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### A Functional Approach to Social Networking Sites

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## Part One

### The Influence of Technology on How Relational Partners Communicate Online

#### Chapter One

#### A Functional Approach to Social Networking Sites

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The widespread use of social networking websites (SNSs) is one of the most groundbreaking communication trends to emerge in recent years. Since its creation in 2004, sites such as Facebook have become immensely popular among college students. Many SNSs continue to experience exponential growth. Facebook, for example, reached 100 million active users in August 2008 and proceeded to quadruple this membership base to surpass 400 million active users by July 2010 (Facebook.com). In addition to maintaining astronomically high membership rates, SNSs also appear to be part of user's daily schedules. In one study assessing Facebook use, Ellison, Heino, and Gibbs (2006) found that participants reported using the site an average of 10 to 30 minutes each day, with 21% of participants spending more than an hour on the site every day. As a result, high membership and usage rates suggest SNSs hold significant power as a relational and social tool for users.

Coinciding with the growth in membership have been significant advances in research that suggest SNSs may serve important interpersonal and relational functions for users. For instance, although the growing body of literature investigating SNSs is still in its infancy, most suggest one of their central functions is the maintenance of existing off-line relationships. Other research, however, reports SNSs may be used to initiate relationships, seek social information about potential relationship partners, construct individual or multiple identities, manage interpersonal impressions and relationships, and enact metacommunication (via, for example, comment postings, photographs, and relationship status indicators). In addition, less studied functions have also emerged via anecdotal evidence or popular press reports such as how SNSs may serve to aid in relational reconnection (or reconnecting with relational partners for one's past). Although

SNSs may fulfill other functions, we propose in this chapter that these are their central functions.

The advantage of taking a functional approach to SNSs, and thus organizing the literature based upon each function, is that it shifts the focus of the chapter from specific SNSs (e.g., Facebook or MySpace only) or contexts (e.g., business/professional SNSs) onto what communicative functions SNSs are used to achieve (for a discussion, see Walther & Ramirez, 2009). This approach borrows from the area of nonverbal communication where it is more clearly articulated through multifunctional “meta-principles” (e.g., multiple functions may be achieved by a single cue; multiple cues may achieve the same function.). It also allows for the integration of seemingly disparate lines of research that fulfill the same underlying function. This latter point is particularly important since research based on niche SNSs—such as LinkedIn, Twitter, LiveJournal, and others—may identify functions similar to those of the more popular Facebook and MySpace sites allowing for their synthesis.

The primary purpose of this chapter then is to use these aforementioned functions as guiding principles in discussing SNSs and provide an assessment of these functions as reflected in existing research. A secondary focus of this chapter is to provide a review of literature relevant to each function that may guide future research on SNSs. Much in the same manner that general research functions such as relational communication, social influence, and social support help guide research in several content areas in the field of communication, the functions identified in this chapter may provide interested scholars a new manner of conceptualizing the study of SNSs.

## The Primary Relational and Social Functions of SNSs

### *Relationship Initiation*

Although people primarily report using the SNSs to maintain or deepen existing relationships, a secondary function of SNSs is the initiation of new relationships. The term social networking site implies that networking will occur to some extent; however, the primacy of the relationship initiation function is largely contingent on the goals of a particular user and the structure and purpose of each specific SNS.

Anonymous SNSs are generally most conducive towards true networking and initiating relationships with previously unknown persons. SNSs such as LiveJournal and Twitter focus on blogging, journaling, and story writing and do not necessarily require users to reveal their offline identity. As a result these SNSs are not structured around “friend” networks, but rather, allow users to subscribe as a “fan” of someone whose writing they enjoy, or “follower” of someone that frequently blogs on a topic of interest. Although users might know many of their contacts on a personal level in anonymous SNSs, these sites provide increased opportunities to broaden social networks by initiating relationships with users that possess common interests.

