

The London School of Economics and Political Science

*Social Solidarity in the Age of Social Media and Algorithmic
Communication*

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Abstract

The concept of social solidarity is fairly intuitive, yet in scholarly debates the term remains essentially abstracted and under-theorized. Discussion of social solidarity has often been carried out at a normative level, with greater focus on the degree of social support, or the search for singular experience of commonality and shared morality, at the expense of a plurality of views, experiences, communicative actions and social practices. Furthermore, in this debate, little emphasis has been placed on the role of social media platforms, even though their ubiquitous yet invisible feedback loops and algorithmic systems today have become deeply intertwined into our everyday social actions and connections. This thesis aims to re-account for the role of social solidarity in this contemporary context, drawing on analysis of social solidarity, social media, and algorithmic systems, using the notion of ‘interdependence’ as a scaffolding for the primary conceptual revision. To avoid any preconceived normative ideals attached to this term, this thesis takes a bottom-up perspective, situating people’s experiences with social media within a wider context of everyday life and exploring how individuals’ actions and experiences in their social life potentially build up towards something that might be termed social solidarity. In this way, a qualitative methodology, more attuned to the sites where people experience and practice social life is adopted. Findings are derived from a qualitative study of 46 individuals in England, interviewed about their everyday experience with social media. This highlights how their everyday social considerations take place in reference to social media, documenting how their practices have been rearticulated in ways pertinent to social solidarity. It also challenges and deconstructs the dominant view in business discourse of social media as a natural bringer of connection, participation and togetherness.

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Table of contents

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	8
1.1. ON SOLIDARITY AND SOCIAL MEDIA.....	8
1.2. RISE OF SOCIAL MEDIA, DEMISE OF SOLIDARITY?.....	12
1.3. DIRECTIONS OF THE THESIS.....	15
1.4. AIMS AND STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS.....	16
CHAPTER 2: THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL SOLIDARITY IN COMPLEX SOCIETIES	20
2.1. INTRODUCTION.....	20
2.2. APPROACHES TO SOCIAL SOLIDARITY	21
2.2.1. <i>Solidarity, Community, and Social Theory</i>	23
2.2.2. <i>Critique of a (Stable) Social Order</i>	26
2.3. CONTEMPORARY APPROACHES TO SOCIAL SOLIDARITY.....	29
2.3.1. <i>A Neo-functionalist Approach</i>	30
2.3.2. <i>Rationalized Communication Approach: on Conditions of Social Solidarity</i>	33
2.3.3. <i>Community as the Basis of Social Solidarity</i>	37
2.4. BEYOND THE NORMATIVE (AND PRESCRIPTIVE) ORDER.....	39
2.5. CONCLUSION	45
CHAPTER 3: RETHINKING SOCIAL SOLIDARITY IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETIES OF MEDIATION.....	46
3.1. INTRODUCTION.....	46
3.2. THE ROLE PLAYED BY THE MEDIA IN SOCIAL SOLIDARITY IN COMPLEX SOCIETIES	47
3.2.1. <i>Place of Social Solidarity Research</i>	52
3.3. WHEN SOCIAL SOLIDARITY IS CONTEXTUALIZED BY SOCIAL MEDIA.....	54
3.3.1. <i>The Shifting Terrain of the ‘Social’</i>	55
3.3.2. <i>Lived Experiences of Social Media</i>	59
3.3.2.1. Algorithms Within Social Media and Social Life.....	64
3.3.3. <i>Solidarity, Interdependence, Figuration</i>	68
3.4. CONCLUSION	73
CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY.....	75
4.1. INTRODUCTION.....	75
4.2. EPISTEMOLOGICAL POSITION	75
4.3. RESEARCH DESIGN.....	78
4.3.1. <i>Choice of Methods: In-depth Interview, Qualitative Mapping, and Think-aloud Practice</i>	78
4.3.1.1. Potential Alternative Methods	82
4.3.2. <i>Creating an Interview Topic Guide</i>	84
4.3.3. <i>Data Collection: Sampling, Recruitment, and Fieldwork</i>	87
4.3.3.1. During the Fieldwork.....	92
4.3.5. <i>Data Analysis</i>	95
4.4. ETHICS AND REFLEXIVITY.....	97
4.5. CONCLUSION	99
CHAPTER 5: UNCOMMON EXPERIENCES OF (COMMON) SOCIAL WORLDS	100
5.1. INTRODUCTION.....	100
5.2. THE SPACE OF SOCIAL EXPERIENCE.....	101
5.2.1. <i>The Uncommon: Different Perceptions and Usages of Social Media</i>	101
5.2.2. <i>Experiencing the Social Across Different Spheres</i>	111
5.2.3. <i>Hashtags or ‘Like-clicking’: Varying Social Connotations of the Same Act</i>	118
5.3. CONCLUSION	125
CHAPTER 6: LIMITS TO SELF-MANAGEMENT OF SOCIAL LIFE.....	127
6.1. INTRODUCTION.....	127
6.2. MYTH OF (DIS)CONNECTABILITY	127
6.2.1. <i>Conditionality of (dis)connection</i>	133
6.3. AN (UNINVITED) ACTOR WITHIN SOCIAL LIFE	138

6.3.1. <i>The Uncontrollable</i>	140
6.3.2. <i>Embracing the Uncertainties</i>	143
6.3.3. <i>Metrics: Social Manifestations of Algorithms</i>	148
6.4. CONCLUSION	153
CHAPTER 7: REBUILDING INTERRELATIONS	155
7.1. INTRODUCTION	155
7.2. MANAGING SOCIAL INTERACTIONS AND RELATIONS.....	156
7.2.1. <i>Social Self in an Algorithmic Context</i>	156
7.2.2. <i>Identifying a Space for Sociability</i>	166
7.2.3. <i>Creating Social Distance</i>	174
7.3. BEING STRATEGIC: A FRAMEWORK FOR THE SOCIAL LIFE.....	178
7.4. CONCLUSION	185
CHAPTER 8: REBUILDING INTERDEPENDENCE	187
8.1. INTRODUCTION	187
8.2. REVIEWING RECIPROCITY AS CONTEXTUALIZED BY SOCIAL MEDIA	188
8.3. MATERIALIZING FORMS OF INTERDEPENDENCE.....	194
8.3.1. <i>Distancing the Self: the Conditionality of Interdependence</i>	199
8.3.2. <i>Efforts Towards Visibility Management</i>	207
8.3.2.1. Non-reciprocal Nature of Visibility	210
8.3.2.2. Displacement: Interdependence, for the Sake of Visibility	214
8.4. CONCLUSION	219
CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION	221
9.1. ARTICULATING THE SOCIAL	223
9.2. NEW INFRASTRUCTURE OF THE SOCIAL	226
9.3. RECONFIGURED INTERRELATIONS, INTERDEPENDENCE, AND UNSTABLE BASES OF SOCIAL SOLIDARITY	230
9.4. OVERALL CONTRIBUTIONS FOR THEORY AND METHOD	234
9.5. LIMITATIONS AND AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH	236
BIBLIOGRAPHY	238
APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW TOPIC GUIDE	257
APPENDIX 2: CALL FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS	261
APPENDIX 3: INFORMED CONSENT	262
APPENDIX 4: PROFILE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS	263

List of Figures

Figure 1: Social networking by age group in the UK 2011-17	89
Figure 2: A sample of drawing from research participant	94
Figure 3: Amanda's drawing	114
Figure 4: Jamie's drawing.....	117
Figure 5: Aaron's drawing	133
Figure 6: Daniel's screenshot of his Instagram Story	162
Figure 7: Norah's drawing	176
Figure 8: Carl's drawing	205

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1. On Solidarity and Social Media

November 2015, when I embarked on my journey towards a PhD was an exciting time for me personally, but a trouble time for society and the world, when we witnessed a series of attacks in Paris on the night of 13th November 2015 where more than 100 people died in a series of mass shootings and suicide bombings.

From that night on, and for the next few days and weeks, the mainstream media were, I still remember this vividly, dominated by breaking news, features and reports of the attacks, and reactions across the globe to this catastrophe. Individuals, celebrities, governments, and many other organizations around the world were expressing their solidarity with France and with the victims. This was mirrored on social media on a similar, if not greater, scale. Back then, I was using social media quite actively, and it was not hard to find numerous posts, comments and hashtags from people seeking to show solidarity with those who had been affected by the attacks, or with Parisians and the French in general. Signs of solidarity were spread around the world not just by French people but also by anybody wanting to show their sympathy. Friends of mine who were American, British, Dutch, Greek, Japanese, South Korean, and of many other nationalities were using hashtags such as #PeaceForParis or #PrayForFrance. Many, on Facebook, were overlaying an image of the French flag onto their Facebook profile pictures to symbolize their support. This appeared to be one form of sympathizing and engaging with the ‘distant suffering’ of others (Boltanski, 1999), involving human actions, and a concrete way of showing solidarity in the event of all the hardship.

In April 2014, about a year-and-a-half before this tragedy, South Korea had suffered not from a terrorist attack, but from a different dreadful disaster: the sinking of the *Sewol* ferry. More than 300 people, the majority of whom were high-school students and ferry crew, died in the accident. The exact reasons of the sinking still remain unknown, although it has been surmised that overloading and improperly secured cargo played their part, along with the failure of the ferry’s captain and operators to respond properly to the accident once it happened. Although this calamity did not seem to receive as much global attention as the terrorist attacks in France, the types of reactions made on and through media were more or less similar, especially of those

made through social media. Images of a yellow ribbon, as a symbol of hope for the safe return of the stranded students and passengers, were circulated on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The color yellow began to symbolize hope, remembrance, and solidarity, and many Koreans and Korean ex-pats (like myself), but also those who wanted to show empathy from Hong Kong, Japan, the UK or the US, changed their social media profiles to images of yellow ribbons – just like in the French case – to symbolize their hope and solidarity with those affected.

These two cases were remarkably different from each other in terms of the specific causes, contexts, and even the consequences and aftermath. Yet the common theme between these tragic happenings, was a spirit of solidarity – standing with *others*, not just loved ones – and a concomitant sense of a shared destiny among those who were involved, be that as a direct victim of the tragedy or not. Media has long played a key role in focusing feelings of solidarity. It has provided ritualistic relations to the social world by marshalling a sense of togetherness and fostering modes of living together, be it surrounding special occasions (Dayan and Katz, 1992) or in everyday life (Anderson, 2006; Williams, 1961). The overall process of media and communications, to paraphrase Raymond Williams, seems to be one of establishing a spirit of community (Williams, 1961: 38-39).

Although I was residing in London, UK, at the time of both these mass-media events, I felt shocked, frustrated, and at times emotionally devastated by both cases. Watching the media allowed me to learn more about the events, while remaining distant, and using social media helped me (even if not allowing me to offer sufficient practical help) express my feelings and share my sympathies with others. These opportunities provided by the media, as I recall, seemed to be creating a sense of temporary belonging that potentially further solidified, promoted, and buttressed solidarity.

In this regard, social media at first glance appears to reify the dream of Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, as explained to New York Times journalist David Kirkpatrick: that, through social media the aim was to achieve the ideal of the ‘gift economy’ (Kirkpatrick, 2011: 287-288). Referring to ideas of celebration, feast and most importantly gift-giving in tribal societies, Zuckerberg noted that ‘when there’s more openness, with everyone being able to express their opinion very quickly, more of the economy starts to operate like a gift economy’ (Zuckerberg, cited in Kirkpatrick, 2011: 287). According to Kirkpatrick, Zuckerberg was then considering individuals’ public expressions on Facebook as a kind of ‘gift’ to others, and so believed that

by exchanging those gifts, we could bring together people and bind communities in a way that was, up until the arrival of social media, impractical in a complex modern society.

This may have been Mr. Zuckerberg, and other social media founders', core belief, and if so, represents an overarching company mission which is both genuine and admirable. But the world today does not quite seem head in this direction. Encouragements of solidarity through social media, especially Facebook and its swift decision to encourage the gestures of solidarity regarding the French case, generated a backlash in the form of sharp criticism from many who pointed out the lack of similarly compassionate gestures for the then-crises in Lebanon and Syria; or for the massive forest fires of November 2015 in Indonesia that caused several deaths and seriously damaged the country's natural environment. Also, what lay beyond the rhetoric of social media platforms was how the Paris attacks came to feed into the sense of crisis in Europe by happening at a time when the continent was caught up in humanitarian politics surrounding the refugee crisis, and how this came to give birth to an imagination that Europe was not secure when a rim of conflict was ongoing in the neighborhood, leading to further securitization of borders.

In this way, there emerged a sense of anxiety around social media companies that they might have ranked the importance of human suffering depending on the location of the sufferers, and promoted solidarity gestures, hashtags and profiles, as a means to augment user engagement. By the same token, criticism was levelled against those who changed their profile pictures to include the Tricolore, suggesting that they were ignorant of what was going on in the world, and instead narrowing their focus down to only one tragedy. As a result, it was argued that what instead was happening was that within the corporate spaces of social media a cozy comfort zone was being evolved, defined by 'slacktivism' and 'clicktivism' (Dahlgren, 2013; Papacharissi, 2010), traits whose base meaning might differ considerably from genuine solidarity.

Meanwhile, regarding the South Korean case, social media did not seem to face these sorts of critique, perhaps owing to the lesser degree of global attention and no formal provision of a profile filter. Yet these events also ended up generating a sense of hostility within the public, between those who kept using the yellow ribbon and those who stopped or did not use them from the outset; where the former blamed the latter for being unempathetic, cold-hearted, and having no solidarity, the latter accused the former of being overly emotional, of overreacting,

and being readily swayed by the views of others rather than responding rationally. The use of the yellow ribbon, in South Korean context, has since evolved from a once apolitical sign of remembrance to a politicized one denoting contention and partisanship, and the tension that emerged around its use has still not fully subsided.

Today, 2020 feels again an unusually precarious and unpredictable time, agitated by social, political, economic and other forms of violent disruption, with defiance and division among people seemingly growing around the world (Sennett, 2012). Moreover, to the above list of examples of societal turbulence, we must also add technological disruption. From this vantage point, instead of holding individuals and groups together, as promised by social media founders and those who once viewed the role of digital media as bearing a promise of democratization and egalitarian culture (Benkler, 2006; Castells, 2013; Leadbeater, 2008; Shirky, 2008) social media in fact do not seem to be fostering great solidarity, and may even be spawning friction and exclusionary practices, not only in highly sensitive and disruptive events such as disasters and tragedies, but also around more mundane events, from sports matches and television to climate changes and economic uprisings.

This apparent division between groups is perhaps itself not surprising. Solidarity has often been based on and stimulated by specific group traits, or by the sharing of characteristics with the objective to generate resentment and backlash from those in socially unmarked (or subordinated) categories – subordinated to the extent they are prevented from participating in social life as a peer (Fraser, 2001), as we can recall from the various recognition-focused social movements. Sometimes, the idea of solidarity is even considered as lying at variance with diversity and plurality of society (Putnam, 2007). This propensity to generate polarization or disputes between individuals and groups is not something newly-created by social media themselves, but is something that is ingrained in the notion of solidarity itself. However, this suggests that the ideal vision underlying social media, for bringing people together through enhanced connection, seem to remain unachieved. On the contrary, in fact, given their increasing entrenchment, popularity and ubiquity in almost every aspect of the contemporary life, social media seem complicit in rendering social, cultural, political, or economic issues and events more visible and leaving them as matters to be grappled with – whether one chooses to address or ignore this fact – in everyday life. What does it even ‘mean’ then to have, or show, solidarity with others in a contemporary context where we are ‘living with’ social media?

This thesis is concerned with this specific aspect of social media and solidarity. More concretely, it focuses less on whether, or to what extent, social media generates and/or intensified divisions among those who use social media; or what specific types of community they give shape to vis-à-vis others; or whether people's apparent gestures and actions of solidarity may, in fact, be a sign of slacktivism or clicktivism. Instead, it seeks to focus on the underlying conditions of our everyday social lives that might enable and/or constrain the development of solidarity, acknowledging that our lives today are irrevocably contextualized by social media. Putting it more directly, this thesis attempts to ask: what are the very *conditions*, in this context of social media, on the basis of which we actually develop solidarity? And how has the deep intricate involvement of social media in our everyday life led to shifts the ways we experience it? The main interest of this thesis thus lies in *how* this relatively new form of structure of mediation and connection, enacted by social media, works: how and to what extent it could be reconfiguring our 'modes of daily [social] life' (Giddens, 1984: 60), thereby (re)shaping the way individuals develop solidarity within that context. This I will define as a focus on 'social' solidarity (rather than political, humanitarian, or particular group-based solidarity) and this is the subject this thesis aims to address.

1.2. Rise of Social Media, Demise of Solidarity?

How can we understand the roles that social media plays in our social lives as forming a basis for solidarity; that is, as an underlying and profound social dimension? The answers from many social media gurus are similar to what has already been outlined above. Extending his concerns about the gift economy, Mark Zuckerberg powerfully suggested that social media (by which of course he meant Facebook and perhaps also Instagram and WhatsApp) along with 'churches, sports teams, unions or other local groups . . . all share important roles as social infrastructure for our communities:'

They provide all of us with a sense of purpose and hope; moral validation that we are needed and part of something bigger than ourselves; comfort that we are not alone and a community is looking out for us; mentorship, guidance and personal development; a safety net; values, cultural norms and accountability; social gatherings, rituals and a way to meet new people; and a way to pass time . . . **In times like these, the most important thing we at Facebook can do is develop the *social infrastructure* to give people the power to**

build a global community that works for all of us (Zuckerberg, 2017; italics added, emphasis in original).

Other social media founders and CEOs may not have put it as straightforwardly as Zuckerberg, but the vision, hope, and belief in enhanced connection, greater interaction, global community and empowerment of ordinary individuals are what most social media platforms share as their base claim about how they enrich our social lives.¹ However noble and ambitious this aim may be, however, it does not appear to have solved the wider issue related to making communities or society better, let alone contributing to solidarity. Many, both from within the academic circle and beyond it, have enumerated various troubling aspects of this vision for social media's role as a kind of 'social infrastructure,' questioning how it overlooks other key features required in order to sustain a collective life, for example politics and journalism (e.g. Bell, 2017; Beckett, 2017; Boellstorff, 2017). In addition, although the provision of infrastructure can help fight polarization and build communities (Klinenberg, 2018), infrastructures do not, by themselves, automatically remedy the issues inherent within them. Consider, for example, how unequal distribution and use of infrastructure, such as electricity and sewage systems, has historically brought forth conflicts rather than cooperation and action of solidarity; and how even public infrastructures, such as parks, unintendedly convey exclusionary narratives through the way they are represented and organized (e.g. Byrne, 2012) rather than providing total inclusion and universal access (Ribes and Bowker, 2008). Do the cases of social media's unanticipated promotion of exclusionary logic, selective inclusion and polarization as discussed above, then not seem to echo this once more in their digital version? There comes a moment, therefore, when compatibility between the private interests of social media and the maintenance of any public values are called into question (van Dijck, Poell, and de Wall, 2018).

Scholars from various disciplines have conducted decades of investigation into how digital media, and more recently social media, have been implicated in the ways that individuals come together, act together, and live together. There is a very extensive spectrum of literature that includes both optimistic and skeptical positions, but the current trend seems to be towards the

¹ For instance, consider the following examples of mission statements with an emphasis on community, sharing, conversation, etc.: *YouTube*: 'Our mission is to give everyone a voice and to show them the world. We believe that everyone deserves to have a voice, and that the world is a better place when we listen, share and build a community through our stories; *Twitter*: 'The mission we serve as Twitter, Inc. is to give everyone the power to create and share ideas and information instantly without barriers. Our business and revenue will always follow that mission in ways that improve – and do not detract from – a free and global conversation'; *LinkedIn*: 'The mission of LinkedIn is simple: connect the world's professionals to make them more productive and successful.'

latter. We find a broad range of dire warnings against, for example, growing surveillance on digital platforms and its consequences for citizens' participation in democracy (Cohen, 2012), or those situations where we come to encounter only information and views conforming to and reinforcing our own beliefs at the expense of a diversity of accounts, something known as the 'filter bubble' (Pariser, 2011). Others also raised vigilance against how social media encourage social distancing of individuals from one another rather than bringing them together (Vaidhyathan, 2018); even though they, at the same time, structurally hamper the individuals' attempts to (permanently) relinquish the use of social media (Jorge, 2019; Karppi, 2018; Seaver, 2018). Naturally, this serves to further the generation of greater data, rather than being helpful for the individuals' social activities and purposes. These sorts of worries seem to validate what Sherry Turkle said nearly a decade ago: 'we are increasingly connected to each other but oddly more alone: in *intimacy, new solitudes*' (Turkle, 2011: 19; italics in original). The spirit of solidarity does not seem to have much power here.

More recently, terms such as 'filter bubble,' 'algorithms,' 'algorithmic curation,' or 'automated surveillance' have entered common parlance, carrying similar concerns as those voiced in skeptical academic accounts about the implications for social media in our social lives. From search results to newsfeeds, what we see and do on and through social media (and beyond, e.g. through Google, digital platforms and apps) is increasingly shaped by the inner workings of algorithms. For instance, recommendation engines potentially influence the formation of new groups and meetings between individuals. Trending algorithms indicate what others are *now* paying attention to, and are thereby capable of driving topics of conversation. Content moderation by social media also plays a part in these processes, creating consequences for visibility of certain public discourse (Gillespie, 2018), yet remaining just as hidden. Again, these issues of encountering one-sided information in an 'echo chamber' (Sunstein, 2007), institutional attempts by corporations to hold on to individuals, or being socially distant and alienating from each other, are all century-old problems, certainly not something newly created by social media. But it is no exaggeration to say that our everyday social lives have become deeply, and ever more intricately tied to invisible feedback loops and algorithmic systems of social media (Helmond, Weltevrede, and Gerlitz, 2014). As yet, there seems to be no clear way to untangle ourselves from this.

This thesis extends the scholarly concerns about the possibilities for social media and its algorithms restructuring, and perhaps compromising, our social lives, and ways of living

together. However, instead of considering the impacts of social media as imposed upon our social life in a top-down way, and grasping the way we live together from a macro point of view, here I propose that the shifting character of solidarity in today's increasingly datafied social world requires a new empirical focus: an attention to how this process plays out through micro-level transformations of individuals' everyday lives.

1.3. Directions of the Thesis

Developing an empirical analysis of how individuals develop solidarity within their social life as contextualized by social media does, however, generate some uncertainties. I will discuss these in more details in Chapters 2 and 3, but it is worth pointing out briefly that, currently, little has been said about social solidarity within a broader context of social media. In sociology and social theory, where social solidarity has historically been an important locus for inquiry, the roles that social media plays in potentially reconfiguring our social lives as the basis for solidarity, has not fully been taken into consideration. Conversely, in media studies, social media have been at the core of current research, and how they are implicated in the forms of collective life from social network to real community have received extensive attention. However, the *concept* of social solidarity itself has not. To be clear, the term itself has been mentioned and used extensively across different kinds of media study, but there has been little systematic attempt to conceptualize and define this term, or apply it in an empirical investigation. In most cases, the term is used to evoke a normative picture of people acting and standing together, at best as an achieved result, and with little explanation as to how it has come about. Moreover, the distinction between 'social' and other forms of solidarity has not always been made clear in media studies. This necessitates a conceptual revision of the term 'social solidarity' to help bridge this gap, connecting those two research traditions and paving a way towards a richer account of social solidarity in a contemporary social context, into whose fabric social media are becoming ever-more-tightly woven.

Achieving this requires a theoretical framework that can offer a conceptual understanding of social solidarity while not prioritizing a top-down 'macro' social structure onto the 'micro' agency of individuals. This thesis therefore seeks to explore the ways in which individuals develop social solidarity, rather than regarding it as developed and constructed extraneously by looking how society is structured, as in the early functionalist approaches to social solidarity.

Thus, it is imperative to draw also on the works of scholars concerned with the connections between individuals' actions and interactions, and a wider sense of collectivity. However, at the same time, the shifting coordinates of the social world as contextualized by social media and algorithms foreclose a straightforward application of any existing framework that ignores the workings of social media platforms themselves. We must therefore theorize the workings not only of social solidarity, but also of the mediations of everyday social life as brought about by social media, a task which in turn entails updating existing conceptual frameworks of social solidarity.

As I will illustrate, starting from the end of Chapter 2 and throughout Chapter 3, the concept of 'interdependence' is employed as a scaffolding for building this framework for social solidarity, as a means to avoid overtly prioritizing either structure (of social media) or agency (of individuals) *per se*. This is because, although 'social solidarity' itself may remain too vague as an idea to be *directly observable*, our disciplinary commitment to its latent presence across a vast list of literature enables us to grasp all manner of interpersonal dependencies, as a fundamental element in human life.

These conceptual choices inform the methodological possibilities, as I will explain in Chapter 4. Since it is important to avoid a functionalist idea of social solidarity working as a tissue that connects individuals across a self-contained society, this thesis seeks to look at social actions and experiences to account for the development of social solidarity. I will explain this in more detail in Chapter 3, but this suggests that social solidarity is deeply rooted also in the reflexivity of individuals and their ability to understand the influence of the wider structure – in this case, social media – over their lives. This calls for a qualitative mode of inquiry capable of opening up a deeper exploration of people's feelings, actions, and experiences.

1.4. Aims and Structure of the Thesis

In this way, through this investigation, I hope to contribute, above all, to discussion of social solidarity in our contemporary context. Despite the term's popularity and widespread use across a range of disciplines, both within and outside academic circles, it remains a conceptually messy word with little attempts at theorization, conceptual definition, or evolutionary development thus far attempted. At present, social solidarity may mean quite

different things to different people depending on the context and who is using the term. Engaging in a conceptual revision of social solidarity, I also hope to show the benefits – indeed, necessities – of deeper engagement with (social) media. In the rare moments where more attention has been paid to the role of media in literature on social solidarity, the focus has been attuned more to questions of media institutions and discourses from a macro point of view, and tends to either overlook people’s practices through media, or consider them in terms of how they help reconstitute individuals’ identities. But they pay scant attention to how media, especially social media, can be a catalyst for interrelations and interdependence more widely, as will be shown in Chapter 3.

Second, this thesis aims to make a contribution to the broader debate on the nature and dynamics of social media and its algorithmic influences, the consequences of which are far-reaching and not confined to social domains. There is an extensive range of studies in this regard, which have attempted to describe, explain, and critique social media and algorithms from a variety of angles. While many of them take a political-economic lens and/or Foucauldian approach (e.g. focusing on the impact of surveillance on behavior shaping, or discriminatory classification by automated technologies and its ramifications) more recently there has been a move to study them from a bottom-up perspective of individuals, as in this thesis (e.g. Bishop, 2019; Bucher, 2017; Cotter, 2019; Eslame et al., 2015; O’Meara, 2019).

Yet compared to the study of those who use social media for specific purposes (e.g. activists, influencers, digital merchants) the issue of ordinary individuals’ viewpoints has been comparatively neglected. In addition, only a few researchers working in this strand have explicitly touched upon the meaning of ‘social’ from an interpretative perspective, or related their study to account for transformations being played out in a wider social dimension. Generally, greater attention has been paid to the notion of a/the ‘self.’ Relatedly, it is hoped that this thesis can contribute to understanding what ‘the social’ means in a context of ‘social’ media.

The current chapter serves as the introduction to the thesis journey towards achieve these outcomes, and the following chapters are structured as follows.

Chapter 2 reviews and discusses classical and contemporary approaches to social solidarity and identifies the gaps. It shows a need for constructing a new framework to account for social

solidarity in a contemporary context, presenting a few of the key building blocks for this construction. The thesis's main research question is herein stated.

Chapter 3 develops the theoretical framework that underpins the empirical investigation of this thesis. To engage in a conceptual revision of social solidarity, it begins by showing a lack of systematic approaches to (social) media for the study of social solidarity; then moves on to clarify the meaning of 'the social' as comprising both meaning and materials (Sewell, 2005), exploring solidarity as a form of interdependence and illustrating how the thesis understands the profound involvement of social media and algorithms in the development of social solidarity. Four sub-research questions, required to address the main question, are also noted here.

Chapter 4 details the methodological foundations of this study. It suggests that the account of social solidarity as developing from the ground up through people's actions and interactions as contextualized by social media, warrants the use of a constructivist epistemology and qualitative methods: in-depth interview, qualitative drawing, and Think-Aloud practice. It also explains the detailed procedures of the research, from sampling strategy to data collection, data analysis, and ethical concerns and reflexivity of the researcher, as pertinent.

Chapter 5 is the first empirical chapter. Based on the discussion of 'the social' in Chapter 3 and construction of the theoretical framework, it discusses how individuals go around their social lives in a context of social media and articulate their *overall* social experiences accordingly. It also explores the meaning of this thesis's choice to situate what people do *through* social media against a wider analytical backdrop.

Chapter 6 extends the concern of Chapter 5, but with a more distinctive focus on people's management of distance (through social media) as a strategy to help organize their overall social life. It then moves on to address how algorithms are implicated in their social lives, and how people come to deal with and embrace them as part of their everyday experience.

Chapter 7 works to understand the models of sociality against a backdrop of algorithmically reconfigured social reality, in reference to development of the various social ties that bring people and groups together, including forms of exchange, phatic functions, and associations. It

probes the ways people manage and control their social relations and effect a proper distance, before later addressing the ways in which people become interrelated in a social media context.

Chapter 8 serves as the final empirical part of this thesis. It focuses on how, and to what extent, relations of interdependence are emerging on the basis of complex interrelations and a backdrop of social media. Discussing the role of reciprocity, exchange and performance to build relations of interdependence, it aims to grapple with the possibility of how forms of interdependence *potentially* get materialized.

Finally, **Chapter 9** recaps the empirical findings to highlight the contributions of this thesis to the wider debate on social solidarity, studies of algorithms through bottom-up approaches, and the place of ‘the social’ in digital research. It also discusses limitations of the research and points to possible avenues for future work. Importantly, in the end, I suggest that this unpacking of *social* solidarity as it exists today in an age of social media and algorithms forms a necessary precondition for a more informed account of the contemporary possibilities for *political* solidarity, i.e. solidarity focused on convergent political actions.

CHAPTER 2: THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL SOLIDARITY IN COMPLEX SOCIETIES

2.1. Introduction

This chapter discusses and reviews theories of social solidarity with the aim of constructing the theoretical framework that will underpin the empirical analysis of this thesis (Chapters 5-8). It begins by reviewing classic and contemporary approaches to social solidarity, and through the course of this analysis, identifies the gap in the extant literature for conceptual revision of what social solidarity is understood to mean.

It should be noted first that, in this thesis, social solidarity is conceptualized as differentiating from related concepts, such as community, pity, altruism, etc., and also from other kinds of solidarity, such as political solidarity or moral solidarity, that often come with a capital *S*. As will be demonstrated, the concept of *social* solidarity here focuses more on interdependence as a fundamental part of human life, since it is the form of solidarity that stems most obviously from different forms of mediated interrelations between individuals. Social solidarity is, therefore, more analytical than normative, and this thesis focuses on the structure and possibility of forming (or dissolving) modes of interdependence through people's actions as contextualized by social media. In other words, social solidarity here is not construed as something based on normative order, humanitarian support, shared commitment to moral principles, or agonistic attitudes.

This chapter proceeds according to three distinct steps. First, by reviewing the extant theories, it builds the analytical foundations for a theoretical framework that can reach beyond a functionalist approach to social solidarity, while identifying key elements of social solidarity as relevant. It then highlights the role of people's actions at a micro-level in the development of social solidarity, drawing on scholars such as Weber and Simmel, but also making explicit the assumption about actions underlying functionalist approaches to social solidarity, and how actions and a sense of order can be reconciled within a new theoretical framework. Last, the chapter discusses the importance of media as germane to social solidarity. Media, and social media for the purposes of this thesis, are intricately involved in mediating relationships between individuals, and its role in weaving a sense of collectivity is undoubted; yet its presence in literature surrounding social solidarity – mostly in sociology, moral philosophy

and cultural studies – is largely missing. Therefore, through this three-fold investigation, this chapter aims to provide a foundation for the following chapter, which concerns the theoretical framework which can be used for empirical analysis of how (or whether) social solidarity develops in an age when social life is heavily contextualized by social media and the algorithmic systems it relies on.

2.2. Approaches to Social Solidarity

Of all the concepts that have been discussed in sociology and political theory, solidarity is a strong candidate for one of the most influential yet challenging and under-theorized. The term appears across a broad range of social science disciplines, from sociology, to political theory and moral philosophy, to cultural studies, post-colonial studies, and even economics and psychology. To the sociologist, for example, solidarity would refer primarily to models of human sociality, the types of ties that bring individuals and groups together; to the economist, meanwhile, it would mean the redistribution of resources between wealthy and poor through taxation systems² (Piketty, 2017); and to the political theorists, solidarity may be associated primarily with collective mobilization based on group identity or class consciousness, vis-à-vis other social classes (Marx and Engels, 1969; Scholz, 2008, 2015); while the philosophers (especially in the communitarian strand) it refers to the concept of normative membership in a moral community, or a basic ethical concern for others manifest in prosocial thoughts and actions, as a kind of ‘civic virtue’ (Sandel, 1996) essential for holding together a tangible society or community (Rorty, 1989). Arguably, little common ground is found across these varying understandings, besides a general consensus that the definition of solidarity is often under-specified and remains largely rhetorical (Wilde, 2013), in other words meaning different things to different people.

The meaning of the term solidarity is itself, of course, fairly intuitive. Solidarity evokes a picture of socially, emotionally, or normatively motivated readiness and preparedness for

² Here, I distinguish between definitions of solidarity drawn from economics and sociology for the sake of analytic convenience, but there are several sociologists, particularly those who employ and uphold rational choice theories like Michael Hetcher (1987) who conceptualize solidarity in a more economics-like fashion, as ‘The preparedness of individuals to use private resources for collective ends and to follow up such preparedness by action’ (Hetcher’s conceptualization of solidarity succinctly summarized by Stjernø [2009: 292]). In a similar fashion, Stjernø, as an academic in social policy himself, suggests that solidarity is a ‘preparedness to share resources with others by personal contribution to those in struggle or in need and through taxation and redistribution organized by the state’ (Stjernø, 2009: 2).

mutual support among people who are standing in broad unity with one another. This intuitive impression may perhaps explain the long-standing ease of use of the term throughout modern and even classical history. Its etymological roots are situated in the ‘in sodium’ notion of Ancient Roman law where the ‘obligation in solidum’ referred to the ‘unlimited liability of each individual member within the family or other community to pay common debts’ (Bayertz, 1999: 3). There have also long been religious ideas connecting with the idea of solidarity, from the idea of God’s family or charity for the poor as means to uphold the good of individuals and society. More recently, solidarity has been identified as a force which may be used to counter economic inequalities generated by the rise of early modern capitalism (Leroux, 1840); or, as one of the key principles of the French Revolution and its slogan *liberté, égalité and fraternité*. As a virtue which would seem fundamental to a successful, peaceful and just human life (United Nations, 2000) few would question its noble connotations.

However, such varied usage and multi-dimensional yet fundamentally normative definitions of solidarity are precisely the reason the term remains abstract and conceptually messy, making a workable definition of solidarity for empirical analysis difficult to attain (there might be a good reason for it being most concretely operationalized in economics as a redistributive tax system).

It is true that we have recently observed new attempts to use the term solidarity more specifically and distinctively, for instance, when discerning between social, political, and moral solidarity (Bayertz, 1999). But there are as yet few clear-cut boundaries between definitions of different kind of solidarity. In fact, rival conceptions of solidarity are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but they often illustrate the fact that different visions are likely obtained according to whether the major concern is with the causes of solidarity, its contexts, processes, or consequences. Given that modern social and political contexts have changed, becoming more diverse, complex and conflicting than ever before, the assumptions and premises upon which a single model of solidarity could be predicated is no longer viable, *as it is at present*. It is not that this chapter seeks to give up on the conceptual revision of solidarity; on the contrary, as I will show in detail in the current and following chapters, such revision is in order. However, it seeks to question the merit of establishing a grand theory of solidarity, accepting that there *are* various types of solidarity that may work together, albeit in different ways, to deliver the normative outcomes ingrained in the concept. By the same token, it aims to shed a spotlight on the key ‘modifier’ on solidarity in this project: namely, *the social*. It must be noted that the use

of ‘social’ here distinguishes social solidarity from other types of solidarity (political solidarity, family solidarity, etc.), as I will show in this chapter.

In the following sections, I will first document and review classic and more contemporary accounts of social solidarity across various strands of social theory, and how conceptions of social solidarity have changed as academic disciplines have sought to grapple with a transformation of society itself, and tackle the limitations of the concept. This review will be thorough but by no means exhaustive – doing so is unrealistic, and nor is it necessary given that there is no single theory of solidarity that can capture the nuances and particularities of how social solidarity comes into place in today’s complex social context.

2.2.1. Solidarity, Community, and Social Theory

‘Men are not isolated non-social atoms, but are men only when in intrinsic relations to men’ (Dewey, 1888: 231). This quote vividly demonstrates the very basic characteristic of human life that we *become* human beings in the process of social living, through modes of associated living. The fact that we are fundamentally interdependent and necessarily interrelated with each other is, thus, an irrevocable and unquestionable *fact* of our lives. It is in this respect that Dewey further urged us to ask *not only* the question of ‘how individuals or singular beings come to be connected . . . [but also] how they come to be connected in just those ways which give human communities traits so different from those [found in the nature]’ (Dewey, 1984: 250). It is from these human forms of connection and interrelations that individuals are inevitably embedded in, that the idea of social solidarity is borne.

However, social solidarity is not a matter reducible to intersubjective relations alone. The wider transformations of the societies in which individuals are located have always brought about concerns of how the relationship of one individual to the others can be materially retained, sustained and reproduced. This is an intellectual problem which has been considered for centuries, and we can find evidence of its contemplation from, for instance, Thomas Hobbes’s view of social order as imposed from above by a powerful government in order to keep people from dreading and distrusting each other (Hobbes, 1949: 11); or in Georg Simmel’s account of ‘the stranger’ (Simmel, 1950b), where a *blasé* attitude of interaction and tenuous commitment is proposed as a means for this notional figures to ‘preserve the autonomy and individuality of

his existence in the face of overwhelming social forces' (Simmel, 1950a: 409). More recently, scholarly anxieties have been formed around a contemporary neoliberal regime that promotes individualism and the projection of a self over other forms of collectivity, potentially resulting in atomization or the advancing nihilism of social disaggregation (e.g. Esposito, 1998; Habermas, 2006; Putnam, 2000). This is exactly the theme taken up in Émile Durkheim's studies on social solidarity, as an attempt to rescue and redefine the very possibility of society *tout court*. Simply, Durkheim asked: 'Why does the individual, while becoming more autonomous, depend more upon society? How can he be at once more individual and more solidary? Certainly, these two movements, contradictory as they appear, develop in parallel fashion' (Durkheim, 1893: 38).

According to Durkheim (1893), a transformation of social solidarity was at the heart of sustaining society in the middle phase of transition from traditional to modern and, as such, helped protect the individual from total fragmentation. Whereas the former structure relied on the social ties marked by a totality of shared belief, value system and sentiments, the latter was created instead by means of crisscrossing social bonds and economic reciprocities, resulting from complex networks of interactions generated by a specialized division of labor, and the concomitant functional differentiation or imperatives of necessity of interdependence and cooperation. This well-known distinction of mechanical and organic solidarities as constitutive forces holding 'social populations and institutions together' (Calhoun, 1992: 205) was, for Durkheim, an analytical means through which to understand how the greater autonomy of individuals in modern society can still harmonize with the functioning of society as an organic whole. Social solidarity from this perspective, forms a kind of social 'tissue' (Durkheim, 1893: 276) that links the aggregate of individuals in a society, all of whom are in 'continuous contact' (Durkheim, 1893: 277).

Closely aligned with Durkheim's view is that of Marcel Mauss, Durkheim's intellectual heir. In his *Essai sur le don: The Gift* (1925/1990) Mauss presents an analysis of gift-giving culture across cultures and times. His analysis is akin to that of Durkheim to the extent that gift-giving was conceptualized, not so much an exploration of individual habits or actions, but as a search for the moral conclusion that underpins the society of his own times. A gift was never, in Mauss's view, simply a token of gratitude, not least as its giving contained an inherent sense of 'obligation to return presents' (Mauss, 1944/2014: 31). For this reason, gift-giving consisted of a three-tier obligation of giving, receiving, and reciprocating, signaling a system of a social

‘exchange’ in place, through which to create, retain and reproduce social relations. For Mauss, this logic of gift-giving leads to a foundation from which ‘solidarity’ as the underpinning of a society (Mauss, 1925/1990: 87) could be born. It is not simply a logic between individuals, but also applied to the relation of the individual to society, with returns to be made not just in terms of monetary elements:

The worker has given his life and his labor, on the one hand to the collectivity, and on the other hand, to his employers . . . Those who have benefited from his services have not discharged their debt to him through the payment of wages. The state itself, representing the community, owes him, as do his employers, together with some assistance from himself, a certain security in life, against unemployment, sickness, old age, and death (Mauss, 1925/1990: 86).

It is observed from these accounts of social solidarity as a ‘tissue’ or ‘social underpinning’ that both Durkheim and Mauss, as well as many others in a similar academic strand (e.g. Halbwachs, 1950; Parsons, 1937) were intrigued by the exploration of an ‘order’ of a society that keeps itself in a (relatively) stable form; and by the key role of social solidarity as a system for retaining such order. Would this idea of organically ordered and stable society hold, however? This is one of the points that must be re-considered in the conceptual revision of social solidarity in today’s society, something this paper will attempt in the following section (2.2.2.). Before moving in that direction, however, let us consider another account of social solidarity which have some resonance with the functionalist ideas of Durkheim and Mauss, the approach of German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies.

Unlike Durkheim and Mauss, Tönnies did not specifically use the term social solidarity. But despite the lack of nomenclature, the very idea of social bonds, ties or associations between individuals in the face of modernity was also well implicated in his accounts. Tönnies (1955), for instance, believed that social entities are held together not just by intersubjectively shared feelings, but also two different types of social bonds, through which they are ‘being bound to others’ (p.8). His concepts for these types of bond were *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* which, respectively, translate as ‘community’ and ‘association,’ with the former referring to a group of people being held together by ‘real and organic life’ in pre-modern society, and the latter indicating people bound together through an ‘imaginary and mechanical structure’ (p.37).

