social networking sites, which is a phrase used to describe any web site that enables users to create public profiles and form relationships with other users. They can be used to describe web sites, online forums, chat rooms, or other online social spaces. So some examples are Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, Tumblr, Myspace, and Google Plus +. For the purposes of this study, I’d like to learn about your social networking site usage. All of the questions that I will be asking you are about when you are on a social networking site—not when you’re online doing other things like downloading music, etc. I’m curious about what sites you go on, how often, and your relationships online. Then I’d like to learn about your offline friendships and relationships. So before we get started, do you have any questions for me?”

1. So I’m wondering if you could tell me the reason(s) you like social networking sites?
2. What do you do on social networking sites?

Prompts:

- a. Search for/join groups? Search for friends? Search for events? Networking professionally?
 - b. Check/send/answer messages? Wallposts? Poke people?
 - c. Post pictures? Browse pictures?
3. Who do you talk to when you’re online?
 - a. Friends?
 - b. Acquaintances?

- c. Family?
 - d. People you don't know?
4. What type of information do you share about yourself online and is it dependent on which SNS you are on?

Prompts:

- a. Do you only share positive information that you like about yourself?
 - b. Negative information, or things that you dislike about yourself?
 - c. Personal information?
 - d. Professional information?
 - e. Are you sharing things that are truthful?
 - f. Are you sharing things that are embellishing?
5. When do you typically share stuff about yourself?
- a. When you are in need of support?

Bridge into—are these the sorts of things you would share offline?:

6. Could you tell me about the types of friendships and relationships you have offline? What are those like?
- a. Are they the same friends you interact with online?
 - b. What do you do with your friends?
 - c. What do you share about yourself with your friends?
 - d. Is it similar to how you act and what you share online?

Bridge into connecting the online and offline experiences:

7. I'm interested in your relationships online and your offline relationships.

- a. Have your in person friendships and relationships ever suffered because of your online friendships and relationships? How so?
- b. Have your in person friendships and relationships ever strengthened because of your online friendships and relationships? How so?
- c. Have your in person friendships and relationships ever suffered by the amount of time you spend online?
- d. Have your in person friendships and relationships ever strengthened by the amount of time you spend online?
- e. Have your in person friendships and relationships ever suffered by what you do or say online?
- f. Have your in person friendships and relationships ever been strengthened by what you do or say online?

Appendix F: HSR Approval Letter



School for Social Work
Smith College
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

January 8, 2014

Josselyn Sheer

Dear Josselyn,

You did a very nice job on your revisions. Your project is now approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Congratulations and our best wishes on your interesting study.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Elaine Kersten'.

Elaine Kersten, Ed.D.
Co-Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee
CC: Kelly Mandarino, Research Advisor