Similarly, there are a large number of niche SNSs aimed at very specific populations such as pet owners (Catster and Dogster), Christians (MyChurch), music fans (Last.fm), and social activists (Change.org). Interaction on niche SNSs might aid in facilitation of *specialized friendships* (Wellman & Gulia, 1999) by enabling users to form connections based on interests their offline friends may or may not share. Indeed, Baym and Ledbetter (2009) found that shared interests predicted the initiation of friendship on

the music SNS Last.fm; however, shared interests did not lead to the development of a more personal relationship. SNS relationships initiated based on shared interests generally remain weak ties; however, partners can develop a more personal focus by utilizing multiple modes of communication.

Some research suggests that people form more cross-sex friendships online than offline (Parks & Roberts, 1998), a finding that has been mirrored in regards to the SNS Last.fm (Baym & Ledbetter, 2009). It might be easier to initiate cross-sex friendships in an anonymous online environment free of the scrutiny of individuals that might judge the relationship or suspect that time spent with a cross-sex friend equates to romance. Similar research is needed to determine whether SNSs structured around offline networks would impose offline relational rules that dissuade the initiation of cross-sex friendship.

As previously mentioned, the primary goal of these SNSs based on offline networks appears to be communicating with and maintaining existing social ties, even if these ties are extremely weak (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). SNSs might also be used to initiate personal relationships with peripheral members of a user's social circle. As noted by Ellison, Lampe, and Steinfield. (2009), we regularly meet new people that we would like to learn more about yet we often are not willing to exert the effort or engage in the risk necessary to exchange phone numbers and personal information. Searching for these individuals on SNSs and adding them as a "friend" provides an easy way to initiate a weak social tie that ensures continued contact with that person. This within network relationship initiation process might be relatively common given that more than half of Facebook and MySpace users in Raacke and Bonds-Raacke's study (2008) reported using the sites to make new friends.

SNSs might even serve as a relatively risk-free way to initiate romantic relationships. People repeatedly deny using SNSs for overt romantic invitations and random dating searches (i.e., Stern & Taylor, 2007), although, this does not mean SNSs are not used for dating or romantic purposes. Indeed, our currently unpublished focus group data suggests romantic initiation might be common within existing social circles. In our data, Facebook users denied conducting random searches for dating purposes, yet willingly admitted they use SNSs to find out if they are compatible with someone they know socially such as a friend of a friend or a classmate. If a person's SNS profile lists them as single and makes a positive impression, students said they might pursue a romantic relationship by asking the person out on a date. SNSs might therefore serve as a valuable uncertainty-reduction tool for users attempting to determine their compatibility with someone they have already met.

### *Relational Maintenance*

Relational maintenance refers to the active and routine behaviors individuals use to sustain their relationships at a desired state (Canary & Stafford, 1994). Key markers of successful interpersonal relationships such as trust, liking, and commitment have been found to increase when partners engage in more strategic and routine maintenance behaviors (Canary & Stafford 1994; Stafford, Dainton, & Haas, 2000; Weigel & Ballard-Reisch 1999). Sometimes individuals are unwilling or unable to perform relational maintenance strategies, which can lead to the deterioration of a relationship.

As technology continues to advance new opportunities for relational maintenance are enabled. Early research assumed email and other text-based computer-mediated

communication (CMC) were useful for relaying task-related communication, yet could not support the nonverbal cues necessary for relational communication. Walther's (1996) social information processing (SIP) theory articulates the alternative viewpoint that CMC users find ways to communicate rich personal information using the cues at their disposal. SIP has arguably become the guiding theory of CMC research, as numerous studies demonstrate CMC is a rich site of relational communication. In fact, email and instant messaging are primarily used for relational maintenance purposes and use of these media has been linked with increased closeness in relationships (Cummings, Lee, & Kraut, 2006).