Tönnies and Durkheim's ideas can be differentiated on a number of counts, notably in the negative connotations often associated with the concept of *gesellschaft*. Unlike Durkheim, Tönnies seemed to be in favor of *gemeinschaft* over *gesellschaft*, regarding it as a more stable basis for social order grounded in what individuals have long inherited from their ancestors (p.87), in the form of kinship, customs and history; whereas *gesellschaft*, as an outcome of greater geographical mobility and the rise of industrial capitalism, could ultimately reduce the bases of social solidarity merely to an 'act of exchange . . . performed by individuals who are alien to each other, having nothing in common with each other, and confront each other in an essentially antagonistic and even hostile manner' (1971: 76f). *Gesellschaft* relies on individuals who are guided by their rational calculation of what is useful to them, and it is in this respect that in his view a society based in *gesellschaft* can be precarious and unstable. This view is intriguing, given that he saw human interdependence, i.e. being bound to others, as 'the exact opposite of freedom . . . implying a moral obligation, a moral imperative, or a prohibition' (1957: 8). But in Tönnies's view, the relations of *gesellschaft* do not seem to have a firm degree of solidarity to the extent that Durkheim and Mauss envisaged.

2.2.2. Critique of a (Stable) Social Order

But the idea of social solidarity, bonds, ties, as an underpinning for a social 'order,' is not free from critique. One of the most powerful criticisms levelled against this functionalist idea of ordered society concerns 'whose' order this is, and so whose social solidarity is under discussion. This line of argument often comes from feminist and post-colonial scholars, who point out that a social order which takes men as the norm may transform women into 'minor subjects' (Gane, 1992: 106), or simply an under-acknowledged 'other.' Our understanding of what *is* a just and stable society formed on the grounds of the experience of the privileged, thus may not recognize how social order can in fact reproduce inequalities in society (Mohanty, 2003). It also fails to understand 'the role of ideology in sustaining oppressive social structure' (Scholz, 2015: 727). The understanding of a just society in this respect requires more than recognizing differences between individuals and how they are nevertheless kept from being fragmented despite the differences, but integrating the experience of the marginalized into the accounts of solidarity, understanding that social identities and differences are socially constructed rather than inherited or given from the outset (Alexander, 2004; Calhoun, 2002).

The possibility of social exclusion by social solidarity raises a fundamental concern about the desirability of social solidarity: that it is critically Janus-faced. We are often blinded by the term's quintessentially normative implications, which intuitively signal a better mode of living together, and so may presume that social solidarity is more or less, if not always, welcomed. But as Richard Sennett (1977) showed through his critique of *gemeinschaft* – community – can potentially have corrosive consequences over social relations. This is because erasing the barriers of strangerhood and celebrating the intimacy and local ghetto of community can undermine the idea that 'people [especially in complex modern societies] grow only by processes of encountering the unknown' (Sennett, 1977: 295). As such, social solidarity may not, or should not blindly be, understood as an *innately positive* value.

In fact, the understanding that solidarity can be in some ways exclusionary, bringing about polemical consequences and conflicts, is something vividly illustrated by Marx and his followers, for instance through the theorization of class consciousness. In Marx's view, different class positions have a strong impact on how an individual is fitted into social solidarity relationships, and this calls into question the desirability of *general* social relations in an organically ordered system. Marx acknowledged that his idea of class-based solidarity is not an inevitable outcome of people sharing the same class-based interests and backgrounds within a single system:

The small-holding peasants form an enormous mass whose members live in similar conditions but without entering into manifold relations with each other. Their mode of production isolates them from one another instead of bringing them into mutual intercourse . . . and the identity of their interests forms no community (Marx and Engels, 1969: 478-479).

The translation of class consciousness into a form of solidarity, for Marx, requires the 'common interests' as the vehicle (1959: 194). But it is not a natural consequence of a social order, no matter what the shared basis, or even the division of labor is. The collective actions and reactions of a particular social class – proletariats in this case – can be mobilized and their strengths consolidated either naturally or automatically.

Yet a focus on class-based or specific group-based solidarity does not stand up to full scrutiny either. If the group is not taken a given, but as the product of agencies of social 'action,' and

constituted more as ‘relations,’ a different picture appears. Two of the most notable scholars in this tradition are Georg Simmel and Max Weber, who questioned *both* the Durkheimian functionalist approach to social solidarity *and* position-based solidarity. Simmel (1902), for instance, claimed through his observations that forms of solidarity were more firmly structured among smaller groups, not because they were based on their own class, but because the level of social *interactions* in smaller groups was much more intensive, and there were more concretely recognizable ‘others’ outside the group who were not as abstract an entity as a ‘class.’³ This stands parallel to Weber’s refusal to take class consciousness or community as the overriding foundation for social solidarity. Specifically, Weber did not altogether reject that class could be a *potential* basis for collective action, but for him this phenomenon is something ‘that might or might not become actual’ (Barnes, 1995: 173). Such abstract social position is one of the many potential categories around which solidarity may be mobilized, as people may not perceive and live their reality primarily in terms of abstract social categories like class:

It is not the rentier, the shareholder and the banker who will suffer the ill will of the worker, but almost exclusively the manufacturer and the business executives who are the *direct* opponents of workers in wage conflicts (Weber, 1978: 931; italics added).

Therefore, whatever collective identities and sense of solidarity that forms the ground for ‘the communalization of social relationships’ (Weber, 1962: 91) stand in contrast against those which are more palpably visible and confronted through the specific actions of the agents who are involved. Indeed, even though Weber used a *prima facie* dualistic notion of ‘communal’ and ‘associative’ ‘types of solidary social relations’ (Weber, 1947: 136) to refer to ideal types of society proposed by Tönnies, his use of these terms was not intended to suggest that such relations were the product of a pre-existing society and stable social order; rather, to clarify distinctions between pre-modern and modern society. Weber believed that associative relations were formed as a consequence of people’s ‘actions’ towards value- or instrumentally *rational* activities in the secularized community of modern times. This is a crucial shift in analytic focus, away from what Talcott Parsons (1937) later termed ‘the problem of order,’ towards the ramifications of social action and experiences. Perhaps this explains why Weber’s

³ Simmel did not discuss relations of gender or race, but the same logic can apply to them as he referred to the scale and abstractness of a social category rather than only discussing the class in its own.

nomenclature did not include the specific terms social solidarity or solidarity, but instead describes communal and associative ‘relations,’ which seem to better highlight the criticality of social actions and interactions relative to a sense of collectivity beyond the remit of individuals themselves.

2.3. Contemporary Approaches to Social Solidarity

Having said all this, the world has changed much since the times of these founding fathers of sociology. It is therefore no surprise that a myriad of scholars have sought to conceptually revise social solidarity, since ‘new forms of solidarity are not captured by these distinctions [between community and association, or mechanical and organic solidarities]’ (Giddens, 1994: 186).

In particular, the force of individualization, furthered in late-modernity and especially through the rise of neoliberalism, is deemed to have a strong influence in the relationship of the individual to society. Some scholars have conceptualized this shift negatively, such that a sense of solidarity based in the collective consciousness no longer exists, and as emotional charges draw us apart ‘it has succumbed to a process of fission, a Balkanization of social identity into fragmented group identities that are hostile to one another’ (Meštrović, 1996: xii). Or as Bauman (1999: 54) put it, social change today has produced a situation in which ‘[o]ur sufferings divide and isolate: our miseries set us apart, tearing up the delicate tissue of human solidarities.’ Bauman introduced the term ‘togetherness,’ in lieu of solidarity, to explain this situation, but claimed that such togetherness, regardless of its forms, is fragmentary, episodic and short-lived (1995: 49); yielding with potentially negative ramifications for trust in social relationships and the understanding of differences between individuals.

Conversely, scholars like Beck (1992) may have seen this shift not as pessimistically as the likes of Bauman, as Beck was suggesting that declining traditional forms of solidarity do not necessarily open up a social void. Yet he acknowledges how the momentum of individualization, impelled and accelerated by the rise of the modern state, gives a different shape to forms of social solidarity:

A new relationship between individual and society is announcing itself here. Communal spirit can no longer be ordained from the top down, but must instead be freed up by questioning [and be] . . . agreed on, negotiated, justified and experienced [by individuals] (Beck, 1998: 35).

Solidarity today, from Beck's standpoint, comes rather from the active engagement of individuals struggling through a process of reflexivity to make sense of their own biographies in this unpredictable world, and so is not based purely in the needs of people but also their 'anxiety' (Beck, 1992: 49), taking into account the growing uncertainties and risks around the world. This process thus necessitates 'new sources for the formation of social bonds' (Beck, 1992: 99) which include ascribed differences and inequalities of race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, age, as well as reflexivity in the domain of private social relations and ways of living. It is to this extent that the 'right to *difference*' paves the way 'for a new definition of solidarity and coexistence' (Melucci, 1989: 178; italics in original) with a possibility to transcend inherited patterns of social inclusion and exclusion built around conventional notions of social identities.

In light of these various conceptual and sociological challenges, many other thinkers and writers have sought to update the notion of social solidarity more systematically, relying on different analytical prisms. These attempts vary greatly in approach and nature, sometimes overlapping but at other times conflicting. But overall three major schools of thought appear: (a) the neo-functionalist approach;⁴ (b) intersubjective rationality and moral recognition; (c) community or communitarian thought as supplement to social solidarity. The key principle behind all these theories is that they seek to show the empirical substrate that can underpin the normative character of social solidarity and still bring people together in a highly individualized context. But each has different virtues and advantages and, most of all, present different resolutions to the modern problems of social solidarity.

2.3.1. A Neo-functionalist Approach

As the name of this approach intimates, it is inspired by and grounded in the commitment of Durkheim and his students to establishing social solidarity as a foundation for retaining social

⁴ See Alexander and Colomy (1998) and Alexander and Smith (2004) for discussion of the term.

order. Yet, at the same time, it seeks to complement the original functionalist approach that prioritized the unity of the whole while playing down issues of subordination and division within the collective. This view starts from the premise that social solidarity in today's complex, highly differentiated and culturally plural societies cannot rely on common interests or shared value systems, nor even on joint activities and shared experiences. Instead, the 'feeling of being connected to others, of being part of something larger than ourselves' (Alexander, 2006: 13) arises from the empathy for other human beings and commitment to diversity. And, exists less upon shared identity or economic interdependence but upon our awareness of unalienable, fundamental human rights to which a person is inherently inherited. In other words, social solidarity is based on mutual identification with a set of democratic ethics, and so distinguishes itself from the feeling of connectedness *within* particularized groups, such as gender, where a woman may feel connected to fellow members of her sorority. On the contrary, social solidarity in Alexander's view (2006, 2011) '*transcends* particular commitments, narrow loyalties, and sectional interests' (Alexander, 2006: 43; italics added) not least because it is grounded in the normative idea of universal human rights and justice – the logic of civility, to use his language – that can be appreciated and understood by any human being, and by the same token, respects 'our individual personalities' (Alexander, 2006: 13). This definition thereby works to harmonize the position of individuals vis-à-vis the functioning of even such heavily differentiated modern societies, where individual values and priorities are inevitably shaped by varying backgrounds and experiences. It is for this reason that social solidarities are fundamentally *civil* in character, underpinned by the vision of democracy and just society rather than private or economic relations such as intimacy, contractual relationships and others. Here, we can find great similarity between Alexander and Durkheim's accounts of social solidarity, which entail an overarching moral framework, where what is sacred and what is profane are clearly distinguished, although it must be noted that Alexander's moral framework is based more on 'secular faith' than religious ideas.

The critical points and great strength of Alexander's argument consists in that, first, it has a strong empirical foundation, and is *not* an espousal of 'weak cosmopolitanism' (Calhoun, 2002), an approach which seeks to evoke pity and assistance based on the nature of humanity alone. Establishing social solidarity in human rights and justice, according to Alexander, is a largely institutionalized process with an empirical grounding, because the codes of democracy itself can be inherently conflictual and subject to continuous contestation, meaning different thing to different people (think of how the meaning of freedom would vary in democratic and

authoritarian regimes, or even within a democracy). So if the founding of the codes of civility – deciding what is *just* or *unjust* – was conducted through individuals, it would not be able to grapple with the problem of exclusion, precisely because ‘the discourse of repression is inherent in the discourse of liberty’ (Alexander, 2006: 67). It is thus rather the social institutions, particularly law and mass media institutions, that articulate symbolic values and confirm their role in helping to stabilize the meaning of civility, justice and ethics – shaping ‘the whatness of what is’ (Boltanski, 2011: 57) – in which individuals’ secular faith in a complex society is based.

Second, and following on from this, Alexander’s view of social solidarity can serve to counter critiques leveled against the functionalist approach that it does not recognize issues of inequality, exclusion, hierarchies and domination within a social system, and the subjective interpretation of social bonds. There is, to be clear, some sense of essentialism in Alexander’s approach, to the extent that he resists certain forms of relativism (for him, what are considered universal human rights and justice, although socially and legally constructed in the first instance, are eventually sacralized as universal, because otherwise they ‘would relativize reality, creating an uncertainty that could undermine not only the cultural core but also the institutional boundaries and solidarity of civil society itself’ [Alexander, 2006: 63]). Yet, his acknowledgment that normative codes are socially constructed in the first place allows him to embrace that fact that establishing social solidarity has parallels to initiating what Raymond Williams called an ‘alternative hegemony – a new predominant practice and consciousness’ (Williams, 1989: 145) in a manner aligned with shifting morality following social transformation. Alexander, in fact, demonstrates eloquently how the values of an American society that is deemed ‘just’ have shifted over history (2006: Ch. 15), for example through the case studies of when suffrage was extended to women and black people, groups who were once demonized and considered as embodying anti-civil qualities (Alexander, 2006: 196-202). It is precisely by leaving room for the possibility that such social order, with social solidarity as its underpinning, can be reconfigured that Alexander’s approach is able to take into consideration the voices and rights of the more marginalized. In turn, in his conceptualizing, the idea of justice remains not simply normative or rhetorical, but comes to define the ‘civil sphere’ of human life that serves as a socio-ontological precondition for the construction of humanity, without losing sight of the unavoidable tension and conflicted uncertainties that exist in its societies.

However, notice that once again, such social changes in this approach are *initiated less* by people than by the institutions of society, so Alexander's account ends up giving less prominence to the role of social actions and interactions at a micro level, as stood at the core of Weber's analysis of solidarity and collective relations, and those who adopted a Weberian approach such as Calhoun (1992, 2007). Under their perspectives, a society comprises an experiential world of social *relationships*, and the various bonds between individuals and their civil identity are really the outcome of the social processes in which they are implicated.

The drive and impetus for change, away from this neo-functionalist viewpoint, still primarily lies in the *structure*, while the cooperation between ordinary individuals that are complicit in retaining and reproducing relations of solidarity are acknowledged but less discussed. It therefore leaves partially unanswered questions of whether enforcing or imposing justice from above may constitute another form of repression (Sennett, 2012), and what, in reality, can help contribute to making *stable* the basis of social solidarity. That is, when people are mediated by sharp differences in experiences, expectations and social conduct, on what points will social solidarity still be contingent – especially, for instance, when the nature of underlying moral codes are undergoing dramatic change. The tension inherent crafting the codes for social solidarity has been well discussed, but less well discussed is the tension that appears in embracing the codes through individual lives, and the wider conditions through which such acceptance can occur. This is a sphere covered by Habermas in his theory of communicative action and rationality, and later also by Honneth, in the arguments about institutionalized relations of mutual recognition that can create the *sustained* conditions (Honneth, 2014: 63) required for democratic and ethical modes of communal together.

2.3.2. Rationalized Communication Approach: on Conditions of Social Solidarity

The concept of social solidarity is often considered to be an underlying principle of Jürgen Habermas's well-known concept of the public sphere (1989, 1996), an area of social life made up of ordinary individuals gathering together as a public to 'articulat[e] the needs of society with the state' (Habermas, 1989: 176), wherein solidarity is the implied binding force bringing people together.⁵ But the concept also, perhaps even more explicitly, appears in other works of

⁵ Later, in *Between Facts and Norms* (1996a), he revised this idea, embracing the critique from Foucault and Fraser among others, with more details about the structure of the modern public sphere relative to the original

his on the rationality of communicative actions (1987). The definition of social solidarity itself remains unclear and under-theorized here, but Habermas provides a thorough discussion of the scaffolding for the emergence of social solidarity. He also interprets Durkheim's account of organic solidarity as a new form of social solidarity, no longer 'secured by prior value consensus but has to be cooperatively achieved by virtue of individual efforts . . . social integration through cooperation' (1987: 84). In Habermas's view, the shift from pre-modern to modern solidarity signaled that modes of social, intersubjective interactions were coming to be dependent *less* on the pre-interpretive resources of a traditionally secured lifeworld, and more on the accomplishments of social actors themselves.

Yet instead of approaching this from a structural, functionalist perspective and seeking to describe the status of social cohesion itself, this move for Habermas signaled something more important, that is, the adoption of a universal, secular form of morality, a 'rationalization' through which individuals come to learn to act responsibly in light of their own position. The changes in the form of social integration Durkheim described, for Habermas, went beyond changes in the rational reconstruction of symbolically mediated interaction to changes in its normative underpinning (1987: 5), with a renewed aim of arriving at mutual understanding between, and not just reciprocal influence over, one another (1987: 85). This normative rationalization thus constitutes a key *condition* for social solidarity in Habermas's argument, as rational communicative action serves as a medium *through which* both socialization and social integration have come to take place in modern complex societies (1987: 64). As such, it can 'fulfill functions of social reproduction, of maintaining social lifeworlds' (1987: 86) for the rationally speaking and acting subjects, equivalent to the 'morally' speaking and acting ones. On this basis, communication becomes the premier medium for reaching mutual understanding and coordinated action, and the social integration that used to be accomplished through shared external belief systems and traditional worldviews is now transmitted to the ordinary individual.

A great virtue of this discourse and communication-focused version of republicanism lies in the possibility that living and acting together through social relations of solidarity is an opportunity open to *everyone*, so long as their socialization takes place against the background

bourgeoise public sphere. But the very basic role of the public sphere as a space (imaginary or real) or quality for discussion of public matters among publics remains the same.

of communicative rationalization. In *The Inclusion of the Other* (1996b), Habermas further argued that this is the main challenge for modern forms of community – be they abstract, identity-based, or post-national forms of polity such as the European Union – that they must negotiate mechanisms for ‘inclusion.’ This does not:

. . . imply locking members into a community that closes itself off from others. The “inclusion of the other” means rather that the boundaries of the community are open for all, also and most especially for those who are strangers to one another and want to remain strangers (Habermas, 1996b: xxxvi).

‘Inclusion’ here, therefore, suggests that social integration in which different people are brought together should occur *without* repressing, and certainly without eliminating, their own differences as a precondition for inclusion. This is normatively much more inclusive than what Durkheim and his students have suggested, making an implied distinction between moral and social aspects of solidarity (Bayertz, 1999). Of course, this is a demanding and highly ambitious objective given how the forces of globalization, multiculturalism and individualization have not only undercut shared cultural norms and social values but also greatly diversified social, ethnic and cultural properties; and given the rise in the 21st Century of several far-right discourses promoting a nation-focused and protectionist approach against migration and the ‘other.’ But suggesting the principles of democracy as a common normative reference-point (Habermas, 2001) for those living in the rationalized lifeworld as a structural condition for solidarity, Habermas claims that social bonds today can be derived from ‘the praxis of citizens who actively exercise their civil rights’ (Habermas, 1992: 3), no matter who they are, and it is this praxis that ‘forms the ultimate medium for a form of abstract . . . [social] solidarity’ (Habermas, 2001: 76).

Meanwhile, running parallel to Habermas’s championing of a powerful political ethics of solidarity, is Honneth’s theory of recognition. As a former student of Habermas, it is not surprising that Honneth’s conceptual framework shares much with that of Habermas, notably the need for a moral framework as the basis of solidarity, though for Honneth the ideal condition for social solidarity would be more the presence and acceptance of differing views and the principle of inclusion – or simply, ‘recognition’ (Honneth, 1996, 2007) – with which to piece back together the ‘fragmented world of the social’ (Honneth, 1995). Like Habermas,

Honneth does not offer an exact definition of social solidarity but explains in detail the process for its development:

To the extent to which every member of a society is in a position to *esteem* himself or herself, one can speak of a state of societal solidarity. In modern societies, therefore, relations of symmetrical *esteem* between individualized (and autonomous) subjects represent a prerequisite for solidarity. In this sense, to *esteem* one another symmetrically means to view the other in light of values that allow the abilities and traits of the other to appear significant for a shared praxis. Relationships of this sort can be said to be cases of “solidarity”, because they inspire not just passive tolerance but felt concern for what is individual and particular about the other person (Honneth, 1995: 128-129; italics added).

Note the italicized word ‘esteem.’ Honneth discusses three types of interpersonal relations, namely, love, respect, and esteem. But he also distinguishes here the notion of esteem from love between individuals (e.g. as in family), and from respect, something which, in his view, has a greater grounding in the nature of law. For Honneth, respect is a matter of normative justice, aimed at an equal treatment of gender, race, class, merits, etc., whereas esteem is conditional on merits or other particularities, and which abstracts from the particular individual at stake. This mode of social esteem should not be read as implying any sense of discrimination, however, as it is a matter of appreciation, admiration, and gratefulness for others’ diverse traits and characters, and the value of the contributions they make. Everyone, in other words, is a potential contributor of mutual support.

It is not that respect plays no role in the creation of solidarity. As Honneth points out and Laitinen (2014: 146) expands upon, equal respect, in having its foundation in justice and law, is required to help draw the boundaries for normatively acceptable forms of solidarity. Respect can thus provide a blueprint for a normatively justified goal of a society that criticizes what may be unequal or potentially immoral forms of social solidarity – something against which Hannah Arendt (1951, 1964) raised vigilance. This implies that social relations of solidarity can occur when there are not merely differences between individuals, but also in the horizon of values that can provide a social context for development of mutual (and ideally) symmetrical esteem, based on the recognition of individuals’ unique contributions and qualities ‘*for the life of the other*’ (Honneth, 1995: 121; italics added).

The core of Honneth's moral framework thus shares much of the belief in ethics as a kind of secular belief, but also Durkheim's commitment to finding each individual's 'standing' in a society or community marked by increasing diversity. Yet, whereas for Durkheim social solidarity was an extraneous phenomenon for the individual (cf. Calhoun, 1992, 2007 for further discussion of this account), Honneth's conception of social solidarity has its bedrock more in the intersubjective processes that integrate a broad spectrum of value orientations through mutual understandings and interests. It is at this juncture that the processes of solidarity can come to be embedded and enacted in the interactional details of our social lives.

Building social relations of solidarity through communication and recognition, however, faces a number of hurdles, in particular to the extent that attaining the conditions for social solidarity can be practical. In today's late-modern complex societies, most individuals may experience their voice being lost or treated as negligible, be that for formal politics, everyday social matters, or understanding of others. What are the possible and achievable forms of more concretized and tangible foundations for making this happen? To ask this question is to look for an answer that many scholars have sought to find from in communitarian thinking.

2.3.3. Community as the Basis of Social Solidarity

From a communitarian perspective, foregrounding the concern to shield and promote individuals' sense of belonging to a 'community' where its members are committed to mutual support, social solidarity is deemed to be built upon a 'moral order' (Etzioni, 1997: 140) that respects *both* individuals' autonomy and the renewal of core social values and reinvigoration of civic responsibilities (Etzioni, 1993), rather than any one of these taking precedence over the other. Unlike Habermas, to whom initiating such order would have recourse to the rationalization of communicative acts, for Etzioni and many other scholars in this vein, changing the backdrops against which a moral order-based solidarity emerges cannot be a top-down process, but is to be achieved through normative yet practical means from the ground-up. In other words, through education, role models and peer pressure, rather than by law enforcement or other formal exercises of social control (Etzioni, 1959: 76).

It is worth noting here that this communitarian approach to social solidarity differs from what Roberto Esposito (1998) termed ‘neo-communitarian’ ethics,⁶ prevailing especially in the USA (e.g. Putnam, 2000) both in and outside academic circles, and grounded in the acclaim of Tönnies’s *gemeinschaft*. Under this neo-communitarian vision, community is often considered a ‘wider subjectivity’ or a totality of the ‘hypertrophic figure of “the unity of unities”’ (Esposito, 1998: 2), a superior quality to that of the individual. This, according to Esposito, spawns the assumption that community is a ‘property’ belonging to individuals that make them join together, ‘a predicate that qualifies them as belonging to the same totality, or as a “substance” that is produced by their union’ (Esposito, 1998: 2). However, as it has been pointed out (Alexander, 2006: 98; Sennett, 1998: 143), the presumption of unity as the main source of the strengths of a social community or solidarity may do little more than render all frictions and conflicts such that they appear to threaten social bonds. Yet it is unrealistic to expect that a sense of belonging to a community will have a capacity to override whatever other elements the individual brings to that community. Conversely, community, argues Esposito, should be seen as a ‘debt’ or a ‘gift’ to others that reminds us of our inevitable and fundamental ‘constitutive alterity’ with respect to ourselves, establishing a sense that we are not perfect by ourselves, and so require ‘being-with’ others (Nancy, 2000) to harmonize ourselves within a social order. Thus, his and arguably Etzioni’s, focal point concerns mainly the interrogation of that which is brought together through the framework of community, and its implications for and capacity to deal with the modern ills of atomization and isolation.

Although the term ‘social solidarity’ is not always given the greatest prominence in Etzioni, Esposito, or Nancy’s writings, it *is* constantly implied, being hinted as a ‘good’ arising from the community or common life, or from connection with and participation in the ‘larger life of our society,’ the virtue of partaking in which makes us ‘what we are’ (Taylor, 1975: 381). In this line of argument, solidarity is not a purely normative concern, but a source of human life that must be attained appropriately, stemming from the dialogical nature of the autonomous individuals that John Dewey emphasized at the beginning of this chapter. It is not surprising then that the question of solidarity for these scholars is often framed in terms of how the relationships in community pose normatively justified demands and what motivational resources are required for people to live up to these exacting demands (Smith and Laitinen,

⁶ Alexander (2006: 98) called it the ‘neo-Tocquevillian approach,’ which is much too broad to adequately delineate the prerequisites for contemporary civil society.

2009: 50). Such extra resources must not, however, in Charles Taylor's and others' view, come from the individuals alone, not least because 'a solidarity ultimately driven by the giver's own sense of moral superiority is a whimsical and fickle thing' (Taylor, 2009: 696). Instead, they should be upheld and promoted by 'modern social imaginaries' (Taylor, 2004): a broader, deeply seated moral order prevailing in a society or community that makes *realizable* the norms underlying our social practice (Taylor, 2004: 40). Importantly, these imaginaries, according to Taylor, *should be* applicable to everyone, whether or not we are participants in the same democratic government as citizens, or in the same economy as workers, consumers or producers, because we all are members of the moral community. In other words, solidarity from this perspective should proceed from a *common* sense or expectation of how things usually go, or how they *ought to* go, and what would normatively invalidate the legitimacy of that practice (Taylor, 2004: 106); so that it can be manifested and materialized in our everyday lives through specific actions and experiences.

As can be seen, accounts that foreground the role of community typically thus theorize ways of tying social knots as a means through which to overcome the (potential) fragmentation in today's complex and diverse societies. While they discussed different sorts of community, be they ethnic, social, cultural or political/ideological, in contrast to the 'neo-communitarian' ethics they all envision forms of collective convergence that can bring autonomous individuals together, yet *without* reducing them into a single organic totality with fixed boundaries or pre-defined positions. Such relation of the individual to community constructs a sense of 'solidarity' that does not concern an essence – the idea of an '*inessential* commonality' (Agamben, 1993: 18-19; italics in original) required for human life.⁷ However, these endeavors to reconfigure solidarity on the basis of community are sometimes subject to castigation in that they seek to construe the 'common' as an ontology of being together, without paying enough attention to the structural (especially political-economic) impediments to the formation of a community *per se*.

2.4. Beyond the Normative (and Prescriptive) Order

⁷ Given the broadly divergent meanings of solidarity, and its ability to accommodate widespread conceptual differences, some would argue that care must be taken not to conflate it with communitarianism. For a fuller argument of this position, cf. Pensky (2008).

We have thus far seen different accounts and associated debates on the subject of social solidarity which, as yet, have remained unresolved. Various kinds of obstacles remain, such as whether social solidarity is better regarded as a moral, rational or non-rational phenomenon, existing structural conditions and impediments, the level at which social solidarity operates, and the simple question as to whether social solidarity is even a desirable outcome. This is partly because the societies in which we live have changed dramatically in recent times, becoming more diverse and complex, and because scholarly foci rest on varying aspects of social solidarity from causes and contexts, to processes of development, conditions, or consequences.

Such plurality of analyses are certainly useful, and may have their own merits. Yet they nonetheless create a perplexing situation, where everything brought together may not, in the end, be sufficient for exploring what is needed for the sake of an enquiry such as this. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the primary analytical focus for this thesis looks at how people's everyday actions and experiences *through* social media are entwined with relations of social solidarity, rather than on how and whether social media and their systems of algorithms create and provide a system that can be imposed upon our ways of our relating to one another. This is to avoid falling into media-centric determinism, and also to foreground the importance of looking at actions and experience of people as lived, while avoiding prescriptive ideas of social solidarity in pre-structuring the empirical research.

This means that a conceptual revision cannot be fully complete without taking into consideration people's actions and experiences. Yet there are certain building blocks we can take from the literature, while decomposing some assumptions that would no longer hold. This required some further clarification.

The starting point for this is to acknowledge that, in today's societies, which are much more complex than, and very different from, the times of the founding figures of sociology (highly globalized, individualized and pluralistic) people inevitably relate to each other differently (Simmel, 1950b). A complete, stably ordered and organically functioning society as implicated in Durkheim's theory is therefore no longer (if it ever was) possible. This is because it is premised on the acceptance that a social order is *not* one that can be imposed from the top, following the structural transformations of society that take place on the plane *beyond* the

remits of individuals alone. Contrarily, a sense of the orderliness of social life arises *also* through the conduct and interactions of individuals (Garfinkel, 1967).

However, this does not suggest I have chosen a Weberian approach to understanding relations and solidarity at the expense of the focus on structure and regulation of individual conduct through institutional controls, factors which cannot be ignored. In fact, Weber himself also denied the virtue of looking at social actions and experiences as insulated entities from the wider social world, and his endeavor to analyze the micro-level social life hope to account *also* for the transformations played out in a wider social context. Most of all, it would be hard to imagine that individuals will be harmonized well with others and society when there is a full lack of norms or sharable framework towards which their actions can be oriented. As Lockwood (1992: 7) observed, would it not be easier for social relations and interdependence to result in conflict rather than promoting, say, relations of symmetrical exchange and recognition? Would it not be more likely that people would seek to subordinate or dispossess those whose resources they need rather than work with them cooperatively?

In fact, we find an answer to this problem from Durkheim's later work on the conceptual revision of organic solidarity. Here, Durkheim acknowledges that organic solidarity cannot be an automatic product of the division of labor and specialization of work, but is a *contingent* result of a new type of shared belief which he called the 'cult of the individual' (Durkheim, 1898/1973). This refers to a kind of secularized religion of 'individualism' which respects the autonomy and dignity of each person, while being shared as a common ideal among people who would otherwise live different lives and have varying values. Individualization from this viewpoint is not atomization or fragmentation, but does imply that those who no longer share the same characteristics with others 'have sympathy for all that is human,' as it is 'the glorification *not* of the self, but of the individual *in general*' (Durkheim, 1898/1973: 48-49; *italics added*). It is in this regard that the cult of the individual does not work as a solidarity imposed by a stable social order to which powerless individuals acquiesce, but allows a unifying social solidarity to coexist with individual diversity and variation. To my understanding, it is this reconceptualization of solidarity as a relatively more flexible, contingent phenomenon that is the legacy of Durkheim which still holds today, even a century on from his era, versus the more oft-cited dualistic distinction between mechanical and organic solidarity.

As we have seen, this idea also resonates greatly in Alexander, Habermas, and Taylor's contemporary accounts of solidarity, and how they conceive of justice, democratic ethics, or modern social imaginaries to perform a role conceptually akin to the cult of the individual – it is not simply a subjective belief of the individual but something that lies at a much deeper level for our mode of living. Even in the case of Honneth, whose focus remains chiefly on 'intersubjective' acts of recognition, acknowledges the need for the redistribution of economic goods and resources as a vital background against which realization of recognition can be facilitated (Fraser and Honneth, 2003).

However, the greatest legacy of this insightful analysis, in my view, does not only lie in the attempt to reconcile the relation between the individual and a wider social context in which s/he lives. It also points out, although only implicitly, a need for the *material basis*, a 'durable context' for the development of social solidarity. Here 'material' refers to an actual or physical infrastructure as opposed to what is *purely* cognitive. As Durkheim himself pointed out, modern forms of solidarity are a 'contingent' result of the cult of the individual, because the likes of morality of individualism and democratic and ethical principles embrace difference and disagreement as the basic foundation of human life, and so do not impose strict controls on individual conduct and relations, as much as the rigid conformity demanded by religious codes and traditions in pre-modern times. There is, therefore, no guarantee that such diversity and variation can be resolved smoothly, because such shared frameworks do not hold the power to *override* other social and cultural elements already in place, to leave enough space for reflexive understanding and conscious shaping of them by individuals themselves. Developing social relations of solidarity therefore *also* requires a material basis, differentiated from the general backdrop. I take this material basis offering a durable (even if intermittent) context to individuals' actions in their social life.⁸ This will be elaborated on further in Chapter 3.

The second point of clarification stems from this structure of social solidarity. If actions and experiences are the material basis through which to usher in a durable context for developing social solidarity, then what are the more specific motivations behind this development? Is it those of a collective nature – collective actions, such as social movements or 'community of

⁸ Regarding the use of people's 'action', this is certainly given prominence in Weber and Simmel's theories, but its importance is also implicit in Durkheim, Honneth, Mauss and the works of many others. Without action, solidarity is impossible. For instance, ritual, economic transactions, gift-giving, etc. are all what people actually *do*, rather than a purely cognitive act. I hope to give this a renewed importance.

practice' (Wenger, 1998) – that can constitute and/or build towards social solidarity? Then should the aim of this research be finding out the occasion wherein and how such collective action comes to take place? To some extent, this may be viable, but the *general* answer to this question, as provided by the work of other scholars reviewed here, is a negative. We have observed how social solidarity cannot be reduced to individuals pursuing what is in their self-interest alone, and sometimes how it also carries not purely rational but also moral and emotional dimensions. Although some collective actions can be, and are related to, relations of solidarity, others may arise merely as 'an aggregation of atomized behaviors' without the ability of individuals to recognize others (Melucci, 1996b: 23). Granted, it is true that sometimes our concern for the well-being of others may be prompted first by rational consideration of how being solidaristic for others will be to our own advantages. But how can self-interest alone always provide a fully satisfactory explanation of what ushers in an unconscious sense of cohesion based on these models of sociality?

Instead, the theme, implied yet consistent throughout the literature on social solidarity, can be encapsulated as a feeling of a bond with others grounded not only the same interests, but also in the need for such a bond, simply 'to make sense of what we are doing' (Melucci, 1996a: 32). This refers to a degree of interdependence as being a fundamental feature of human life. I will elaborate on interdependence in Chapter 3 (section 3.3.3) in relation to the related concept of reciprocity, but it can be understood loosely as a reference to the state of reciprocal orientation and dependence stemming from the way individuals are interrelated by mediation, *whether or not* those involved are aware of that state.

The degree and intensity of interdependence and how what it *congeals* varies from case to case but remains defined by individuals' need for one another for various reasons – from economic, to moral, or emotional, ethical and rational reasons – appears as the key underlying fact for social solidarity. The notion of interdependence is thus the 'scaffolding' I will use for building a conceptually revised framework of social solidarity in this project; at the same time, it is through this interdependence that social relations of solidarity distinguish themselves from related concepts such as altruism, charity, compassion or pity. Of course, the relationship between solidarity and other concepts are not mutually exclusive, and the latter can themselves form the basis for other forms of human association, as Auguste Comte once noted (cited in Thompson, 1976: 154). But being benevolent, altruistic and charitable, although noble in intention, may rather be 'meant to be a free gift, a voluntary, unrequited surrender of resources'

which do not acknowledge the mutual orientations, relationships between autonomous individuals (Douglas, 1992: 155), and so fail to qualify as a solid grounding for social solidarity. By the same token, social solidarity as predicated upon interdependence differs from the notion of political solidarity in that it is marked less by interdependence and interaction, and more by a shared commitment to moral obligations, and often triggered as a corrective to moral deficits (Habermas, 2001; Scholz, 2008) or misrecognition (Fraser, 2001; Honneth, 2007) in a society or community. It is also typically more revolutionary or agonistic in character, rather than based on the need for others.

Last but not least, and arguably most relevant to and significant for the objective of this thesis, the role of (social) media must be expanded upon to a much greater degree has been previously in the literature on social solidarity. The introduction of electronic and, more recently, digital media unequivocally provides the possibility that '[n]ew forms of social solidarity might often be less based upon fixed localities of place than before' (Giddens, 1994: 186), hence a new possibility of forming social relations of solidarity. This is not to subvert, of course, the claim that geography-based communal identities continue to exist (Borja and Castells, 1997; Sennett, 1998), as the value of 'place' and 'a longing for community' (Sennett, 1998: 138) still remains vital to social life. But how 'a new [digitally mediated] *form* of social bonding' (Beck, 2000: 49; italics added) would weave into the development of social solidarity and therefore materialize what otherwise could have been contingent, remains largely under-theorized and less explored. This leads to the main research question of this thesis: ***How does social solidarity develop today where so much of people's actions are contextualized by social media (and their algorithmic systems)?*** This question aims to deal with the unsolved issue of contingency of social solidarity development, an inevitable phenomenon in a society which is not conceptualized as a self-bounded and self-functioning organic whole, and in which social relations are contingent not only on the wider structure, but also people's actions.

Surely, there are some useful insights to be taken from the reviewed literature on how media plays a critical role with regard to social relations and social solidarity (e.g. Habermas, 1996a, 2006; Alexander, 2006, 2014). But oftentimes, these insights are generally focused on the role of media institutions and/or discourse in creating and confirming the meaning of, say, morality and justice (Alexander, 2006), but with relatively little explanation as to how media can provide 'the *preconditions for the possibility* of social life and for an individual's place and competence within it' (Silverstone, 1994: 22; italics added) – a newly configured social life that appears to

be hung together as a ‘reality’ (Boltanski, 2011; for a detailed discussion cf. Couldry and Hepp, 2017: 74-76). Moreover, while the extant literature demonstrates, explicitly or implicitly, how social solidarity can emerge without needing anything in common, and through a complicated network of actions, interactions, communications or, more simply, criss-crossing of human perspectives (Mead, 1934), little is discussed about how such complex networks have been reconfigured by digital media, and social media in particular. A more elaborate account of social media here is thus in order. Chapter 3 addresses this concern.

2.5. Conclusion

This chapter has tackled the intellectual challenges posed by the concept of social solidarity. The main aim was to highlight, against the grain of several arguments in the extant literature, how individualization and social solidarity are compatible and reconcilable in being the implied forces underpinning people’s actions in most of the literature on social solidarity. This is an attempt to go beyond the understanding of social solidarity as a tissue of society as a self-contained organic whole. It is also to give a renewed importance to what and how people *do* things, especially in the contemporary societies where much of what they do is conducted *through* and contextualized by social media. In a nutshell, this is a two-fold attempt to *de-center* social solidarity in the context of an empirical analysis, and at the same time, to highlight the role of social media as a vital component for various aspect of human social life.

De-centering social solidarity, to avoid any prescriptive definition, suggests that this thesis takes as its point of departure not only scholarly insights from long-standing traditions of social solidarity research, but also the empirical findings used in the conceptual revision. The next chapter explains the foundations for this approach, through illustrating and explaining the key elements required for analysis of social solidarity today.

CHAPTER 3: RETHINKING SOCIAL SOLIDARITY IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETIES OF MEDIATION

3.1. Introduction

Chapter 2 reviewed existing theories of social solidarity and identified gaps in the literature that need to be addressed if the present analysis of solidarity in social media is to be achieved. Based on this review, it was clarified that the focus of this thesis lies in ‘social’ solidarity vis-à-vis related concepts including political solidarity and community. The rationale behind making this distinction was that, while they are not mutually exclusive (and, on the contrary, many aspects of these concepts are overlapping) an empirical approach to social solidarity requires a degree of clarity that is sometimes precluded by the normative implications of standing or acting together. Rather than focusing primarily on what ideal outcome social solidarity can yield, this thesis, once again, foregrounds the procedural process of social solidarity development and how that happens, exploring it from a bottom-up standpoint.

This necessitates more elaborate definitions of what the key components of social solidarity as contextualized by social media may be, namely: ‘the social,’ interdependence, social media (and its algorithms), and in what ways these impact upon social solidarity. This chapter thus serves to address this issue, offering a revised theoretical framework for empirical analysis. It begins by reviewing how the role media plays in developing social solidarity is considered in the extant literature. As I will show, there are relatively few studies in the field of media and communication studies on social solidarity in relation to social media, and sociological research often omits discussion of social media from its analysis, or does not pay it adequate attention. One of the main aims of this thesis is therefore to bridge this gap by connecting the two research traditions, thereby providing a more detailed and enriched account of social solidarity.

Following the review of the role of the media in developing social solidarity, I engage in discussing the vital components of social solidarity, first through defining ‘the social.’ Instead of using the term as an adjectival form of society as a geographically, linguistically and legally bounded community, I draw on William Sewell’s (2005) account of what the social means; that is, in a broader sense as a *totality* of human interrelatedness. This view of the social is

aligned with the phenomenological approach in this thesis towards solidarity that foregrounds how people experience reality through what they *do* in ways contextualized by social media, while offering room to see how forms of interdependence arise from such interrelations. Then, in the latter part of this chapter, I will discuss ways of conceptualizing social media as akin to an infrastructure woven into the basic texture of our social lives, socially situated entities that are involved in providing a scaffolding upon which our actions and experiences congeal. I will also illustrate the importance of algorithms in accepting the role of social media as such. Finally, I will situate an account of interdependence, in relation to exchange and reciprocity, within the context of social media, rather than discussing it as a standalone concept. Although the components of social solidarity hold significance in their own right, it is through their combination that we can better grasp social solidarity as contextualized by social media.

3.2. The Role Played by the Media in Social Solidarity in Complex Societies

Media institutions and different forms of mediated communications have long played a significant role in composing our social lives (Knorr-Cetina, 2001), sometimes through representation of worlds beyond the horizons of our immediate experiences, a kind of differentiated social ‘reality,’⁹ and at other times through their routine presence within our life, occupying ‘particular spaces and times of a basic level of social reality . . . [and so constituting] part of the grain of everyday life’ (Silverstone, 1994: 22). The varying ways they are related to and woven into the structure and development of myriad social relations and collective forms of social life have, therefore, long been a central locus of scholarly attention.