The prevalent use of online media to enact relational maintenance led researchers to explore the potential relationship maintenance functions of SNSs. Human and Lane (2008) predicted email would be the primary mode of communication between friends seeking to maintain their relationship and surprisingly found that most participants (35%) checked "other" and wrote in "Facebook" on their survey. Other research has found that SNS use is linked with increased levels of intimacy and liking (Kim & Yun, 2007), closeness and trust (Human & Lane, 2008; Wright, 2004), and willingness to share information (Dwyer, 2007). Pearson (2009) argues that the performative nature of SNSs creates an intimate atmosphere that encourages the flow of information and allows users to feel maintained relationships. Clearly, SNSs are becoming increasingly popular venues for individuals to maintain relationships.

SNSs are embedded in users' daily lives as means to maintain relationships with a variety of people. Indeed, relational maintenance has been cited as the primary function of various SNSs such as MySpace and Facebook (boyd, 2008) and the popular Korean

SNS Cyworld (Choi, 2006; Kim & Yun, 2007). Many SNSs such as Facebook are structured around the display of existing offline social networks so it is no surprise people primarily use Facebook to maintain or solidify pre-existing offline relationships and keep in touch with relational partners (Ellison et al., 2007; Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2006; Joinson, 2008; Hargittai, 2007). SNSs enable users to broadcast updates regarding their lives to a large network of “friends” and also to stream updates about these friends in a single location. SNSs serve as an effective way to stay in the loop regarding social information such as a friend getting engaged, moving, or making other significant life changes. Possessing this information can help two people maintain the minimal level of contact necessary to feel their relationship is being maintained even if they rarely converse in a one-on-one manner.

SNSs serve as powerful relational maintenance tools for many reasons. SNSs provide an easy way for users to locate friends and maintain relationships with the multitude of people they might not see on a regular basis (Dwyer, 2007). Most SNSs provide reminders when a friend has a birthday and broadcast updates when a friend posts news of success or hardship. Knowing these events are occurring enables users to enact relational maintenance strategies such as offering congratulations or wishing friends happy birthday. In fact, SNSs have been noted to reduce the costs associated with relational maintenance (i.e., time, effort, etc.) and therefore enable users to maintain relationships with an extremely large number of people.

Furthermore, most SNSs are asynchronous, meaning users do not have to be on the site at the same time in order to communicate. The asynchronous nature of SNSs can therefore facilitate relational maintenance between users with different schedules and also

provide users with increased control over their impressions by allowing extra time to compose and edit messages (O'Sullivan, 2000; Walther & Boyd, 2002). Cost is also cited as a benefit of SNSs and other free online media; however, it may have limited explanatory power given that most CMC users also have access to cell phones, text-messaging devices, and other communication tools (Walther & Ramirez, 2009). It is therefore safe to assume that people use SNSs because they enjoy doing so and are able to efficiently gratify needs (Bryant, 2008).

Our current understanding of relational maintenance on SNSs rests on knowledge accumulated through the secondary findings of numerous studies. Existing research clearly demonstrates that SNSs are functioning to maintain relationships; however, few studies to date have focused entirely on the relational maintenance uses of SNSs. Thus, we agree with Walther and Ramirez's (2009) argument that, "the greatest utility of social networking systems has yet to be explored. These systems provide a dramatically new way to enact *relational maintenance*" (p. 302). Relational communication scholars should devote extensive attention toward unpacking the relational maintenance function of SNSs as the sites should continue to alter the way people maintain relationships into the foreseeable future.

### *Relational Reconnection*

Whereas accumulated research suggests that the primary function of SNSs may be to facilitate the maintenance of existing off-line relationships (boyd, 2008; Ellison et al., 2007; Lampe et al., 2006; Joinson, 2008; Hargittai, 2007), a less studied function is that of how SNSs serve to aid in relational reconnection. Popular press reports of how users

employ SNSs in locating long lost friends and family members are becoming increasingly common (e.g., Porter, 2009). In fact, a recent workplace survey found that an overwhelming majority of respondents (82%) reported that reconnecting with family or friends was their primary motivation for using SNSs (Steelcase, 2008). With respect to the present chapter, relational reconnection refers to the re-establishment of a previously existing relationship that, for one or more reasons, the parties involved lost contact with each other.