Raymond Williams, for instance, stressed the significance of communication in social life by identifying ‘the process of communication’ to be the same as ‘the process of community’ itself (Williams, 1961: 55); while Gabriel Tarde *more specifically* underlined the role of newspapers for promoting the formation of publics, as a network of overlapping and shifting groupings differentiated from the crowd (Clark, 1969: 56) against the backdrop of ‘an increasing need for sociability, which necessitates the regular communication of those associated by a continual current of common information and enthusiasms’ (Tarde, 1969: 285). In a similar fashion, Jürgen Habermas (1989) famously conceptualized the role of quality newspapers in the public sphere in 18th and 19th Century Western Europe as purveying the information and hard-news

⁹ For the distinction between ‘world’ and ‘reality’, see Boltanski (2011); Frosh (2018).

that are vital for citizens to engage in open argument and critical discussion of public matters. Later (in 1996) he then built upon his theory of rational communicative action, embracing critiques levelled against his work (notably by Foucault and Fraser) to lay further emphasis on the role of communication and its mediators as conduits through which to form the public will.

Meanwhile, Benedict Anderson (2006) demonstrated the ways in which different types of media address and typify mass audiences as the public of a same community, while circulating the vernacular that encourages them to imagine their community as ‘inherently limited’ (2006: 48), thereby helping to give a concrete shape to the image of a nation-state as a ‘deep, horizontal comradeship . . . regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail’ (2006: 7). Aligned with this view is that of Michael Schudson (1995), who noted that media organize ‘not just information but audiences . . . [because] [t]heir capacity to *publicly include* is perhaps their most important feature’ (1995: 25; italics in original). Schudson believed that it is not so much the content of the media as the fact that everyone living in a society – be that ordinary individuals like us or the US President and the chairman of IBM – who are empowered, promoting ideas of commonality and so sustaining a hope of equal, democratic life, albeit in a somewhat illusory way. As can be seen from these accounts, various media together provide a space for imagination through which to see others as one of us (Rorty, 1989: xvi), witnessing their pivotal role for the development of social solidarity.

However, as research has long demonstrated, forms of solidarity, collective life, connections and direct and indirect social relationships vary according to the divergent logic of different media and the concomitantly differing manners in which they are intertwined within our lives (Calhoun, 1992; Meyrowitz, 1985; Thompson, 1995). For instance, whereas broadcast mass media often work to establish a kind of indirect relationship among people where individuals are aware of their relationship with others with ‘no physical copresence’ (Calhoun, 1992: 218), say, with their political representatives and public figures or those living in remote regions, digital media are increasingly giving greater prominence to another type of indirect social relationship, one which Calhoun called a ‘quaternary’ relationship, where at least one of the parties involved in a communication are not aware of that involvement. At the time of Calhoun’s writing, in 1992, such quaternary relations were relatively scarce, marked mostly by acts of hacking, wire-tapping or eavesdropping on the phone, and how such relations in most cases ‘exist[] wherever a sociotechnical system allows the monitoring of people’s actions and turns these actions into communications, regardless of the actors’ intentions’ (Calhoun, 1992:

219). By contrast, we can now think of myriad contemporary examples that correspond to such relationships, from everyday surveillance of data exchange and transactions, to the use of location-based map systems and the monitoring of credit card usage or supermarket loyalty schemes.

There is therefore little reason to think that the configuration of social solidarity and the ways they are formed would have remained the same. Scholars are, indeed, not necessarily in complete agreement in regard to the role of the media in social solidarity. Compare, for instance, Dayan and Katz's (1992) well-known study of 'media events' and the account of Jeffrey Alexander reviewed in the previous chapter. Arguably, both take a similar neo-functionalist approach towards understanding the role of the media regarding the development of social solidarity. The former stresses how global media events, such as the Olympic games, the Royal Wedding and the moon landing, can yield a technologically-enhanced vision of mechanical solidarity as a consequence of providing a moment of public spectacle through which audiences can reconcile, integrate and affirm the particular values of a society, despite their individual differences. It is to this extent that media events produce not just a reality *as it is*, but a reality *as it should be* (Dayan and Katz, 1992: 104-119). The latter focuses less on such special occasions but still identifies the role of mass media as articulating 'the cultural environment from which common identities and solidarities can be constructed' (Alexander and Jacobs, 1998: 30), providing a common framework for building social identities and normatively dramatizing civil society as an important socio-cultural (rather than political) institution. But instead of evoking the values central to a society, in this strand of argument mass media 'provide plot points for updating the ongoing public narratives of civil society and nation' (Alexander and Jacobs, 1998: 28), and so work to reshape discourse about what is *just or unjust*.

As a consequence, media of mass communication cast a network of civil discourse across society and, as such, mobilize symbols and codes of civil society, weaving them 'into broad narratives and popular genres [by providing] a continuous flow of representations about ongoing social events and actors' (Alexander, 2006: 75), constituting a 'fundamentally significant articulation of the imagined and idealized civil domain' in a less visibly constructivist manner (Alexander, 2006: 75, 80). Later in his response to Bryan Turner's critique of his conceptualization of media institutions as cultural institutions at the expense of influence stemming from the institutional difference between public and private television channels, Alexander explicitly underlined that the role of public broadcasting for achieving

justice and social solidarity *does not* come from its institutional form as a publicly-funded and regulated broadcaster, but rather by the manner in which such ownership is ‘regulated by the web of political, legal, and moral mechanisms representing the civil domain’ (Alexander, 2008: 186).

Meanwhile, other scholars have credited the role of mass media, but in a more negative fashion. Habermas (1989), for example, lamented the commercialization of quality press which he considered to be the vehicle and arbiter of a healthy public sphere and in which discussions of public matters could take place in a rational and well-informed manner, and later expressed a parallel concern about the possibilities of the Internet, which despite its power to revitalize the ‘grassroots of an egalitarian public of writers and readers,’ would ‘lead to the fragmentation of large but politically focused mass audiences into a huge number of isolated issue publics’ (Habermas, 2006: 423). One of the strongest critiques of this kind comes from Robert Putnam (2000) who maintained that the mass media, especially television, instigated the fragmentation of the wider public into individuals. Indeed, he partly attributed the rampant individualism in US society and the simultaneous decline of political and civic participation to the rise of television-watching, a habit which he saw as leading to a decline in social trust, connection, and solidarity. Putnam’s best idea for remedying the ills of atomization and political apathy was to further the degree of participation in local institutions like scout groups and churches, as a means to help people accumulate greater social capital, thereby reinvigorating the civic spirit of cooperation and solidarity. Yet his proposal remains subject to a double criticism, first in being founded on the assumption that greater sociality would automatically translate into greater political participation; and second, in being too isolated from people’s everyday lives to advance a critical perspective on how different forms of mediation could also influence the formation of social capital and solidarity.

So far, we have observed how different scholarly traditions have attempted to scrutinize the role that media plays in the development of social solidarity, from different approaches. Sometimes their position as an institution to articulate and circulate discourse for the consumption and stabilization of symbolic meanings in a society are foregrounded (as in Alexander, Habermas, or Tarde’s accounts), while in other cases, their status as mediating between the private world of the household and a wider context – be that local, communal, national, or global – is given more eminence (as in Anderson, Dayan and Katz, Putnam, or Williams’s views). These studies are not mutually exclusive or contradictory, but they together

illustrate, and make clear, the role of media as ‘doubly articulated’ (Silverstone, 1994; also Livingstone, 2007: 17). That is, that media are intricately involved in the ways people develop social solidarity, not only by offering content and discourse that can be consumed and internalized, but also by altering the way people come to imagine and connect with a world beyond their lives (Couldry, Livingstone, and Markham, 2007).

At the same time, however, the differences in analytical details, and even the eclectic character of one same medium such as television, indicate an important fact that different media sources are unlikely to work in the exact same fashion concerning the development of social solidarity.

For example, several analyses of social solidarity and ties through mobile phone, as differentiated from the mass media and the Internet as above, confirm this point. Ling (2004, 2008) to cite one researcher, examined how the use of mobile phones in Western Europe (Norway, in particular) affected mediated mobile communication vis-à-vis face-to-face communication, concluding that mobile communication worked as a social ritual to engender closer social ties and facilitate reciprocation, and so fortified a sense of cohesion within the family circle and peer group, but often at the alienation of physically ‘co-present’ others (2008: 3) making social solidarity more ‘bounded’ in character. By contrast, Donner (2006) and Wei and Lo (2006) offered somewhat different findings through their case studies in Rwanda and Taiwan, finding that mobile phone usage also offered a unique advantage and opportunity for amplifying social relationships for, respectively, microentrepreneurs and those with poor social connections. No matter how seemingly contradictory these two groups might appear, the point being emphasized here is that the manner in which social solidarity and bonds are created and retained through mobile media are fairly and even qualitatively different from the mass media (as Calhoun (1992) implied) since the former was taking place more through ritualized, and/or symbolic *and* reciprocal interactions that occur more frequently due to the greater mobility and constant availability of mediated communication. Different modes of networks and connections likely generate new affinities, relationships, identifications, loyalties and hostilities.

It is then fair to ask whether, and how, social media are woven into the processes of social solidarity development in ways that would, arguably, diverge from *both* the mass and mobile (and any other forms of) media. However, the implications of social media as an increasingly significant and essential bedrock for social living today have not yet been fully integrated into

theories of social solidarity, and the extant literature is rife with empirical accounts of the various relations between social media use and social ties, bonds or capital. In the following section, therefore, I will briefly review those that touch upon the issue of social solidarity and social media, and then devote the rest of the chapter to explaining how social media have become particularly important to the material base of social solidarity.

3.2.1. Place of Social Solidarity Research

Social media are first and foremost conceptualized by the public and in business discourses (e.g. mission statements of Facebook, Twitter and others) as networked spaces where social networks and communities are formed and, under ideal circumstances, social relations and connections can become intensified, groups become more tightly-knit, and individuals can come to feel more empowered. It is following this prevailing understanding of social media as affecting degrees of sociality that much of earlier social media research was based (e.g. boyd and Ellison, 2007; Lampe, Ellison, and Steinfield, 2007; Papacharissi, 2010)¹⁰ as is the research on different types of social bonds, relations, and solidarity. Relatively speaking, not so much has been done on social media *specifically*, and social solidarity compared to, say, social capital. There are some exceptions to this, including Schroeder and Ling (2014) who sought to revive the Durkheimian notion of mechanical solidarity via social media among digital information and communication technologies, suggesting that these technologies, as an integral *part* of our social environment today, hold the potential to usher in collective sentiment by serving as a ‘means of bridging the divide’ between groups of people, thanks to their allowing digital modes of sharing beyond spatio-temporal barriers and so yielding mechanically solid experiences (Schroeder and Ling, 2014: 797).

In terms of the wider general research on the relationship of social media to social ties or capital, there is an almost inexhaustible amount of work conducted with different analytic foci and prisms across the world. For instance, some researchers have investigated whether, or to what extent, social media are beneficial for the accumulation of social capital and building a wider network of friendship (Standlee, 2018); how this social-media-reconfigured context of communication requires different social tactics on the part of the individuals (e.g. Ellison,

¹⁰ boyd and Ellison later updated their definition of social media in 2013 (Ellison and boyd, 2013) to include the renewed importance of media streams and acknowledge communication as the primary engine driving changing usage patterns.

Steinfeld, and Lampe, 2011) tactics which include communicating social information but also ‘news sharing’ as a type of relational communications with concerns for specific audience and a method through by which to gain greater acknowledgement (Ihm and Kim, 2018); and how increased social capital can potentially translate into civic engagement and political participation (e.g. Gil de Zúñiga, Jung, and Valenzuela, 2012). There are also more critical conceptions of social media as inimical to social relations and lives, including studies that see social media as moving people away from the ideas of communities and substantive communication towards networks and phatic communion while urging us to ‘maintain some sense of connection to an ever-expanding social network’ (Miller, 2008: 398-399); in this way, they in fact drive us apart despite their *prima facie* prevalent socializing activities, particularly through ‘information pollution’ and a ‘filter bubble’ that together reduce the opportunities for acquisition of knowledge and political discourse in a reasoned manner (Vaidhyathan, 2018), and as a result ‘alienate’ us from one another, and ultimately, democracy (Fuchs, 2018). In psychology, some radical claims are made, for example that greater social connections, in satisfying one’s own need for being social, are instrumental in maintaining physical and mental well-being, potentially lead to a kind of ‘dehumanization’, propelling people either to fail to recognize distant others as human beings worthy of moral concern and instead treating them as objects; or, to see them as worthy of moral care but denying their autonomy (Waytz and Epley, 2012).

However, such plurality of analyses of social media and social relations, capitals and ties, only serves to highlight the comparative lack of research on *social solidarity*. To be absolutely clear, this does not mean that the concept is not given enough weight or substance currently; on the contrary, as I noted at the beginning of the Chapter 2, ‘solidarity’ and/or ‘social solidarity’ are mentioned across a wide array of scholarly works and disciplines, and acknowledged as an important ‘goal’ for us to achieve, as a crucial quality for living together, and often as a normative, moral concept *par excellence*. Rather, that despite such extensive attention to and interest in social solidarity, there has been fairly little attempt to engage in a theoretical revision of the concept itself *in ways that involve social media*; and the focus has been placed instead on closely related but differing notions, including ‘connective actions’ (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013), ‘collective identity’ (Milan, 2015), ‘media solidarities’ (Nikunen, 2019), ‘networked solidarity’ (Neff, 2018), or the confluence of mere ‘gesturing’ of solidarity and news sharing (Papacharissi, 2015) to name but a few.

A few exceptions that actually delve deeper into an analysis of social solidarity in a specifically social media context include the aforementioned Schroeder and Ling (2014) work, as well as Jeffrey Alexander (2011) who in his later essay on the Egyptian revolution, refuted the political-economy consideration of the revolution as the outcome of a demographic bulge, and instead explained how it was fundamentally a struggle over the ‘meaning’ of revolution (2011: 66). In this case, Alexander illuminated how deep grievances and social demands among the Egyptian people were translated into signs, symbols, and idioms that were expressed in terms of what is *right* versus what is *wrong*, and, by so doing, made these people eager to justify their situation and create a powerful moral framework for galvanizing support and advancing the revolution. During the unfolding of this revolution, social media, in Alexander’s view, provided a key resource for stabilizing meaning and articulating and circulating different moral narratives. It is worth noting, however, that the role of social media here remains as more or less akin to that of the mass media which Alexander already offered an insightful analysis of (2006) yet discusses little on what is distinctive about the logic of social media as a new means of communication, as differentiated from mass media.¹¹ This is also the case with Schroeder and Ling, who in spite of their keen examination of the role that social media and ICTs play in fostering co-presence and mediating our interpersonal lives, and the acknowledgement of how our *prima facie* taken-for-granted routines of everyday digital life, such as gossiping and joking on social media, may serve as a social ritual Durkheim described in his analysis of religion (2014: 797). That is, they did not further develop this idea to show how precisely the idiosyncrasies of social media *on their own* are significant for the development of social solidarity. But taking into consideration the importance of solidarity in our social living, as found in Chapter 2, the current use of social media (which has arguably become much more intense since the time of the above writings) and an associated conceptual revision – with an aim of placing social solidarity at the core of any empirical analysis – is in order.

3.3. When Social Solidarity is Contextualized by Social Media

In this section, I will endeavor to construct a theoretical framework for this thesis, starting by clarifying the meaning of the ‘social’ in regard to social media. Although the major aim of this thesis concerns social solidarity, as I will show, to account for what it means cannot start with

¹¹ It should be noted, however, that the primary focus of this book was *not* social media but rather the ‘cultural power’ of the revolution to project symbols and real-time performances and circulate emotions and moral frameworks.

social solidarity itself, neither can it focus only on the *interactions* between individuals. A detour must also be taken which can systematically identify the factors that constitute the materiality of social media, through which we experience the world as a social ‘reality.’ This will be the crux of section 3.3.2., along with an exploration of how algorithms not only underpin the overarching systems of social media, but are also embedded in people’s experience of the social.

3.3.1. The Shifting Terrain of the ‘Social’

The pervasiveness and widespread use of social media together suggest that they have become more deeply embedded within the fabric of our everyday lives in recent years, especially with the soaring penetration rate of smartphones and, as such, are closely implicated in the heterogeneous processes through which we come to interact with others, represent our selves and build social identities and impressions, or more generally, experience the world beyond our immediate physical surroundings. Indeed, much of our everyday activities have been migrated into digital environments in recent times, and what once were informal and ephemeral manifestations of our social lives, such as talking to friends, have become the subject of permanent record.

Whether this shift towards distinctive types of social processes enacted through media-related and media-specific practices has enabled more dynamic socialities remains a question to be answered, however (Couldry, 2012: 44). Rather, this change seems to have spawned severe confusion about what it means to be ‘social’ *specifically in regard to* social media. To the minds of social media gurus like Zuckerberg, being social seems to indicate being brought together and to have our values reinforced by ‘sharing jokes . . . staying in touch . . . finding groups . . . for joy, coming together around religion or sports,’ all of which are, according to Zuckerberg, enhanced, facilitated or better performed by virtue of Facebook and social media (Zuckerberg, 2017). What is intriguing here is that the CEO of Facebook recognizes and foregrounds conversations and interactions as a key component of the social, but does not (though not unexpectedly) further disclose the fact that our social activities on social media are unavoidably ‘engineered’ (van Dijck, 2013) by the apparatuses of social media, to the extent they are narrowed down to, or given the shape of, specific acts that leave digital traces which can be collected, classified, calculated and processed for the corporate purpose of value and

profit-generation (van Dijck, 2013; Couldry and van Dijck, 2015). It becomes apparent here that ‘the social’ of social media as delineated by the likes of Zuckerberg’s discourse presumes a *singular* experience that may come as an ‘*effect* of a new dominant techno-economic materiality’ (Couldry and van Dijck, 2015: 3; italics added). Or, even more radically considered, as organized around social media, with people merely ‘acting as [their] input, output, or gears’ (Sandvig, 2015: 3). Such a notion simplifies the meaning of the social and is, however, at variance with the insights in the literature on the essence of sociability, that it ‘makes up its substance from *numerous fundamental forms of serious relationships* among men [and women!]’ (Simmel, 1949: 255; italics added). In other words, the social needs to be conceptualized, as in William Sewell’s apt summary, ‘the totality of complex interrelatedness’ (Sewell, 2005: 326) that forms the inescapable ontological ground of our common life as interdependent human beings, whose complexity cannot be reduced into a one-dimensional phenomenon.

At the same time, it must be noted that the social is *not* just about intersubjective relationships or associations and symbolic interactions. The social is always *both* form of meaning *and* built-environment, that is, physical *and* material conditions that contextualize meaning and relations that, as such, not only ‘constrain the actions of actors in that [social] system’ (Cheal, 2005: 137) but also enable them. One might prefer to adopt a long-lasting dualistic nomenclature in social theory of ‘micro-macro linkage’ or ‘the relationship between agency and structure’ (Ritzer and Gindoff, 1994: 3) to refer to what together constitute the social,¹² but the relationship between meaning and built-environment as the pillars of the social are beautifully, and in a way that captures the details more subtly, encapsulated by Sewell’s definition of ‘an articulated, evolving web of semiotic practices . . . that builds up and transforms a range of physical frameworks that both provide matrices for these practices and constrain their consequences’ (Sewell, 2005: 369). It is worth elaborating that ‘physical frameworks’ here does *not only* denote institutions, infrastructure, material objects and technological artefacts such as, in case of this thesis, social media platforms, but also ‘[t]he physical media of *human action* . . . [that] are in constant interplay with semiotic practices’ (Sewell, 2005: 367; italics added), forming materiality that consists of different layers.¹³

¹² For a comprehensive survey of this debate, see Ritzer (2010).

¹³ See Schatzki (2003, 2010) for an elaboration on how different categories of materiality can be distinguished, e.g. people (human bodies), organisms, artefacts, things, etc.

This suggestion, that intersubjective, symbolic human actions are in a *dialectic* relationship with the materiality of built-environments, illuminates the fact that social solidarity, as our relation of interdependence (as defined in the Chapter 2) cannot exist in a void, but must be predicated on the material ground, i.e. individuals' actions and experiences, established *within and in regard to* the other material framework of social media – what social media constrain and enable us to do and how we are put into mediated interrelation in a specific manner. From this account, it should be clear that 'the social' is *not* necessarily an adjectival form of a 'society' *qua* an ensemble of things, but refers to 'various *mediated* forms of human interrelationship [that] make people interdependent members of each other's worlds' (Sewell, 2005: 329; italics in original)¹⁴ and the 'worldly material transformation' that constitute the condition for the changes (Sewell, 2005: 362).

If Sewell summarized this dynamic interplay between meaning and materiality most effectively, the idea itself is neither unique nor new. Simmel, for instance, discussed the implications of modern metropolitan life over sociability, and how individuals internalize certain mechanisms to cope with the changes in urban worlds of 'objective culture' (1950a) that are rapidly growing technological and physical environments, in an attempt to negotiate the overstimulating external environment. As he put it:

If we now have the conception that we enter into sociability purely as "human beings," as that which we really are, lacking all the burdens, the agitations, the inequalities with which real life disturbs the purity of our picture, it is because modern life is overburdened with objective content and material demands (Simmel, 1949: 257).

The point here is not so much that all these forms of urban malaise exist, rather that the process of relating to one another should take into consideration the specific *conditions* that allow for that process, constituting our subjectivities and realities. Aligned closely with this view is also that of Gabriel Tarde who conceptualized a social actor as a 'somnambulist' (Tarde, 1962: 87), for whom the social is akin to a hypnotic state, and we remain possessed by an illusion that our ideas are spontaneous and rational, whereas in fact they are provided to us (Tarde, 1962: 77).

¹⁴ Again, the term 'mediated interrelations' should not be confused as encompassing *only* the relations on and through social media, but also construed as the *totality* of complex human relations.

This is a process he terms ‘imitation,’¹⁵ grounded in unreflective impulses or habits (Williams, 1982: 350) whereby an individual might take actions that appear to be mutually contrasting, yet such dissonance and nuanced variations of action are not proof of irrationality of the individual. Indeed, the crux of his theory holds some significance here, in that our actions are formulated *conditionally*, that is based on certain material conditions of actions and interactions.

On the other hand, other profound analyses have appeared on materiality and the social, from somewhat different angles. More recently, the social is taken to be *collapsed into* ‘the same immanent plane’ on which social, cultural and technological things are *all* joined (Lash, 2002: x). Another approach views ‘network’ as an archetypal form of contemporary society, where the social is taken to be equivalent to a ‘networked individualism,’ grounded in common belief in the power of networked media (Castells, 2013: xxviii, 38). In other cases, there are even objections to our general, and analytic, proclivities for detaching technologies from their social worlds and instead arguing to interpret the social as a movement resulting from the interconnections of human *and* non-human actors (Latour, 2005). In these cases, although their approaches to the power of media and technologies vary in the detail, it would be reasonable to see media as weaving into the fabric and texture of our everyday social life, making ‘everything we associate with who we are, what we belong to and what our world is made of speculative’ (Deuze, 2014: 39; also cf. Manovich, 2009). These accounts are important in particular to the extent that they provide more space for a thorough understanding of how technologies (and media) play a key role in making our social relations and associations more interdependent in nature: the necessity of media for performing our everyday social duties in an attempt to account for our shifting modes of sociality.

However, despite their acknowledgement of the indispensable role that media plays in constructing ‘the social,’ what remains less developed here is the possibility that conventions and rules can stand outside such a datafied plane and networked system (Mansell, 2012: 103), *also* constituting the basic conditions of possibility for the social and co-composing (in tandem with media) our worlds of experience. This would include, on the one hand, social media’s own political, ideological, and economic commitments, forces which may not simply channel the patterns of our social actions but also *program* them in accordance with their specific

¹⁵ Elihu Katz (2006) suggests that the term imitation may be better replaced with the term ‘influence,’ on the basis of its more positive nuances; but either way, the gist of Tarde’s theory is on the conditional formulation of human action.

objectives (van Dijck, 2013: 6; also cf. Cohen, 2013). On the other hand, it would also encompass the other kinds of materiality in our lives, such as socio-economic status, gender, race, etc., with which individuals' varying ways of using social media are necessarily intertwined.¹⁶ In this line of thinking, it is fair to say that the social in the context of social media cannot be seen as a seamless process through which the 'old social' has readily metamorphosed into the 'new social;' rather, it should be captured as an ongoing, *contested*, phenomenological, and material process.

The need to understand the social as a contested process in which complex, intricate and heterogenous forms of interaction occur, gives a contour to the first sub-research question of this thesis, required for the sake of conceptual revision of social solidarity: ***How do people articulate their experiences of the social through social-media related actions?***

The purpose of this question is not to look out for a 'common' values or conjoint participation and/or experiences that penetrates across all interviewees' answers and thereby serve as the basis of the social in a social media context (as in mechanical solidarity, *gemeinschaft*, or communal relations) but rather to see what is social about social media in the views of the interviewees from the bottom up. The former would be almost impractical given today's diverse, complex social contexts, but also because the reciprocal reshaping of the technical by the social logic of different users and/or settings is likely produce strikingly different outcomes (Sassen, 2018: 14). The aim is rather to see whether, in the experience of the social, are certain commonalities that serve to create a 'backdrop' for individuals (as discussed in Chapter 2) against which social solidarity develops. As I will detail further in Chapter 4 (methodology), answering this question necessitates more than mere observation of what individuals do (only *on* social media and what happens *there*, but also an exploration of how their social actions are situated in a wider context of the social, into which social media are woven, and how that feeds into their *overall* experience. This empirical domain will be the subject of Chapter 5.

3.3.2. Lived Experiences of Social Media

¹⁶ As my empirical chapters will show, there are several cases where these kinds of materiality in our life reflect upon the way people live their social life.

This section addresses specifically with the organization of material frameworks through social media, and the related problem of *contingency* of social solidarity development. Regarding the conceptualization of the materiality of social media, a useful point of departure is the fact that several scholars have drifted slightly away from the definition of social media as primarily a social *network* service that gives salience to the functions of networking, interactions, and participation, and instead chosen to highlight its powerful affordances to shape ‘the performance of social acts instead of merely facilitating them’ (van Dijck, 2013: 29). One such notion is the idea of the ‘platform,’ referring to, in technical terms, ‘sites and services that host public expression, store it on and service it up from the cloud, organize access to it through search and recommendation’ (Gillespie, 2017: 1) with the power to ‘facilitate and shape personalised interactions among end-users and complementors, organised through the systematic collection, algorithmic processing, monetisation, and circulation of data’ (Poell, Nieborg, and van Dijck, 2019).

The key to this understanding of social media as a platform(s) consists in its power to potentially ‘shape,’ rather than simply channel or convey, *what we do*, thereby playing a role in materializing our actions, thoughts and imaginations, perhaps potentially in conformity with their particular set of rules and conventions (Mansell, 2012: 103; Zuboff, 1988) and yet the architecture of social media remain controlled primarily, if not exclusively, by their corporate owners (Andrejevic, 2013). As such, general users rarely have systematic input into the design and governance of social media among other digital platforms. It is around this situation that academic anxieties have been formed; for instance, Striphas (2010) worries about the potential that platforms and their algorithms might increasingly measure and shape our cultural tastes, while Tufekci (2014) raises vigilance against the political consequences of the ‘opacity of algorithms and private control of platforms’ that ‘determine the visibility of content’ and so may ‘alter[] the ability of the *public* to understand what is ostensibly a part of the public sphere,’ without consultation or participation of users (Tufekci, 2014: 9; italics in original).

Arguably, what has further accelerated such concerns is the so-called ‘infrastructuralization of platforms’ (Plantin et al., 2018) made possible by the rise of platform strategies in Web 2.0 systems due to the combination of digital technologies’ merits with lower costs, more competitive and dynamic services, and so on. But if we take infrastructure as a basic,

underlying framework of our life,¹⁷ of course not all platforms qualify as formal infrastructure. From a normative perspective, whether platforms comply with infrastructure's long-emphasized critical role in a society or community to be 'inclusive,' offering, purportedly, universal access and services (Ribes and Bowker, 2008; Klinenberg, 2018) remains controversial; while from a practical standpoint, not all platforms would be potent and far-reaching enough to the extent that their social, technological and organizational components can act as the durable, connective tissues linking places and sites in our social lives (Bowker et al., 2010; Edwards, 2010). But given the previous discussions of social media's role in this chapter, it would be fair to see them as a kind of infrastructure, in the condition whereby material reality and knowledge of that reality are brought together. To this extent, as John Durham Peters points out, 'media [are] our infrastructures of being, the habitats and materials through which we act and are' (Peters, 2015: 15); they are basic everyday tools *and* systems so deeply embedded in our life as to both enable and restrain the conditions of social possibilities (Plantin and Punathambekar, 2019).

This brings to the fore the concerns about whether those 'infrastructuralized' social media, as studies of infrastructure have illustrated (Bowker and Star, 1999; Winner, 1986) may *pre*-structure the basic textures of our social life: our actions, behaviors, lived experience. More specifically for the purposes of this thesis, the main concern is not so much about how the values and rhetoric of social media platforms would 'suppress' our social living *extraneously*, and more about how those that are encoded into infrastructuralized social media may, from the onset, align social media-related practices with particular meanings of our social life, and thus come to *congeal* over time our ways of social living in accordance with the vision prefigured by the platforms. It is to this extent that the conceptual revision of social solidarity *concerning* social media, should not lose sight of how the artifices of social media, which may have already been seen as a naturalized part of our everyday life, can in fact be 'constantly directing us here and there' beyond our awareness (Amin and Thrift, 2002: 91). The demanding task at hand is, therefore, how to study how social solidarity develops as contextualized by social media when our experience of the social may have *already* been adjusted towards the imperatives of social media, and when the intertwining webs of our social actions, from keeping in touch to reaching out for information and communicating with others, have come to depend so heavily upon it.

¹⁷ For a detailed discussion of 'infrastructure' and its various connotations in a social science context, see e.g. Bowker et al., 2010).

As regards this aim, some helpful guidance comes from the work of urban geographer Ash Amin on the intricate relationships between infrastructures, space, and social solidarity, directing our attention towards the intermediaries and mediators of urban public spaces, and the artefacts of objects, signs and other technical systems that are designed to guide people's actions, thus acting as an 'informal source of regulation' (Amin, 2008: 16). Amin, accounting for the relation between public space and social solidarity, argues that '[s]imply throwing open public spaces to mixed use and to all who wish to participate is to give sway to practices that may serve the interests of the powerful, the menacing and the intolerant' (Amin, 2008: 15). It is a well-orchestrated public space that can bring forth 'the potential for social communion by allowing us to lift our gaze from the daily grind, and as a result, increase our disposition towards the other . . . generate intense feelings of social solidarity' (Amin, 2008: 6, 16). This view requires many policy makers and urban planners to develop mechanisms that somehow help to reduce the feeling of threat of unanticipated violence, fear, and anxiety, and prompt a sense of 'ease' with strangers. Examples of such mechanisms in cities include multicultural festivals in the name of both diverse solidarities and common interests stretching across and beyond a city, and the use of public art to jolt settled cultural and social stereotypes, such as those relating to injuries of religion, ethnicity and poverty. By this, Amin stressed that social solidarity is the result, not only of our inner mentality and intersubjective relations, but also everyday objects and technologies in the space we encounter as we go about living our lives. There is what Nigel Thrift (2005) calls the 'technological unconscious' at work; consisting of predispositions that regulate our actions in unconscious ways and thereby acting as the hidden hand of urban life and our actions in it.

But Amin made two points vividly clear; first, that conceptualizing the surrounding materiality as a distinct, separate entity from people's lived experience may risk moving the focus towards investigating the 'impact' of this environment, e.g. whether it enhances or compromises solidarity, at the expense of how they can reconfigure, and are incorporated into, people's diversified experiences of solidarity. He therefore urges us to look at how they are jointly implicated in the development of solidarity. This resonates with the idea noted above in relation to Sewell's understanding of 'the social,' that meaning and built-environment are mutually bound together as the common ontological ground for our lives, and where the former transforms the latter while, at the same time, the latter provides a basis for the former and all its consequences.

Second, from the same perspective, there is the question as to whether social solidarity cannot be guaranteed by what we imagine to be a '*proper*' way of organizing our surroundings, be that public space, urban infrastructures, or social media. Amin himself notes in reference to the example of 'cultural solidarity,' which tries to counter ethnic and racial prejudice, that although a multicultural city has signals to help build solidarity often manifested in imaginative ventures in everyday life, such as experiments with street theatre, multicultural festivals or photographic projections on public buildings of varied ethnicities on the street, whether they are successful and will actually give birth to solidarity remains a matter of conjecture (Amin, 2008: 17). It is normal that individuals would use public spaces, objects and systems, not necessarily in ways that conform to what was intended and designed by the city's council or urban planners, no matter how noble the aims were. All in all, people may actualize the other kinds of possibilities of where they are in unanticipated ways, making new interpretations and uses of the space along the line of their own needs and backgrounds (de Certeau, 1984).

From these insights from urban geography and sociology, two useful points follow for the idea social solidarity in a context of social media as an infrastructuralized platform. First, the development of social solidarity is necessarily a *contingent* practice, whose results are not always guaranteed or stabilized by the regulation of infrastructure itself. Indeed, as Sennett (2003) reminds us, if the existence of public spaces themselves could create social solidarity, that would rather have meant another form of top-down repression that inflicts the spirit of solidarity upon individuals. Second, and in relation to the first point, it moves the analytic focus away from the 'impact' of social media on what people do, towards the practical aspects of everyday existence – what individuals do beyond it, how they do it, and over the course of action, how they deal with and experience social media and their spaces, objects, technologies and systems as a part of their daily living. This will therefore be the primary focus of this thesis, as oriented towards the second sub-research question: ***In their attempts to manage social life, how do people act towards and deal with social media?***

But our attention on how people conduct their everyday existence with and through social media needs itself to be oriented to a larger point absent from urban geography. Here, it is useful to draw instead on recent work in management studies, particularly the notion of 'computed sociality' (Alaimo and Kallinikos, 2017; Kallinikos and Tempini, 2014). This perspective, rather than assuming 'the social' to be encoded in its entirety by the operations of

social media, attempts to show how ways of being and doing social, including purposeful social activities like event-going and news consumption, but also more prosaic and mundane activities of interacting with others, may have been reconstituted from an ontological ground that differs from that which underpinned sociality decades ago (Couldry and Kallinikos, 2017). In this regard, social media cannot be just a different kind of framework that is a ‘mere substrate for meaning’ (Cohen, 2012: 35). Analyzing social solidarity in this material context means understanding the possible forms of connected life not as something already out there (to be either facilitated or undermined) but as something that must be reconstructed from within the reconfigured context of today’s social-media-related actions; or, what others, emphasizing social media platforms’ commercial role within this transformation, have termed ‘platformed sociality’ (van Dijck, 2013; also cf. Helmond, 2015; van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal, 2019).

Focusing on social media and its artefacts requires, however, an account of what artefacts people in everyday life interact with. If the subject of inquiry were a public urban space such as a crossroad, then it would have been planned by the local government, and built by engineers according to specific construction technologies, utilizing material resources such as steel, cement, and asphalt, and then completed (temporarily) with the installation of various artefacts including traffic lights, pedestrian crossings, and so forth. While all these elements hold significance in their own right, the ‘informal source of regulation’ (Amin, 2008: 16) where the focus of this thesis remains refers to the one that the *individuals* experience and deal with every day. If we apply this to social media, then there are various features individuals have to deal with, such as changing newsfeeds, likes and comments, metrics, add-ons, and so on. As I will show in the empirical chapters, they all play a significant part in the interviewees’ stories. But understanding them requires a brief review of a layer of the vital patterning that underpins social media’s space and artefacts: the algorithms. This is the subject of following sub-section.

3.3.2.1. Algorithms Within Social Media and Social Life

In 1985, prominent American media scholar Neil Postman (1985/2005) wrote provocatively that there is little connection between a piece of information people receive through the (mass) media and what they actually *do*, because people are so glutted with information that, although concerning important social issues such as inflation, crime and unemployment, such events

appear decontextualized from their own life and so have little bearing upon them (1985/2005: 68-70). Information, in other words, was losing its actionable quality.

Today, 35 years on, the information coming from today's dominant media interfaces (social media) seems to take on a somewhat different character. Although people may not necessarily act to tackle those public issues, at least the information in this context *does* seem to have some capacity to shape their behaviors and actions, as demonstrated by Facebook's notorious psychological experiment on emotional contagion (Kramer, Guillory, and Hancock, 2014). In this experiment, Facebook deliberately tweaked its algorithm to selectively expose either positive or negative posts to users, as a result of which they were nudged to behave in certain ways.

This outcome, despite the ethical conundrums, potently illustrates that certain forms of power are localized in the algorithmic forms of communication with a potential to 'shape social and cultural formations and impact directly on individual lives' (Beer, 2009: 994). It is not surprising that, from this perspective, there is currently a meteoric rise in scholarly accounts concerning algorithms, their pervasiveness (e.g. Galloway, 2006; Lash, 2007), their ramifications over social and cultural lives (e.g. Gillespie, 2014; Pasquale, 2015; Striplas, 2015), and how they are complicit in building an environment of constant extraction, analysis and manipulation of millions of users' data with the goal of influencing their decision-making (Yeung, 2017), assisting in establishing 'a new economic order that claims human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices' (Zuboff, 2019: 9).

However, this intricate entanglement of algorithms within our social lives is precisely what takes studying social solidarity ever further away from the top-down process imposed upon the individual. While algorithms, in other words, as technical and material objects, have the capacity to classify and potentially rearrange what appears first or most significant (Bowker and Star, 1999) they *also* carry a 'social power,' to the extent that their power extends outside the computational domain in which they operate, affecting our modes of living, while at the same time being framed by the discourse in the social world (Beer, 2017). Algorithms are thus neither purely a top-down nor bottom-up force; they concern *both* how individuals' engagement with social media are potentially shaped by the materiality of algorithmic operations, and how that engagement may also engender autonomous understandings about its operation (Bucher, 2017). It is for this reason that algorithms are not conceptualized as a

singular noun ‘algorithm’ in this thesis. Instead, they are deemed as a set of algorithms, or ‘algorithmic systems’ (Seaver, 2013), helping indicate not just their power as computational code and object for quantifying and analyzing human life, but also sophisticated, dynamic arrangements of people and code.

Algorithms, in other words, are heterogeneous and diffuse sociotechnical systems whose properties, features and powers are deeply woven into the base fabric of social life and its outcomes, potentially shaping what people *do*; at the same time, those outcomes are also ‘recursively’ modelled back into algorithmic design (Beer, 2017; Gillespie, 2013). The result is that, rather than simply mediating realities or generating effects for the individual, algorithmic systems and the information they process become a part of the morphology of human life, mapping out our modes of living, helping to remake key premises that individuals frame the world and act upon – a process identified as the ‘computational rendition of [social] reality’ (Kallinikos, 2009: 185).

Conceptualizing algorithms as algorithmic systems, therefore, means to recognize how (a large fraction of) our social existence and actions have already been datafied and fed into the systems, and concomitantly to argue that an explanation of social solidarity needs to take into consideration any tensions and ruptures created by such systems’ automated decisions, decisions that may trigger our reflections and/or reflect into what we do. This is particularly the case given that social media, as a base site for human life, *do more than* provide information. Instead, they also constitute a foundation (partially) through which, in part, our social life is organized, and have thus become incorporated into our socially situated actions, together performatively enacting our reality (Bucher, 2016: 88; Introna, 2016).

The difficulty of tackling the consequences of algorithms for social solidarity lies precisely in this issue. If they are *already* incorporated into what we do and entangled with our social life, how do we trace back what *they do*? How do we know if the ‘technological unconscious’ (Thrift, 2005) is at work, as the term suggests, in *unconscious* ways? This is indeed a key concern of many studies of algorithms, especially when their inputs and outputs become much more visible over the internal logic, formulations that have become so complicated to understand (Latour, 1999), and while social media algorithms are simultaneously bound to protect trade secrets. Furthermore, social media have gradually adopted more algorithmic systems over time through frequent multi-level updates rather than single radical changes (van

Dijk, 2013: 54-58) making it even harder to trace how their algorithmic systems have evolved. It is in this light people are thought to be ‘incapable of really experiencing the effect that algorithms have in determining one’s life’ (Cheney-Lippold, 2011: 176). See also the ‘black-box’ metaphor for their opaqueness (Pasquale, 2015).

However, this idea of algorithms as being ‘black-box’ sometimes appears to be an intimidating epistemological limitation, *too readily* closing off the possibility of studying their ramifications over human life. To individuals, algorithms might seem alienated constructs, but regardless, their outcomes and manifestations in terms of suggestions, recommendations, content personalization, metrics, etc. are very much *not*. They are clearly visible on anyone’s social media’s feed, and the visible outputs from algorithmic systems are the clear outcome of algorithmic curation and processing, not ‘raw data’ (Gitelman, 2013). Granted, it *is* true that people may not comprehend how *exactly* how algorithmic systems work, or the *exhaustive* lists of data points through which social media collect our data and give them to their systems to process, assigning value to them accordingly. But even ordinary end-users, as Taina Bucher (2018) reminds us, can nonetheless grasp how algorithms work, simply through experiencing their outcomes. So provided we remain in a recursive loop with the underlying algorithmic systems, by changing our actions we should be able to see how the outcomes produced are changed. Moreover, based on people’s individual experience, and what they read and hear about algorithms, they can form their own impression of what algorithms are all about, the ‘algorithmic imaginaries’ (Bucher, 2017).

Indeed, more empirical studies have recently appeared from this standpoint, seeking to illustrate the process of algorithmic influence from the bottom-up by, for instance by examining ‘user surprise’ as a feature of algorithmic filtering (Eslame et al., 2015); investigating the kinds of ‘moods, affects and sensations that the algorithm helps to generate’ (Bucher, 2017: 32); analyzing ‘gossip’ about recommender algorithms as a means for beauty vloggers to secure financial consistency and visibility on social media (Bishop, 2019); or studying Instagram influencers’ pursuit of visibility as akin to playing a game with their attempt to learn the ‘rules’ of that visibility game encoded in the algorithms (Cotter, 2019). These studies resonate with, and also revitalize, the point media audience research has long demonstrated, that individuals are not passive spectators or mere consumers of media content, but active persons with the facility to reflectively and critically interpret what they see, and act accordingly (Livingstone, 2018). Thus, even though people may not have the depth of technical knowledge, or the

language skills to describe the meta-process of algorithmic systems, they are still likely to understand what algorithms are meant to do *in social life*. All in all, from a phenomenological point of view, ‘whatever its appearance of complexity, even of opacity, the social world remains something accessible to interpretation and understanding by human actors’ (Couldry and Hepp, 2017: 5).

This suggests that we can access the reverberations in the development of social solidarity of both social media as infrastructuralized platform and their underlying algorithmic systems, through what people do on *and* through social media, and how they subsequently experience the world as social realities hanging together (Boltanski, 2011). This is to understand what Annemarie Mol described as ‘a sociomaterial practice where reality is transformed and where *new ways of doing reality* are crafted’ (1999: 75; italics added). To do so requires focusing not only on what is *observable* from what people do with social media, but also on the background against which such actions and their experiences *are made realizable*. This approach reverses ideas of the top-down abilities or impacts of algorithms exerted ‘over’ the individual and instead asks, developing the second sub-research question already noted: ***In their attempts to manage social life, how do people act towards, deal with, and get informed by, social media and their algorithmic systems?*** This is the question I aim to address mainly in Chapter 6, although other chapters also contain some materials as pertinent.