SNSs may aid users in fulfilling the relational reconnection function in various ways. As with relationship maintenance, SNSs and the tools they offer users make them ideal for locating and re-establishing contact with relational partners from the past. For instance, users can utilize search tools to locate target profiles. Users may also locate targets indirectly (and possibly accidentally) by examining photographs and wall postings on others' profiles within their own personal network to seek contact with targets. Many SNSs such as Facebook even provide users with a list of "people you might know" based on overlapping social networks. In addition, the various communication tools available on most SNSs make it possible to initiate contact fairly efficiently once a target is located and begin testing the possibility of reconnecting.

Unfortunately, academic research has lagged behind anecdotal and popular press reports of relational reconnection. To date, no published academic study documenting relational reconnection exists. However, recently collected data from six college campuses across the United States currently under analysis by one of the co-authors of this chapter provides some preliminary insight into the relational reconnection process. Overall, relational reconnection among college students is quite common. Approximately

75% of participants reported involvement in at least one relational reconnection attempt within the preceding year; almost 60% of the participants reported being recipients of such attempts. Not surprisingly, the relationship targeted most commonly for reconnection, approximately 80%, was that with a friend from the past. Of these friendships, the majority were same-sex. Although not conclusive, these preliminary findings suggest that the relational reconnection function is worthy of further academic study in order to better understand the role of SNSs in facilitating this process.

### *Identity Experimentation*

An individual's identity is complex and multi-faceted; people share similar traits, beliefs, values, characteristics, and interests with different people. People are generally drawn to form social ties with individuals they see as possessing similar traits and identity markers (Feld, 1981). In an online world, however, a person's identity is "mutable and unanchored by the body that is its locus in the real world" (Donath, 1998, p. 29). The corporeal body becomes detached, leaving a person to not fully exist online until he/she writes him/herself into being through "textual performances" (Sundén, 2003); word choice, grammar, spelling, and sentence structure are the text through which we create our online identity. "You are what you type" captures the essence of identity experimentation (Slater, 2002, p. 536). In fact, SNSs have been argued to offer limitless ability for people to shape, alter, or completely change their identity; however, this sentiment has been challenged.

Early CMC research examined identity experimentation in anonymous online settings such as chat rooms and bulletin boards (Rheingold, 1995; Surratt, 1998; Turkle, 1995). In these environments individuals were found to predominantly engage in role-

playing by being someone else, acting out underlying aggressions, using anti-normative behavior, or putting on personae differing from their “real-life” identity (Stone, 1996; Turkle, 1995). The disembodiment and anonymity of these sites was concluded to allow these forms of identity experimentation. Reinventing one’s identity can be especially empowering for individuals who feel disadvantaged in face-to-face settings (McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002). Identity experimentation in anonymous SNSs also provides an outlet for the expression of “hidden selves,” those bubbling under the surface and not shared with most people, (Suler, 2002) as well as the exploration of various non-conventional identities we are not meant to be (Rosenmann & Safir, 2006). In sum, anonymous SNSs might provide users a venue to essentially try on different identity markers to experiment with who we are, who we wish to be, and who we might become.

Recently, research has shifted to focus on identity experimentation on nymous sites such as MySpace, Facebook, and dating sites. There is less space for experimentation on these sites because they are structured around offline networks and identities. The function of identity experimentation is less prevalent in nymous sites for a few reasons. First, these sites are typically high in offline-online integration (Ellison et al., 2007) because a person’s social network will know if they are being untrue to his/her identity (Donath & boyd, 2004). Additionally SNSs are designed to facilitate the exchange of information requiring honesty from users; deviance from social norms where users are expected to present their “real” selves may be punished or ridiculed (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). Honesty is particularly valued on dating websites where people are attempting to find true love and wish to avoid unpleasant surprises if they decide to pursue a relationship by meeting a person face-to-face (Greene, Derlega, &

Mathews, 2006; Ellison et al., 2007). For these reasons, nonymous website users engage more actively in impression management, the next function to be discussed, than in identity experimentation.