Based on this discussion of ‘the social’ as constituted in a world of social media and algorithms, the final part of this current chapter delineates the consequences for the concept of interdependence, the key component of solidarity, as noted at the end of Chapter 2.

3.3.3. Solidarity, Interdependence, Figuration

Interdependence is the key component of solidarity, a notion that underlies (either implicitly or explicitly) the majority of accounts on solidarity. As per Dewey’s quote in the beginning of Chapter 2 that humans are not isolated non-social atoms, but are human only when in intrinsic relation to one another (Dewey, 1888: 231), interdependence refers to the irrevocable and unquestionable fact of our human life.

At the same time, however, the remits of interdependence is broader than that of solidarity and, in itself, interdependence is not identical to solidarity, not least because the former reflects an empirical reality that makes up a necessary condition for the latter, whereas solidarity, containing the word ‘solid,’ symbolizes that such an empirical reality needs to be made in order to *persist*; that the relations of interdependence can become solid enough to hold individuals together while those who are involved strike a balance between being themselves and, simultaneously, being part of a wider social context. For instance, consider economic transactions, recognition of moral bonds and the value of others, or gift-giving. These are all exemplary cases that underpin solidarity, as discussed in Chapter 2, be that solidarity of instrumental, affective or moral character. But if a transaction is a one-off event, and individuals withdraw themselves from the situation instantly; if once ‘morally recognized’ person stop being recognized and instead are ‘looked through’ or rendered ‘socially invisible’ (Honneth, 2001: 115), because of, say, a resurgence of racism, sexism, xenophobia or anti-Semitism; or, if a gift is sent to another individual as a gesture of favor and affection never to be returned; in these scenarios, we cannot say there is a true relation of solidarity. Broader relations of interdependence, therefore, must be differentiated, at least analytically, from the concept of achieved *social* solidarity used in this thesis.

If interdependence is a state of reciprocal orientation and dependence stemming from the way individuals are interrelated by mediation, solidarity is, in its simplest form, *interdependence made durable*. This is why solidarity requires a ‘material basis’ as discussed in Chapter 2, a basis which is not a purely cognitive act (like thinking) and which can provide continuously, even if intermittently, a ground on which to potentially sustain, reproduce and (ideally) perpetuate the relations of interdependence and translate them into solidarity. To use Simmel’s words, ‘all sociability, even the purely spontaneous, if it is to have meaning and stability, lays such great value on form, on good form . . . [which is] interaction of the elements, through which a unity is made’ (Simmel, 1949: 255). Thus, using the notion of interdependence as the ‘scaffolding’ of social solidarity means that relations of interdependence, emerging out of ‘the social,’ will congeal through certain material bases, or ‘good forms.’ Then, weaving this conceptualization of social solidarity to the social media requires looking out for whether or not that there is a relatively stable (and hopefully permanent) basis for that congealing to occur. Without such a basis, solidarity is unlikely to occur, or will remain precarious at best.

The emphasis on the material basis or durability in the conceptualization of social solidarity, however, *does not* imply that such a basis must be a ‘community,’ as moral philosophers would argue (cf. section 2.3.3.). Or other forms of tangible communities like a nation-state. Of course, they *can be* of such, but the basis needs not necessarily come in the form of a durable community or nation-state. Rather, we must identify the relations of interdependence as they operate in the context of contemporary forms of social life, alongside sustained and organized communities. As we have seen from the literature in Chapter 2, there are a few components that are essential for interdependence, some of which are implied and others explicitly noted as integral to interdependence, such as visibility, social distance, and (reciprocal) exchange, which have their meaning in the play of relations they establish between individuals. For instance, to be acknowledged as a potential interlocutor, you must be visible – entering into others’ sight to be sensorially perceived: ‘[w]hat is not seen is not thematized as an object in the domain of action’ (Brighenti, 2007: 328). If you are not perceivable at all, how can others perform a social action oriented towards you? At the same time, interdependence requires certain ‘distance’ between individuals for them to balance the simultaneous closeness and distance as a precondition for being able to take a dispassionate view of relationships (Simmel, 1950b).¹⁸ Then, once the individual is acknowledged and distance secured, it is through the mutual, even if asymmetrical, exchange of things from words, kinship, economics, recognition, to emotions that relations of interdependence can be created and potentially sustained (Durkheim, 1919; Mauss, 1954; Lévi-Strauss, 1967; Sahlins, 1972).

However, building on the argument of the preceding section, all these traits, actions and their conditions have likely been reconfigured by social media and the algorithmic systems, notably by their materiality, as discussed in the preceding sections. Not only do we expand our social network through social media by ‘friending’ and ‘following’ others, but we may also perform our social actions differently through social media-related, sometimes social media-specific, functions. In addition, considering ‘the social’ as a *totality* of interrelatedness that is not limited to intersubjective relations but also encompasses plural forms of association, suggests that the picture may look much more complex. For instance, through algorithmic systems, social media can disrupt familiar patterns and create the possibility of initiating new attachments by, for instance, proposing relations between individuals who may otherwise have remained disparate.

¹⁸ Similar yet more developed views on the importance of distance can be found in Sennett (1977) where distance is considered a condition of civility; and in Ricoeur (1992) where the maintenance and/or restoration of ‘just distance’ is seen as required to recognize human independence.

Information and profile of different individuals from varying social, cultural and geographical backgrounds are collected through their use of social media, datafied for analysis, classified and then given certain attributes. In turn, the relevancy between these attributes are calculated to be manifest in the form of suggestions back to end-users, such as ‘based on photos you liked’ or ‘your friend XXX likes this page.’ Although large-scale analysis of quantified social data itself is not a new phenomenon (Starr, 1987), now it has come to carry more practical implications for how we *actually* relate with one another, while what we *do* is interconnected with that relation in a more convoluted, sometimes unaware-able, manner. In light of such complexities, how can we define interdependence? More specifically, how can we explore the ways that relations of interdependence, rather than mere gatherings of individuals, are made possible (or not) and experienced by individuals, *without* losing sight on the materiality of social media whose scale reaches global heights, *and yet* whose consequences are ever more tightly linked with our actions and experiences?

A further useful insight this thesis may draw upon here is that of Nöbert Elias, in his account of ‘figuration’ as a conceptual tool used ‘to grasp the complex problems of interdependence that living together in large numbers generates’ (Couldry and Hepp, 2017: 10-11). On the one hand, the concept of figuration was an attempt to overcome the dualisms prevailing in sociology of macro/micro and agency/structure, and view society as a matter of relations, a ‘web of interdependences formed among human beings and which connects them: that is to say, a structure of mutually oriented and dependent persons’ (Elias, 1978b: 249). Using the metaphor of games (card game and sports match), Elias sought to explicate the conceptual significance of figuration for understanding interdependence. A game is always ‘the “outcome” of the interrelated practices of the players and their ongoing process of playing’ rather than of the gathering of players itself (Couldry and Hepp, 2017: 63). Thus, it is *interdependent* moves and *interrelations* between players that take precedence over individual movements of single players. What is central to the game, therefore, is not an individual actor *her/himself*; they may leave or join the game (or be substituted for other players, in the case of a sports match) without interrupting the overall flow of the game (although joining/leaving of new players would affect how the game is to proceed from then). So, the crux of the game is centered more on ‘the changing pattern created by the players as a whole – not only by their intellects but by their whole selves, the totality of their dealings in the relationships with each other’ (Elias, 1978a: 130). Here, the concept of figuration puts a spotlight particularly on the fundamentally dynamic, ongoing nature of the relations of interdependence between those involved, without losing

track of the meaningfulness that (re)orients human actions towards one another within that complex web of interrelations.

This concept of figuration assists in the conceptual revision of social solidarity, precisely owing to role it can play in this analysis. By bringing out the complexity of *continuously changing* interrelations and interactions within which how, and why, people take actions and may alter them *in accordance with those changes*, Elias's view emphasizes the link between action and interrelations (a crucial link put forward for defining solidarity in Chapter 2) without losing sight of their meaningful aspects. By the same token, it helps to understand how people come to share mutual orientation towards each other and so may create a (temporary) sense of situational belonging, thereby retaining a sense of orderliness, while taking in account that differential power dynamics are potentially implicated in those interrelations (for instance, as in a football match where players are not equal). In a nutshell, it helps to understand how the 'chains of interdependence become more differentiated and grow longer; consequently [how] they become more opaque and, for any single group or individual, more uncontrollable' (Elias, 1978a: 68).

Conceptualizing the problems of interdependence in terms of figuration is therefore very useful for understanding solidarity as *interdependence made durable*, focusing the attention more towards the ways in which actors are linked to one another, and *at what point* and *how* that being made durable happens. For instance, when is the moment during which mutual orientation to one another is shared and/or intensified; in what ways does that happen; what are the types of interrelations preceding that moment; what are the bases supporting that moment, and so on? This leads to the third sub-research question: ***Are there any markers of interdependence in contemporary social life? If so, in what ways, and on what basis, are they made realizable, intensified, and (potentially) durable?***

In this way, incorporating social media into an analysis of interdependence means, first, to see what role social media plays in the ways people develop the relations of interdependence. While social media are differentiated from each other in terms of their interfaces, functions, primary purposes, modes of access and so on, most (if not all) share the common vision of connection. On the one hand, they are institutions that produce and purvey tools people can use to meet their needs and wants to interact and connect with others, ideas and things; providing, in principle, an enhanced connectedness to people across spaces. On the other hand, however,

hidden underneath this effort to amplify connectedness is the ‘owner-centered logic of *connectivity*’ (van Dijck, 2013: 50; italics added), predicated upon the sharing of people’s data with third parties in the name of providing a better user experience, as a consequence of which the ‘contextual meanings of “connectedness” and “sharing” . . . shifted from interaction *inside* the social network site to interaction with all virtual life *outside* [social media’s] territory’ (van Dijck, 2013: 48; italics in original). This hints at the possibility that social media and their algorithmic systems may have become another principle of human interrelations and interdependence (for example, creating a relation between otherwise unrelated individuals), alongside people’s sociability and intention to (mutually) relate with others. Moreover, people might choose, unconsciously, to perform their sociability through distinctively social media-related or media-specific functions, such as tagging.¹⁹

In theoretical terms, this might be interpreted within the notion of ‘deep mediatization,’ whereby ‘the nature and dynamics of interdependencies (and so of the social world) *themselves become dependent upon* media contents and media infrastructure’ (Couldry and Hepp, 2017: 215; italics in original; also cf. Hepp, 2019). But this thesis does not depend for its design on that formulation. Rather, its empirical fieldwork is built on acknowledging how the extent to which people are dependent on social media for their interdependence is now, at a time of great transformation in the conditions of social life, *itself* something that needs investigation. Hence, independent of the third sub-research question, a fourth sub-research question may be proposed: ***To what extent do people rely on social media and algorithms for social (life)?*** As these two sub-research questions outlined in this section are both specifically couched in terms of interdependence, rather than addressing them separately I will tackle them together throughout Chapters 7 and 8.

Before, however, we can start the empirical analysis of this chapter, we need to review the methodological choices on which its empirical fieldwork is based, as follows in the next chapter.

3.4. Conclusion

¹⁹ Paul Frosh (2018) discusses in detail how tagging can be a new way of performing sociability through the computational ‘selving’ of others, and without other’s prior permission, by virtue of their named body images that can be replicated in various feeds. For further details, cf. Frosh (2018: Ch. 4).

This chapter engaged in revising the concept of social solidarity, by de-centering it, constructing a conceptual foundation (the social) that can be put jointly with the accounts of social media as an infrastructuralized platform and solidarity as interdependence. Social solidarity is thus construed as *forms of interdependence (even intermittently and temporarily) made durable out of the ways individuals are interrelated through various mediations*. This brings to the fore the importance of what people do, but without losing crucial insights on the role of structure – in the case of this thesis, social media – seeing them as socially situated and entwined with the everyday life of individuals.

Based on Chapters 2 and 3, the empirical analysis of this research looks at the development of social solidarity, not through a study of any particular ideas and symbols of social solidarity as evidence of existing (or declining) solidarity, but rather by seeking to explore how practical and material forms of interdependence arise in this complicated context of the social as contextualized by social media. Chapter 5 will partly work to justify this approach, showing how social media's assumption of 'what the social is' is somewhat simplistic, and the idea of solidarity must be built on a complex interrelatedness that often goes beyond the boundaries of social media platforms themselves. But before embarking on an analysis of the research questions proposed, we may first turn to Chapter 4, where I explain the methodological choices made in this thesis, with a view to addressing the questions and challenges facing the empirical investigation.

CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

4.1. Introduction

Having established a theoretical framework for conceptual revision of social solidarity in the preceding chapter, and before moving onto the empirical details, this chapter will outline the methodological approaches adopted in this thesis and the rationale behind selecting them.

Based on the premise that social solidarity develops through people's actions and experiences as contextualized by social media, and through the ways they act towards, and get informed by, social media and its algorithmic systems as part of their social lives, this thesis foregrounds the capabilities of the individual to act reflexively and performatively while taking into consideration the presence of others, in the digital realm and potentially beyond, as prospective interlocutors with whom they can build relations of interdependence. This emphasis should be, first and foremost, accompanied by a clarification of the epistemological foundations upon which the thesis is built.

This chapter thus proceeds according to three steps. First, I will discuss the epistemological stance adopted in the thesis, which is fundamentally phenomenological and material, or more loosely, constructivist. This will be followed by an explanation of how I arrived at the use of the three key qualitative methods: in-depth semi-structured interview, physical drawing, and Think-Aloud practice, as the most suitable means to address the research questions in hand.

I will then present how I proceeded with the processes of sampling, recruitment, and fieldwork, before finally touching upon ethical issues, and reflexively considering how my own position may have permeated into these methodological decisions and the execution of the fieldwork, as well as the research process as a whole.

4.2. Epistemological Position

The objective of this thesis is to investigate what 'social solidarity' means practically in a world contextualized by social media. As outlined in Chapter 3, I aim to grapple with this issue by

exploring the relations of people's actions with their interdependence and interrelations with one another in the context of social media.

It is useful to clarify, first, the epistemological position on which this thesis is constructed. For researching social media, there has been a body of robust methodological studies aimed at explicating the techniques, efficacy and ethics of methods for collection and analysis of data produced on and through digital media and communications. This originated from the recent rise and increasing popularity of digital media and objects in the last few decades, a rise that has shifted how media have enabled (or restrained) people's actions to varying degrees, while providing new forms of data in the form of digital traces. Nevertheless, relatively less methodological attention has been paid to what is 'the social' among these traces. It is true there have been attempts to update social research methods for digital environments by migrating existing methods into the digital domain, such as ethnography into digital ethnography (e.g. Hine, 2005) or netnography (Kozinets, 2015); and more recently the emergence of 'digital methods' (Rogers, 2013) that seek to use digital-native functions to study cultural changes and social conditions lying beyond digital objects *per se*. Yet, although these approaches seem to respond to the scholars' fear of 'losing whatever jurisdiction we once had over the study of the "social" as the generation, mobilization and analysis of social data become ubiquitous' (Savage and Burrows, 2009: 763), acknowledging that digital media have increasingly been involved in rewriting of our 'social makeup' (Mejias, 2013), what has been studied less is how the social in this digital context may be conceptualized in a fundamentally different way, seeing social media as a socio-technical infrastructure intertwined in the process of creating, enabling or constraining inscriptions of the individual and their social life.

If we are, as suggested in Chapter 3, to conceptualize social solidarity as being contingent upon the dynamic interplay between what people *do* and their interrelations with each other in the context of social media, with a focus on the potentially reconfigured meaning of 'the social,' this necessitates an approach that should also be able to explicate the tension implicated in the (re)making of the social from people's own perspective(s). This is not to romanticize what people do over the potential constraints or reconfiguration ushered in by their use of social media. But it is to note that this thesis researches '*people*' who are reflexively involved in the creation, retention, and reproduction of relations of interdependence in the 'specific context' (Berger, 1998) of social media rather than researching '*with the Internet*' (Venturini, 2018: 4198; italics in original) in some abstract sense.

This suggests what can broadly be framed as a constructivist paradigm and a qualitative mode of inquiry as the methodical toolkit of this thesis. Thus, on the one hand, the thesis aims to ‘document the world from the point of view of the people studied’ (Hammersley, 2013: 165), highlighting the dynamic *contours* of social reality as experienced by people themselves. On the other hand, however, my approach goes further than describing people’s native points of view, and seeks also to understand ‘the *processes* by which social reality is put together and assigned meaning’ (Gubrium and Holstein, 2008: 3; italics added), analyzing how those processes are structured and made realizable. So, even though I use the phrases such as ‘what people do’ or their ways of ‘being and doing social’ throughout the study, this is to delineate *both* what is going on, and to understand how, and why, that has become possible.

The employment of constructivist and qualitative modes of inquiry is attributed also to the definition of algorithms in the thesis as ‘algorithmic systems’ (cf. section 3.3.2.1), computational in character and often remaining ‘black-box’ (Pasquale, 2015). Some scholars have sought to open up these boxes for the purposes of conducting research (e.g. Power, 1999), so as to make things more transparent. But while such efforts are admirable, this thesis’s emphasis on *people’s* interdependence and interrelations exempts us from the same endeavor, allowing us to focus instead on what becomes intelligible to, and interpretable by, the individuals who ‘encounter the algorithmic realities and principles underlying contemporary media platforms’ as part of their social life (Bucher, 2018: 96).

Despite not knowing exactly what algorithms are or how they work, people would likely ‘arrive at *reasonably founded* opinion in fields which . . . are at least mediately of concern to [them]’ (Schütz, 1946: 466; italics in original), and reflect upon and adjust their online presence accordingly (Bucher, 2018: 63; Couldry, Fotopoulou, and Dickens, 2016). This in turn will play a role in the reconfiguration of their social lives. To this extent, the mysterious character of algorithmic systems and their manifestations can be understood not as barriers to empirical research into people’s interrelations and interdependence, but as part of the thing that is to be investigated.

For this reason, this thesis takes a phenomenological approach, aiming to explore how realities are experienced and familiarized by people through a stock of knowledge available in their social life. But at the same time, it also takes a *material* perspective (Couldry and Hepp, 2017:

33-34), not least because, as was noted in Chapter 3, the social cannot be understood only in terms of meaningful exchanges, knowledge, or intersubjective actions, but must embrace the materiality of technical contexts that make possible such exchanges, knowledge generation and actions. That is, what people reflexively and performatively *do* is necessarily reconfigured by, or moulded through, a framework provided by the forms and means of social media including algorithmic systems. This is where a traditional phenomenological approach may focus too much on understanding ‘how people “see” their workaday worlds’ at the expense of ‘discover[ing] and exhibit[ing] features of these worlds so that they can be “seen”’ (Maynard, 1989: 144). Rather, the goal is to use such methods as allow for deeper access to people’s experiences and in what terms they are made realizable (Holstein and Gubrium, 2008), in this particular material context.

4.3. Research Design

The research design is informed by this epistemological position and general considerations of qualitative research. This section explains the employment of three qualitative methods and the underlying rationales, processes of creating an interview topic guide, and data collection and analysis.

4.3.1. Choice of Methods: In-depth Interview, Qualitative Mapping, and Think-aloud Practice

Given the objective and epistemological position on which this research is founded, the chosen qualitative data collection and analysis methods have been selected. The principal method for data collection is qualitative interview; and in particular, the in-depth ‘semi-structured life world interview’ (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015). This type of interview is planned according to insights and themes from existing literature and other sources, yet remains flexible enough to allow for changes in sequences and forms of questions to follow up with, or probe into, specific answers from the interviewees (hence, semi-structured). At the same time, it aims to grasp people’s experiences of everyday social life from *their own perspective*, regardless of whether that experience is seamless, without losing sight of the specific contexts in which their perspective is situated (Gaskell, 2000: 39) (hence, life world interview).

There is also another reason for why an in-depth interview is appropriate for studying social solidarity as contextualized by social media. In Chapter 3, we saw how current theories of social solidarity often do not delve sufficiently deeply into the role that (social) media plays in its development, while social media research rarely shows a systematic attempt to engage empirically with social solidarity. One of the aims of this thesis is thus to bridge the gap between these two disciplines through an attempt at a conceptual revision of the meaning of social solidarity. The comparative lack of previous studies justifies the goal of this research as exploring people's experiences of social solidarity, rather than assuming we already know the character of these experiences in advance. Interviews, by leaving enough space for previously unconsidered topics and unpredicted findings to emerge, become visible and analyzable (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005: 3), allowing us to obtain 'unexpected information that other forms of research might not discover' (Berger, 1998: 57).

By the same token, the interview procedures in this thesis follow a paradigm which Holstein and Gubrium (2004) called 'active interview,' which, instead of keeping involvement of the interviewer to a minimum in order to 'extract' or 'mine' as much 'preformed, purely informational commodity' (Holstein and Gubrium, 2004: 155) from them, is built on the premise that knowledge generation is a collaborative, interactional effort (Garfinkel, 1967). As it is collaborative in character, therefore, actively interviewing does not presuppose rigidity, even though it is scripted, and lets the interviewer focus not only on 'what' the answer is, but also on 'how,' and in what context, interviewees remarks are made, and how their meaning-making processes are unfolded, rather than taking their answer as a more or less accurate description of representation of reality. To use the language of Kvale and Brinkmann (2015), this interviewer resembles a 'traveler' who explores respondents' stories, not only to find new knowledge for himself, but also to instigate a process of reflection for the traveler, helping them to reach a new, foreign understanding on top of the 'taken-for-granted values and customs in the traveler's home country' (2008: 49). This is also one of the ways I worked to avoid preconceptions about the role of social media, something that will be discussed further in the section on positionality and reflexivity.

Meanwhile, this interview was complemented in two important ways: by integrating (1) interviewees' own mapping of how they imagine the entanglement of social media in their social life through drawing, and; (2) 'Think-Aloud' practice that seeks to stimulate the individuals' reflexivity and highlight the performative aspects of their actions.

The inclusion of drawing as an activity in qualitative method has been used widely by practitioners and researchers studying the thoughts and behaviors of children (e.g. Gauntlett, 2005; McWhirter, 2014; Wetton and McWhirter, 1998), who as children may struggle to articulate their ideas clearly, enabling them to make complex string diagrams of what they are thinking and doing (Zweifel and van Wezemael, 2012). However, by the same token, it has a great virtue applicable for generalized qualitative research, in that it helps better reveal subconscious and unrealized feelings and perspectives in the mind (Rattine-Flaherty and Singhal, 2007).²⁰ Its principle objective is, therefore, to facilitate the expression of stories and perspectives that might otherwise have been overlooked or silenced (Singhal and Rattine-Flaherty, 2006: 317), or remained subtle, obscured or in some way self-contradictory. Such visual ways of representing thoughts and feelings are, as with the outcome of these interviews, not necessarily a complete nor more precise representation of people's knowledge and realities, but merely another point of access to 'apprehending something of their worlds and world-making' (Mitchell, 2006: 63).

It was on this basis that I decided to use drawing as part of my methodology and bring in wider perceptions of social realities from the interviewees' perspectives. This allowed me to create a more complete picture of this rather complex scenario, and while the in-depth interview was also designed to understand the interviewees' realities, drawing allowed the respondents to decide *more freely* on the content and framing of their images, so that they could also highlight elements that might be missing in the interview questions or otherwise overlooked by the interviewer, 'placing the agency literally in their own hands' (Literate, 2013: 12).

Furthermore, unlike in the interview, where an immediate response is anticipated, at this stage, interviewees are given more time to think and reflect before or during the drawing, something which can encourage more active contemplation over the matter at hand (Gauntlett, 2007). This is indeed helpful for researching difficult topics related to the hidden workings of algorithmic systems, where more reflective answers might be required. Meanwhile, drawing can even give people an opportunity to escape the linearity of the spoken interview and potentially turn the study into a more enjoyable experience. Indeed, it is noteworthy that three interviewees

²⁰ Carl Jung, for instance, often asked his patients to produce drawings during therapy sessions as a way to explore and understand the inner workings of their creative unconscious (Gauntlett, 2007).

explicitly noted how the drawing activity was a new learning opportunity for themselves, helping them realize what they thought.

Second, Think-Aloud practice is a method that ‘requires the research participant to continually speak aloud the thoughts in their head as they work’ (Young, 2005: 20). Interviewees are asked to ‘think out loud’ as they go about a specific, pre-set task, which, in case of this thesis, was to navigate across their social media and see things on computers or smartphone screens, do things, etc., and to say what was occurring in their mind as they performed these tasks.

Historically speaking, Think-Aloud practice is a method that has been more widely used in non-sociology disciplines like cognitive psychology (e.g. Ericsson and Simon, 1993), usability testing for new products (e.g. Dumas, 1999), or more recently, in media psychology (e.g. Eveland and Dunwoody, 2009), with a view to offering a closer insight into human consciousness, information processing, learning and/or problem solving. As may be evident, however, such studies are predicated upon quantitative and experimental rather than qualitative, interpretive, or phenomenological research settings; for instance, Ericsson and Simon (1980) seemed to position the individual metaphorically as an information-processing machine that is able to provide accurate reports about their cognitions, provided specific conditions are met (e.g. in experiment).

However, this does not mean that Think-Aloud practice is at variance with qualitative empirical investigation (Eccles and Aarsal, 2017). Contrarily, as Charters (2003) claimed, ‘the depth, variety, and complexity of thought processes may be equally effectively interpreted using a qualitative approach’ (Charters, 2003: 76). Rankin, for example, who used a quantitative approach, nonetheless suggested that researchers can treat a think-aloud participant as providing a ‘tightly focused’ case study (Rankin, 1988: 122), better illustrating the nuances of a situation and therefore useful when seeking to offer an explication of things (rather than mere cause and effect), especially when ‘it is impossible to identify all the important variables ahead of time’ (Merriam, 1988: 7). In other words, Think-Aloud practice in this thesis is employed *not* with a view to securing a ‘cognitive reflection’ (Ericsson and Simon, 1993) of the interviewees that can be generalized and reproduced in different settings; rather, to offer further materials that together form the sum of the interviewees’ narratives. In fact, Think-Aloud practice is useful for giving researchers access to research participants’ short-term memories via *immediate* perceptual and linguistic processing, rather than focusing on the long-term

memory, which has been processed by reasoning and remade to fit with certain values or norms (the latter is more likely what can be gained from the interview stage).²¹ This is particularly useful for exploring interviewees' actions towards and experiences with algorithms, given algorithms are *already* deeply embedded in what they do in their social life. What may be considered natural within their consciousness might show a different story when the minute details of how they act with algorithms and social media point to something contradictory, and this may not be something that can be recalled retrospectively in interview. Thus, the purpose of incorporating Think-Aloud practice into the methodology of this thesis is to permit 'a clearer picture of the variability of individual experience to emerge' (Charters, 2003: 76) further highlighting the process of meaning-making and clarifying any *potential* tension between what interviewees *do* and *say* (in the interview) – not because they mean to lie, but simply because they may be unaware of something deeply embedded and naturalized in their life.

4.3.1.1. *Potential Alternative Methods*

The rationales behind adopting a qualitative mode of inquiry discussed so far have also elucidated the reasons for not employing quantitative-inspired techniques of data collection, such as survey or computer-assisted techniques that mine data directly from individuals' social media accounts. Those methods might have provided similar results in that they all obtain insights into people's actions, and have their own virtues, especially to the extent that findings based on numbers and figures are often widely considered more reliable and valid (Stone, 2012). However, compared to the self-reported qualitative data in this study, quantitative methods would likely limit the potential for unexpected phenomena to emerge from the data, while risking impoverishing the answers to the degree that they may lack the 'depth and details'

²¹ According to the researchers using Think-Aloud practice, this verbalization of short-term memory is made through Level 1 or 2 verbalizations: where the former is a direct articulation of the information in the conscious memory (e.g. overt verbalization of implicit speech) and the latter refers to the recoding of non-verbal information without additional processing by reasoning (e.g. describing a visual image). Generally, the researchers agree that it is only information obtained through Level 1 and 2 verbalization that can be trustworthy, as these are the 'raw data,' and this framing makes sense from a vantage point of quantitative and (natural) scientific studies. From the perspective of this thesis, however, the verbal reports are not treated as raw data, but as additional materials whose strength mainly consists in helping unveil what may be too naturalized as to come to the surface of the interviewees' consciousness during the interview. For this reason, as I hope to show later in the section on data analysis, I further asked the interviewees to look at what they said during their Think-Aloud practice, and gave them time to contemplate and come up with their own, more reflexive accounts of social media and their social life. This is a process called Level 3 verbalization which, according to Ericsson and Simon (1980), should be ignored in cognitive psychology as contaminated by human perspective and therefore unreliable. However, in this thesis, the Level 3 verbalization materials enriched the interviewees' points of view and helped them better understand the complicated situations involving social media, providing more detailed accounts of their social life.

required to answer the research questions of this thesis (Holdaway, 2000). Furthermore, a relatively limited literature on social solidarity in relation to social media suggests that there is not enough existing stock of information to identify all the possible variables and create an adequate questionnaire (although it is hoped that the findings from this thesis may be informative for such future quantitative research on certain aspects of social solidarity as contextualized by social media).

In terms of other qualitative modes of inquiry, three alternative methods were previously considered: personal diaries, focus groups, and (participant) observation. However, after further contemplation it seemed that the combination of interview, drawing, and Think-Aloud would outperform those three methods, for different reasons. First, personal diaries, although they might provide the type of (reflexive) data this thesis requires in even richer detail than the interviews, through allowing for enough time to fully research the participants, it is difficult to control and persuade people to make a diary regularly. Many might feel lack of time and so drop out, or come to believe that what they were jotting down was not worth the time and effort. There might also be attempts to overly refine the writing rather than providing an account of what they would *actually* do or say, as part of a process of impression management. The diary might also be more suitable for longitudinal studies where user experience needs be recorded over an extended period of time, making other methods less practical (Alaszewski, 2006).

Second, focus groups were dropped in the end simply because the details required for this study might be the kind of information the interviewees would not want to share in public. Last, (participant) observation would have provided a good account of what people do, but that account is likely confined to what people do *on social media*, rather than *through* them. As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, social solidarity should not be seen as a *result* of what people do *on* social media – this fails to address the rich complexity of ‘the social’ – but rather as contingent on what people do in ways that include social media. Simply, observation may not have been able to provide sufficient details about what social possibilities and resources may exist *beyond* social media platforms themselves. Thus, this thesis heeds Kvale and Brinkmann’s simple adage that it is best to ‘talk with’ people when researchers ‘want to know how people understand their world and their lives’ (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015: 1).

This does not mean, however, the complementary combination of interview, drawing, and Think-Aloud are free from limitations. For instance, findings based on qualitative data are often

not generalizable beyond the specific contexts, hence have relatively little reproducibility. There are also concerns about over-interpretation of qualitative data (Myers, 1995), especially for open-ended forms of data like drawing (Silverman, 2001). Varying degrees of reactivity across individuals for Think-Aloud practice may also skew the data by nudging the researcher to engage more with those who have spoken more. (Eccles and Arsal, 2017). Albeit I took every effort to minimize some of these in my research design, this must still be considered as possibility. I will discuss these potential limitations in more detail in Chapter 9: Conclusion.

4.3.2. Creating an Interview Topic Guide

Operationalizing the research questions for an empirical analysis of social solidarity involved the construction of an interview topic guide, but the lack of systematic empirical research into social solidarity in the context of social media indicated that previous research on which this thesis could *directly* draw on was in short supply. However, following the discussion in Chapter 2 and 3, and as noted at the end of Chapter 2, interdependence was proposed as the ‘scaffolding’ for the interview questions. The questions were thus concerned with what people do themselves, but also what they do in relation to other people, from clicking on ‘like’ to commenting, other types of interactions, information consumption, and so on (see Appendix 1 for the topic guide). Yet, an effort was not made to make the questions overly wide-ranging and cover every possible form of interdependence that could be recalled. As noted in the preceding section, the interview should allow enough space for the unknown, unexpected possibilities to emerge from the perspective of the interviewee. So, this topic guide was to be used as a way to help distinguish the interviews from a mundane conversational style of talking (Flick, 2002) while also creating ‘an easy and comfortable framework for a discussion, providing a logical and plausible progression through the issues in focus’ (Gaskell, 2000: 40); rather than one to be followed slavishly.

Meanwhile, neither the questions nor the words I used included social solidarity or solidarity explicitly. Although I was confident that everyone would be familiar with the term itself, this path of avoidance was taken because of this familiarity and, as noted in Chapter 2, because of the terms’ varying meanings, connotations, and different usages in different contexts, which might have confused the interviewees and produced variegated accounts that were not commensurable with one another. I therefore limited the use of ‘social solidarity’ or ‘solidarity’

only to occasions when the interviewees mentioned the term *by themselves* first, at which time I could further ask them to clarify what they meant by (social) solidarity. However, I did include the term in the informed consent (see Appendix 3), and used it when explaining to the interviewees the objective of the research, for the sake of candidness and clarity.

In addition, I also refrained from using the terms ‘algorithms’ or ‘algorithmic systems,’ as such jargon might have been equally confusing, and mentioning them might appear to indicate involvement of which the interviewees would have been unaware. Furthermore, as a researcher in social media from a well-known university in London, I hoped to avoid appearing an (alleged) expert who could give useful information and explanations about social media and algorithms to them. This is why the term ‘algorithms’ was used only once in a question in the second part of the interview. However, it transpired that my worry was virtually groundless, as all interviewees were not only familiar with these terms, but also well aware that they were somehow implicated in their use of social media. As I will show in the empirical chapters, a large number of them also showed a desire to work around them, having developed their own understanding about how social media and algorithms functioned, and were eager to discuss the implications with me.

The first topic guide was created around November 2016 and, based on this, I carried out five pilot interviews (with drawing and Think-Aloud practice) between December 2016 and February 2017. At that time, the topic guide was framed less by the notion of interdependence, but the focus on understanding what people do and how social media are implicated was the same. Three participants were recruited from an online advert placed on Facebook and two others were referred by the first three as avid social media users. I explained to them this was a pilot study, but informed them what they said during the interview would remain confidential, and to be recorded and analyzed only used for research purposes.

Based on the results of this pilot, I reappraised several aspects of the guide, including rephrasing and streamlining several of the questions. For instance, I tried to frame the questions in ways that avoid any negative nuances (e.g. instead of saying “what would you not do if . . .”, asking directly what they would do) and added more small-talk questions at the beginning of interviews, asking about their history of social media use as a way to build rapport (Gaskell, 2000: 45), developing the conversation gradually into a more formal interview.

Importantly, in the revised topic guide I included questions concerning the notion of interdependence based on the elements of interdependence identified in the literature, such as what kinds of exchange (e.g. communication including like, comment, tagging) were made, to what extent people showed an effort to listen and reciprocate to what others were doing, and so on. In addition, I rephrased several questions to address their general social life and how they live their social lives through, or with the help of social media, rather than documenting merely what they did on social media.

For example, some of the initial questions included, “How have your activities on social media changed your offline life?” Not only were these considered hard to answer (as one cannot gauge the impact of social media) but they also did not resonate with the way ‘the social’ is conceptualized in this thesis and focused too much on what happened online as relative to offline. A similar example was: “Would you say social media have made it easier for you to get information on what you consider to be socially, politically important issues and to talk about them with other people?” To give less emphasis on social media, this question was reworded as: “Where, in general, do you get information about socially, politically important issues?”, and I also probed further in case social media or media were not mentioned in their answers.

Another major change was the organization of interview protocol vis-à-vis drawing and Think-Aloud practice. Originally, I located these two activities at the end of an interview that lasted for around two hours. It was soon noticed that some interviewees began feeling tired, or at times did not manage to finish the drawing and Think-Aloud, simply because the interviews ran beyond two hours and they had to stop before then. Most of all, having answered all the questions regarding a diversity of aspects of her social media use, one participant told me directly that she found the Think-Aloud practice fairly awkward, and could not see whether this method was providing anything other than what she had already covered. The transcription of her interview proved that she was right; and this was in part because the interviewees were not abstracting themselves from their social media practice over the course of the interview. At the same time, they were willing to show me, throughout the interview, the screen (of smartphone or laptop) to better explain to me what they meant. By the time they had finished the interview, there were not many materials they felt needed to be added. The particular interviewee mentioned above in fact ended up *mechanically* describing what she was doing

instead of performatively using social media (“I ‘liked’ this photo, I’m scrolling down, I’m liking another photo . . .”).

One of the expected pitfalls of the Think-Aloud practice was that not everyone would have the same level of verbalization skills, and this would affect their ability to produce comparable amounts of data. But more importantly, despite having acknowledged that social media played a key part of the interviewees’ everyday social lives, I did not fully recognize the consequences of that acknowledgement, and may have disregarded how this would affect the quality of data.

For this reason, I decided to rearrange the order of the stages, dividing the interview into two parts (one hour each) and locating the drawing at the end of the first interview section and the Think-Aloud practice at the beginning of the second part. Interviewees were given a 15-minute break between the two interviewees. One reason for this was so as to distinguish between the types of question in the two interview sessions, where the former covered the interviewees’ general experience of social media use through questions to document what they actually did or saw, while the latter part interrogated the issues requiring deeper reflection, such as their feelings, opinions, or positioning of social media within their social life. Meanwhile, as drawing and Think-Aloud practice were expected to require extra instructions and effort on the participants’ part, I hoped to avoid diminishing their attention span or causing unnecessary fatigue, something which could have resulted from including both activities in the same session.

Another lesson learnt from the pilot was that I needed to ask the interviewees to refrain from using social media preferably for 24 hours but at least on the day of interview before our meeting, even though the interview took place early in the morning (around 9am). This was because social media are deeply embedded in their daily life routine and so most interviewees begin their day by checking social media, meaning that they may not have enough updates to be narrated during the Think-Aloud practice. In fact, this was the case with one of the pilot participants, that he was so bored of going through updates he had already seen, that he wanted to end the Think-Aloud practice more rapidly.

4.3.3. Data Collection: Sampling, Recruitment, and Fieldwork

Having designed the interview protocol, I moved on to sampling strategy. In line with the qualitative nature of this research, I adopted non-probability sampling, or purposive sampling, the predominant method in small-scale studies that investigate complex social phenomena where the research questions demand a deep interrogation and which aim at an explorative analysis of social patterns rather than making statistical inferences to large-scale populations and generalizing the findings (Yin, 2014). This, however, did not suggest that I had no intention to make any generalizations. There are other logics of generalization that qualitative studies can aim for. Yin (2014), for example, argued that there is a difference between analytic generalization and statistical generalization, and in the former, ‘previously developed theory is used as a template against which to compare the empirical results of the case study’ (Yin, 2014: 67). The idea behind this analytical generalization is to link empirical findings to a theoretical proposition and thereby test the validity of extant theories and, if applicable, guide the modification or extension of the underlying theories. It is in this sense that I hoped to analytically generalize the findings from the research to shed light onto social solidarity as contextualized by social media.

Among the various principles of non-probability sampling, this research design followed the maximum-variation principle, which aims at ‘obtain[ing] information about the significance of various circumstances for case process and outcome’ through inclusion of different ends of a social spectrum to enhance diversity (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 79). This is because, first, my focus was on *social* solidarity specifically, and sought to explore communication and interrelations rather than shared group traits or characteristics. In order to avoid a different form of solidarity emerging (e.g. racial, gender-based, religious, political) across the interviewees’ narratives I therefore tried to ensure a balanced gender-ratio in the sample, which was eventually achieved by the recruitment of 24 men and 22 women.

I also limited the ages of the interviewees to between 21 and 45 years. In the case of digital research, it may often be the case that it is necessary to recruit more younger subjects, since they are what may be called ‘digital natives,’ borne into a world already suffused with digital technology (Palfrey and Grasser, 2008; Prensky, 2001) and likely to have higher digital skills and savviness. The purpose of doing this is to ensure that a wide variety of digital practices can be documented. If this is applied to social media research, then it might have made more sense to recruit people who can be termed ‘social media natives,’ presumably younger than the generation of digital natives alone, and into whose lives social media have become even more

deeply embedded. Yet I did not follow this track because, on the one hand, concepts like the idea of digital natives often overlook other important forms of social materiality noted in Chapters 2 and 3, such as socio-economic status, race, and educational background, which would likely affect the ways people use digital media as well (Helsper and Eynon, 2010). In addition, as this research is primarily concerned with a broader understanding of the social rather than people's social media practices *themselves*, it was important to include those who did not necessarily 'grow up with' social media, just as long as they did use social media frequently and regard them as an important part of their everyday living. Different reasons and purposes of social media usage among the participants were also taken into account to allow for a variety of practices to emerge.

For the sake of clarity, the majority of interviewees were still in their 20s and 30s, but this is not at odds with the principle that it is mostly those under 44 years old who used social media the most in the UK at the time the fieldwork was completed (above 80% of the age group exploiting social media, as the below figure shows). Minors were not included for ethical reasons.

SOCIAL NETWORKING BY AGE GROUP, 2011 TO 2017

Within the last 3 months

	Age group					
	16-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
2017	96	88	83	68	51	27
2016	91	89	75	66	51	23
2015	90	83	73	55	42	15
2014	91	80	68	54	37	13
2013	93	84	66	50	29	11
2012	87	78	62	40	24	10
2011	90	73	54	36	22	7

Figure 1: Social networking by age group in the UK 2011-17

(source: Office for National Statistics)

Another point that should be noted here is location diversity. As the participant profile shows (Appendix 4) many of the interviewees were residing outside of London, which is my own place of residence. I first considered conducting all the interviews in London for the sake of convenience and practicality, but this was changed following an experience in 2016. In June 2016, a few days prior to the Brexit referendum, I was visiting Oxford to attend an academic conference, where I had a chance to talk with some locals (other than academics or students at Oxford University). One of them told me that he was using social media actively and aggressively to promote the Leave campaign online which was striking to me, as that was the very first time I had met someone advocating Leave online. All friends, acquaintances and colleagues of mine in London, continental European and British, were Remain supporters and my Facebook feed was dominated with anti-Brexit slogans, with no sign of a single Brexit advocate, as far as I can recall. Once the referendum result came out, this made me realize that people outside of London would potentially have much more (for me) unexpected and diversified ways of using social media that would have some important practical implications for the study. I thus altered my plan accordingly, deciding to recruit participants across England. As a consequence, interviewees were recruited across England, mostly in London, Cambridge, Loughborough and Reading (and some other places). This was to ensure a range of urban settings, but also because of the practical consideration that these were the places residence of friends of some friends of mine who helped with recruitment in their local areas (see Appendix 2 for the call for research participants).

Recruitment began around March 2017. I posted flyers at universities (in London, City University, Goldsmiths, Imperial College, SOAS, UCL), public sports and leisure facilities (e.g. DW Fitness clubs in the Strand and Holborn), social clubs, local pubs, and supermarkets (no big chains such as Tesco or Waitrose but local ones). Notices were, by virtue of some people I knew directly, also placed on the intranet of two different companies. In the other cities listed above, my friends and acquaintances kindly offered to help with placing notices across various spaces and spreading the word around. I also posted the notice in online spaces including Facebook groups, Reddit, and Mumsnet. Choosing a combination of such diversity of contexts was aimed at ensuring a broader participation from varied social and educational backgrounds and occupational profiles outside the domain of university students. It is not that university students were not good data providers for the purposes of this thesis, and indeed they may have been more easily accessible and familiar with participating in academic studies such as this project. But given that social materiality such as age, location, and socio-economic background

likely play a role in people's being and doing social, I bore in mind that 'the most easily available measure may not be the most valid one' (Mahrt and Scharkow, 2013: 27) and so tried to gather data across a wider range of social contexts.

Fieldwork took place mostly in 2017, but some interviewees were also completed in early 2018, across various locations in England. Around October 2017, I looked again at the sampling, to make sure it was not homogeneous in character. It transpired that, although the desired outcome seemed close in terms of gender and location, many people in the sample were from middle or upper-middle class.²² In terms of occupation, there was a good diversity, e.g. teachers, journalists, sommelière, creative workers, and so on, but again they were relatively well educated (most of them with a degree in higher education and a few with postgraduate degrees). At this point, I tried to be more careful with recruitment of interviewees, aiming to recruit those who self-identified as coming from lower-middle or working class backgrounds, and those who were both affluent and less economically stable. As it was comparatively more difficult to reach these types of people (both poor and rich), I asked participants to recommend people they knew, using a snowballing effect. The final sample did not include equal numbers of different backgrounds but overall the effort to include people from a broad range of backgrounds and standpoints was *not* to highlight distinctions in the interviewees' social media use across different backgrounds (e.g. between rural and urban areas; men and women) but rather 'to maximize the opportunity to understand the different positions taken by members of the social milieu' (Gaskell, 2000: 41). For the same reason, I deliberately included a few individuals who were expected to be particularly social-media-savvy or familiar with algorithmic systems, such as people working at datamining or digital companies. The rationale behind this was the assumption that they might hold a very different types of imaginary concerning algorithmic systems and social media in general.

The fieldwork came to an end fully in early 2018 when I felt that data collection had reached a point of 'theoretical saturation' across this variegated sample; that is, the moment in which the collected data seemed to 'stop telling . . . anything new about the social process' (Mason, 2002: 134; Yin, 2014). The final sample consisted of 46 individuals across England (see Appendix 4 for details of their profile).

²² The notion of 'class' here does not refer to a category formed historically and bound by traditions in the UK, but is used to broadly evoke the distinction between the interviewees' (acquired) wealth, cultural taste or social capital.

4.3.3.1. During the Fieldwork

Interviews (with drawing and Think-Aloud practice) took place in various places, including universities, cafes, pubs, company meeting rooms, and so forth. They were largely chosen for the sake of interviewees' convenience and to create a feeling of open, welcoming ambience where they can feel at ease. As the three research methods all relied strongly on the individuals' ability to recount or narrate first-handed experiences, the amount and quality of data hinged on their willingness to share stories.

All interviews and Think-Aloud practices were recorded. They began with a briefing and the signing of an informed consent that specified the overall purpose and the design of this research. Participants were briefed about this via email before the interview began, but this was repeated to make sure they understood the goal of research and were participating voluntarily, as a result of which their remarks and drawings could be published for research purposes, but would not be shared with any third-party without their explicit consent. They were also briefed that in all publications their name and profile would remain deidentified and deidentified completely, and personal information would be treated as confidential.²³ But instead of being assigned a code (e.g. interviewee 17), here they are pseudonymized, while age, gender, residential area and occupation are disclosed. This was not because such information was necessarily germane to their stories (although sometimes it was, in which case I made that explicit) but more because I wanted to humanize the interviewees and enhance the readability of the empirical chapters. Finally, participants were informed that they could withdraw from the research at any point without giving a reason. This incentive was included in the calls for participants and offered to all participants.

Fieldwork with each participant comprised two interviews, drawing, and Think-Aloud practice, which altogether lasted, excluding the break, between 100 minutes and 180 minutes, but mostly around 140 minutes. It ended with wrapping-up questions, a debriefing and a thank you for their participation, and I then offered an incentive of £40 for the entire participation in the study.

²³ Once data analysis was done, I emailed a few interviewees whose script included information that might be used to re-identify them (e.g. photos in screenshot, proper nouns or information they mentioned, etc.), to check whether they were comfortable with this. Some asked to anonymize the names and so I followed their instructions, but they were all fine with including sentences in which those specific pieces of information occurred.

On interview questions, although I generally followed the topic guide, I did not ask identical questions, but tailored them to each participant's response and the flow of the interview, meaning that the order of questions in the topic guide was not necessarily followed. This is because, as inspired by Kvale and Brinkmann (2015), interview was not treated as a mode of interrogation, but a 'collaborative endeavour' between those who hold a conversation together. For this reason, I sometimes took a more active stance, for instance when the interviewee asked for clarification or explanation of something they encountered on social media, although generally I listened carefully to their stories and asked probing questions as pertinent.

The first-part interview, which lasted between 40 and 70 minutes, was followed by drawing, as a way to dig deeper into the participants' understanding of the role social media played in the interviewees' lives. It was remarkable (although not entirely surprising) as I will show in the empirical chapters, that the drawings varied from one another, not just in terms of the role that social media was playing, but the way that those roles were depicted. As I noted in the preceding section, sometimes drawings turned out to offer a more intuitive illustration of people's understanding, capturing the more subtle dimensions that did not surface in the interview. One good example of this is in the figure below, which shows how interviewees performed different social activities through the limited repertoire of functions provided by social media, and how this affected the ways they went around their normal social lives, s I will detail further in the following empirical chapters.

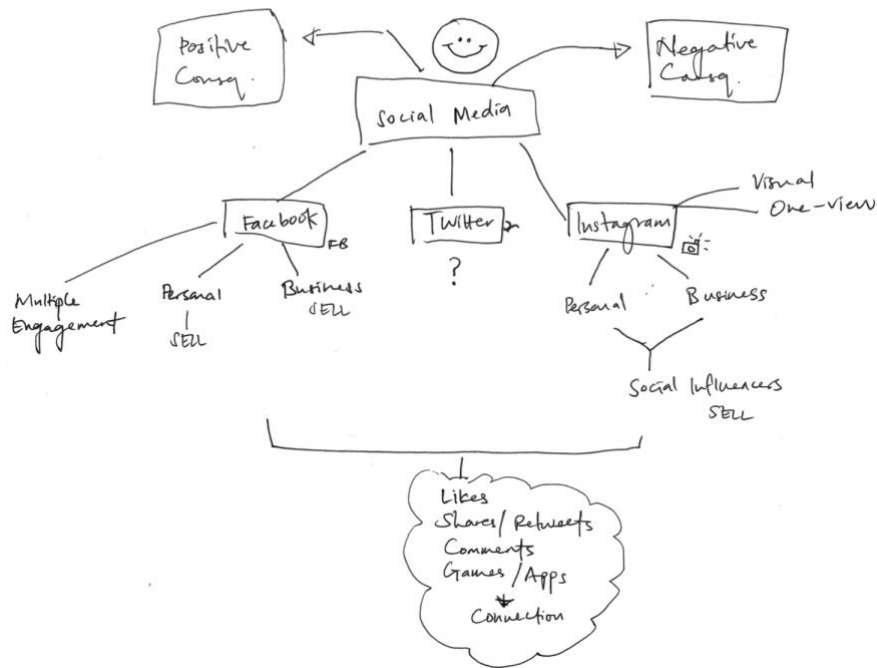


Figure 2: A sample of drawing from research participant

Clearly, it is hard to interpret such drawings in isolation, especially when there is little common features uniting them, and I wanted to avoid my own impressions taking precedence. So after the drawing session I discussed with the participants the meaning and process of drawing, and also often came back to them during the second-part interview as a reference where applicable. The questions for the above case included: “What does this smile emoticon mean?” “Why is there a question mark below Twitter?” “How does Facebook’s ‘personal’ and ‘business’ function differ from those of Instagram?”

Meanwhile, this process to make clear the meaning of certain answers’ was also followed for the Think-Aloud practice. First, I made it clear that, during the session (which generally lasted around 10 minutes), I would remain silent unless absolutely necessary, and asked for their understanding on this matter. The only cues I gave as a researcher were reminders to encourage participants to continue thinking out loud when they seemed to fall into silence, as I wanted to hear directly their viewpoints. Indeed, normally researchers do not interfere in or raise questions during the Think-Aloud process, to make sure that what participants actually do and say is not affected by undue external influence. As I noted above (section 4.3.1.) this is also the reason cognitive psychologist only regard as valid level 1 and 2 verbalizations, i.e. pre-reasoning verbal reports. However, as a qualitative researcher, I wanted to make sure that I did

not misunderstand the participants' accounts, and give them opportunity to correct any 'factual' errors and 'add further thoughts and comments' (Charters, 2003: 314). Thus, I created a few questions from the notes I made during each Think-Aloud session and asked the participants in the beginning of the second-part interview to elaborate on what they had said. Introducing this reflexive dimension may appear, to those cognitive psychologists, as polluting the 'raw data;' but from my perspective, and the position on which this thesis stands, this was to better grasp the connection between what people do and their experiences of social media. All in all, recalling what they had done and said in the drawing activity and Think-Aloud practice, many interviewees came to illustrate what they wrote in close relation to their experience, while some clarified the *prima facie* contradiction between what they did and said in the interview and Think-Aloud. For instance, one interviewee said that she tried to listen to as diverse a range of voices and so rarely 'blocks' people, but she 'muted' a few social media accounts during her Think-Aloud practice, which to me seemed to clash with her efforts to listen. Also, other interviewees showed me, in the second-part interview, how they actually deal with algorithms, referring back to comments they made previously.

4.3.5. Data Analysis

Once I had transcribed the interviews and Think-Aloud practice, I employed a thematic analysis to analyze the transcripts and drawings. There was a clear theory-led thematic structure based on 'interdependence' in relation to interrelations and people's actions and experiences, and my focus was less on the semantic details of their language use or life-story, which cancelled out the need for (critical) discourse or narrative analysis. In fact, I was concerned that an analytic toolkit with a different focus on power relations and narrative might 'no longer be able to give an account of the experience of the social actors themselves' (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999: 364). Thematic analysis, instead, is a method used to recognize common patterns within the data, 'where emerging themes become the categories for analysis' (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006: 82). It normally begins from the construction of a theoretical framework specifying a list of thematic dimensions articulated deductively (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015: 106) based on the extant literature and concepts. But because the patterns emerge across different research participants and the events they report, thematic analysis also has a strong commitment to the empirically collected data. The thematic analysis in this thesis, indeed, combines deductive and inductive approaches by grounding empirical data in a

conceptually-informed framework, as defined in Chapter 3. That required me to be reflexive in using the concepts identified from the literature, rather than letting the data ‘speak for themselves’ (Holstein and Gubrium, 2004: 156). This would help to make sure the findings would be properly grounded in the data, rather than distorted to fit existing definitions of elements of social solidarity. Furthermore, as noted in Chapter 3 (see section 3.3.1 for the detail) in relation to the main research question, this thesis does not aim to find a common value or conjoint experience across the interviewees’ stories, or study what people do as a means to ‘read social solidarity off.’

This implies that the analysis could not be a linear process. Indeed, I had to learn to understand and embrace the inevitable messiness and recurrent, iterative nature of this analytical approach. For instance, before engaging in any analysis, I tried to familiarize myself with the data by reading the transcripts and making some initial notes, which together with the concepts from the literature, were used to come up with the specific codes. This process entailed tenacious and repeated visit to and recoding of the earlier data to ensure that the findings were sufficiently grounded in the data. It also required adjusting, removing, or merging certain codes throughout the writing, as a result of which I came up with codes to deal with the elements of four sub-research questions outlined in Chapter 3. This includes the kinds of (social) actions conducted through social media; various ways of involvement of algorithms in the social life (e.g. being aware that algorithms somehow affect the use of social media); exploitation of algorithms by individuals for the social life (e.g. tactics employed by people); and specific types of exchange (e.g. of affection, communicative acts). In this process, I used NVivo software to help organize and manage the massive amount of data (transcripts of more than 100 hours) but bearing in mind that this is *not* the solution for coding and analysis but assistance; as Ezzy (2013: 112) made clear, the ‘identification of meaningful categories, and relationships between these categories can be done only by the researcher.’ Yet it helped me avoid falling into ‘anecdotalism’ (Bryman, 1988), whereby a construct is reified only by a few idiosyncratic instances that just appear to fit the criteria.²⁴ It also allowed me to decide on which materials to use; for instance, I came to decide not to use the materials that were coded as e.g. privacy or digital labour. Those materials hold importance in their own right, but did not fit with the

²⁴ To be clear, given the qualitative nature of this study, this does not mean that certain phenomena, tendencies, or inclination towards particular actions mentioned in the empirical chapters were noted by or found concurrence in every interviewee’s story. It was to show that there were enough cases for this to be regarded as more than individual idiosyncrasies. I tried to make this clear, particularly, in line with the suggestion of Creswell and Miller (2000: 126) whenever dissonant voices or activities appeared.

conceptualization of social solidarity, nor were they germane to answering the research questions in hand.

4.4. Ethics and Reflexivity

Over the course of interacting with the research participants, whether before, during, or after the study, I kept reminding myself of the ethical principles with which I was bound. This included being open and clear about the purposes of the research (hence my use of the term ‘social solidarity’ in briefing and informed consent), obtaining a signed informed consent, protecting the identity of participants, and treating confidentially their personal information, including the transcripts. Further, I spared no efforts to avoid compromising their privacy, for instance by sitting opposite participants across the table, and not looking at their laptop or smartphone screens unless they first asked me to take a look.

One tricky moment was when some participants showed me their Instagram *Stories* to show content uploaded by their ‘friends/followers.’ I was worried that, for instance if a *Story* was uploaded by their follower whose account is set as private and so not visible to me, this might make me unintendedly compromise the privacy of the third parties involved, by trespassing the information boundaries set by them. Considering this might effectively be implicating someone into the research process without consent, I asked the interviewees whether they could ‘describe’ those third-party contents in lieu of showing to me directly, and when this was not feasible for any reason, I asked them to hide the name of accounts or other personal information that could be used for identifying the profile of the third parties involved.

In terms of reflecting on the results of the study, I made a continuous effort to reflect on the possibility that my personal position, background and thinking could have shaped the data collection process. Qualitative modes of inquiry are inherently ‘value-laden’ (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015: 60) because the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection, and this alludes to the ‘personal nature of the relationship between data and the researcher’ (Lewins, 2008: 417). I was therefore well aware of my position, especially as a non-British (and non-European) PhD student from a commonly-known university living in London. Acting as if an (alleged) social media expert might have increased the power asymmetries between myself and participants by rendering myself appear as a figure of knowledge, I made every effort to avoid

this. For instance, I made it clear that, based on the principles of ‘active interview,’ what we were doing was more akin to a conversation in which we were sharing views, rather than a formal interview at a workplace, where information was provided to be judged. I also emphasized that there was absolutely no right or wrong answer, or better and worse, but only different (also to prevent people from hiding what they actually do, for example in cases where such actions might not seem to be greatly inspiring of pride).²⁵ At the same time, I was conscious of myself as a non-British person since I did not want the participants to misunderstand the purpose of the research as exploring British national solidarity from an outsider’s perspective. Although I did not use the term social solidarity during the interview, I did mention it before the interview, e.g. over the process of recruitment and in the informed consent, so this is a misunderstanding that could have come into play. The construction of a theory-led interview topic guide was another way of mitigating these problems and preserving the integrity of the interview (Esterberg, 2002).

Yet most likely this consciousness of my own position during the study itself was still not sufficient, not least because the entire research design, including data analysis, reporting and even writing this thesis, may all have been influenced by my own positionality. For instance, although I tried hard in Chapters 2 and 3 to justify the necessity and significance of studying *social* solidarity over other solidarities, and in relation to social media, this inspiration might not have come up in the first place without the influence of my own views, values and experiences. As I noted in Chapter 1, my attempt to grapple with the complicated idea of solidarity was stimulated by the fact that solidarity in three very different contexts showed similar normative implications of standing and acting together and being interdependent with one another. However, for others solidarity might mean something radically different; for instance, one of the participants noted after the interview that for him solidarity was something that *necessarily* involved struggle, fights, or revolution, evoking the imaginary of the *Solidarity* movement in 1980s Poland, May 1968 France, or Zenkyoto (All Campus Joint Struggle Committee) protests in the late-1960s Japan. On the one hand, this confirmed that I had made the right decision of not using the term solidarity during the interview, so as to avoid confusion; at the same time, it also offered a chance for me to realize just how vividly I needed to reflect

²⁵ It turned out that this emphasis was highly important, because, as I will show in Chapter 7 and 8, some people did not want to reveal some activities, such as ‘buying’ followers, as they first thought it is kind of activities that might attract judgement.

upon my own views and values and how they might affect not just the interview, but the entire study.

This does not mean that I worked to isolate the potential effects of subjective values from the findings, something which is arguably impossible in qualitative studies. Also, such a positivist interpretation of social realities does not align with the fundamentally phenomenological and constructivist paradigm adopted in this thesis. Rather, the way to enhance credibility here was to produce ‘rounded and contextual understandings on the basis of rich, nuanced and detailed data’ (Mason, 2002: 3), and to reflect on how my own values affected those understandings. For this reason, I also jotted down various memos and notes about the thoughts, feelings, and questions which emerged continually over the research process (Charmaz, 2014). This ‘audit trail’ (Creswell and Miller, 2000: 126) was part of a wider reflexive process that had taken place through the research and writing periods, which aimed at ensuring the final conclusion of this thesis would be ‘grounded’ in the data (Charmaz, 2008) rather than in existing theories or the researcher’s own positionality.

4.5. Conclusion

This chapter described my methodological decisions and procedures. First, I framed the study as a constructivist and phenomenological (material) inquiry and justified the use of three qualitative methods: semi-structured interview, drawing, and Think-Aloud practice as the most appropriate means to probe the development of social solidarity through people’s actions and experience as contextualized by social media. Then I detailed the practical procedures of how I proceeded with sampling strategy, fieldwork and data analysis, and pointed out the importance of self-reflection on my own position while detailing the attempt to avoid any ethical concerns, such as privacy and protection of identities.

The proceeding empirical chapters discuss the findings obtained via these methods. Chapter 5 will address the first sub-research question, by examining how the individuals studied in this thesis articulated their experiences of the social through social-media related actions.

CHAPTER 5: UNCOMMON EXPERIENCES OF (COMMON) SOCIAL WORLDS

5.1. Introduction

Building on the conceptual foundations set out in Chapters 2 and 3, this chapter turns to the thesis' first sub-research question: *How do people articulate their experiences of the social through social-media related actions?* As has already been suggested, this requires a more substantial empirical analysis of social solidarity, focusing *less* on identifying the signs of what we hold *in common* (e.g. as in *gemeinschaft* or mechanical solidarity), and more on examining, from the ground up, people's lived experience of the social through social media. This can then lay the foundations for the analysis in later chapters of solidarity as involving forms of interdependence, given that relations of interdependence emerge *out of* the ongoing experience of the social.

My analysis of interviewees' narratives of how they arrived at their own, variegated, conclusions about their experiences on *and* through social media suggests that all respondents identified different realities, even when they were engaged in apparently common patterns of action, such as news and information searching or developing relationships. More specifically, the first part of this chapter examines how, depending on widely variegated conceptions, and the subsequently varying usage of social media, interviewees experience the social world in strongly differentiated ways from one another. As I will illuminate, this justifies the need to widen the analytical prism and situate what people do on social media within their overall social life, reinterpreting their social media activities as what they do *through* social media.

The rest of the chapter explores the further details of interviewees' colorful stories, including how the same function provided by social media (e.g. clicking on 'like') may take on different meanings depending on the *overall* social context and the ways that what people do are situated in; and how the fact of being connected through social media may carry unexpected consequences over how they would act or see others. As I will claim in this chapter's conclusion, this does not necessarily signal the fragmentation of the social or some kind of atomization, but rather requires an analysis of the shifting positions from which social solidarity develops.

5.2. The Space of Social Experience

5.2.1. The Uncommon: Different Perceptions and Usages of Social Media

“Do you think there are any agreed rules about how we use social media?” This is a question I asked all my research participants at towards the end of my interviews with them. The phrasing was kept abstract on purpose, to see to what extent their replies overlapped with their opinions and views during the rest of the interview. Interestingly, everyone agreed that there is *no* agreed rule, but for varying reasons. For instance, Chloe, a 30-year old school teacher from London, regarded social media platforms as a type of public space, having come to participate in the then-Brexit march through Facebook. But she struggles to pinpoint what kind of public spaces social media are, and replied back, “Hmm, is it like café or park? Perhaps it’s a plaza? But I don’t know. I don’t know what rules [social media] needs.”

Chloe’s perception of social media was not necessarily shared by the other interviewees. Josh, a German man in his early 30s working as a sales manager for a global data-mining company in London, partially agreed with Chloe’s view that social media *could function* as a public space. But he rejected the conception of all social media *as* a public space, adding further nuances in terms of each social media platform:

[5.01]²⁶ Well, social media can be a ‘public’ [air quotes] space. Like during the times of Arab Spring, Twitter played a key role in mobilizing protestors, the Tahrir Square . . . But you can’t expect all social media to be a public space or work like broadcasting station. It depends. For example, Facebook is a completely private space and Instagram’s quasi-private, but Twitter’s completely public and non-sentimental.

Christina’s understanding of social media also differs, but more radically so, from Chloe and Josh’s account of social media. The 41-year-old potter and resident of Newcastle sees social media as “just a tool, like telephone.” For her, Instagram is the most important, and she uses social media as a daily diary; “like my Moleskine diary but [it’s] on the Internet, so it’s more convenient and accessible.” Using this analogy to capture the role Instagram plays in Chloe’s

²⁶ Each quote given in this thesis will be identified by a number to facilitate cross-referencing between chapters.

everyday life, she argued that there need not be any agreed rules for Instagram, because it is a tool she uses to achieve her own end – keeping a diary.

Meanwhile, while the perceptions of social media vary greatly from interviewees to interviewees, others point out that there is no agreed rule, but not so much because of different understanding of the nature or role of social media in their life, as different ways of using them. Darren is one of them. This Master's student at the University of Liverpool asked me specifically to narrow down the scope of my question:

[5.02] How can we have an agreed rule for *the* [interviewee's emphasis] social media? They're all designed for different purposes. Twitter's for news, Instagram and Tumblr are for image sharing, YouTube's for videos, Tinder is for dating...

It is evident that, for Darren, different conceptions of social media inform the way he takes (the kinds of) actions and experiences the world through social media *differently*. This makes the situation far more complicated, not least because other individuals might perceive social media in a very different manner, and that would feed into how they use social media and, as a result, the way they experience the world. For instance, two individuals considered LinkedIn not as social media for different reasons. Consider the following example from my fieldwork: Gavin, a 25-year old Englishman, is currently unemployed and uses LinkedIn for job-hunting, so for him LinkedIn is a “tool for business” and has little relevance to his social life. On the other hand, for Bernadette, who works as an energy policy consultant in London, LinkedIn is more or less similar to an “RSS feed” as she has never used it to find a job, but does it to receive regular newsletters and updates from companies and organizations which she is interested in. In other words, her way of ‘using’ social media seems rather akin to watching traditional mass media, like television. This is potentially an interesting point that *seemingly* contradicts what I wrote in Chapter 2 about different logics of various media bringing about different ways of being social; although from her accounts of using Facebook (see quotation 8.06) (and as many others' stories in this chapter will demonstrate) it became clearer that the system of social media *did* lead many interviewees to a direction different from where their uses of television would have.

Yet LinkedIn is far from being the only case of a social media, perception of whose usage see variations among the respondents. YouTube was deemed a type of social media by two other

research participants²⁷ but their reasons for this were radically different. When I asked Chelsea, a French sommelière working in a fine dining restaurant in Mayfair, about the meaning of social in social media, she explained it with reference to her use of YouTube. As a person working in the hospitality industry she often works until very late and has thus failed to develop a healthy sleep routine. So, Chelsea frequently, almost every day, relies on the ASMR (Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response) video clips which are designed as a sleep-aid, in theory, by giving one a feeling of relaxation and thus to help overcome insomnia. Having incorporated the ASMR video-*listening* into her everyday bedtime routine has stirred up Chelsea to communicate sometimes with other “fellow listeners” (not “watch”, as opposed to the second respondent’s view of YouTube as a purely “video-watching platform”) on the comment section (although by ‘communicating’, Chelsea more meant reading other listeners’ comments and occasionally leaving comments herself to the relevant YouTubers, rather than talking directly with other listeners).

On the other hand, Darren also points out YouTube is a social media platform not least because he “learn[s] a lot [about society and the world] from watching video clips on current affairs.” Yet he never leaves a comment nor interacts with other YouTube users. For him, YouTube is first and foremost a platform for *watching* videos, the platform for *consumption* of different media content just like watching television, although the kinds of videos can be diverse. It was therefore unsurprising to see him a little shocked when I mentioned to him Chelsea’s story and showed YouTube’s mission statement,²⁸ whose language puts a greater emphasis on giving a “voice” and community-building, rather than visual culture or creativity.

[5.03] Yeah, I know some people treat YouTube like Facebook [leaving comments on videos and talking with others]. But I never use YouTube that way. It is nothing but a video-watching platform.

What is interesting about Darren’s above comment is, although he did not mention it himself, and was not aware of what I might term the social dimension of dataveillance, YouTube collects data through the digital tokens he leaves, analyzing and recommending him certain

²⁷ Overall, five interviewees mentioned that YouTube can be said to be a form of social media, but they either did not elaborate on the reasons why, or more or less agreed with what Chelsea and Darren said.

²⁸ “To give everyone a voice and to show them the world. We believe that everyone deserves to have a voice, and that the world is a better place when we listen, share and build a community through our stories.”

content or particular YouTubers' channels in return, based on the calculation of what might be most 'relevant' (Gillespie, 2014). This forms an example of a 'quaternary relationship' (Calhoun, 1992) – quaternary as Darren is not aware of YouTube's involvement in making certain recommendations for him. So content which is ushered in by YouTube is, to Darren, not considered as constituting a part of his 'social' life. This is in fact a point that finds much resonance in other interviewees' answers, that 'the social' in the context of social media is not always necessarily considered as a *totality* of interrelations but often limited to distinctively interactive features of social media use, accompanied by a clear awareness of interlocutors.²⁹

Sometimes, and for related reasons, social media are not even considered part of one's social life! Abigale and Cindy, a PhD student at the University of Reading and a homemaker in Birmingham respectively, use the Facebook messenger app to contact their friends and family living overseas, but both use the main Facebook *qua* platform all but exclusively to retain their, what Abigale calls, "tenuous link" with not-so-close colleagues and acquaintances. In Cindy's words, Facebook serves as a "telephone directory" where she keeps the list of her contacts from whom she wants to reserve certain distance. They are important information yet do not make up a major part of her 'social' life: "If it [Facebook] were important [for my social life], I would be freaking out every time I take a break [i.e. deactivating her account from time to time]." Meanwhile, for Abigale, Facebook is increasingly coming to resemble Gumtree, given that second-handed goods are exchanged and sold on it and that the platform is becoming more and more suffused with irremovable advertisements. Her conception has especially been strengthened by the Facebook's introduction of the 'marketplace' page in 2016. For this reason, Abigale sets herself apart from Facebook when it comes to sharing whatever she considers to be a "social thing," such as travel photos, and she is a far more avid user of Instagram which, in her view, is "clearly purpose-driven, so [] more useful and easier to connect and socialize [there]." Here, we find a resonance with Darren's account above, that the economic relations of buying items on Facebook's marketplace, something which would inevitably involve certain 'social' interactions, say, with the potential seller or so, is not counted as formative for a 'social' life. It is true that both Abigale and Darren in fact had a clear sense of what their social life would be. Although they did not provide an exact definition of what the social for them was,

²⁹ As I will show in Chapter 6, algorithms are further complicating this situation; interviewees *all* are aware of their existence and influence, sometimes considering them as an unwelcomed actor in their social life, yet they do not consider the relationship created or inferred by algorithms in itself a social relation – be that the relation of the interviewee to algorithms, or to a third-party person (e.g. through recommendation).

they *did* acknowledge that the complicated relations of their offline life, such as ordering a cup of coffee at Starbucks, would involve a social dimension. That does not seem to be the case with regard to the ‘social’ as experienced *through* social media, however.

Meanwhile, there are a few others who believe social media are important part of their social life, although in their cases, what they called social life is marked by a more prominently observable and clear sense of interaction with others, which they performed themselves. When I summarized these stories of Abigale and Cindy to those who still hold a strong belief in the vital role of Facebook in their everyday social life, they found them fairly striking. One of them was Jamie, a 20-year old music student originally from Mexico. His perception of Facebook is utterly opposite to that of Abigale and Cindy, as for him Facebook is an “indispensable part of [] social life.”

[5.04] Facebook is utmost important. We [my friends, classmates, and I] are always on it, talk about video games, share cool memes . . . [On Facebook] I check out music events and concerts, look up comedy shows, and show interests [in some events]. I check who’s going to the events I ‘liked’ so we can go together. We meet and socialize on Facebook.

In a similar fashion, for Chelsea, YouTube is an important part of her social and communal life (presumably to a lesser degree than Jamie, though). She is under the impression that a sense of (imagined) community exists among the subscribers to this ASMR artist’s channel:

[5.05] My boyfriend thinks it’s a bit creepy I have to listen to this kind of video every night and talk with strangers. He doesn’t understand this really helps me sleep . . . Here I am in a community. It’s not a church community. But I feel comfortable here, other YouTubers understand me, better than my boyfriend [smile]. We listen to this ASMRtist [ASMR artist] together. I was an ASMR nomad till I found this channel.

From these comments, it appears that the same social media spaces of Facebook and YouTube are far more deeply embedded in Jamie’s ‘social’ life and Chelsea’s *imagination* of communal life than they are in Abigale and Cindy’s. This comparison brings to mind de Certeau’s (1984) argument that media space always involves the dialectic interaction between different interpretations of the space (Silverstone, 1989), where ordinary people make sense of, and use, the space for their own needs, ends, and pleasures in ways that are not necessarily intended by,

or complying with, the strategies of institutions that first developed the space to serve particular purposes, with little conjoint activities or exactly the same kinds of actions.

But a broader theme ranging across the participants' narratives is that the meaning of 'the social' has been complicated, becoming at least somewhat divergent from the social as a *totality* of interrelations. For social media are now quite deeply embedded in the interviewees' lives, and each carries out their own social (and non-social) activities differently, mostly through different social media platforms according to their own understanding of each platform. More precisely, from the researcher's point of view, many of interviewees' actions *can* be categorized as an experience of 'the social;' using Facebook as a site for the consumption of information about the world or trading on the market, as I noted above, necessarily involves creating a relation with other users (even if we disregard the complication of quaternary relationship here). What is emerging here is that *the articulation of the social seems to qualitatively differ from how, based on previous social theory (see Chapter 2) we might have previously understood sociality.*

Nevertheless, it is interesting to look at this point Edward's creative metaphor that eloquently captures one fact of his contemporary social life:

[5.06] I sometimes go on social media detox. For a few days or weeks I disable my Instagram account and that makes me feel good. I don't get alerted by notifications, don't need to check updates . . . [Still] I can't imagine a world without social media. Perhaps I've been using them for too many years? It's going to be a wholly different world [without social media]. Imagine you take a holiday to get refreshed. Without social media everything becomes so quiet and peaceful. But then the holiday doesn't come to an end. [Researcher: That sounds great to me.] [laughter] Yes, same for me, but if that continues for months and years, that can be an uncanny experience.

For this 30-year-old investment banker, deviating from the life permeated by and suffused with social media is considered a break, rather than the ordinary. This is far from suggesting that his life is assimilated into social media or vice versa, but it insinuates the near-omnipresence of social media in his everyday lived experience, that social media are working also as a 'backdrop' against which interviewees' actions are organized – a point echoed by many other interviewees. Consider the following statements from Luciana and Josh:

[5.07] I think social media are good for the social, communal, and political lives. They *always* [my emphasis] give you a sense of what others are doing and what's happening in the world. You get to learn about what's going on [in every field] while still in bed, kitchen, toilet, etc.

[5.08] It's not easy to find the right information [due to fake news and information overload]. You need to be more critical, careful, and knowledgeable. Having said that, it *is* [interviewee's emphasis] easier to find information if you have enough time and skills, cuz the world is better connected than it'd ever been before.

Both statements are the manifestations that social media have become key part of their lives, especially to the extent they enhance the degree of perceived connection between users and facilitate the search for information, despite the known negatives such as fake news. This seems to be in-line with the mission of many social media companies – virtually all of which concern a stronger connection and community-building around the world (worded in abstract ways) – and underlines an image of a new social as based on such connected forms of life.

Nonetheless, such connected status as one part of the basis of the social appear to leave vague the consequences of such connection, or more specifically, sometimes alter the connotations of the social nature of communication. Consider the following remark by Luciana, a 37-year-old PhD student reading the Classics and living in London. She described in the previous quote [5.07] in relatively positive terms the benefits of social media for offering a continual sense of *what is going on* in society and the world. But later she also commented, more cynically:

[5.09] If I want to make sure they [specific audience in her mind] see my new post, I will always tag or mention them or send personal message, 'Hey, you might want to check out what I've just posted'. Otherwise I wouldn't know if they will see my update, cuz there are too many [posts being uploaded]. Like, if I post something at 2am they'd probably miss that . . . *The rest majority of posts with no tags or mentions, they're stuff I won't care for even if everyone misses [them]* [my emphasis].

This implies, on the basis of connectedness as arranged through what social media allow for, a change in the quality of Luciana's communicative act. Taking her statements (quotations 5.07 and 5.09) together, information on social media can inform about the ongoing events in the

wider context outside her social circle, just like news media did in the past, managing to give their audiences a sense of collectivity in different fashions (Schudson, 1998; Williams, 1958).

Yet contrary to this, information on social media and connectivity purveyed appear not to offer that concrete *experience* of social living with others that has generally been assumed to be required for the translation of sense of connectedness into modes of interdependences. Instead, from her remark Luciana anchors her communicative acts to specific targeted individuals, and those without such anchoring are *not* necessarily considered as an action carrying potential for the social – because simply, there exists a possibility for someone might see her post and reach out. The implication of this for social solidarity is that, if this is how the social is to be construed by the interviewees, then their modes of interdependence may also rely on a similarly constrained idea of the social.

In a somewhat different but related manner, Angelo, a 34-year-old technical project manager in London, notes more radically how the ideas of care and interests in others are not motivated by social media, in part proving that users online more likely remain as a ‘spectator’ (Chouliaraki, 2013) instead of acting towards others:

[5.10] Social media let people learn about different cultures, issues in other parts of country and the world, regional politics, and other important stuff. It makes you turn the head around so you can find something new, interesting, fun, or educational. But is this good? Information isn’t the core of life. You want information you need, not some random information about whatever happens in Scotland or Brazil. When I want to know about things I care about, I’d rather read Wikipedia or listen to Radio 4 or Podcasts. I’ve told you I’m interested in food provision issues, but I won’t care that much when these happen in Brazil. Actually, it’s hard to care for that.

It is not that Angelo’s apathy towards the cases in Scotland and Brazil is necessarily caused by, or associated with, the role social media assume in his life. Yet this implies that the expanded scope of information coverage, knowledge of the cases and ubiquitous possibility of access to information *per se* – which are claimed to be one of the main benefits of social media – are not aligned with the role of media that helps us imagine an assumed common ground (Anderson, 2006), or allow for a lived experience of social community (Williams, 1958), even though they still convey the impression of what is happening in society and the world. In other words, while

social media have amplified the amount of information and intensity of connection between individuals and, as such, delivered a sense of digital proximity, the reality of distance – be that cultural, geographical or others – seems to remain still important.

On the contrary, the enhanced connections may even cause relationship issues from time to time, as the words of Kenzi, a 40-year-old film director, show:

[5.11] I think some people aren't aware how much their personal stories can bother others at any time of the day. I don't want to see your too personal stuff on any social media. That's too much for me to know. Don't upload those. And don't upload anything too frequently.

This is an exemplary case showing that people's actions, whether or not the intention behind is to be socializing, may in fact intrude into the space of a (unintended) recipient. Partly caused by the complicated process of relationship creation between individuals, because, from Kenzi's implied viewpoint, 'some people' are lacking a thoughtful consideration of how their actions carry the potential to reach others, and this leads him to reject some other interviewees' (e.g. Chelsea) assumption that there can be a community bond between them and him. To this extent, those other people's actions are in fact having an alienating effect that would be detrimental to making *durable* the mode of relation between them and Kenzi.

It may, however, be premature to interpret these statements as a sign of waning social solidarity. I will return to this point in the following section in more detail when I discuss the meaningfulness people ascribe to their acts of communication. But the aforementioned experience of Chelsea listening to the ASMR videos, for example, explicitly refers to an imaginary locus, where she recognizes other listeners as fellow members of her community, on which she can be *reliant*, helping to (re)produce digitally a sense of place. In addition, there is also a case from a local area where enhanced connection by social media *does* assist in building a stronger community among local residents. Yvonne, a 40-year-old French lady working in the UK government and living in the south London suburb of Dulwich, narrates her story of using social media as a useful means to contact other residents and doctors in the same area and cope with issues collectively.

[5.12] I use it [Facebook] to advertise sublet mostly, because I think it's a useful tool to reach people in small town. But it's not always very effective. In most cases I find the subtenants from SpareRoom . . . I deal with the NHS issues in our area [on Facebook]. We [local residents of Dulwich] have a Facebook group where we share our experiences, opinions, and make complaints together. This is very helpful, really.

Yvonne, from this remark, implies that there is a sense of community built around a material locus, compared to Chelsea's case of imaginary place. It is worth making clear that, though, Yvonne is the only respondent who distinctively uses social media to reinforce her *local* bonds, partly testifying to the fact that everyone uses social media *differently* although certain *patterns* – in the cases of Chelsea and Yvonne, an action of producing a sense of placeness – can be found in common across the interviewees' varying narratives. This contrast between Chelsea and Yvonne's cases brings out more explicitly the idea that what feeds into the formation of a community, and/or solidarity as a mode of interdependence among individuals, may not necessarily be *determined* by the enhanced connection and abundance of information that are acclaimed by public and business discourses as the blessings of social media. Instead, things seem to remain contingent, that is, the purveyance of technical connectivity or other virtues of social media discussed so far do not guarantee the development of social solidarity.

Such a variety of accounts as to how interviewees perceive and use social media differently, and how such variegation feeds into their experiences of the social, may appear, at first glance, to merely exhibit how heterogeneous and disparate people's experiences with social media are, sometimes reflecting their individual social materiality, such as location and occupation. However, as I have also shown, there *are* certain commonalities to the extent that people's actions that make up their social life can be *patterned* into certain categories, justifies that the analysis of social solidarity in relation to social media needs to be situated within a wider context of people's lifeworld, rather than being taken as a standalone experience. Simply put, the focus of analysis should be placed on how people carry out their actions *through* social media, both of which are *situated within* their overall social life, rather than on the observation of what people do *on* social media itself. This forms an essential conceptual foundation for further analysis.

The respondents generally agreed that individuals and even the world are better connected, but the connotations and consequences of such connections are far more complex and sometimes

hard to understand than the mere celebration of connectivity suggests. According to the insights obtained from a wide array of experiences with social media, the interviewees' eyes they are seen as taking on different roles and functions in each individual's life, yet scarcely work as a vehicle for imagining a community (Anderson, 2006) of heterogeneous groups of people. Social media, on the other hand, sometimes shapes people's understanding of the social to be akin to that of interaction, simplifying the complicated and nuanced character of what the social would mean. Further, contrary to the role of mass media discussed in the theoretical chapters, there is little evidence social media can craft an overarching discourse and form a 'moral foundation' of social solidarity (Alexander, 2006). Social media may not be detrimental to the existence of community and social solidarity by themselves, but focusing on social media activities alone cannot provide much in the way of insight to go beyond the contingency of solidarity development.

Against this backdrop, I seek to widen the analytical prism on social solidarity by coming from a different angle: interviewees' experiences with social media are situated within a wider context of their everyday social lives, instead of searching for a common foundation in activities *on* social media. My aim, in other words, is to carry out a substantial analysis of social solidarity by exploring it empirically from the bottom-up, so as to better identify the parameters of the social life that inform the interviewees' actions and experiences. I thus explore their lives under the general fabric of the social into which social media are tightly woven. This is a more-called-for approach today when social media have become deeply embedded in daily life and integrated into our societal fabric, just like one of the interviewee's (Angelo) comment fittingly and succinctly summarized: "Social media have become more multi-dimensional. This is like an evolution from social *media* to *social media*" [interviewee's emphasis].

Taking this as a point of departure for my analysis, the following section will document how mundane activities and practices are diffused across various sites – both online and offline – and how this rearticulation complicates individuals' social experiences. This will also help understand the ways social media are embedded in the interviewees' lives.

5.2.2. Experiencing the Social Across Different Spheres

In this section, I extend the question from the previous section on how people's conceptions of their social actions change, looking at different offline and online spheres. I emphasize how differently assumed significance and varied conceptions of social media platforms can carry ramifications over *where and how people are being and doing social*, which would normally involve managing interactions with others, keeping up with friends, networking with colleagues, etc.

Yet, more importantly, I will show how this contributes to changes in the way individuals physically and cognitively perform actions as they relate to the social, and reconfigures the ways they experience their social lives. This does not imply that their actions or practices on and through social media are new or completely different from how they acted before the rise of social media. Neither does it suggest their offline actions have been discontinued, completely displaced, or necessarily have a tighter coherence. I will instead focus on showing how their experience of the social is being rearticulated because of the involvement of social media in their life, and how this entails a potential shift in the norms of actions, as well as in the relations that forge as a consequence. This is not simply an automatic result of the introduction of social media, but a consequence of people's incorporation of social media into their social routine in different manners, whereby their functions have become deeply entrenched within our life and entangled with mundane social activities.

First of all, people's experience of social life is, and perhaps has always been, a collage of experiences of various sites of life, and accordingly they carry out actions across those sites. At stake is whether social media, by being woven deeply into the fabric of social life, changes this process and if so, to what extent. Consider, for example, news consumptions as one of the ways of being and doing social – social to the extent that it helps in different ways imagine a wider community beyond the horizon of immediate surroundings (Anderson, 2006; Schudson, 1998), working as a useful resource for discussion of public matters through interactions (Habermas, 1989), or serving as a guide for understanding the social values that are deemed just in a community (Alexander, 2006).