In sum, identity experimentation is one function of SNSs. Online users are like actors playing a role; they can claim to be whomever they want, whenever they want (Pearson, 2009). Although questions and disagreements are raised regarding manufactured and mediated identities, identity experimentation is popular in anonymous SNSs and likely occurs to a lesser extent in all SNSs.

### *Impression Formation and Management*

Impression formation and management is another critical function of SNSs (boyd & Ellison, 2007) pertaining to the methods people employ to control their own image and make inference regarding other users. As Goffman (1959) observed, individuals strive to influence how others perceive them by minimizing the appearance of characteristics contrary to their idealized self. Impression management occurs in all settings; however, it is becoming an increasingly prominent topic in regards to SNSs and other CMCs.

SNSs are popular venues for young adults to interact via the construction of profiles that “(re)present their public persona (and their networks of connections) to others” (Acquisti & Gross, 2006, p. 2). Impression formation and management occurs in SNSs at both an individual and public level. On an individual level, SNS users attempt to manage their impressions and exert control over their public image by crafting a profile, displaying their likes and dislikes, posting photos, joining groups, and altering the appearance of their profile to fit an idealized notion of their self (boyd & Heer 2006;

Lampe, Ellison & Steinfield, 2007; Tufekci 2008). Facebook users generally believe their profiles are accurate and positive representations of their identity (Lampe et al., 2006) demonstrating that non-anonymous SNSs seem to make people more “realistic and honest” (Ellison et al., 2006). Deception and misrepresentation, however, are major concerns for SNS users.

The most common form of deception in SNSs is “stretching the truth” regarding positive attributes to present an attractive and ideal self (Gibbs, Ellison, & Heino, 2006). Indeed, SNS users go to great efforts to create profiles that reveal certain characteristics of their identity, often attempting to exhibit desirable and attractive aspects and downplay less attractive ones (boyd, 2008; Kim & Yun, 2007). Yurchisin, Watchravesringkan, and McCabe (2005) found that people often attempt to hide undesirable features such as being overweight or short. Moreover, many SNSs allow users to limit the viewing of their profile to select individuals enabling them to tailor their identities to particular audiences. SNS users present “highly socially desirable identities” (Zhao et al., 2008, p. 1830) with most engaging in some form of self-enhancement (Gossling, Gaddis, & Vazire, 2007; Ellison et al., 2007). By strategically selecting how and what to convey to certain receivers users are able to enhance their self-image.

SNS users are often judged by the company they keep, meaning impression formation and management also involves inherently social processes (Mazer, Murphy, Simmons, 2007; Walther et al., 2008). Third party perspectives are often considered to be objective and are therefore used as “a signal of the reliability of one’s identity claims” (Donath & boyd, 2004, p. 73). For example, Walther and colleagues (2008) found that if a person’s friends were attractive the target was more likely to be found physically

attractive. Complimentary and pro-social statements by friends enhanced the profile owner's social and task attractiveness, as well as the target's credibility whereas negative statements depicting normatively undesirable traits raised male attractiveness while lowering female attractiveness. Furthermore, number of friends can have a significant impact on social attractiveness (Tong, Van Der Heide, Langwell, & Walther, 2008). Walther, Van Der Heide, Hamel, & Shulman (2009) found that friends' comments overrode an individual's comments about him/herself, pinpointing the importance of friends to an individual's impression formation and management. Similarly, Zhao et al.'s (2008) results revealed a triangular relationship between desires/interests of user, displayed friends/mates, and the audience. Impressions of a person's identity can be greatly hindered or enhanced by friends and their comments; we are known by the company we keep.

Identity is not an individual characteristic, but rather a "social product, the outcome of a given social environment" (Zhao et al., 2008, p. 1831). Impression management is a necessary component to social interaction as identity evolves and changes to reflect social networks and communities. Additionally, with SNSs being used for legal, employment, academic, athletic, and admission purposes users need to be aware of the impressions they are giving off. For this and other reasons, forming and maintaining impressions appears to be a prevalent function of SNSs. Additional research is needed to examine the extent that SNS impressions carry over into offline interactions by reflecting and shaping users' reputations in the offline world.

### *Information Seeking*

Another important function of SNSs involves information seeking. Ramirez, Walther, Burgoon, and Sunnagrank (2002) conceptualize information seeking as the goal-driven “pursuit of desired information about a target” (p. 217). SNS users possess near instant access to the wealth of information provided by friends and other members of their social networks. Additionally, users can select how to use the information they find, take it out of context, and/or reproduce it without the knowledge of the person that posted it (boyd, 2007). As a result, SNSs essentially function as archives of social information at the disposal of users in pursuit of information about a target. Unfortunately, there is no way for SNS users to know whether their personal information is being sought for noble or nefarious purposes.

Early theoretical approaches, collectively coined as the “cues filtered-out” perspective (Culnan & Markus, 1987), suggested that CMC would hinder interpersonal communication processes such as information seeking. More recent theoretical approaches such as social information processing theory suggest that people will find ways to utilize the contextual cues afforded by online environments to follow the same information-seeking strategies they employ in offline settings (Walther, 1994; 1996).

According to uncertainty-reduction theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) people try to relieve uncertainty by seeking information that allows them to assign predictable characteristics to people. To do so, people employ a number of tactics such as active, passive, interactive, and extractive strategies (Ramirez et al., 2002). Active strategies involve asking a third party for information about a person of interest. Passive strategies include observing a person’s actions and making inferences to collect information about them. Interactive strategies are utilized by directly interacting with the person of interest

and engaging in reciprocal self-disclosure. Perhaps unique to online environments, extractive strategies involve using search engines like Google to indirectly gather multiple sources of stored information available about a person of interest. Extractive strategies differ from passive strategies because the person of interest often has no control over the information and/or does not know it is being collected and used for purposes they did not originally intend.

The multiple forms of contextual cues provided by different SNSs might enable all of the above information-seeking strategies. Sanders (2008) examined how active, passive, and interactive strategies function to reduce uncertainty on Facebook and found that interactive strategies most effectively reduced uncertainty, passive strategies were only mildly effective as reducing uncertainty, and active strategies were unimportant in reducing uncertainty on Facebook. Additionally, intense Facebook users reported more confidence in their ability to reduce uncertainty with information collected on Facebook, signaling that intense users might view Facebook as a valuable source of social information. SNSs might also enable a mixture of passive and active strategies to the extent that users gather information that third parties have posted on a person of interest's profile, yet do not directly ask that third party for information.

SNSs are created and maintained by the millions of users who provide information and interact on the sites. This information serves as potential data to be collected by users and used for various purposes. SNS users who are skeptical of other members' identity claims might strategically seek information to confirm or discredit claims made by other users or new relational partners (Walther et al., 2009). SNSs can also be used to seek information concerning what a user's existing friends are doing as

well as with whom these friends associate. Specific profile elements such as a person's contact information, current status, schedule, or hobbies might also be sought. Users might even seek information such as the interests or relationship status of a romantic interest.

As SNSs increase in popularity they will likely continue to serve as a primary source of information about users that create profiles. Continued research is needed to explore how the information-seeking experience of SNSs is similar to and distinct from other information-seeking tools such as search engines, email, text messaging, chat rooms, and instant messenger. Given that SNSs are often only one component of larger relational dynamics, research should also aim to understand how SNSs operate in conjunction with other information seeking tools. Research by Lampe and colleagues (2006) demonstrates that Facebook users typically use the site for social searching (finding out more information about current contacts) rather than social browsing (randomly searching for new contacts). Future research should apply the concept of searching versus browsing within the context of existing networks. How often do SNS users engage in goal-driven information-seeking and how often do they engage in passive browsing such as following newsfeed updates. Such an understanding will help provide a better understanding of the ways SNS users obtain information.