Social media have ushered in two further notable changes here. The first change concerns the diversification of news-related platforms through which interviewees have gained access to a greater plurality of multimedia tools enabling more imaginative ways of consuming news. For instance, Angelo commented that while he continues to catch up with news every day, he

disconnected Twitter for news alerts, because “it requires too much effort” and for him “receiv[ing] alert noise from the BBC app for all important news . . . is enough.” What is intriguing here is that he used to be a more avid reader of news on the mainstream media or news platforms until the introduction of social media once nudged him to focus on reading news there, especially on Twitter. Yet he noted that his main news sources were no longer social media, but offline conversations, Podcasts and Wikipedia, because of the feeling they cannot be *seamlessly* integrated into his everyday routine: “we can live without them [social media]. I mean, they make your life more convenient, but why must we use them [if doing so is hard]?” He still uses social media for other purposes, but not really for news consumption purposes; and at the same time, his giving up of using social media in such ways did not restore his usage of reading news through the mainstream media.

Conversely, Amanda, a 26-year-old accountant working in London, uses as her primary news source Twitter, as well as established news media institutions, especially BBC, CNN, and The Telegraph, but hardly any other digital platform or social media. For Chelsea, on the other hand, the chief news sources have been “always the BBC,” but this has never been more true recently as she has increasingly been concerned with what she calls “the tide of fake news on social media.” Meanwhile, Robin, 25-year-old student union officer, holds one of the most extreme opinions; she rather “look[s] out for local media coverage . . . read[s] books or talk[s] with [her] friends and colleagues” to catch up with news and see what is going on, because in her view most “mainstream media just portray issues from their political angles.”

The second shift is that the same practice of catching up with news can be *differently structured* even within the same platform according to each individual. Let us first see the following imaging of the ‘social media universe’ Amanda drew for a mapping exercise:

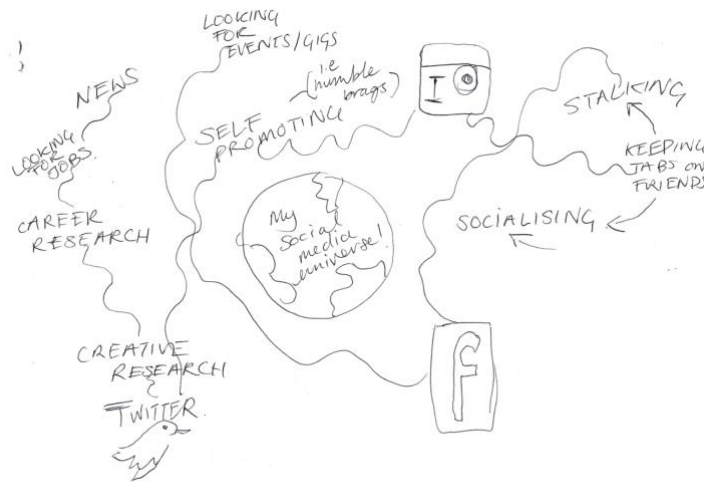


Figure 3: Amanda's drawing

When Amanda was walking me through Figure 3 above, she mentioned her news consumption occurs *concurrently* with certain other types of actions, such as ‘creative research,’ ‘career research,’ ‘looking for events/gigs,’ and even ‘stalking.’³⁰ all of which are ways of consuming or finding information, while she scrolls down through her social media feeds and occasionally news media websites with a view to looking out for interesting headlines or information for a more in-depth reading. Conversely, Casper’s news consumption takes a different approach. This 41-year-old GP and the resident of Reading is, as with Amanda an avid user of Twitter and social media in general, but his news consumption does not normally involve any of the above habits, but instead includes what he considered to be more social (‘interactional,’ from the researcher’s analytical perspective) actions such as messaging to his friends, sharing a piece of news and post, frequently leaving comments, etc. Indeed, when Casper was trying to catch up with news about Brexit during his Think-Aloud practice, he stopped several times with what he had been doing (e.g. scrolling, searching) in order to share the post or to message friends. But interestingly, Casper does not regard this as a divergence from news-related practice:

[5.13] It’s a must to retweet news and use mentions to alert others about [those] news [they may find interesting]. [Researcher: Why is that so important?] Hmm... I am not sure, but it’s good to learn about others’ opinion . . . Someone shared an article about gay marriage and that was beginning of a discussion thread. I found it a little disturbing. [Researcher:

³⁰ By this Amanda indicates an ordinary, everyday action of constantly catching up with posts from ‘friends’ and ‘followers,’ and it certainly does not mean anything related to serious surveillance or felonious activity, but is rather given an entertaining nuance.

You mean... gay marriage?] No, no, not the gay marriage. The discussion was. It wasn't fun, we ended up annoying each other [laughter]. But [it was] interesting to see how different our [discussants] opinions were . . . I learnt a lot from there. Even I've met a few followers in person and some of them are my good friends now. It is worth taking the time to engage. Wait, maybe that's [sharing, commenting, mentioning, retweeting] also about... socializing?

Both Amanda and Casper's news consumption incorporates several *common* actions occurring simultaneously, for example scrolling down, searching for information, and assessing validity of news source and information. Yet Casper has *additionally* incorporated into his news reading some activities which others (and as even he himself later admitted) were a form of socializing that need not be part of news or information consumption. Casper is indeed not the only person inclined to think and act in this way. Tiffany, 32-year-old woman working for an NGO as communication officer, also emphasized sharing as one crux of news reading, believing that social media has made following news and information much easier: "thanks to people who share news it's [social media's success] been triumphant."

Contrary to this more positive conception over the role of the user in news reading, we have Colin and Katherine who are, respectively, 24-year-old Italian master's student in London and 37-year-old self-employed small-business owner, who voice concerns about what users *do* with news. For them, the primary issue with news-related social media consists of 'meaningless' sharing of information and news, and sometimes comments which may in the end defile their newsfeed:

[5.14] Fake news is a serious problem but that's not everything, that's not even a new problem. And, you know, established media outlets, like Guardian and Telegraph are terrible. They use eye-catching headlines to grab our attention, but the contents [of those articles with eye-catching headlines] fool us . . . Problem with social media is [people's] habitual, meaningless clickings to like . . . and share them [fake news, news and articles with glamorous headline, etc.] mechanically. That's polluting our [news]feed.

[5.15] I don't bother seeking any news on social media, because they come with "noise" [air quotes]. [Researcher: What's the noise?] I mean people's comments.

So far, perhaps it seems that there is no radical movement caused by social media regarding news consumption. People take different actions and adopt varying tactics to deal with reading news, but in the end, they are all joined by the same practice of catching up with (the) news – just as Schatzki noted elsewhere regarding the practice of ‘cooking’ (2001), where people might cook in ways radically different from each other but do *all cook*, with a universally shared kernel that is the preparation of food for eating. Here, instead of food, it is the consumption of news and information through social media.

Even more interesting, however, is the insight that can be gained through considering Colin’s further claims below. He notes that, because of his concern with meaningless clicking and sharing of fake news or articles with eye-catching headlines, he “never” shares any news articles or posts without scrutinizing the validity of both information source and the information itself, no matter how important the content appears to be at first glance. But as his busy lifestyle does not allow for enough time to contemplate every single issue, often he ends up not sharing, retweeting, or clicking much, even though he visits social media frequently throughout the day. Thus Colin, in fact, seems to evaluate people’s very actions of news sharing by others from a point of view of his own ideal understanding, implicitly suggesting that this goes against ‘his’ idealized form of what news sharing *ought to be*.

Granted, this may have been the case with ‘cooking’ too; some people may use techniques and ingredients that are not acceptable or desirable to others. What is different here, though, is that what does not seem to be in line with the interviewees’ own standards may become vividly visible to them, and so may exert an influence over how they would see others. In fact, to the eyes of those paying greater attention to the importance of sharing on social media, Colin and Katherine may appear to be mere “lurkers and spectators [who] are unhelpful” and who make no contribution whatsoever to coaxing the potential out of social media – a claim Tiffany made to criticize her friends when she noticed some of them were less involved in sharing of information.

Considering other examples from my fieldwork on how different norms of using social media for reading news *might* potentially preclude the sociality involved in news consumption. If we look at Amanda’s case, her news consumption did not involve much sharing or active interaction with others, yet there were still certain social elements in it, to the extent that, for example, she was ‘stalking’ her friends, something which could potentially form the basis for

a connection action. On the other hand, if we look at Jamie, who uses Twitter as one of his primary news sources, he does not share much in the ways of clicks or likes, but appreciates other social media friends and followers sharing news and information.



Figure 4: Jamie's drawing

When explaining Figure 4, which Jamie drew himself, however, he characterized Twitter as akin to a “magazine” rather than news media, particularly because of what he calls Twitter’s “content-packed, editable” characteristic and its purveyance of “up-to-date information.” This view led Jamie to consider navigating Twitter as a “solo activity” normally conducted in private, and whatever he does through Twitter, including news consumption, is insulated from his social worlds and excludes the potential of interactions with others – be that sharers or others. Thus, the same action to consume and catch up with news can unfold in very different spaces and manners depending on the individual, with widely diverging implications.

Through this lengthy case study of news consumption, what I have hoped to illustrate is that interviewees’ actions *through* social media may entail not just a further stretch of an action across different sites of living, but also an unexpected consequence for their social life. This is in part because whatever occurs on social media carries the potential to create or complicate relations, in ways that are not always realized by the interviewees – a point implied in the previous section in the discussion of how ‘the social’ is seen a characteristically similar to the interactional from the vantage point of the interviewees here. So while the observed fact of

how people consume news in a very different manner remains important, something that is more vital not to lose sight of is what is really going on *beneath* these more visible shifts.

5.2.3. Hashtags or ‘Like-clicking:’ Varying Social Connotations of the Same Act

Let us meet Gabriel, a 34-year old working in the creative industries while at the same time studying for a Master’s degree. He self-identifies as a political activist deeply interested in current affairs and political issues and holds strong political convictions, enjoying debating and learning about social and political topics, and frequently seeking to raise people’s awareness of those topics and issues – but *only offline*.

[5.16] You know, there’re too much information about Donald Trump on Facebook, I’m so fed up with seeing anything about him. It’s not like I don’t trust them [information and news on social media], but this [information] overload makes these important politics too trivial, it drives me mad.

As we see here, Gabriel holds a fairly cynical view about what social media can do for his information consumption. He makes it clear, though, that he acknowledges the utility of social media and believes in its potential to serve as a good information source and a means for small and medium-sized organizations and businesses to leverage fruitful outcomes. Yet he is not satisfied by the way in which such potential is being realized at the moment, due to what interviewees like Casper and Tiffany for their part *might* regard as fruitful – the information ‘boost’ which, for Gabriel, is an ‘overload’ that does little more than downplaying the seriousness of important issues. In other words, what might be deemed as a kernel of news consumption, and at the same time take on a social characteristic (sharing), serves as a reason for Gabriel to ‘avoid’ news (Newman et al., 2019) and for reflecting back upon how he sees others.

Interestingly, Gabriel noted near the end of the interview how his view once caused a minor misunderstanding between him and some of his friends who are both university and Facebook friends. They were puzzled about why Gabriel was acting “like an activist [offline]” but being

“inactivist”³¹ online, not least because he *does* “comment socially,” e.g. leaving comments about the party last night, or sharing photos of home cooking. They thus wondered if Gabriel was overly anxious about the possibility of his political remarks being exposed unexpectedly to audiences outside his social circle. However, Gabriel’s actual reason was very different: sharing a post for him can be meaningful and natural when it is only *for* a purely social, or interactional, purposes, but *not for* actions that may further exacerbate the information overload problem: “it’s ok if you wanna share your pain or feelings with others, it’s *not* [interviewee’s emphasis] ok if you wanna spread around links and stuff because they look cool, interesting . . . you aren’t a journalist after all.” As such, Gabriel did not fully comprehend some of his classmates either, sometimes addressing them somewhat derogatorily as “half-hearted clicktivists” who are “just living a life online.” It is interesting to note here that Gabriel and his friends generally take the same position on most topics, especially for the ones they consider to be of great social and political significance, such as Brexit and the rise of far-right political parties across the world, yet they somehow misunderstood each other in their disagreement on the best ways of using social media, in a mismatch between how Gabriel self-identifies as a political person and how he appears to his friends.

In light of this, these different perspectives between Gabriel and his friends on what kinds of content can be migrated from offline to online digital platforms, and what others cannot, those specific acts through which social media can assume a social (or interactional) dimension, seems to incur normatively different expectations about what procedures to follow, and how. This is in part because much of their social actions (e.g. sharing news, communicating with friends) are manifest through the same ‘acts’ purveyed by social media (e.g. ‘like’, ‘click share’, etc.). In this case, therefore, to the eyes of some interviewees, it would appear that an action that should be practiced in a particular manner (e.g. political self-expression, news consumption) seems to be contaminated by another (e.g. information overload, unreflexive sharing of content).

It is fair to say, though, that those normative expectations about how things *ought to be done* are not as strict or rigid as, say, the codes of moral justice or religious faith, which, as I showed in Chapter 2, serve as a framework in which a form of solidarity can be grounded. None of the

³¹ This is the wording Gabriel used to describe how his friends think about him: “They think I’m like an activist at uni, but a total inactivist on Facebook . . .”

interviewees, although they were not fond of different ways of being and doing social, showed a strong aversion to those ‘other’ ways different from their own. Most of all, elevating the analysis of empirical research to a normative conclusion is not the aim I have in mind here. The hope instead is to show that, in spite of some common *patterns of action* across the interviewees’ narratives (patterns that are arguably more dispersed and variedly structured than before) each respondents’ formula of carrying out those actions vary from one to another. This, in part, contributes to the changing ways in which individuals experience the world, not just through what they see on social media *but also* through how they live the social. This, in turn, links back to the point which I mentioned at the end of the previous section, that observing what individuals do *on* social media and measuring the intensity or frequency of those activities, *in themselves*, would not be sufficient to provide a basis for social *solidarity*.

Meanwhile, this restructuring of norms to guide through interviewees’ actions is vividly illustrated by the ways individuals develop their social relationships. Becky, for example, seemed fairly appalled when she heard the story of Yvonne, the French lady who uses Facebook primarily to advertise her sublet in Dulwich. Her anger was not directed at Yvonne herself, to be precise, but at the *kinds* of people who dominate social media space, especially Instagram, with a view to monetizing their content. Examples include adverts, dummy accounts (e.g. having a large number of followers with no single post), bots (e.g. performing automated tasks like following users and leaving meaningless comments on users’ posts), and sometimes including ‘selling’ things like what Yvonne does:

[5.17] Isn’t that [money-related activities] for advertising boring? . . . These ghost accounts³² are fine, they’re a little annoying but benign. But those fake accounts, bots, dummies, reposters,³³ they are nauseating, really, really irritating . . . What’s the point of having these sorts of “followers” [air quotes]? You want to pollute your feeds?

As a well-educated³⁴ real estate analyst working for a global financial conglomerate, Becky is aware that these accounts are, in reality, presumably more than a hoax, and often part of the strategies of serious marketing businesses and Instagram influencers. Yet her framework to

³² Users on social media platforms who remain inactive or do not engage in activity.

³³ Users on social media platforms who ‘re-post’ other users’ post with none or little of their original content.

³⁴ Becky holds a BS degree in Mathematics and MSc in Economics from two prestigious universities in the US and UK with an outstanding reputation.

critique those accounts and their visibility on Instagram emerges from her own social experience and how she reflects on it. Becky characterizes herself as a foodie and an ecologist, interested in more than visiting a good restaurant, but also in local produce and farmers' markets, organic food, and general food culture. As Becky felt there was nobody in her offline social circle to discuss these issues with other than mere "restaurant-goers and dining-outers [who often] look for Instagrammable foods," she started using social media with an intention to connect with people who share the same interests, leveraging her online network to construct offline friendships in line with some findings from the literature (e.g. Standlee, 2018). But as she began using "popular hashtags" like #foodie, #londonrestaurants, etc., she faced several dubious accounts, bots, and dummies that made her search more difficult; sponsored contents that she thought were taking advantage of her search; and unimaginative accounts giving her "bad vibes." Together, they were undermining the fundamental purpose of social media platforms, which she thinks is to "expand your [social] horizon." As a consequence, Becky had chosen to "us[e] the right hashtags" such as #greatbritishproduce and #greengrocer, which helped her narrow down search results to a manageable number and find content worth following.

Interestingly, however, Becky does not repudiate adverts and suspicious accounts altogether; she seemed less vexed with sponsored contents on her Facebook newsfeeds, as she confessed how she ended up purchasing a pair of Nike sneakers after watching an interesting Adidas ad on Facebook. Furthermore, despite her belief in the social character of Instagram, Becky's account is currently set as 'private,' meaning those who do not already follow her are not able to find her posts through hashtags, geolocations, or the *Explore* tab,³⁵ and so she seems precluded from developing the social community she claims to cherish. When I pointed this out to her, Becky responded:

[5.18] I used to leave something publicly . . . [But now] I think it's almost meaningless effort. I may still look for a sense of community that exists beyond my own small group [foodies in London], but at the moment this group is where I want to share my life, with the people that matter more [to me] . . . This makes my social interactions and life something more fulfilling . . . Also that's the answer to your first question. I use Facebook

³⁵ The section at the bottom of the screen that shows posts, stories, visuals, and media a user *might* like based on the history of that user's content engagement.

just to be nosey about my overseas friends. I don't socialize there, I don't mind whatever [appears on Facebook].

Becky's (online) social life is based on Instagram *alone* and she does not have an aversion for adverts and bizarre accounts by themselves. Her indignation over them is contingent upon the context within which they are located. Significantly, this elicits a broader theme across many respondents' stories by offering a perspective on how people demarcate their social experience – what is normal in the social life hinges on each individual's worldview and past experiences. Unlike Yvonne, for whom adverts are presumably acceptable, if not desired on Facebook *qua* social space, Becky delineates the boundary of her social world in ways that rule them out, by changing privacy settings and the use of hashtags.

Sometimes, respondents use hashtags for politically-laden topics, too. Robin, the student union officer mentioned above, and Nicole, a 27-year-old working in the domestic violence sector, both regard themselves as feminist, and show a deep interest in, and support for, the recent #MeToo movement on social media. But their use of #MeToo hashtag is fairly mutually contrasting. Robin actively uses the hashtag across all of her social media platforms every time she uploads a post germane to issues of sexual harassment, domestic abuse, and gender inequalities, because:

[5.19] When I use #MeToo I am [also] advertising [to my social network and beyond] I am a person who agrees [that] sexual abuse and harassment are morally wrong and must be shamed, reprehended, and punished . . . [thanks to the hashtag] on the odd occasion I have met someone to discuss [the gender-related issues] . . . it really cheers me up.

On the other hand, Nicole rarely leaves hashtags. When I asked in relation to #MeToo whether she has ever engaged in any public discussion of the movement on social media, she replied:

[5.20] No, never. [Researcher: So, does that mean you don't want to discuss sensitive issues on social media?] No, I mean, I don't really discuss anything online. There are too many unnecessary and unintended audiences. I prefer to discuss it [#MeToo] with people I know [preferably offline], I don't want to talk with any strangers who I just happen to bump into. [Researcher: Why is that?] Erm... I don't know, but when I talk to strangers, I feel I

contribute nothing [to society and the world]. I can't make any move forward. It's just a huge waste of time.

These *prima facie* contrasting statements both recognize that the use of hashtags would facilitate connecting with others – be they useful or undesired. But as opposed to Robin, for Nicole social media are akin to what Marc Augé (1995) would call a ‘non-place’, which does not confer her a feeling of place and/or willingness to build common references to a sense of group but being a passage with little meaningful interactions or frictions. This point, however, requires clarification on what it means to qualify as an ‘interaction,’ because we know that Facebook among other social media, quantifies the time you spend in someone’s channel, feeds or posts, and so tries to bring in some (quaternary) relationships – or, even additionally, what I would call ‘quinary’ relationships in which neither of the involved actors is aware of the relationship generated by the third actor (e.g. a relevancy link can be made by social media algorithms between A and B users but that link has not yet been manifest or informed to the users). This suggests that there are *some* kind of interactions between users, or users and social media themselves, and there might even be *some* link between Nicole and Robin, for they share much in common, such as both being a long-standing student of #MeToo movements among other gender or sexual-related issues. But these kinds of interaction – computed-mediated ones and potentially with other users (through recommendations, for instance), do not seem to endow a sense of meaningfulness to what they do through social media.

Sometimes, such meaningfulness is contingent upon the type of space in which their activities are organized. Josh, for instance, uses Instagram for the most part for socializing, yet his usage is heavily focused on Instagram *Stories*, a feature that allows users to post photos and videos that vanish after 24 hours:

[5.21] I rarely upload posts but I'm on *Story* all the time . . . There is a sort of *Story* community [community for those who use *Story* mainly] . . . [because] it's “cool” [air quotes]” . . . [and] it's more authentic, genuine representation of your life, cuz it happens live . . . [and] you don't heavily retouch or photoshop images on *Stories*. [Researcher: Really?] I can't speak for others, but I don't. You know, *Stories* disappear after 24 hours, so I don't need to [retouch or photoshop images when they will not remain permanent].

A sense of connectedness here *congeals* through the long-term performance of socializing practices curated by Josh himself, by being on *Stories* ‘all the time.’ ‘Congeal’ is a key term here, as it implies that such meaningfulness is not something to be given instantly or by the intention or organization of a space itself – there are plenty of other interviewees who did not care for Instagram’s *Story* functions, for instance – but over time by continuous usage of this *Story* space and attributing particular meaning to it.

Josh himself assumes, however, that his experience with Instagram would be quite different from that of post-uploaders whom he addresses as “like [traditional] bloggers.” His socializing via Instagram centers on watching and flipping through other users’ *Stories* but with almost no like-clicking (*Story* cannot be ‘liked’), leaving comments, scrolling down the feed, or selecting the visual filters – all of which he thinks are distracting him from this more cool, real-time experience of *Story*. Indeed, there are other interviewees who opt for the experience unravelling as whatever live event takes place, such as Darren, who switched away from Snapchat ever since Instagram introduced the *Story* function.

Conversely, others believe clicking ‘like’ is integral to social relationships. Whereas Josh sees like-clicking merely as an action native to social media and a useful data for data-mining and advertising agencies (remember he works for a data-mining company), his girlfriend thinks otherwise, considering it to be one of the ways to show “care and interest” in her everyday life. Josh divulged that they have quarreled over this a few times (albeit not to the degree that jeopardizes their relationship). In a similar fashion to Josh’s girlfriend, when Becky and Casper were narrating their stories of how they initiated friendship with their online followers, they both acknowledged the vital role of *continuously* clicking like and leaving comments as a method to claim their presence and so attract the attention of other users. Becky feels constantly watching *Stories* without any *social reaction* rather resembles an act of stalking, and Casper says:

[5.22] You need to like, reply, leave comments continually so others can recognize you are there. It may result in nothing. [To that extent] It’s maybe like playing lotto [laughter]. [But] You actually have to play the lottery to win it, right? [Also] You don’t lose anything.

Here we also see how socializing can be organized differently and centered on varying actions, and how this may spawn differences in the ways people experience their social life, causing

minor (and sometimes major) friction between them, with a further possibility to make certain actions more durable over others in the long run and giving particular meanings to different spaces of social media. This itself is not entirely unexpected, but what matter is how social media, as part of the basic texture of the social, are implicated in these differentiations – which do not necessarily occur exclusively on social media but across the individuals’ *overall* social life.

To sum up this section, the fact that social media have let us experience the social across such diversified spheres is not entirely unexpected, yet, it has practical consequences for the way individuals experience the social world, diversifying how interviewees use social media to imagining them as *non*-social spaces, even when conducting the same kind of social practice for achieving a similar objective (e.g. information consumption). This also has been shown to affect the connotations social media have for people, and the way they come to associate their actions with different spaces across *both* online and offline. As the cases of Gabriel and his friends, or Tiffany’s view of non-sharers as “lurkers” have also shown, such change may affect the way one is understood *regardless of* whether individuals hold the same values, say, political standpoints, and it may restructure the way social recognition is forged – because people use the same act of clicking like, for instance, to denote different things from support to more meaningless things – as Becky, Casper, and Josh and his girlfriend’s stories imply.

From this it follows that social media carry powerful ramifications for our social lives (van Dijck, Poell, and de Wall, 2018), but also recognizing that such ramifications are not about collapsing all social complexities into an amorphous plane of social media; that is, to avoid dualistically thinking that the social is either compromised or enhanced by social media. Doing so would blind us from seeing the changes to the bases of social solidarity that emerge more subtly through our uses of social media platforms.

5.3. Conclusion

Earlier, Joshua Meyrowitz (1985) eloquently explained, with reference to the then-new media of television, how the use of media can do more than merely affect the amount and degree of social interaction, in that it changes the *uniqueness* of what happens in a particular social setting and the way that it happens (1985: 147). Applying this to the research in hand suggests the

analysis of social solidarity needs to move beyond sporadic inclusion of disembodied, decontextualized observations of individuals' behaviors and actions occurring *on* social media.

From this perspective, Chapter 5 examined interviewees' narratives and accounts about how they perceive and use social media in varying ways, and how this, in turn, shapes their experiences of social life through social media. It also confirmed the need to look at interviewees' actions as situated within a wider context of social media, showing how 'the social' has been complicated and why it cannot be grasped by focusing on what people do *on* social media alone.

As the interviewees' stories demonstrated, however, social media were routinely present in their social life for various practical and occupational reasons, as well as in their taken-for-granted ground of lives, beyond the horizon of their immediate social settings. This shows how the introduction of social media into their lives have complicated, sometimes rearticulated, their experiences of connection, communications, actions, relations – or simply, what they *do*. Building on this, in Chapter 6 I will show how social media are implicated deeply in the ways individuals manage their social distance and relations, sometimes by dealing with the algorithmic objects and systems of social media, yet there remains among interviewees a belief that such management of their social life hinges *primarily* (almost exclusively) on their will.

CHAPTER 6: LIMITS TO SELF-MANAGEMENT OF SOCIAL LIFE

6.1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I established the need to look at ‘what people do’ as situated within a broader social context, and argued for a focus on how they are being and doing social *through*, rather than *on*, social media. This is because, although the interviewees sometimes deemed the social as concerning connecting and engaging in interaction with others, what they imply to be being and doing social is often more complicated and nuanced. Social media, as anticipated, plays a key role in this making of the social, but are so deeply embedded in the interviewees’ social life that their workings are sometimes not fully understood.

However, this does not mean that social media are entirely naturalized beyond the interviewees’ cognition. This, in fact, needs to be taken further in terms of how, and to what extent, the interviewees deal with, explicitly or implicitly, social media in their everyday management of the social. This is particularly the case because, although social media are working like a kind of hidden infrastructure, they do not work as a top-down force controlling the development of social solidarity, a process remains contingent on other factors. Hence, Chapter 6 concerns the second sub-research question: *In their attempts to manage social life, how do people act towards, deal with, and get informed by, social media and their algorithmic systems?* I will address this question according to two key steps: first, in the section that follows, I will illustrate how people try to arrange their social distance and relations to suit their own needs, for example as by ‘disconnecting’ themselves or others from social media, and how their attempts to do so *on* social media is, in fact, *also* a strategy to enhance the quality of their ‘overall’ social life. Often this is framed in terms of their own ability to exert control over their own social life. In the second section (section 6.3) I will then exhibit how people deal with the algorithmic objects and systems of social media and how they heed them in managing their social distance and relations.

6.2. Myth of (Dis)Connectability

No interviewee disputed that social media *can* help them connect more easily with others, and that the enhanced connection is beneficial for various reasons, from being able to be informed

of others' potential to access greater diversity of news and information, to receiving support from like-minded individuals, etc. Some of them also admitted, as we saw in the previous chapter (e.g. quotation 5.04), that social media plays a focal role in organization of social life. What remains striking, however, is that many of them still insist that they can, and sometimes do, disconnect others on social media or themselves from social media with little difficulty *if they want to*.

The reasons for people wanting to disconnect from social media vary from person to person. Arguably the most popular reason found in this study was the extended degree of social 'connections' that are found to be encroaching on an individual's social 'life.' For instance, Charles, 22-year-old hotel employee and undergraduate student in London stated that: "Too much connection isn't [good] . . . connection can hurt your social life." Charles did not fully articulate the meaning of "too much connection," yet he mentioned a few worrying issues which he thinks would be caused by "being connected to others" via social media. These include potential compromise of his own privacy and the encounter with "unwanted" content including adverts and the posts of others.

Many of the interviewees' comments resonate with the view that social connections and social life are potentially in a mutually conflicting relationship dynamic, depending on the degree of influence of the former. Kenzi already showed in Chapter 5 (quotation 5.11) his dislike of seeing "too much" content from others, and how that disturbed his own way of living by intruding into his social space. But other interviewees also voiced similar concerns, like Tiffany, the NGO communication officer, who said:

[6.01] Social media make it really hard to have my own comfort zone. That's tiring. I feel like in a public space all the time . . . these [others' posts] are barging into my own space when I don't expect them.

If we look back at her words from the previous chapter, that it is people who *share* that make social media "triumphant," then it seems she generally views social media's role for boosting information circulation and encouraging sharing news contents in a positive light, while accusing the others, i.e. non-sharers, of being unhelpful "lurkers." Yet when it comes to personal stories and posts, she becomes nervous that connection may trespass into her own personal space, and so comes to maintain a blasé attitude and beg for proper social distance

from others. As with the case of Kenzi, Tiffany's proper distance from others – a kind of distance that one might see as forming the basis for personal privacy³⁶ – is undermined by the others. It should be noted that although Tiffany said 'social media make it hard,' she did not blame social media for this, but rather expanded later that *some* people are not reflexive about the consequences of their actions; or in her own words, "[some people] aren't thinking much about what's going to happen."

Similarly, for some others, the issues of social-media-based connection is germane to unwanted social proximity that would likely bring in undesirable consequences for their, again, social 'life' in general. For Gabriel, being over-connected is detrimental to *both* his social life and productive relationships of interdependence at work. While he is socially active and willing to discuss politics with his university friends, he added:

[6.02] I'm not sure if I ever included my occupational status on Facebook [profile]. I didn't want my work colleagues to find me on Facebook . . . I know many people are friends with their colleagues but I try to keep them outside my [close] social network circle as much as possible, and I try not to meet them outside workplace. Because, if you have like personal disagreement [like he had with his university classmates], that might drive into workplace and that'd be really uncomfortable. I wouldn't be able to work with them as if nothing happened.

Another interviewee anxious of unwanted social proximity is Sally, a 22-year old queer student originally from South India but who grew up in New York City and currently lives in London. According to her, the local community in her hometown in India generally abhors LGBTQ people and related ideas such as the Gay Pride movement. She used to have quarrels with her friends and classmates while living in her hometown. So ever since she left her hometown, she has been using newly-created accounts, across every social media platform, leaving off all personal information such as her *alma mater* and city of birth to disguise herself. She has even used an alias in lieu of her real name, to ensure she cannot be found in searches by old friends,

³⁶ The understanding of maintaining certain distance from others as a right to privacy has been noted by many scholars across various disciplines (e.g. Warren and Brandeis, 1890; Ricoeur, 1992; Sennett, 1977). I will not further pursue this link here, as privacy itself is not the focus of this thesis; it is more a sociological notion of 'social distance' (Simmel, 1949) and proximity relevant to social solidarity. For a recent detailed discussion of distance and privacy in the context of the technologized media environment, see Cohen (2012: Chapter 5 and 6; also 2013).

acquaintances, and even parents. Nevertheless, Sally did not want to set her account to private, not least because, by so doing, she felt afraid of losing potential communication channels to the *general* LGBTQ communities in NYC and London.

Intriguingly, issues which are characterized as potentially pernicious to social life here, from the researcher's analytic point of view, appear to present an issue *also* with 'connectivity' as the status of being connected all time, the potential cost of which is indeed often privacy and distance (cf. Cohen, 2013; Couldry and Mejias, 2019). Although no interviewees actually used the word 'connectivity,' their somewhat peculiar distinction between 'social connection' and 'social life' (rather than seeing the former as part of the latter) appears to imply that what they find problematic *is* indeed also the experience of connectivity, which allowed much of the uninvited other actions to intrude into their space, or inner social circles, making it difficult to secure the distance they themselves wanted.

In line with this, interviewees opted for different measures to remedy the connectivity problem. Some choose to set their accounts to private or temporarily deactivate them (something which *is* a mode of disconnection, as I will return to later). But among the most common solutions was through disconnecting others, for instance, by muting, blocking, unfriending or unfollowing, and even reporting others' contents and accounts to social media. As Chris says:

[6.03] [Block and unfriend] buttons give you the power to get rid of annoying things . . . [at least] you can hide things you really hate. I mean, that's what those buttons are for.

Those buttons, for this 26-year-old marketing consultant, are a practical means to get rid of what he does not want in his space; or a measure, presented by social media, through which to control his social distance from others – implying that what he does *through* social media may affect the rest of his social life.

Yet, this does not mean the interviewees were generally less willing to accept disagreement or handle disputes, especially online, because their actions, if lumped together as varying modes of disconnection, do carry different layers of meaning and intensity. For instance, Robin noted that she rarely blocks people and tries to listen to opposing opinions, even though she often 'mutes' Instagram *Stories* from certain accounts so as to make their content disappear from her feed. Robin explained that blocking is a "much more powerful" mode of disconnection,

because blocked accounts will not be able to read her posts or even search for her profile on social media, thereby *precluding* possibilities of future connection and communications online. Conversely, she mutes accounts and content merely for the sake of her convenience; that is, to “streamline” and “simplify” her feed and avoid information overload. Most of all, Robin notes convincingly that she holds no “negative attitude towards these [muted] contents or accounts.”

More strikingly, some other interviewees disconnect others *in order to* save and maintain their social relationships! James, a 38-year old potter living in York, is a Conservative and hard-lined advocate for Brexit. He never revealed his political opinion on social media or anywhere else online, chiefly to avoid “unnecessary time-wasting quarrels” with his friends, colleagues and others who come with different views and/or pro-EU stance. Yet neither did he want to continually run into posts and discussions that for example critique Brexit, and so he muted or even unfriended several accounts not “to hate [his] friends” but rather to retain their friendship by avoiding messy, turbulent and unnecessarily powerful clashes (Mestrović, 1996). Disconnecting with others in James’s case was thus a rather rational choice taken in order to help maintain his long-term relationships with others.

What these various ways of disconnecting demonstrate is the ‘ease’ of taking certain actions to avoid or pre-empt fuss within a social media context, as Cameron among some other participants noted, somewhat cynically:

[6.04] Social media make it [disconnecting from others] too easy. Why bother talking through when you can just click a button to unfollow or block someone? That’s just too easy.

Being able to too readily disengage (or engage) with others appears, to the eye of this 25-year-old PhD student, to be attributable to social media, and that is undesirable for a healthy social relationship. However, at the same time, Cameron’s critique was oriented principally at people, *not* social media, for their making decisions to block contents or unfriend other people “too impulsively.” Cameron maintains that “people should think twice . . . before whatever they do on social media, like . . . blocking someone . . . these people [from his experience] clearly didn’t think before blocking some of those accounts.”

Many other participants affirmed the ease of disconnecting others, but also the considered ease of disconnecting from social media themselves. Aaron, for example, is a 32-year-old working in a company legal team in London. He admitted that he is “so addicted” to communicating on social media. Clicking likes, leaving comments, scrolling down to look out for new updates are just part of his everyday life, a mundane routine he goes through “all the time” throughout a day. Yet he thought he could easily cease this addiction if he *wanted* to.

[6.05] I’m so addicted, I’m using social media for like 30 secs, when I’m just going downstairs to grab a drink from the fridge . . . [But] I can always leave, I don’t [leave] because it’s [social media] useful and fun. It’s not like serious gambling or alcohol problem. I guess, if I become really concerned, I can just stop using it. That’s not difficult. Just one click, that’s all I need to reclaim my [offline] social life.

Even when he framed his social media use as addiction, he did not consider this to be a serious symptom requiring external aid or long-term treatment (as in other forms of addiction such as drug or alcohol) but simply something that can be stopped based on his decision *alone*. Also when I asked for the meaning of “one click,” he explained it with the drawing below (Figure 5) of his imagination of the social media world: it indicated a click to delete social media apps on his smartphone, as doing so would help him re-focus on his offline social life by deleting the conduit between the offline and online social realities – two realities held as distinct in Aaron’s view.

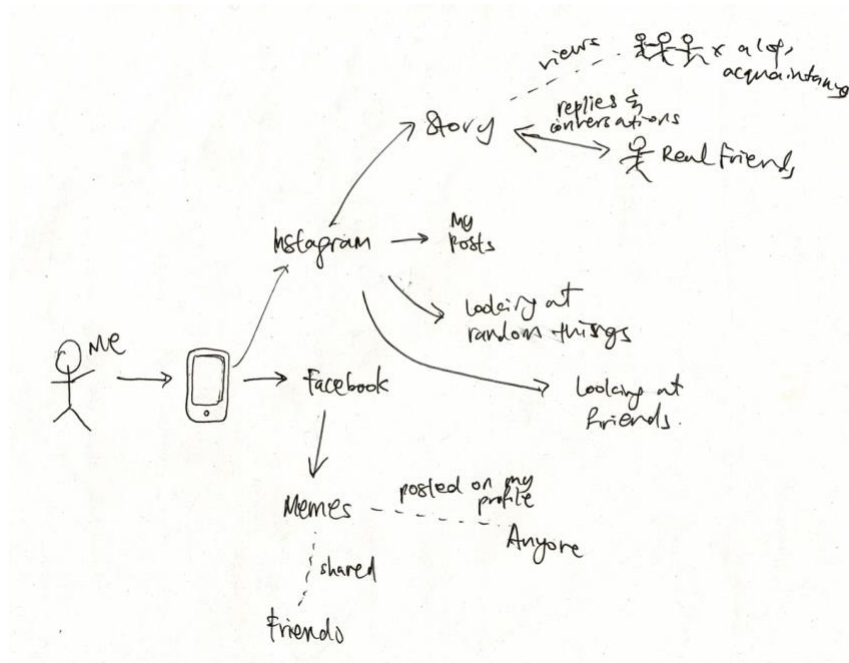


Figure 5: Aaron's drawing

6.2.1. Conditionality of (dis)connection

However, does this apparent ease of (dis)connecting others and/or from social media fully capture the reality as experienced by interviewees? As I argued in Chapter 5, a focus merely on what interviewees do *on* social media does not reveal the full picture.

First, for many interviewees social media play a vital role for their professional life, notably by facilitating connection with others. If we re-consider Gavin's case from Chapter 5, the currently unemployed English citizen, he could not afford personal laptop and smartphone and so went to public library every day to use LinkedIn. Why? Gavin thought he had otherwise "no social network that can connect [him] with potential employers or introduce [him to them]" and, for that reason, LinkedIn is the last and the only resort. Using LinkedIn is "not a matter of choice" in Gavin's case.

In a similar fashion, using social media, especially Twitter, is not optional for Jasper, formerly a tech journalist and currently editor at a media company. When I asked him how many hours he would use social media per day, he replied:

[6.06] Huge amount of time. I might check [social media] three times or four times, in an hour. I mean, each time, I don't use it for long . . . [but] they are just there. I start a day by checking Twitter to see what stories people have been talking about in the last few hours . . . a lot of industry people are on social media, on Twitter, and so, for example, I had 2,000 Twitter followers years ago but now I have 15,000 followers . . . I have used Twitter in the same way but [the number has been] magnified by my job. It's not optional.

Jasper then elaborated how even the rhythm of his everyday life had become compliant with that of Twitter, as he would normally get busiest around 10-11am every day when "the US wakes up and more and more news are coming through."³⁷

Such commitment to remaining connected is certainly not a pre-requisite for all professions. Tiffany, for example, believed that social media offers "fantastic opportunities for better, easier marketing, networking . . . [but] there are other opportunities outside the platforms, opportunities [that are] even more excellent." For people like Tiffany (or Aaron who believed that he would be able to stop using social media whenever he wants) connecting online is not essential, but offers the best complement for their offline connections. However, consider the following remark by Daniel, sales manager in a wine merchant in Liverpool, whose story would appear different from that of Tiffany or Aaron.

[6.07] Twitter and Instagram are helpful, a lot . . . you never just add someone to your Facebook, unless you know them in person, or you have a common friend. I don't accept new [friend] request from a total stranger, nobody does . . . but [on Twitter and Instagram] things are more open . . . it doesn't really matter if you know them or not, only if they have an interesting account. You can build your [social] network more easily. I have met a few of my clients through Instagram, I'm new in this business and I really need this connection [on social media].

It is worth noting here that both Tiffany and Aaron have been working in their industry for the last few years and, in terms of professional connection, they are well connected offline with colleagues, sources, other industry workers, and potential clients. For them, the decision to disconnect others or themselves from social media by going off network, does not carry the

³⁷ See Newport (2017) for a further discussion of relations between changing body rhythms and social media pace.

same implication as Daniel or Gavin, for whom connecting through social media serves as much more than having additional connections, and represents a crucial part of their everyday (work) life. This is similar for Sally, who did not set her account to private despite her anxiety around unwanted social proximity, in order not to lose her conduit to the general LGBTQ community in NYC and London.

This difference between ease of disconnection and the meaning of online connection elicits an important point that the issue at stake is not simply about a distinction between online and offline, and certainly not about whether one is superior to the other. But it is also about whether you have enough connection across your *overall* life, to the degree you can afford some disconnection on social media or not being on them. In other words, without having substitutable social capital that can be paid as a price, disconnecting others becomes harder if not impossible. Preparing for disconnection (online) thus requires people to understand, perhaps ironically, that doing so will have an impact on their present, and *overall*, situations and social lives (Karppi, 2018: 8).

In addition, occupational practicalities are not the sole reason that (dis)connection matters or cannot hinge upon one's willingness alone. Equally important is that social activities in this context of social media have taken on greater nuance, altering the meaningfulness of many interviewees' experiences of the social. As we observed in Chapter 5, Josh and his girlfriend showed how they held different opinions on clicking 'like,' with Josh seeing it as an almost meaningless action whereas his girlfriend saw it as a display of care and interest. According to Josh, his girlfriend would understand how he was thinking of 'like' and so did *not force* him to click like on all of her posts; but from time to time she seemed, in Josh's view, to feel uneasy about not receiving this so-called evidence of care and interest from her loved one.

Furthermore, Flora, a 22-year undergraduate studying theatre and drama at Loughborough, showed how hanging out online became a key part of her social life:

[6.08] I joined [social media] . . . because no one calls or texts any more . . . Everyone but me thought this [Instagram] is the new playground, like new youth club. Unless you go and hang out [there], you get forgotten.

Flora particularly emphasized that this would still continue to be the case, even though she now meets and hangs out with most of her friends almost every day at university. For the sake of clarity, Flora did not think she will be completely forgotten by not being online for a few days and weeks, but was rather worried about missing others' activity and the presence online that would contribute to her being social. This resonates with what Jamie said earlier about how social media have increasingly become a 'place' (in Auge's sense) through more clearly observable intersubjective actions, an indispensable locale where Jamie and his peers socialize and develop relationships. In the case of both Flora and Jamie, social media seem to have been involved in creating a sense of placeness in their everyday life, giving a feeling of (mediated) connectedness or meaningfulness beyond (and in addition to) their immediate, unmediated settings.