### *Metacommunication*

Metacommunication is assumed to play an important role in all forms of relationships yet it is currently understudied in many contexts, including SNSs. The term *metacommunication* can be loosely defined as communication about communication

(DeVito, 2001). More specifically, metacommunication addresses that communication is a complex process involving numerous situational and contextualization factors that determine the availability and appropriateness of specific cues. Metacommunication also refers to the unarticulated meanings transmitted through communication that reinforce, contradict, or distract the surface meaning of a message (Young, 1978). Message attributions are made based on the sender's chosen mode of communication, sensitivity to the setting, and use of all available cues. The numerous cues enabled by SNSs could facilitate several forms of metacommunication.

In many cases, metacommunication functions as actual talk or communication about a previous message. On SNSs, metacommunication manifests in the form of comments made in regard to other users' wall posts, status updates, and notes. Facebook even installed a "Like" feature that allows users to communicate whether they approve of the comments and status updates made by friends. Many SNS posts provoke additional comments from multiple users, essentially forming a conversational thread akin to those seen in blogs and newsgroups. This form of interaction can therefore be examined as a form of metacommunication; however, research has yet to examine this potentially valuable line of research.

SNSs might serve a particularly important role in romantic-relationship metacommunication. Romantic partners who engage in more metacommunication report higher relational satisfaction than partners who engage in less metacommunication. Mann (2003) found that Facebook users display their romantic-relationship status by indicating whether they are "single," "in a relationship," "in an open relationship," or even "in a complicated relationship." Samp and Palevitz (2008) point out that changing one's

Facebook relationship status has become an important public ritual akin to the traditional bonding and terminating stages described by Knapp and Vangelisti (2005). It is not uncommon to see a couple's relationship status change numerous times over the course of a single night, indicating that SNS users are aware of the impact they can make by publicizing their relational woes.

SNS users might also monitor the "relationship status" of their partner to ensure their relationship is viewed as official. Existing research suggests metacommunication is prevalent during relational turning points such as the beginning or ending of a relationship (Baxter & Bullis, 1986). It therefore makes sense that SNS users stress the importance of relationship status indicators. A person's relationship status on SNS profiles should be updated to reflect offline communication such as agreeing to begin or end a monogamous relationship; however, the manipulation of SNS relationship status can also provoke offline metacommunication if one partner's status does not coincide with the other partner's vision of the relationship. A person might feel uncomfortable if the person they went on one date with suddenly declared them as a romantic partner on SNS. Similarly, a person might feel hurt or confused if the person they are dating does not declare their relationship via SNS. In many cases, couples change their status to "in a relationship" or "single" at nearly the same time, suggesting that some form of offline metacommunication occurred in the form of a state-of-relationship talk.

SNSs also provide an underexplored site of metacommunication regarding the multiple attributions that can be made based on any given message. Indeed, SNS users learn to read a great deal of meaning into seemingly innocuous behaviors with the unfortunate side effect that inaccurate message attributions can be made. Facebook users

in Stern and Taylor's (2007) study reported using the site to monitor the fidelity of their current romantic partner yet noted that doing so can cause problems when comments or photos are taken out of context. Knowing this, some SNS users might purposely manipulate their profile to make romantic partners and friends jealous by publicly communicating with someone their relational partner dislikes, removing that person from their "top friends" list, or posting photos that will arouse jealousy. SNSs can even be used to enact revenge on a relational partner (romantic or friendship) by posting pictures and comments that display the user has moved on, or even by sharing information that will destroy the reputation of their former partner. In this way, SNS profiles can take on a life of their own and indirectly communicate messages that may or may not have been intended by the user.

There is much room for metacommunication research in the field of relational research at large and in the specific context of SNSs. The prevalence of SNSs as a site of relational communication, coupled with the potential ambiguity of messages in CMC contexts, creates a need to unpack the connections of SNSs and metacommunication. Indeed, we believe that the metacommunication functions of SNSs could provide a fruitful line of research for relational communication scholars.