This partially explains the reason that those who critique social media for being unhelpful for their own lives may nonetheless stay online. The following comment from Edward, who sometimes goes on what he calls a 'social media detox,' elucidates this point, as follows:

[6.09] I'm not a social media addict. I just want to know what's going on [in my friend's life, country, and the world]. [Researcher: But don't you talk to your friends anyway? Also you said you're reading newspapers every day, right? Wouldn't that be enough?] Hmm... I don't know. I feel something's different . . . [That] I'm not on social media doesn't mean I'm losing contact with my friends, no, of course not . . . I can still learn what's going on [about Brexit] . . . but they are just information. Something's different [without social media].

Edward did not quite pinpoint or describe in detail what exactly would constitute this feeling of difference, yet he was under the impression that catching up with news and contacting with his friends through social media add inarticulable meanings to his social activities. Likewise, Sally also displayed a similar feeling, if she was clearer as to why she would feel as such:

[6.10] I can't not tweet or upload on *Story* . . . if I can't check in locations, when I am, like participating in demonstrations, that's a whole different experience.

Here, Sally explained that displaying her offline physical activities and locations on social media would be, for her, a key element of presenting her 'self' to others in her everyday life,

and this would be considered normal both by those who ongoingly communicate with her online, and by those physically co-present, e.g. fellow marchers participating in the same social demonstrations. Not being able to be co-located across online and offline spaces (Schwartz and Halegoua, 2014) would strip some important meaning from her overall social experience. Sally presumed that she would continue taking her actions and pursuing her ends without having to be digitally mediated and hold a digital presence, but also admitted that doing so would likely change how she would feel about the events she participates in and the meaning of the actions she takes.

I want to acknowledge that not every single member of a society uses social media and certainly not everything is mediated via digital media. Using social media has not necessarily displaced the extant social norms or procedures of social activities. Rather, it has added greater nuance to interviewees' ways of social living by complicating their experiences (Moore, 2004). Interviewees' experiences of staying away from social media do not just involve them missing out on the possible advantages of being online; it also suggests that 'social conditions are altered offline by the very existence of the online, and this in turn gives the online *a new significance*' (Livingstone, 2010: 136; italics added).

I do not intend here to completely dismiss the possibility of disconnection – disconnection referring to the state in which the individual actually, entirely (and permanently) gives up using social media. But the main purpose of those modes of disconnection appears to be to enrich interviewees' overall social 'life,' and no one implied (and who would?) that they would disconnect from the entirety of their social life. It should then be made clear that whether it is disconnecting others on social media or detaching oneself from social media as a whole, does not always depend on an individual's willingness *alone*; especially once their version of long-standing social procedures to retain their presence and interact with others in the world – a way of performing sociability – have been intensified, complicated, and/or nuanced in this social fabric into which social media is woven. In light of this, might disconnection appear to be an attempt by the individual, if not a struggle exactly, to claim their agency and control over their social distance and closeness, on the basis that they cannot change the more solid, background fact of 'being connected' (connectivity) through social media? Answering this question requires close attention to some of the insights derived from urban sociologies, that how people's social actions and lives in general are regulated to maintain a sense of social orderliness, not just by the law, but more subtly by the informal sources of regulation (Amin,

2008) that comprise the mundane objects, signs, organization of space, technical systems and so on in our lives.

The idea of social distance and its relation to interrelations and interdependence will further be discussed in Chapters 7 and 8, both of which are integral to the conceptual revision of social solidarity as addressed in Chapter 3. Doing so, however, first necessitates the exploration of how individuals cope with social media's algorithmic systems as they go about their social lives.

6.3. An (Uninvited) Actor Within Social Life

Based on the conclusion in the previous section, in this section we will address the interviewees' encounters and experiences with the algorithmic systems of social media. In Chapter 3, I explored how people's experience of algorithms and their manifestations are germane to the understanding of social solidarity, particularly of the articulation of the social, to the extent that they come to potentially reconfigure individuals' ways of being and doing social. This is not that social media's algorithmic systems and their manifestations, such as hashtags, metrics, and recommended contents, *determine* or repress what people do, but they work in a more indirect way by being entwined with the ways people live their lives, together performatively weaving a different kind of sociality (Alaimo and Kallinikos, 2017).

That algorithm systems are hugely powerful is of little doubt. But it is also worth reiterating the point mentioned in Chapter 4 (see section 4.3.2.) that algorithms were mentioned by all the interviewees themselves before the term was introduced, even while they showed different degrees of understanding about how deeply algorithms have become embedded within their social life *in general* (not just *on* social media). At the same time, what is intriguing is that although every single interviewee was clearly aware of the existence of algorithms, they were missing in all the drawing of their imaginary social media universe, no matter how detailed and creative their drawings were. Might this imply that they are to some extent working as a 'hidden infrastructure' of their lives, while still possessing a certain level of formative power (Star, 1999; Thrift, 2005)? If so, how does this affect people's experience of the social? This is the main question for the second part of Chapter 6.

For starters, interviewees were *all* well aware that algorithms were at work in affect their experience.³⁸ Algorithms do not exist completely beyond the interviewees' consciousness as other infrastructure of their life might do. Every interviewee was familiar with the term 'algorithms,' and used the term in an everyday sense rather than as a piece of complex technical jargon. Having regularly seen or read about algorithms on the news or articles, and talked about them in everyday conversation at university, at work, in church or other in social settings, algorithms have clearly become a common theme and entered into daily parlance.

However, and much more importantly here, all the interviewees identified algorithms as lying at the core of provision and optimization of services and goods on virtually all social media (and even beyond, on Google, Amazon and Uber, etc.). As mentioned, before they were asked any questions about algorithms or social media technologies in general, every interviewee noted how their experience with social media involves, at least intermittently, algorithms and algorithmic manifestations of their social lives, for example in the form of personalized recommendations of content and accounts. They also realized, and sometimes managed to document, how algorithms would affect their everyday interactions and social lives – again, not just life on social media. Consider the remark from Anthony, a 24-year-old working for Sainsbury's supermarket, for whom the existence and latent influence of algorithms became more conspicuous when he reacted to them:

[6.11] Instagram kept showing me videos of animals brutally fighting each other . . . [I don't know the reason, but is it because I'd been watching] cat videos, maybe? Whatever, I didn't want to see them. So, once, I tried to get rid of all animal videos on my *Explore* tab . . . I tried not to click on videos for the sound to start . . . kept refreshing until all cat videos disappeared . . . I know [on Instagram] what I've done, you know, what I've clicked, must mean something [for what I see]. I don't know how this "algorithm" [air quotes] works but I know this happens.

These kinds experience, which vary in detail but all entail discussion of algorithms, were a common thread among all the participants' answers, independent of their varying levels of

³⁸ This itself may not be too surprising, given that most interviewees are educated and young, use social media often, and sometimes relatively well-off. But in fairness, those who were of a comparatively older group (over 40) were also aware of algorithmic operations in their social lives, even though *how* they acquired knowledge about this matter varied from one person to the next.

knowledge about algorithms and social media, technical expertise, media know-how, or educational backgrounds. This proves that our social actions and lives are *not* unilaterally determined or molded by algorithms as *exogenous* agents. Rather, the interviewees' stories reveal that the workings of algorithms have come to be intertwined with, or even understood to be immanent to, their social lives, reconfiguring what the social has come to mean.

6.3.1. The Uncontrollable

It is first worth noting that people distinguish between how they think of their *experience with* algorithms, and of algorithms *themselves*. When interviewees talked of the former, it was commonly framed as sparking off some negative feelings. For example, Charlotte spoke of her experience in relation to the fear of surveillance, as follows.

[6.12] I bought a coffee maker from John Lewis . . . [Then I started] seeing adverts about coffee beans and grinders [on Facebook] . . . It's scary when the adverts demonstrate my interests or what I want too well.

Following this experience, this director of a small design company in London started reading more reports and news about social media and surveillance, and found a plethora of articles raising vigilance against how such results could have happened due to the processing of our collected data, especially by what the article called 'opaque algorithms.' The corporate justification for this process was that it helped them to offer more personalized adverts and more effectively organized services. Sally voiced a further concern:

[6.13] Even I keep my account private doesn't mean my account won't appear on the recommended feed [of other Instagram users], right? Maybe I'm wrong, but I'm not relaxed about this possibility.

As observed in the previous section (e.g. quotation 6.10), Sally wanted some degree of visibility in order not to lose her linkage to a larger (mostly LGBTQ) community [e.g. by showing in real-time that she is taking part in demonstrations]), but without her account being shown to friends in her hometown. Yet, her attempt to strike the balance between her privacy

protection and being visible – that is, adjusting her social proximity to others – seemed nuanced by an uncertainty about the operations of algorithms, over which Sally had no control.

Meanwhile, other interviewees were more anxious about the unexpected consequences of their actions due to the involvement of algorithms. Chris was one of them who came to notice how his engagement with other *individuals* on social media (such as his friends or acquaintances) frequently, and almost inevitably, brought about “unsolicited responses . . . [which] is super annoying.” For instance, when Chris used some popular hashtag, he felt somehow bots and automated advert accounts *would* visit his account and leave meaningless comments, which he finds “super annoying,” but could not think of ways to avoid this happening without setting his account to private. To be precise, Chris did not mention the word algorithms here, but elsewhere he showed his understanding of how hashtags are collected and processed as one of the means by which social media companies calculate relevancy between contents.

In a similar case to that Chris, Edward doubted how effective the ‘reporting’ function would be, as it is, in his assumption, based on automated technologies and algorithmic judgement *alone*:

[6.14] I reported several times to remove it [his photo posted by an unknown “weirdo” pretending to be himself]. Instagram replied back, very generously: ‘the photo does not violate our community guideline.’ Of course it doesn’t, cuz that’s my photo! Is that the best you could do? I think I had to try 10 times until I finally got rid of it . . . I don’t get how this automated reviewing [of whether language and visuals violate the Instagram’s community guideline] works.

This was only the tip of the iceberg as far as interviewees’ experiences with negative, uncomfortable, or unwanted experiences with algorithms went. But regardless of the kinds of experience, common across all their views was the framing of algorithms as not being negative *per se* ! On the contrary, algorithms themselves were rather regarded as entirely neutral agents, even when some interviewees saw them as opaque and non-transparent by nature. For instance, despite her “scary” feeling (quotation 6.12), Charlotte expanded that her uncanny experience (of adverts displaying her interest) “doesn’t involve anything harmful” or “malicious intent” lying behind. She was curious about how that would happen, though, and so I explained to her how her experience may have occurred by Facebook’s collection of her data in anonymized

manner through cookies and an application called ATLAS, and this led to the display of personalized adverts based on the analysis of her data. She expressed concerns about how these large digital corporations were tracking her and, at times, seemed outraged by the digital gurus and business leaders that had made this happen. Nonetheless, Charlotte made clear that she did not feel repelled or imperiled by algorithms or personalization of adverts as such; neither did she consider them as being detrimental to her life, despite the scary feeling they generated.

In a similar fashion, Cameron mentioned what was to him a rather bizarre experience:

[6.15] Sometimes I go to yoga class . . . I never google yoga, never post anything about yoga [on social media], I just go to class or text my yoga buddy, ‘hey you want to go yoga with me?’ But there was, for a period [of time], when Google, Facebook showed me a lot of advertisement about yoga. I don’t know how they did this, I don’t know how they found this.

Cameron was shocked that he was presented with this series of adverts about yoga, yet he did not take any further action, say, to protect his privacy, because this was neither the first, nor the only kind of uncanny experience he had had. Saying that “this happens pretty often,” he seemed to have resignedly accepted this experience as part of his daily life. It was certainly not that he showed no concerns about his data being collected and analyzed, and indeed, he expected Google and Facebook among other digital corporations to work better to protect his personal data and information. That being said, Cameron was still not overly worried, as these uncanny experiences did not, or had not yet, brought about any harmful consequences for his life. Further, characteristically, he differentiated his experience with algorithms (and corporations) from the algorithms themselves:

[6.16] I’m not sure if this is the best analogy, but it’s the difference between robbery and earthquake. You don’t complain about the earthquake, do you?

The outlined views so far together show that interviewees are conscious of the involvement of algorithms in their everyday experiences, albeit in different ways, and such involvement often seems to spawn what people consider to be “weird,” “peculiar,” or “strange” experiences. But in general, interviewees showed little aversion to algorithms and/or technologies themselves and still think of them as neutral in agency – neutral not in the sense of being impartial, but

rather as tools that work in a mechanical or indifferent fashion. Even when facing outcomes that are potentially damaging to one's social life, privacy and personal information (as in Cameron or Charlotte's case) algorithms are not seen as directly connected to, or responsible for, such concerns, but rather as one the base categories that underpins everyday life.

This conflict between interviewees' accounts of their experiences with algorithms *and* of algorithms on their own, is a recurring feature throughout the interviewees' narratives. This, in turn, gives rise to a dominant view, whereby algorithms are seen uncontrollable, and dealing with algorithms in a social media context entails a necessary degree of uncertainty. This is expressed well in the words of Gavin and Josh:

[6.17] I do want to be seen by my potential employers, but I won't do anything to increase my visibility [other than having his CV uploaded] . . . I'm not sure how viral it [what I do and upload] might become."

[6.18] Hashtag's perhaps good [for increasing his visibility on social media] but it could be really annoying, it attracts strange things and comments, you know, it's like speaking loudly [in public].

Gradually accepting that there is an uncontrollable element existing in their own social lives, a newly emerging principle underlying interviewees' actions, was to comprehend how to deal with these unavoidable uncertainties in their experience of the social; or as Sally put it, how to cope with the algorithms' "different minds," minds different from those of human beings.

6.3.2. Embracing the Uncertainties

That algorithms are accepted and embedded within people's everyday lives does not suggest that the interviewees in this study were totally care-free or that algorithms have been integrated seamlessly into their existence. Although social media corporations try to minutely personalize each individual's newsfeed and wider information environment, for example, interviewees often showed how far they try and wish to circumvent and foil such algorithmic curation, or seek to modulate this through organizing their actions in unconventional ways, as Anthony above did, by trying to outmaneuver the system (quotation 6.11) trying to remove cat photos

even though he was *without* broader technical understanding of the system (Bucher, 2017). Or, how in Flora's view, social media space as constituted and underpinned by algorithms may inaccurately and unfairly silence certain voices: "I understand it [that algorithms (re)arranges her Facebook newsfeed] but is it really working efficient? Sometimes, I feel it blinds me from seeing some of my friend's posts."

More importantly, many interviewees have been embracing algorithms, incorporating them into their lives in different ways. For example, sometimes, unlike natural disasters, algorithms are deemed ubiquitous *and* often helpful. Jasper mentions this, as follows:

[6.19] [I would not describe what algorithms do as] personalization but optimization . . . in the days of RSS feeds I tried to organize everything and read through everything, but now I just trust the sorting algorithms, the default sorting algorithms [of social media]. My reasoning is, if it's [particular piece of news and information] important enough it'll appear somewhere else, if not that's fine . . . they [algorithms] aren't perfect but neither are us human.

As we have observed from the interviewees' remarks thus far, they hardly believe algorithms are flawless, and often question their accuracy. But that is not synonymous with, or leading them to have, a hope for an algorithm-free space. Even those who critiqued algorithms for their potential inaccuracies, like Flora, did not necessarily want them to be removed:

[6.20] I'm not so happy with my newsfeed, there are too many memes, cat photos . . . They are cute, but they make it hard to read my friends' posts . . . [but] it's not like I prefer Facebook without algorithms, I have like thousand [Facebook] friends and I wouldn't scroll down to the end to see everything updated anyway.

Flora then further noted that what she would want instead is an improvement in the algorithms, to reflect her interest "more efficiently and accurately," and help her to have an enhanced experience, more consistent with the meaningful things in her life.

Likewise, other interviewees have shown willingness to more *actively* embrace algorithms, as they find them useful especially to the extent that algorithms potentially expand their social horizons. Gavin, elaborating on his aforementioned fear of uncertain virality of content

(quotation 6.17), stated that he would also appreciate opportunities social media algorithms manifest, through the personalized recommendations made to himself.

[6.21] I'm having an interview for a chef job tonight . . . I've never thought of working as a chef, but LinkedIn suggested I try out for this position. I suspect how it [LinkedIn and its algorithms] saw that potential in me, but this, personalized recommendations, they are very interesting.

Similarly, Kenzi also noticed the assistance of algorithms in expanding his everyday horizons and finding new possibilities:

[6.22] Yeah I find people are more and more bypassing blogs or signing up for the newsletters . . . [because] connection on social media is much better . . . since I moved back to the UK [from Australia], I've slowly been getting back a bit of UK-based ads or events, they're coming on my newsfeed, although not the right type of ads [laughter] but I'm welcoming this change . . . I also deliberately un-liked and unfollowed pages in Australia . . . because I don't need to know what's happening there. I want to know what's happening here, in the local community.

Underlying these remarks, regardless of the interviewees' varying feelings towards algorithms, is a broader belief in the prospects that technologies present for opening up better, more effective management of social relations than might otherwise occur. Most strikingly, none of the interviewees found algorithms and the different manifestation of collected social data (from recommended contents to classifying information) to be at odds with what they think and do, even when the result was not fully consistent with what they bore in mind. This is not least because, as Robin put most succinctly, the results of sorting out seemed to reflect (at least partially) of "who [she is] about and what [she does]". Aligned with this view is the belief that, in the words of Rachel, a science PhD student from Reading: "Instagram algorithms know more about [her] than [herself], just like Fitbit does."

The most extreme example of this type of discourse comes from Angelo's answer to my question about whether he would do something to change what appears on the Facebook newsfeed. He replied:

[6.23] No, I mean, because Facebook has a lot of personal touch, it's not a professional tool, not always. So [even] if I find it [the newsfeed] mostly boring, I wouldn't still go as far as to do something to make it more interesting because that's futile. I'm better off doing something else. What it shows is what it is . . . if it's boring, then that's what I am now.

To what exact extent the interviewees' tactics, changes in location, situation and activities have triggered the (re)curation of their social media feed remains questionable without opening up the algorithmic 'black-box' (Pasquale, 2015). But the important thing to note is that, despite interviewees' clear awareness of algorithms at work, occupying a place in their own social life, they have all come, to different degrees, to embrace algorithms as part of their taken-for-granted social existence, something they will have to deal with in their daily activities independent of whether or not they enjoy the resulting outcomes. Jasper's words capture this feeling:

[6.24] Twitter used to be arranged reverse chronologically, but it's algorithmically sorted now. You can still turn it off, [Researcher: Oh, really?] I believe so . . . even on Facebook you can change a newsfeed to show the most recent ones first . . . the interesting thing is, clearly these are big changes, but those big changes haven't affected my usage [of social media] that much. See, I can't even tell you if I can really turn it off, cuz I haven't really been bothered to look at it . . . social media companies managed to introduce them in a way that they haven't changed much . . . [and] I've accepted that you can't follow everything perfectly.

In some cases, respondents' actions are sometimes *already* predicated upon the influence of algorithms, even when there was no reference to algorithms or technologies. In her previous quotes, Becky discussed how she opted to use the "right hashtags" in order to identify the right Instagram accounts for her, aware that hashtags are a function utilizing and reliant on algorithms. This is not a view confined to Becky, as a few others also mentioned that they engage in similar tactics. Chloe also put it:

[6.25] I don't feel lonely [when I am on social media]. I can always do something . . . there're always some comments on my posts [for me to reply to]. But if I ever feel, hmm, I want others to comment more, I'd post about something interesting, something

emotionally strong, perhaps? Erm, but that might run afoul of others . . . Definitely I'd keep the post short and concise and use trendy words or hashtags. That's absolutely important.

It is intriguing to see how the use of trendy hashtags – contributing to the calculation of relevancy (Gillespie, 2014) of her posts to others – is considered by Chloe as a more important factor than any other, even the content of her post, and how this encouraged her to change the way she acted, e.g. when writing a post. This is not to suggest one always has to bear algorithms in mind when taking an action; yet doing so seems being largely accepted as desirable where possible, as per Colin's answer to my question as to whether his privacy settings would affect the amount of 'likes' he gets:

[6.26] Think so, but other things are more important, like the content of post, the time I post. [Researcher: The time?] Yeah, because even when you post something that's gonna be relevant [to a potential audience], just in a couple of hours there'll be a storm of other posts coming in. I mean, I'm not completely sure how algorithms work, but from my understanding, if I put something in between 12 and 5 in the afternoon, probably also because I have lots of friends in the States and a couple of friends in Asia . . . so in that period of time, that's when most likely people see my posts, no matter where they are, whether they are in Europe, Asia, US . . . you don't have to really think about these [impacts of algorithms], but is there a reason you shouldn't? It helps you get more likes, it's nothing difficult, it's just how I upload.

Thus, the fact that algorithms are deemed uncontrollable does not imply people's resignation in dealing with them, but rather their *acceptance* of things beyond their control in their social life – a means through which the potential tension between agency and algorithms may be alleviated. This acceptance plays a pivotal role in social-algorithmic spaces of social media, adding another layer to the usual, familiar realities people experience. Here, thinking about algorithms is not an alien activity reserved for computer scientists, social media experts and the media savvy, but simple routine part of the fabric of social life. As such, the interviewees embraced the existence of algorithms as part of their taken-for-granted existence. This, again, calls for a clearer understanding of the user's perspective, and how treating algorithms as a separate entity detached from the social reality may not always be meaningful (Beer, 2017: 4). If routinization of social life is fundamental to gaining that which Giddens calls 'ontological security' from the familiar contours of the realities, then it is fair say from this perspective that

social media and their algorithmic systems have rewoven the fabric of our social lives by doing more than giving advantages or causing concern.

6.3.3. Metrics: Social Manifestations of Algorithms

Meanwhile, interviewees' experiences of algorithms' uncertainties and uncontrollability as implicated in their lives does not suggest a chaotic state or messiness in life. Flora put this view succinctly, through a comparison of social media and offline life to 'cinema' and 'theatre,' where both offline and online have a sense of orderliness, just in slightly different ways:

[6.27] From my perspective as an actress, difference [between experience through social media and in offline] is just, you know, social media are like cinema, everything is organized and testable in advance and I perform according to the written script. If I fail, I can be re-filmed. Life is, like, theatre, I can rehearse, but it happens live and spontaneously and there is no going back.

Flora further elaborated that this "[d]oesn't mean everything goes as planned on social media but [that] you have to follow the rules of that like scripts, directing, staging." Then she pointed out that for her, 'metrics' is one of those rules for her, not least because the metrics, especially the number of likes, comments, shares, clicks, views, retweets and so on, are the algorithmic manifestation of the gauge of her 'social' engagement through social media. This is in fact a perspective echoed, although to different degrees, by the majority of interviewees.

Being clear from the outset, those who agreed about the importance of metrics as a kind of barometer for the degree of being and doing social, distinguished the role of metrics itself from the actions that produce the metrics (such as clicking, leaving comments, following, etc.). For the latter, the actions calculated and turned into numbers, interviewees' views were not necessarily commensurable with one another. For instance, as Josh noted in Chapter 5, to a data professional like himself, clicking on 'like' means little more than feeding a useful set of data for marketing and advertising purposes, whereas to his girlfriend it meant sending a sign of care and interest. In another instance, for Charles, the meaning of such an action is almost 'non-existent:' "'like' covers a vast range of stuff I feel lukewarm about . . . [both] things I'm enthusiastic about and I show smoldering to . . . when I feel relaxed, there are few things I

don't 'like'." In this case, clicking on 'like' is rather an impulsive and habitual activity from which Charles's emotion and feeling are separated (Mestrovic, 1996). Meanwhile, for several others, these actions are meaningful but for different reasons. Colin affirms that "you get disappointed [when you have no enough likes or comments, especially from friends and closed ones] right? Let's face it, everyone cares about it, some of them just pretend they don't. . . I think this is why Instagram *Story* is so popular, you can broadcast yourself without letting others know how many watched you." In contrast to Colin's answer, Luciana thinks that likes and comments are meaningful only because it is 'phatic' (Ito, 2001): "[leaving comments] are not really to deliver information. You feel nice when you see them. It's like saying 'hello, how are you?' when you bump into a friend."

However, notwithstanding the varying meanings the interviewees gave to these actions, they all agreed that metrics *as they are* represent a powerful, and also meaningful, aspect of their being and doing social, something that is ubiquitous and likely plays a role in way they experience the social life. When I asked the interviewees what they thought would determine or affect what they saw on their social media feed, most of the answers included the degree of 'relevancy' of posts/tweets/*Stories* to themselves, in terms of content but also time of uploading, geography and so on. Chris, for instance, stated:

[6.28] I think what determines what I see [on social media] are *not* [interviewee's emphasis] what I do . . . [but] their [social media algorithms] conjecture of what I want to see . . . that's [the conjecture] based on quantification of what I've done.

Chris's remark runs in parallel to claims in the literature that metrics, as a result of computed relevancy calculation (Gillespie, 2014) affect the degree of visibility of individuals and institutions (Bucher, 2012). However, the more interesting point does not just concern the interviewees' awareness of quantification in their social activities. It also lies in the way that the interviewees view such quantified elements as a factor underpinning, and closely related with, their experience of social life, versus any technical mechanism or analytical category in public debate.

Numbers, of course, have always been a powerful factor in social life. But the incorporation of these metrics, taking them in part as the *visible and intelligible* manifestations of their social engagement, into everyday life often extends to reconfiguring the conditions and rules of social

interactions and relations (van Dijck and Poell, 2013); and, as such, numbers have come to feed into the intentions and meanings lying behind their social actions. For instance, following her comment above on the ‘phatic’ function of likes and comments, Luciana also noted: “[But] usually I don’t ‘like’ the ones with many likes, as my like or comment wouldn’t add much value,” so her leaving comments is in part driven by the existence of metrics in visible format in her social life. Related to this is Colin’s story where the act of following/friending others on social media illustrated similar thoughts to Luciana’s:

[6.29] Following is a social thing, not following back is rude, unless you are a celebrity, public figures [like politician or company], or at least an Insta influencer . . . [by the Insta influencer] I’m not talking about real celebs, like Taylor Swift or Coldplay. I mean the artists, painters, singers, food critics, not super well known to public, you know, they advertise their work on Instagram . . . number [of followers of an influencer] determines the likelihood of you getting back the response. Less famous ones, having less followees, they may reply back.

The power of metrics here is not limited to the rules and conditions of short-term interactions and social relationships. Strikingly, numbers can dramatize what otherwise may have been a mundane experience, and so help *congeal* certain actions of individuals over others in the long haul. Consider the following example. During the Think-Aloud session with Colin, he posted on Instagram a photo of the café interior where our interview was being held. He then noticed that the photo had received more than 10 likes within 3 minutes of uploading. He sighed and said:

[6.30] See, I have a mixed feeling about my political postings on Instagram, that [kind of posting] doesn’t give me many likes. When I posted about Berlusconi’s return to Italian politics, that received, 5 likes I think? Politics isn’t sexy . . . you want to be listened [cf. for Colin, the number of ‘like’ and comments are the evidence and barometer of how many others listen to him.]? Don’t post political stuff . . . or make it super emotional.

It is worth reiterating here that Colin thought, as illustrated by his statement (quotation 5.14), people’s “habitual, meaningless clickings” and sharing things mechanically contaminate his newsfeed. Yet despite this thought, when it came to how he could be listened to and socially recognized by fellow others, he still gave weight to the number of likes itself, without taking

into account the underlying meaningfulness of actions that produced the 10-odd likes. Algorithms here seem to be serving as an agent that helps him be more (or less) social.

This somewhat self-contradictory account is not only germane to sensitive issues like politics, but is also found in the daily practices of some interviewees' impression management. Baker is 31-year-old data scientist and self-identifies as an Instagram 'influencer,' with more than 3,000 followers, known for his wine and whisky reviews. He talked of how he had sought to build his online profile as an influencer:

[6.31] I've made a couple of posts with very budget-friendly wines. As I expected I lost a few followers, especially those who just care about DRC and Port Ellen³⁹ . . . [but] I don't get followers immediately when posting expensive bottles . . . losing [followers] happens quick, gaining [followers] takes some time. I am still posting whatever I want to, but if I want to build my profile as a connoisseur more seriously, I have to be consistent, I have to heed what this fluctuating number tells.

For Baker, the number of followers is thus a proxy for assessing the results of uploading a post and the measure not only of his popularity but also his self-judgment as a wine and whisky connoisseur, or influencer. Even, sometimes (although rarely) the number even works as a proof of quality! Norah, a 24-year-old interning at an NGO, suggests that in this "world full of fake news," the numbers and metrics can refer to credibility:

[6.32] I'd trust only established media channels like Channel 4, BBC, Al-Jazeera... [and] some renowned YouTubers. [Researcher: YouTubers?] [Interviewee nodded positively] They have tens of thousands of audiences, so they do fact-checking, like, historical novelists do some archival research . . . [Researcher: I think many famous YouTubers have been critiqued for their wrongdoings and spreading misinformation.] Uh-huh, exactly. If they spread misinformation, or promote some scam, they can get slammed [by the public], like Shane Dawson or Logan Paul . . . That's why I'm expecting them to behave more carefully.

³⁹ These are, respectively, the name of a top-class French winery and a Scottish whisky distillery producing some of the most expensive wines and whiskies in the world.

Norah's use of the word 'trust' reminds of the 'generalized trust in numbers' in societies (Porter, 1998). Yet, no matter how paradoxical this may appear given the power of numbers detailed thus far, interviewees' stories showed scant evidence that they actually *trust* the numbers when making decisions or taking actions. On the contrary, many were suspicious of the numbers they see on social media, based on their experiences, wondering if these numbers are frequently fallible and their meaning ambiguous (Baym, 2013). In fact, while Norah said she would trust *some* YouTubers based on the number of their followers (and occasionally the liveliness of the comments section), she recognized that famous YouTubers do make mistakes, and continued to question the validity of numbers in other contexts, such as Uber ratings and Google reviews. Her conclusion was rather skeptical of numbers, in that "we rely too much on ratings. I know lots of ratings [online] are fake . . . [or, at best] ratings are subjective, but five-stars looks glamorous."

So, although there seems to be a general 'desire' for numbers (Grosser, 2014), it is misleading to interpret that desire as always and necessarily shaping people's actions or eliciting trust. A more appropriate interpretation, obtained from the participants' stories, would be to view the number as a basic item of meaning which carries certain expectations and implications, a sort of proxy for how one is recognized. If so, metrics would appear to be a new parameter that *guides* (again, *not* determines or fixes) interviewees through their social life, notably to the extent that they furnish individuals with certain kinds of social status, and might thereby *potentially* reconfigure the rules and condition of social interactions and relations, especially in a long run. Edward's remarks below demonstrate how the intricate power of numbers come into his everyday social considerations:

[6.33] I know people are paying attention to my post, I feel heard because the number of likes . . . confirms that. I'd prefer comment [to likes], because that shows this person's taken more effort [to give an opinion], but likes is enough, usually . . . Of course I know these [likes] are different from the response, what I get from others in offline, but having likes is quite satisfying. I like these 'likes', because it's, kind of shows *how much* [my emphasis] connections and relationships I have.

Reiterated by many other interviewees, Edward's view shows that individuals often relate to, engage with, and communicate through metrics with regard to their being and doing social

through social media, and this reveals much wider issues about the mundanity of living with metrics as part of social life.

From this standpoint, metrics of interaction have become a parameter in social life with their *own* meanings and expectations that cannot be ignored, independent of meaning-making actions that actually generate that number. It has become a social parameter in this context with the power to work as a proxy for judging quality, dramatizing mundane experiences, or nudging certain actions over others in the long run. The taken-for-grantedness of our social lives has come to encompass the metrics as part of life – not because individuals are forced to do so or give full trust to them, but because they, taking metrics as offering a helpful proxy for their social life based on (unavoidable) algorithms, seek to incorporate it into their own ways of thinking about, and acting towards, the social life (especially to the extent it informs various ways interviewees manage their relationships with others). This shows that the coordinates of people's everyday experience of being and doing social are undergoing a change within this social-algorithmic space of social media. The implications of such a shift for further experiences, as well as feelings, as pertinent to the elements of social solidarity, from reciprocity to exchange and others, need be further explored in the following chapters.

6.4. Conclusion

This chapter inquired into interviewees' various efforts to manage distance and organize relations through social media as a means to address their overall social life, and how algorithms and their manifestations are deeply implicated in their efforts. Interviewees generally regarded social media as helpful for managing their connections with others, while acknowledging that the enhanced connection may, in turn, encroach on their social life in general, hence the attempt to manage social distance. Moreover, despite various reasons from the occupational to the practical that may render resigning from social media difficult, their answers revealed an implied confidence in their own ability to disconnect from social media, suggesting that there may be a claim of their agency against the background where they cannot change the fact of their being connected through social media. Meanwhile, however, their ways of performing sociability have been further complicated and nuanced in this social fabric into which social media and their algorithmic systems are intricately woven, as a result of which the interviewees were obliged to deal with algorithms as the 'informal sources of regulation'

(Amin, 2008) that constitute a key part of their everyday social life. But no interviewee wanted or hoped to eliminate algorithms from this management process; instead, they accepted their existence and potentially uncontrollability, understanding that sometimes their social lives remain guided by the ways in which algorithms are manifested, for example social metrics.

From the findings of this chapter, there is a high likelihood that the ways in which people are interrelated through mediation with one another is not only further complicated, but also made dependent on social media and their algorithmic systems to a large extent. Based on this, in the following chapter I will further probe into the details of interviewees' management and organization of social relations, showing that their efforts are intersected with the algorithmic systems at work, sometimes in a manner intelligible to the interviewees, though not always. I will also aim to show how this algorithmically reconfigured context of the social life may give shape to the ways various social ties develop and constitute people's experiences of the social.

CHAPTER 7: REBUILDING INTERRELATIONS

7.1. Introduction

In Chapter 6, we saw how interviewees were seeking to manage their social lives, adjusting a sense of social distance, yet were also well aware of the underlying algorithms at work in social media, and had gradually come to accept their existence and incorporate them into their thinking about their everyday social lives, in part through acknowledging their uncontrollable, unanticipated character.

Extending concerns from the preceding chapters, in this chapter I will continue exploring the social from different people's perspective, using the interviewees' narratives and word choices words, against a backdrop of how they went about their everyday social lives. This will help to understand the different models of human sociality against a backdrop of algorithmically reconfigured social reality in reference to development of the various ties that bring people and groups together, including forms of exchange, phatic functions and association. Specifically, this chapter aims to address the third and fourth sub-research questions, as outlined in Chapter 3:

- *Are there any markers of interdependence in contemporary social life? If so, in what ways, and on what basis, are they made realizable, intensified, and (potentially) durable?*
- *To what extent do people rely on social media and algorithms for social (life)?*

By probing into the ways people manage and control their social relations, and to maintain proper distance, here I aim to grapple with how the ways in which people are interrelated may have been reconfigured in a context of social media. For this reason, this chapter mainly concerns the fourth question, seeking to understand the specific role that social media plays in such interrelations. But as noted in Chapter 3, as both questions are couched in terms related to interdependence, this chapter will also address some elements germane to the third question. This forms a necessary preamble to the final empirical chapter of this thesis (Chapter 8) which deals with interdependence.

7.2. Managing Social Interactions and Relations

7.2.1. Social Self in an Algorithmic Context

In discussing the interviewees' attempts to manage their relations and interactions, it is first worth noting that their conceptualization of the term 'technology' in regard to social media differs from that of algorithms. Algorithms are of course a kind of technology underpinning the systems of social media, and unsurprisingly, every interviewee was well aware of this. Yet when interviewees mentioned technology (albeit that they did so much less frequently than in the case of algorithms) they generally referred to a much broader entity that entails anything 'techie' on social media, from privacy and notification settings to add-on apps, among others. Importantly, these forms of technology were mostly construed as a 'fix' that people could employ to help them achieve their own ends in their social lives, for example meeting objectives they find hard to attain on their own. Josh, for instance, told the story of how he came to use a third-party Instagram analytics app called *InstaFollow*:

[7.01] It's an app for follower management. It shows who followed or unfollowed you, but also who 'liked' your post most, who left how many comments, et cetera. So you can easily analyze stuff, like who's your most loyal follower, or who are ghost followers. I don't have to watch out all the time, this app does it for me . . . I started using this app when I was trying to increase followership when I relocated to London. I started scouting out in [my local] area, to find out who are some rather popular individuals here, what're the good restaurants, pubs, towns. I started just follow, follow, follow, follow many accounts and some of them followed me back . . . then it started getting really hard to manage this. Some may unfollow me suddenly, some may stop liking me . . . and I came across this great tech.

Josh seems to have a clear 'imaginary' (Jasanoff and Kim, 2015) here about this app that it is promising and helpful, and designed to enhance his experience of following and being followed. Most of all, its results are straightforward and eminently intelligible, as opposed to algorithms, and as such, he would not have to worry about how the app works in any fundamental sense. Meanwhile, although Josh was the only interviewee to use this sort of app to assist in his social media use, all the interviews revealed similar understanding of technology (again, when not conceived of as algorithms) as useful for management of their everyday lives. Bernadette, for

example, remarked about her ‘getting alert’ settings that she did not have to keep thinking or worrying about whether she would receive the right information from the right people and accounts, because “once [she had] configured the settings correctly [to receive alerts when certain accounts update], LinkedIn, and Facebook, they’ll take care of it for [her].” As with Josh, this 28-year-old energy policy consultant seems to have confidence in how technological configurations will help her manage not just her interactions and relations with the platform but also with other individuals.

When it comes to talking *specifically* about algorithms, however, the picture starts to look rather different. Whereas the impression of digital technology throughout the interviews is fairly consistent as a helpful agent, that of algorithms is somewhat variegated, with nobody seeming to know exactly how algorithms work. The majority of the interviewees, instead, agreed with one another on the point that data infrastructure and algorithmic systems remain invisible, and so what they think they know and can deal with is a *manifestation* of algorithmic processes, such as metrics and personalized recommendations, rather than the algorithmic systems *per se*. This was the same also for those who worked, or had worked in computer, data, or algorithm-related fields, such as Baker, Chris and Josh.

In addition, more than half of the interviewees were well aware that they were being monitored, their data collected, and their user profiles developed for analysis (by the social media companies). Yet also realized that they would not be able to tackle these underlying algorithmic systems directly. This knowledge is not contingent or accidental; it is linked with the point made in Chapter 6, about interviewees becoming familiarized with the basic processing of algorithms, through reading or hearing about them frequently on news, articles, or through discussions with their friends and co-workers. This resonates with their acceptance of algorithms as agents in their social lives, though unsolicited at first. Indeed, several cases explored in Chapter 6, such as Anthony’s (quotation 6.11) *detour* to remove brutal animal fights videos (the presence of which he was clueless about) without having to deal directly with the infrastructure behind the screen. Such actions have, indeed, congealed against the backdrop of this social-algorithmic context.

By the same token, several interviewees considered algorithms to be a mysterious or, quoting Dean, the 21-year-old undergraduate studying in London, an “enigmatic thing in our life.” Dean seemed to share the same impression of algorithms as the other interviewees, and based

on his past experiences, reckoned that ways of managing his own social activities and lives rested at least partly with algorithms, rather than on himself alone. He recounted how he ended up seeing 20-odd *Stories* on Instagram, but never more than that:

[7.02] Can we actually see everything [on Instagram]? Let's assume that everyone knows about this *Story* thing, that's not ridiculous assumption. I follow like 800 people, but I've never seen more than like 20 *Stories* displayed on top at a time. It seems that some of them are not active or they blocked me from seeing their *Stories*. But I think, it makes more sense to think that some of them are just not being suggested to me, because the Instagram algorithms think I wouldn't be interested in what they're posting. You know, out of 800, don't you think there should be more people doing the *Story*?

Whether or not this is true, here Dean assumes, with some confidence, that algorithms would be involved in demarcating the boundary of his activities and possible social actions, thereby setting limits on the possibility (Mumford, 1944) of him doing and being social. Put simply, Dean, and many other interviewees who sympathize with his view, use media to manage their social lives while, simultaneously, remaining aware that their ability to do so and the ways of doing so are in part algorithmically bounded. Nevertheless, when I asked Dean whether he would feel frustrated by this, he was careful to make clear that he would not see algorithms as “paternalistic” or “controlling,” as his emphasis was also, if not more, put on the part that “I wouldn't be interested.” One account parallel to Dean's was that of Jasper, who noted that, on Twitter, it is always algorithms and people *together* that determine whose content becomes more observable and is ranked more prominently over others, even though algorithms may have optimized and speeded up the process. Intriguingly, as a former tech journalist, Jasper was well aware of the ongoing discussions on the controlling role of algorithms in what we see, such as the notorious concerns about a filter bubble, and indeed he had been reading a wide range of articles and features on the subject, as well as some academic books. He thus admitted the influence of algorithms, yet did not fully agree with the view that algorithms ‘control’ totally what he sees and can thereby do, also because he thought that whatever recursively returns back to him through social media (be that new piece of relevant information or recommendation) would reflect his own interests and actions.

Does this suggest that interviewees like Dean and Jasper, as well as many others holding a similar position on algorithms, are relatively relaxed and easygoing as algorithmic influence?

The answer lies in the negative; especially when the results of algorithmic processing are manifested in something striking beyond their anticipation. In Chapter 6, for example, Cameron spoke (quotation 6.15) about his freakish experience of being presented with a series of yoga-related adverts online, even when he never googled or talked about yoga on social media. As mentioned then, he did not take any further actions, such as changing his privacy settings, nor did he worry too much about this happening again; but he admitted he *was* shocked to some extent. Moreover, Cameron was not the only interviewee with this kind of outlook, as Abigale and Josh both revealed that a similar scenario was true for them too:

[7.03] I was listening to my friend, in a café not on Facebook, talking about a company I never heard of before . . . in two days I noticed that company's product on my Facebook ad. How is this possible? The only reasonable explanation is, somehow Facebook is eavesdropping on our conversations!

[7.04] I try not to do anything about guns or military kinds of things on Instagram. And nevertheless, it still shows some military demonstration in the US. I was wondering why this happens. I don't follow [on all my social media] anything about weapons or so for sure. So maybe, maybe Instagram algorithms collect my info elsewhere. Like, I'm playing a lot of online warfare games with friends.

Following this, Abigale asked me how this could have happened, and so I replied to her that I could not know either. Yet, there are in fact a number of stories similar to this, about people getting panicked out by adverts or contents that do not seem possible without social media companies' eavesdropping on conversations and/or overseeing activities elsewhere. In order to probe into Abigale's thoughts on this matter in more detail, especially to the extent of how such happenings reflected on her management of relations and interactions with others – given Abigale presumed Facebook was listening to her conversation with her friend – I mentioned that such monitoring would presumably be quite impractical, not to mention illegal. A more likely scenario was social media companies were improving on their capacity to accurately identify and target potential customers for different products, as a result of massive data collection and processing (for instance, in Abigale's example, her friend could have talked about the company they were discussing on Facebook, and Facebook picked on that). But whatever the cause, Abigale found this chilling, especially to the extent that social media 'read' her mind and fairly correctly represented her actions, prying into her private social affairs.