### Conclusion

SNSs are playing an increasingly important role in the communication patterns of young adults and are even beginning to gain reputation as a viable networking tool for adults. It is important to continue questioning the ways that SNSs are impacting personal relationships; however, it is equally important to note that SNSs are only one

development in the ongoing evolution of communication technology (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). As such, this chapter aimed to shift the focus of SNS research away from describing individual sites by reorganizing SNS research using a functional approach.

This chapter discussed many of the primary functions of SNSs: relationship initiation, relational maintenance, relational reconnection, identity experimentation, impression formation and management, information seeking, and metacommunication. This chapter focused on describing the relational and pro-social functions of SNSs; however, SNSs are clearly not utilized entirely for pro-social relational purposes. For example, research has shown that people use SNSs as a complementary source of political information (Kushin & Yamamoto, 2009). In fact, a 2007 study by the Pew Center found that 27% of young adults sought information regarding the 2008 presidential election from SNSs (Kohut, 2008). The political information sought from SNSs is likely of a more social nature than other political sources because content is created, supplied, and endorsed by members of their social network. Similarly, people commonly report using SNSs for diversionary and entertainment purposes; SNSs relieve boredom, kill time, and are a procrastination tool for students wishing to postpone work (Bryant, 2008). Diversion and entertainment uses are not commonly grouped as a relational function; however, the relational communication and socialization opportunities provided by SNSs might actually drive this function. SNSs might be yet another venue where people virtually “hang-out” with their friends, even if those friends are not physically present.

There are undoubtedly many anti-social functions of SNSs as well. For example, surveillance and “Facebook stalking” can be used to keep track of friends’ actions and

maintain relationships, yet true stalking also occurs on SNSs. Indeed, the openness that many users display might attract cyber-stalkers who can use SNSs to harass, threaten, or bully other users. Privacy is also an issue as SNS profiles are being used by admission officers, employers, and even legal officials as a way to judge the character of applicants. Furthermore, many of the SNS social functions rely on users' willingness to disclose information; however, privacy and safety concerns might limit the information users are willing to provide. SNSs are increasingly being infiltrated by hackers and so-called "phishing scams" (Jagatic, Johnson, Jakobsson, & Menczer, 2007) that manipulate user's information to commit identity theft (Gross & Acquisti, 2005).

As SNSs and other mediated forms of communication increase in popularity the line between the offline and online world will become difficult to distinguish. The terms online and offline relationships are becoming increasingly entwined (boyd & Ellison, 2007) as people engage in mixed mode relationships (Walther & Parks, 2002) that are formed and maintained using multiple communication venues. Imagining an unmediated relationship might become difficult as offline relationships increasingly matriculate to SNSs and use the sites as a mundane form of interaction (Beers, 2008). As a result, there is a need to understand how relational schemas and social scripts are adjusting to incorporate the growing presence of online technology such as SNS (Samp & Palevitz, 2008). Future research needs to examine how SNSs are incorporated into the initiation, maintenance, and dissolution of the relationship trajectory as well as how these relationship stages manifest themselves in SNS interaction.

SNSs are also becoming increasingly mobile with popular sites such as Facebook and MySpace accessible via mobile devices, and new MSNs (mobile social network

systems) like Twitter and Dodgeball enabling the broadcasting of microblogs and text messages within networks (Humphreys, 2007). Understanding SNSs in a tumultuous technological landscape requires embracing an approach that maintains focus on functionality and common theoretically driven research.

The functional approach described in this chapter asserts that SNSs are essentially another interpersonal communication tool being used to fulfill various relational functions such as initiating and maintaining relationships, managing and forming impressions, and seeking information about relational partners. Highlighting the centrality of relational functions on SNSs should allow for the continued study of SNSs both in isolation and in the larger context of interpersonal communication.

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