Similar thoughts were also offered by Josh and Cameron, but the ‘chilling’ feeling is one most succinctly described by Abigale:

[7.05] So are you saying Facebook doesn’t need to listen to our conversations because they already know enough about our social life? But that’s even scarier . . . It’s like having a helpful friend that you didn’t want.

This comment (on the one hand) sparks a wider question about mass surveillance touched on by every single interviewee to a certain extent. While its ramifications have been widely documented and analyzed in a number extant studies (e.g. Zuboff, 2019; Couldry and Mejias, 2019) it is interesting to see in the data analyzed in this study how questions about how commercial controls on social media sites are potentially compromising their own ‘competence’ for being and doing social; that is, you need some ‘competence’ yourself – be that skills to deal with algorithms, knowledge about social media or whatever – as a condition for maintaining sociability. This is not a radically new idea; for instance, Goffman’s (1959) famous concept of ‘impression management’ would also require a certain type of competence, to organize your ‘front’ in a way that appears favorable to others. Yet there comes a change in the degree to which such competence for being social in the context of social media seems to encompass a broader range of things, many of which, like algorithm knowledge or skills, are construed as a set of individualized skills. Most of all, competence also seems to encompass one’s ability to accept this change and deal with it. As Edward put it:

[7.06] Some said Instagram is pushing for more ads, so they’re blocking the views [on your *Story*] and try to get people to pay for promotions; others mentioned they changed algorithms again and removed bots, so we don’t get many random views anymore from real people other than from our followers now. Anyway, I didn’t choose this. Not the first I feel discouraged and won’t be the last. I should live with this, though.

In tandem with his experience of attempting to remove his photo posted by someone else yet kept failing (cf. quotation 6.14) to do so, Edward felt such experiences would undermine his own capacity for doing and being social, especially when, as a subject of social media algorithms, he lacked effective formal recourse or due process to such automatically generated processes (Citron and Pasquale, 2014: 8). Nevertheless, it is noteworthy how he made clear that his phrase “I should live with this” is not denoting a ‘digital resignation’ (Draper and

Turow, 2019); compromising Edward's desire (and competence too) to manage his social relations and actions on his own was not nudging him towards giving up using social media. This stands in stark contrast to Gavin, who saw himself as precarious (being currently unemployed with no smartphone or laptop) and for whom giving up social media was not an option. Comparatively speaking Edward was wealthier, well-networked away from social media, and arguably socially better recognized, being a young investment banker. Yet not being fully competent or capable within their social domains was taken as something almost unavoidable, just like the algorithms themselves.

For some interviewees, like Kenzi, the film director, the situation was not even frightening: "[I] think that's [fear] too strong word. Not that I like being watched or intervened, but that's not harmful, that's just what it is." He then went on to elaborate that:

[7.07] Long before iPhone, or Blackberry, do you remember when texting caught on but it had limited characters? [Researcher: Like Twitter?] Exactly. That time, we abbreviated lots of words, shortened phrases . . . do we ever use them now on WhatsApp, iMessage, or Facebook messenger? I don't think so. Just like that. Just, we need to do things differently [taking into consideration social media].

Kenzi's argument makes sense if we consider the long-standing studies in sociology that show how, when people embrace new technologies, they rarely comply with technological design or accept their effects *as a given*, but often seek to 'work around' them for their own ends (e.g. de Certeau, 1984; Woolgar, 1990). Algorithms are no exception (Bucher, 2017); people constantly adjust their behavior and take different actions in response to the result of being measured and what is presented as relevant to them (Beer, 2012). In this context, Kenzi's words highlight how people embrace the fact that the conditions of our social possibilities have been reshaped in and through situated practices (Law, 2002) within the assemblages of algorithmic components.

Indeed, every respondent showed that they chose to work around, although to different degrees, algorithms, in an attempt to deal with such (limited) conditions of possibilities and help attain their own social goals and objectives. At certain times, such constrained conditions of digital possibilities frame lifestyle or product options outside social media as being more glamorous and push people to take action outside the realm of social media, as some interviewees noted

in regard to visibility (see Chapter 8 section 8.3.2.). But in many other cases, people chose to continue using social media, and merely adopted a more empathetic approach to their online activities, as depicted in the below screenshot of Daniel's Instagram *Story*, where he insisted that "we can beat Instagram's algorithms" and "expand our community:"



Figure 6: Daniel's screenshot of his Instagram Story

When Daniel was showing this *Story* to me during his Think-Aloud practice, he confessed that he *reckoned*, rather than believed, that a filter bubble would exist based on what he heard and read. Yet he was not entirely certain whether such bubble truly existed, or, if it does, how exactly this would demarcate our lives and actions. By the same token, Daniel did not know who would see this 'particular' *Story*, and even assumed that the algorithms might show this *Story* only to those who were calculated to be the most relevant of his, people who might be interested in the content.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, Daniel repeated the campaign from time to time, and did sometimes receive resonance from "fellow followers and friends" who also wanted to, and did, start similar initiatives.

⁴⁰ For this reason, in the original screenshot, there is an accompanying picture of a bottle of wine in Daniel's post, as we were working for a wine merchant and wanted to spread the word about them and expand their online community (the picture has been excised here at his request, as he wanted to minimize the chances of being re-identified).

Other interviewees, albeit not as straightforward or explicit as Daniel, also took similar action; for instance, using the Twitter and Instagram *hashtag* to *break* the algorithmic delimitation and meet new people, as Becky showed in Chapter 5 (see section 5.2.3.). Moreover, Tiffany, the NGO communication officer, suggested that “hashtags can be more individually created creative stuff, unlike the terms and functions [such as ‘like’] offered by social media themselves,” even though she was conscious that those individual hashtags would be gathered and analyzed by linguistic software.

Other cases include taking more careful approach to interacting with others, as in the case of Robin. When she found an interesting or intriguing advert or article, she tried to copy and paste the hyperlinks into a web browser, rather than clicking on them directly, or even ‘liking’ them, in order “not to feed the monsters” – this implying that the underlying algorithmic system was completely beyond her control. This also included text or other pieces of content her friends and colleagues sent to her, independent of *whom* offered the link. Robin started to copy links from her messenger and paste them into the browser, as this would interrupt, in her thinking, the ability of the given social media platform to follow her activity and archive the interests: “if I copy and paste the link, I will not let Facebook know I followed something”. This strategy may or may not be effective. But the point is that she takes this approach into consideration in her thinking. This was her response to the algorithmization of the hyperlinks (Helmond, 2013), not just towards other individuals.

Sometimes, algorithms’ positive features are seen as more salient, making them appear *helpful* – as Abigale’s “helpful friend that you didn’t want” phrase alluded to (quotation 7.05). What is considered negative by some, as with the aforesaid delimitation of the boundaries of social action and community by Daniel, to others is seen as an assistance in socializing.

Meanwhile, Charlotte went on, noting how she would embrace algorithms as part of her social life without particularly feeling uneasy.

[7.08] What’s the point of considering tracking? Yes, that *is* [interviewee’s emphasis] quite scary . . . [but] minimizing our digital footprints will tell those businesses something about myself anyway, like I am this kind of an easily agitated person. I’d rather prefer to look for ways to get a better commendation of content, people I’d like more, and more effectively curated social media feed. Isn’t that the new way of [social] life?

Likewise, many interviewees sought ways to utilize algorithms to achieve their own social ends. But perhaps that tendency reached its extreme with Kenzi and Angelo, both of whom showed an inclination to rely on media as part of themselves:

[7.09] I really don't need to think about it all the time . . . Facebook reminds of your friend's birthday, Instagram reminds when someone posts . . . you don't have to remember this yourself. I just let them do it for me. It's like my external brain part.

[7.10] [When it comes to activities on social media] I think the choice lies with me. They [companies] cannot force me to buy something or do something, because I have this, great sense of control [of myself]. I treat these ads as harmless. Of course it could be damaging . . . if you've bought something for your mistress, woman's clothing, and your wife saw what you bought [laughter] . . . but not in the sense of, you know, manipulated by companies or algorithms . . . If you had spoiled milk and got a tummy bug, is that, your body is manipulated by your stomach? Like that, I am not very easily manipulated, it doesn't bother me.

Here emerges an interesting metaphor of algorithms as a human organ that reminds us of what McLuhan (1964) noted about media as the extension of human. But unlike what McLuhan implied, this has less to do with sensory expansion, but rather represents a useful feature which the individual can delegate certain social functions to, and yet, at the same time, retain their own agency within the context of a reality reconfigured by what Alaimo and Kallinikos (2017) called the algorithm-driven modulation of user's social media interface and functionality, exerting in part an influence over what becomes visible from time to time.

It is worth noting here some apparently deviating cases where some interviewees decided to use more alternative social media platforms, such as WeChat and Weibo. I say alternative, not because their use of WeChat and Weibo displaced Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, but rather because of how the three interviewees regarded them as serving a different function for their social life. The three interviewees here are Alyssa, Jean and Tom, who are respectively a British Chinese, UK-resident Hong Kongese, and a British citizen married to a Chinese lady. They mention in common that, although they started using those Chinese-based social media mainly due to their Chinese, Hong Kongese or Singaporean friends using the platforms, they felt

comparatively more empowered when using WeChat and Weibo, enabling them to exert some control over the feed and see everything as arranged in a chronological order, with no involvement of algorithms and, as such, no tracking or personalized modulation of their feed.

In fact, currently, in 2020, this is no longer the case; Weibo, for instance, has introduced algorithms to change what used to be a time-based feed to one that is now algorithmically based, to make more content visible and attract higher levels of user engagement. But even at the time of the interview with these three people in 2017, all three were aware that those China-based platforms were not a fully free space, as Weibo, for instance, was being monitored regularly by the Chinese government and so could have been subject to state control. Indeed, as Alyssa put cynically: “[It’s] not that I prefer to be controlled by the [Chinese] government [than by social media corporations] . . . they [government and companies] are the same evils.” However, what differentiated algorithm-based social media and ones monitored by the Chinese government was, to Alyssa, and for Jean and Tom implicitly too, not just the fact that they *might be* ‘controlled’ by this third party but also that the former (Facebook, Twitter) seemed to operate in a more “subtle and crafty” way, beyond their full understanding of how they would work, and they were afraid of the possibility that whatever they did through social media might *already* have been configured by the algorithmic systems and their social media settings.

From the researcher’s perspective, their remarks and fear of being controlled and losing agency to manage their social lives, in fact seemed to allude to two different, yet both equally pessimistic, visions of how we would come to be controlled in the future, whether we realize it or not. But this subtle difference between the two visions, together with the stories illustrated by the other interviewees, that they would embrace or accept the existence of algorithms and their influence and ramifications over organizing their social life (even if that may not be enjoyable) points to an important characterization of algorithms as (increasingly becoming) part of their life – just as infrastructure *itself* is central to our urban life despite the possible inequalities or segregation it may create. Even when interviewees expressed some discomfort over how they worked, this was not often framed as an object to be taken down or confronted, but rather something to be improved. Of course, interviewees were aware that they have no way to systematically input the actual, technical, material infrastructure that manifests to them the results of algorithmic calculation, but for that reason they try to work around it where possible.

As I have shown, through the interviewees' narratives, not everyone held an identical 'algorithmic imaginary' (Bucher, 2017), that is, 'way[] of thinking about what algorithms are, what they should be, how they function and what these imaginaries in turn make possible' (2017: 39). But underlying the detail of how these imaginaries vary is a more deep-seated and increasing acceptance that we simply have to live with algorithms. By 'living with algorithms' I do not mean living a 'media life' (Deuze, 2011) and I do not intend to refer more broadly to the 'mediatization' (Hepp, 2013; Hepp, Hjarvard, and Lundby, 2015) of social life whereby media are involved on a meta-level in the dynamic processes of co-constituting our notion of ways of living and relating with others.⁴¹ It is rather that, when an individual's experiences and actions are interconnected and transform each other through this social fabric into which social media are woven, people find different, reconfigured ways of being and doing social and, in doing so, seek to retain a sense of orderliness in their social lives, as the quotes from Edward (quotation 7.05) Charlotte (quotation 7.08) or Kenzi (quotation 7.09) among others showed. A new social(-algorithmic) order entails not only the creation of a new agency, but also a new way of relating with one another through managing what they do. In this sense, although a certain script is available to guide their actions, scripts such as data metrics and other algorithmic manifestations of what is trending or most relevant, etc., the interviewees' performative aspect of living their social life has become just as prominent as the algorithms themselves. Put simply, through their actions people 'creatively perform' (Isin, 2017)⁴² their social life entwined with algorithms.

7.2.2. Identifying a Space for Sociability

From the interviewees' stories, it seems that taking advantages of, or at least trying to deal with, algorithms and social media technologies has become an almost inevitable if not unavoidable factor in organizing and taking care of different aspects of our social lives. This has often involved rearticulation of ways people relate to and contact others, for instance, as Dean's

⁴¹ This is not an analytical argument that 'media life' or 'mediatization' does not occur. It is simply to explain what I mean in this thesis by 'living with media.'

⁴² Isin's original case concerns citizenship, as he argues that citizens' creative acts, performing the various aspects of citizenship are just as important as their legally defined status as a citizen; creative acts, he argues, are especially important for achieving change and resilience in the polity or community to which they belong. My empirical data do not concern citizenship or politics, but the concept of 'performativity' is useful here, to foreground the dimension of interviewees' organizing, managing, and living social life as a dynamic ongoing performance woven not just by algorithms but through their own actions (but certainly with some tensions and ruptures, e.g. feeling discomfort with algorithms; wanting to break the boundary of algorithms), not static.

(quotation 7.02) or Kenzi's (quotation 7.09) among others show. Furthermore, interviewees are continuously reminded on a regular or even daily basis of the ramifications of these non-human actors, as they continually bump into bots, automated adverts, algorithmically rearranged feeds, changing metrics, recommendations, and so forth, across virtually every social media platform. Yet, including people like Christina who use social media purely as a tool, still believe that social media are a medium through which *real* people inhabit and engage with others.

One might ask: is it not obvious that real people are using social media? That was in fact also the assumption I had. But apparently, at least for some interviewees like Darren, this was not so much the case. Consider the following quote from him, comparing social media vis-à-vis other (what he sees as) non-social-centered digital platforms like Google and Amazon.

[7.11] I've read articles about how fake news industry works . . . they hire new grads to write fake reviews for products on Amazon, can you believe it? They pay a lot though, maybe I should get that job after all [laughter]. The point is, you see, you can't believe what you see there . . . [on the *general* Web] I wanna interact with "real" [air quotes] people. [Researcher: So, do you think there are no fake reviews on Facebook or Instagram?] No, no I didn't say that. There are bots, spammers, trolls, some of them are obnoxious. But that's just human life in general. But there're also real people who really use the product, or go to museum, cafes, restaurants, and talk about them.

In fact, Darren's belief in the existence of real people on social media finds resonance in many other interviewees' narratives, for instance, when they note they feel 'genuinely supported' by people. According to Calvin, a 29-year-old paralegal based near Cambridge, social media *can* be a place on which to find empathetic and helpful people:

[7.12] I did bad at work. I posted [about it]. I know, you might think I am stupid. Why don't I go for a drink with friends? Well, I do that too. But I can't do that every time I feel depressed, discouraged or frustrated. My friends may be too busy to hang out . . . But [when I post about whatever sad happenings on social media] I receive some warm messages and comments. Last time I posted a horrible experience to my Instagram story and someone said, like, 'Don't worry, this isn't gonna stop you from being amazing.' That was very touching.

Calvin further elaborated that he occasionally found this sense of fellowship, or what he would like to call a “friendly association” among social media users who seemed to be understanding and sympathetic, even though he had never met with many of them in person. He said ‘many’ because he indeed developed a sense of friendship with some of them after having met a few times both online *and* offline, but when he was referring to the “friendly association” he did not only include those friends, but potentially a much wider group of social media users (in his case, mostly Instagram and Facebook). This feeling, according to Calvin, was not a contingent result of a total stranger leaving comments, but rather came mainly from a sense of proximity developed over time – having followed and been followed by each other for a few months and up to years, and having talked about various details of his social life, events and sentiments, Calvin admitted that he was under the impression that he *knew* others fairly well, and contacted them even more regularly than his brother who was living overseas and barely used any social media.

This does not mean that Calvin displayed such cordial feeling towards every user he interacted with on social media; on the contrary, he did not appreciate (he even resented!) what he felt to be “mechanical” messages, such as annual birthday wishes on his Facebook wall, which to his mind had no “human touch.” Calvin also acknowledged that this “friendly association” and his friendship with his offline friends were *not* alike, as the latter was the culmination of many years not just of *knowing* one another, but also of physically sharing life’s events and weathering through together. Yet Calvin, at one point, made an interesting characterization of social media, that “Facebook is something like a church community,” not least because, in his opinion, on Facebook people can foster intimacy and nurture social relationships as they do in his local church, free from the burdens of his workplace and everyday life, thanks to this digital ‘tap on the shoulder’ (Ito, 2001: 8). This was especially so when his friends could not be with him emotionally every time he needed them. In this respect, social media seems to provide opportunities for people to be empathetic with distant others, serving as a channel for mediating solidarity in situations such as emergency news (Chouliaraki, 2008) and turning these situations into opportunities for people to express warmth and care, where previously they might just have been spectators (Chouliaraki, 2013). What should also be noted, though, is that it is apparently *not* just the existence of social media as a special meaningful space that provided such opportunities for Calvin, but also his and other people’s *long-term* ‘actions’ that

gradually led to certain associations with social media and what they do through it, *potentially* leading to a sense of (affective) solidarity.

Sometimes, this desire for reaching out to ‘real people’ is implied quite delicately in the interviewees’ reasoning for using social media. Charles, the hotel employee who later revealed that he was gay, said that generally he would “tune in to social media,” with a hope of hearing “untarnished and real” voices. This was related with his coming out of the closet, as his quote below shows. Although Charles conceded that the established media outlets, such as the BBC, would have better resources and manpower for reporting events and “doing journalism,” and he knew that these large institutions run ‘vox pop’ interviews to help give people their voice, he remained less convinced as to whether these large media institutions really represented people’s opinion in an objective and unbiased manner, especially when the content of news concerned sensitive topics, like homosexuality. As he put it:

[7.13] I don’t trust that’s [mainstream media news] accurate. See, he [pointing to a CNN anchor] runs the news about gay politics and, I’m sorry, a white man runs the show? Is he gay? I’m not saying he’s not competent, but it’s [this news] just not an authentic view of gay people.

Following this, Charles made vividly clear that he did not stop watching the news from large media institutions as a result, and read several national newspapers from time to time. Nevertheless, he felt that these institutionalized media outlets did not do justice to the stories of those who were actually represented or featured, for the reasons as above, but also because he felt that the media institutions “must have some limitations about how they can deliver a story” depending on each institution’s political orientation. Conversely, even though social media are packed with information, making it increasingly difficult to discover the right ones, Charles believed social media to be a space where people’s true voice and perspective *can* be found. For him what mattered was, thus, whether you can find them, and if you have time and skills to do so, rather than the authenticity of the voice.

Meanwhile, closely aligned with Charles’s view was that of Robin. She mentioned (see Chapter 5, section 5.2.2.) that she would normally turn to small-sized local media for news coverage, instead of mainstream or social media. However, the issue at stake was not whether a universally trustable medium exists. Robin made clear her reasons for not going on social

media for this purpose, being mainly that finding truly unskewed views on social media would require too much time and effort. In contrast to this, in the case of mass media she avoided them because of what she called the “political bias” inherent in them. In other words, as with Charles, Robin saw social media to be a place where people could express more authentic and honest opinions.

Potentially, Charles and Robin’s accounts imply that there is a possible basis for social solidarity in social media, not least because the voices of people on social media may represent a more credible – credible to the extent that they are authentic and unadulterated – source of information around which people can be bound together, that is, be *dependent on*. What still remains questionable is, though, whether this possibility *alone* would be enough to articulate a sufficiently durable basis to *congeal* these authentic voices and valid information into a more lasting (even if intermittent) mode of interdependence. The existence and the role of this basis will be the main theme of Chapter 8, but we can also briefly consider from the following example how this may be happening through social media.

All interviewees implied, and sometimes explicitly claimed, that they believe social media are a space where you can interact with real people – really existing individuals. Such a view in itself would not be surprising, especially when we recall Flora’s metaphorical comparison of social media to a “new youth club” (quotation 6.08), or Jamie’s characterization of Facebook as an “indispensable part of his social life” (quotation 5.04). To this extent, social media is implied as having not only a *social* character, but also an ordinariness – just like a place for socialization, a youth club or a church community (as Calvin noted in the paragraph following quotation 7.12). Nonetheless, when I further probed into this issue, interviewees started enumerating several key differences between the social character of social media and the other locales that they treated as social spaces (e.g. youth club, church, university, park, gym). While they pointed out several different reasons for this, one theme was reoccurring throughout the interviewees’ answers; that is, a lack of agreed norms about using social media, as best encapsulated by Josh’s remark:

[7.14] In the public library, you know how to behave. You should respect the rules [e.g. silence, no anti-social behaviors], we all know that. [Conversely] There’s nothing, no rules [on social media] . . . Some people keep posting politics stuff, but to me that’s like

approaching someone on the public street and shout at him about, like, political scandal. Isn't that weird?

Here he compares posting about politics with approaching someone in public and shouting about political scandal, which resonate with his analogy in Chapter 5 between social media and public spaces, where he mentioned that hashtags are like “speaking loudly [in public]” (quotation 5.40) once again suggesting that what might have been the same intention – talking about politics or using hashtags for greater visibility or finding like-minded people – could deliver a different meaning depending on the context in which that action took place. This was also definitely the case for interviewees like Gavin and Christina who regarded social media as a pure ‘tool,’ because a tool, in their view, should not dictate any overarching norm or standard by itself.⁴³

Yet, what emerged in the interviews here was something initially surprising: that people had a sense of the importance of social media in their social life (its integral relation to that life), but without thinking of social media as itself a space *with social features*. I therefore probed deeper into this issue, asking the interviews to elaborate further on it.

At first, many interviewees struggled to clearly articulate the reasons in words. Then, after some contemplation, Daniel tried to answer by saying that his definition of a social space was to provide more of a site in which *meaningful* interactions could occur, helping develop “stronger ties and emotional attachments” between people; whereas social media was more specialized in “increasing the frequency of interactions” and/or “connecting otherwise isolated” or unrelated individuals. The implication underlying such comparison of social space to social media was succinctly captured by Jamie’s words that “perhaps can it [Facebook] be, erm . . . a space for, social activities?” But as we see from this remark, Jamie, like Daniel, while not entirely confident about how to distinguish social space from social media explicitly, was able to expand that, his checking which of his friends was going to an event he clicked ‘like’ on, for example, would be important not least because they “could [potentially] go to that event together.” From this, we find a similar pattern between Daniel and Jamie’s statements, which

⁴³ Even these tools may have a quality of property that guide certain modes of usage over others, as studies of the concept of ‘affordance’ show, but this did not appear in the interviews and so I will not develop this idea further here. For the possibility of imagining affordances in an algorithmic context or how algorithmic affordance may define the acts of resistance, see Ettlinger (2018); Nagy and Neff (2015).

is that the distinction between social space and social media is likely established by the level of meaningfulness – whether it is strong enough to translate ‘what people do’ into something more than that which carries consequences, be that stronger bonds, affects or doing something together. Putting this in a more blunt and simplified manner, these conceptions of social space and social media from Daniel and Jamie seem to suggest that the ideas of solidarity, whether more moral ones like recognition or affective ones, or solid forms of interdependence, could be *congealed* in social spaces like churches and youth clubs, but not through social media *alone*, rendering social media one of the (potentially necessary) conditions for solidarity but not sufficient *in itself*.

Hoping to hear more about this puzzling distinction, I asked a few of the interviewees what their opinion on conceptualizing social media as a space for social activities but not necessarily as a social space might be. Some of them initially seemed baffled by the distinction, sometimes because the distinction was vague and, like Jamie and Daniel, this led to vague expressions of understanding. Nevertheless, the interviewees I did probe on this point generally nodded and agreed – affirming the overlap between a social space like a church and social media, but *without* equating them with one another.

Jasper, for example, noted that he sometimes felt *as if* he was “living in parallel realities” when using social media. I asked him to follow up on this interesting-sounding yet slightly unclear phrase, wondering whether he had in mind something similar to a ‘parallel universe’ as in science fiction or movies, as a hypothetical self-contained plane that undoubtedly existed and resembles our own world yet without a necessary link between the two. Jasper replied:

[7.15] No, it’s not that. I mean, it’s in a way similar, but they aren’t the same. Erm, it’s like, [when using social media] I can see what other people are doing, they are replying to others, ‘liking’ stuff . . . but whatever they do, whatever I see, that doesn’t really make me feel I’m with them.

Building on this, Jasper explained further that his understanding of social space, in contrast to that of social media, was somewhere where he could feel he was doing something social, entailing not just interactions and knowledge of what others were doing, but also a feeling of being with others, feeling their reactions and responses as appropriate. He stopped here and, like Daniel and Jamie, was not able to provide a more thorough and detailed explanation of the

difference between social space and social media. But we can see that social space should carry a possibility for consequences for individuals' lives, consequences that are more *perceptively* materialized, rather than purely happening through the cognitive faculties. Social spaces should also not be identical to a 'parallel universe' in science fiction because this implies a totally independent and self-contained world that does not have any necessary and causative relationship with ours.

In a similar fashion, Chelsea, who commented how she found a strong sense of community on her favorite ASMR channel on YouTube (quotation 5.05), also made it clear that she had never had this same feeling of community or sense of belonging either on Facebook or Instagram. For her it was only within that specific YouTube page (not even YouTube *in general*) where she could feel at ease. This view was already echoed by Josh, who considered Instagram *Story* as a more closely-knit community or social grouping compared to his complete network of followers on Instagram (quotation 5.21). To qualify as a special meaningful place, in other words, requires a more specific setting – although it could be a physical space like church or virtual one like *Story* – without which a sense of 'social orderliness' (Garfinkel, 1967) cannot result.

Meanwhile, Edward also felt that social media did not represent a true social space, albeit for different, and perhaps more surprising reasons. Building on his disappointment with Instagram's reporting function (quotation 5.36), which he found to be "incompetent," not least because it kept failing to evaluate and process his request to remove photos posted by another unknown person, Edward insisted that Instagram should develop a better, and frequent, monitoring and improved reporting function, if the company wanted its users to be more "socially active." Resonating with his (and some other interviewees') points suggested in the beginning of the current chapter concerning the need for people to be competent in being and doing social, it seems not only people but also the system in and through which they act needs to be competent as well. When I asked Edward about whether he would not feel uncomfortable about the surveillance by Instagram that may come as a price of such enhanced monitoring and reporting, he replied:

[7.16] It's [building a better system for active social life on Instagram] got nothing to do with surveillance. Look, CCTV's everywhere in London, on main public streets, at parks,

in museums, in every corner of the street. So, don't you socialize there because of those cameras?

For Edward, it is thus not the idea of surveillance, but the incompetence of infrastructure (in this case, of Instagram) that makes it harder for people to become more socially involved. Here arises a need for a kind of support system for the individual and their social life.

7.2.3. Creating Social Distance

Edward's remarks may appear fairly radical, given the global rise in fear of surveillance following various events, from Edward Snowden's revelations to the more recent Cambridge Analytica scandal (although this interview was conducted before the latter broke). Yet the kernel of his idea, that certain barriers to people's social life exist beyond their remits, is not unique. For instance, Amanda deemed what appeared to be friendly comments left on social media as not necessarily welcoming, but rather an impediment to her replying.

[7.17] I used to appreciate some strangers' reactions . . . sometimes I 'like' [my friends' post] and leave comments just because it's from my friends, not because I'm really interested [in their posts]. But if you comment on posts from somebody you don't know, that's a sign that you really care for that . . . But [more recently] people are repeatedly leaving, so many meaningless comments like, 'wow this looks amazing!', over and over again. I don't know how to respond to this kinda comments.

Amanda then went on to note that if something similar had happened to her offline, say, at a local café, she would have ignored that, or made some half-hearted response without giving too much thought to it. Yet without facing the strange interlocutor in person, and not having a clear way to avoid the person on social media (unless setting her account private) she seemed baffled about how to handle such a situation.

A similar, but slightly different issue of unsolicited friendly gestures was recalled by Luciana:

[7.18] You might happen to 'like' my photo [even if you don't follow my account], that's absolutely fine. Happens all the time. You probably saw it [my photo] on the Explore page

and liked it. Maybe Instagram recommended it to you? But if you [don't follow me and] *continue to* [my emphasis] 'like' everything I post or watch every Story I upload, that's quite chilling. I'd start asking, 'Who's this guy? Why is he stalking me?'

For both Amanda and Luciana, *constant* attention from a stranger is not necessarily gratifying, and can even be frightening at times, especially when that attention is without a clear purpose (such as a request of information). Clicking on 'like' here is over time congealed as a cause of concern rather than what could have been a phatic gesture potentially conducive to growth of personal intimacy.

If we look at interviewees setting their accounts to private in light of this, then their activities might be seen as not only as a form of protection of their intimate information and privacy, but also a means for keeping themselves from becoming complicit in any unwanted and unnecessary social activities, either consciously or unconsciously, helping them better manage their social interactions and lives. This interpretation was, indeed, hinted at briefly by Becky in Chapter 5, where she strategized her choices about the right kinds of hashtags to avoid unnecessary nuisance and properly "expand [her social] horizon," then eventually made her account private once she had wanted to delineate the boundaries of her own social life.

Moreover, although not everyone chose to set their account to private, and instead used other tactics (e.g. mute, block) or focused more on ephemeral social platforms (e.g. Instagram *Story*, Snapchat) these moves also involved a disposition towards a more *effective* management of their social life. Chris, for instance, said that Instagram *Story* let him check who was actually viewing his uploads and videos, allowing for a greater sense of who his audience *is*, without the "downside of having to wait for others' reactions . . . [and] tempt[ing] some random reactions [such as meaningless comments and emojis]." Chris admitted that his use of Instagram was more and more inclined towards uploading *Stories* over posts, not because he wanted to interact more with the 'viewers' of his *Stories*, but because he felt "safer" and more "in control" of what he could do. As he put it, "*Story* isn't visible to anyone else [but you] and . . . you can show it [*Story*] to only the people you want . . . I think this is the ultimate social media experience." In other words, for Chris Instagram *Story* is a means through which he can secure a sense of 'proper distance' (Silverstone, 2007) from others – including what he called in Chapter 5 as "super annoying" contents such as meaningless comments – and so chooses to commence his own way of being and doing social. This is a mode of social self

whose existence and actions seem to become increasingly dependent not just on the *Story* viewers but *also* on social media platforms and their respective resources. This is because, Chris's attempts to manage, or experiment, with social distance on his own – without the assistance from social media's function – would result in different outcomes given the uncertainty involved in this social-algorithmic context, and the volume of interactions and relations he has to manage.

We can see here, therefore, that many interviewees are seeking (even temporarily) to constitute their own social space through the vast networks of social media, a space they want for a well-organized social life, arranged by the management of human relations (Massey, 2005) but that is not just made up of human relations and interactions. Like Luciana's discomfort for constant attention to her from others, Amanda's disapproval of meaningless comments, or Chris's likeness of Instagram *Story*'s specific environment that frames the interaction in particular ways all show, the social aspect of what people perceive as their social space seems to encompass much more than face-to-face interactions between individuals.

This constitution of such space does not indicate anti- or less social modes of behavior, however, and the interviewees in this study generally remained open and willing to socialize with others. Most of all, seeking to secure a proper distance from others *before* socially engaging is far from a new phenomenon (Simmel, 1950a, 1950b), particularly when people face an overwhelming change in their surrounding conditions. The below drawing by Norah, the NGO intern, represents this change in quite an intuitive fashion.

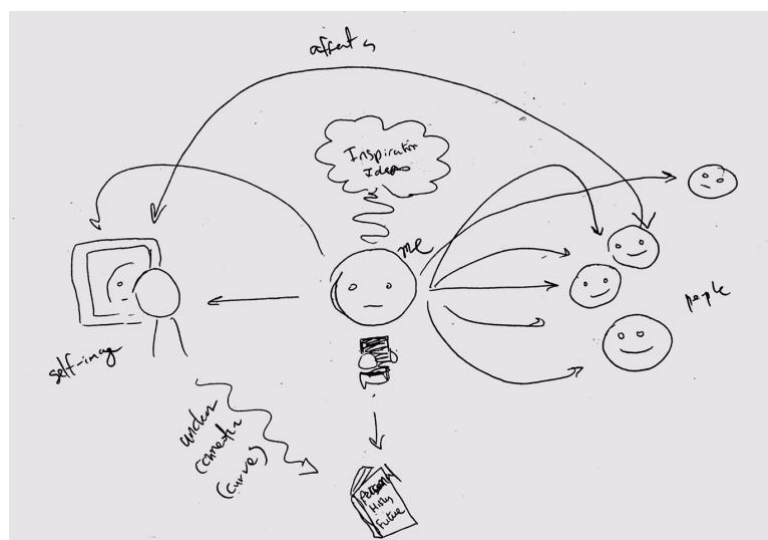


Figure 7: Norah's drawing

In the interview that followed her drawing activity, Norah elaborated on this picture, explaining that it was sometimes hard to identify connection between her personal history and future and herself, because “what other people say [on social media] affects [and] changes” who she is, and what she does. While that sounds perfectly normal, on the one hand, it contradicts what Neil Postman (1985) claimed regarding the ‘impact’ over people’s behaviors of news and information received from *the mass media*, that they would have little impact, not least because most people would not have a sense of being able to control contingencies in a wider social context. By contrast, the situation now seems reversed, at least in the case of Norah. What she came to know through social media about ‘what other people say and do’ would potentially have an ‘action-value’ (Postman, 1985: 76), which is the potency to translate what Norah knew and heard from media into specific action. Norah took this as a serious situation, noting that unlike in the past, now her “[social] life [was always] full of chaos and tribulations, [with] no safe harbor to pull into.” Contributing to this problem, for Norah, was her smartphone, which she compared to a ‘black mirror’ – a metaphor originating from the title of the British science fiction television series. Her point was that she came to hear what others say and do, and what was happening in the wider world *too continuously* through social media on her smartphone, on which a large part of her social life was dependent.

The point to consider at the end of this section is the possible influence over social solidarity of the social-algorithmic context, in which people’s efforts, often knowingly enacted, to secure a more sociable space and a proper sense of social distance were made in an attempt to better manage their social life within that context. But this context remains full of uncertainties, including objects that are often beyond individual control, as the interviewees showed in Chapters 5 and 6. In this situation, if the social is a totality of interrelatedness knotted through various mediated interactions, then that totality may seem to be tightly entangled, not just by the individual but also by other actors – not only other individuals, but also social media and their algorithms. What basis for solidarity as a durably made interdependence can therefore stem from such a totality?

To sum up the progress in this section: alongside interviewees’ attempts to claim a new mode of performative agency, secure their own social space and proper distance through social media use, emerges a somewhat different kind of experience of the social life. In Chapter 6, Edward and Sally implied this when they noted that without social media “something’s different”

(quotation 6.09) or comes “a whole different experience” (quotation 6.10). Although neither of them then made clear exactly how their experience has become different (in fact, they tried to explain it but did not manage to articulate it in words), its details are often manifest within the interviewees’ modes of ‘being and doing social’ through social media, given that their experiences and actions are interconnected and transforming each other. The following section aims to explore in-depth this transformation of experience of the social through looking at the respondents’ actions.

7.3. Being Strategic: a Framework for the Social Life

When asked about the main purpose of using social media, the interviewees’ responses were wide-ranging, almost as various as the number of interviewees (see Chapter 5 for more detailed examples). However, they rarely posted or uploaded items without somehow *crafting* the content. This was particularly the case with photos, as all interviewees (except for Gavin who did not have smartphone or laptop and only uses LinkedIn) used visual filters, Photoshop and/or beauty apps to make snapshots of their lives, holidays, or food experiences look more glamorous; this was often also the case with their writings. Put simply, they thought carefully about what, and how, to post things.

This crafting, often considered as akin to the art of impression management and self-promotion, is neither new nor surprising, and has been covered well by the extant studies (e.g. Marwick and boyd, 2011; Marwick, 2013; Picone, 2016). What is intriguing is that such crafting today is sometimes also triggered by their anxiety about surveillance, as Flora mentioned:

[7.19] You shouldn’t say things spontaneously [on social media]. [Researcher: Why is that?] Well, you can’t retract what you say. You can delete it, but it might still be there, somewhere, in the corner of Internet.

At first, Flora said she would craft her posts, being wary of delivering a wrong impression, as she has more than a thousand ‘friends’ on Facebook and a similar number of ‘followers’ on Instagram. Yet, she came to notice that whatever she uploaded through the Instagram app might become subject to record permanence, even when she did not intend this, because of websites like *Pikdo*, *Pictame*, *Deskgram*, etc.: applications or websites that are developed *not* by

Instagram/Facebook but third-party companies, and designed to enable uploading photos to Instagram from desktop computer rather than from a mobile phone.⁴⁴

Flora found it embarrassing that her photos were somehow stored on these third-party websites without her consent – she said she never used these websites herself, but whatever she posted on Instagram was automatically digitally-copied onto them. Flora then found out they were, in theory, designed in order to provide a better view of Instagram on her desktop, or provide some other kinds of metrics Instagram does not offer, e.g. number of readers of a post. Yet she found the prospect that content only uploaded to Instagram (and sometimes on Facebook *via* Instagram) came to be displayed on the Web for anyone on the Internet to view. This potential to appear outside the boundary of social media and in other, linked spaces on the Internet was an underlying worry when she was crafting her content.

However, focusing only on acts of impression management, self-advertising, or vigilance against surveillance may risk missing another important dimension embedded in people's crafting and selectiveness; that is, how individuals are being increasingly strategic with regard to their being and doing social. That is, impression management can be seen as a type of strategy based on certain skills (e.g. communication) to boost one's self-profile, although that strategy itself does not penetrate into a deeper level in one's social habits; whereas in the context of social media, the very basics of being and doing social becomes in part defined around increasingly strategic attitudes, for instance in building connections, optimizing the impact of these connections, and so forth.

For instance, Flora said she edits and glamourizes her photos every time before uploading, but specific methods of how she does this, such as whether she uses Instagram's in-app editing functions or other beauty apps like *Snapseed* and *BeautyPlus*, or how much time she spends in editing, depend on the purpose of each post. For instance, when it comes to her holiday photos or selfies, she uses *BeautyPlus* to make her "skin blemish-less [and her] legs longer" to achieve a better self-representation; uses *Snapseed* for photos of cocktails and foods; and uses Instagram's prefabricated visual filters for landscapes or outdoor activities. Furthermore,

⁴⁴ Pictame, for instance, describes itself as an 'online Instagram posts viewer,' which operates through Instagram's Application Programming Interface. Similarly, Deskgram self-depicts as 'your desktop version of Instagram.'

during the course of her Think-Aloud practice, Flora further specified about her use of each Instagram filter, explaining that:

[7.20] See, the number of likes is what people pay me. If I use this, Valencia [Instagram filter] [for the outdoor life], I'll get 50 likes [cf. this is relatively small number for Flora]. If I use other filter and it comes with 100 likes, that tells me, this filter is more welcomed [by other people].

Flora had learnt about this strategy from an Internet magazine article that argues each filter suits a different photo or posting purpose, and how clearly distinguished use of filters can boost the level of attention her posts attract. The article also noted, said Flora, that these choices could help her network better, as the filter selection filter tells Instagram's algorithms who would be the ideal candidate for her posts (e.g. because each demographic group tends towards a focus on different specific things). By so doing, Flora hopes to attract more reactions – likes, comments, new followers and friends. What is striking is, however, that although Flora explained these reasons for the sake of my understanding, she would not think about such 'theories' when she actually edits and posts; that is, such strategic choice-making of program, filters and others are deeply and almost instinctively ingrained in what she does.

It is also intriguing to note how this nearly unconscious tendency towards being strategic was evident across the stories of many other interviewees, such as Katherine, a London-based entrepreneur, albeit in a different manner. Katherine said she had never read the aforesaid kind of article and had not used such a variety of different filters and apps. On the contrary, Katherine would stick to 'Clarendon filter,' as a means to "cools down" photos in line with her desired look and feel (her company's cosmetics are packed in black and white containers). Moreover, Katherine wanted to deliver a "consistency in atmosphere" on her Instagram feed rather than receiving greater attention to individual posts, since she reckoned *and* hoped that such consistency would attract more people to visit her account and communicate in the long run.

Like many others, in this social-algorithmic context, Flora and Katherine do not know whether the ways these filters work are valid, achieving what they hope for; neither do they know exactly how Instagram algorithms operate to reflect their choice of visual changes and invite other users to their feed. On the face of it, their rationale to tweak the photos is that, by investing

some time and effort in being strategic, they can get more likes and draw greater attention, which *potentially* and *they hope* lead to an expansion in their social network; even though the strategy of how to achieve that objective varies from person to person. If we reverse this view, then we see underlying both Flora and Katherine's deeply ingrained habits of being strategic is an implied assumption that this is what other people would want, and hence it comes across as a trait for socializing with others.

Meanwhile, Baker, the data scientist and Instagram influencer, walked me through a Think-Aloud practice of his "strategies" to manage relationships with his followers. Although he took the number of followers and sometimes of 'likes' as a proxy for the relative success of his posts (quotation 6.31) he is more cautious than focusing just on building numbers.

[7.21] Provenance of the 'likes' on your content is very important. See this, I'm based in the UK [clicking on the number of likes on his post about a whisky bar in London] and here, this, this, is from... [clicking the account name] some random page based in, I guess, somewhere middle-east [the page has a profile in language that looks to resemble Arabic]? I'd think, 'well, how did this person find my page? Probably Instagram algorithms recommended my page?' But see [pointing at the screen], there're just a few weird posts, nothing to do with whisky or London. I'd think, 'this person's engagement isn't authentic' . . . You want to see comments from genuine people, form relationships with them, that's what social media are about. You don't want those intended to dupe the metrics by liking everything or sharing some rubbish like 'OMG and heart eye emojis' only. That's meaningless, and that person's probably doing the same with a number of other users. That's why you gotta think about your posts carefully, what will attract the right users you want [to interact with].

Baker further clarified that, having met a few other influencers in his field (of fine alcoholic beverages) it is a myth to think people would focus first and foremost on the number of likes and followers, especially for those who try to build a publicly visible profile like himself. As with Flora and Katherine – in fact, like all other interviewees – he does not know the precise inner-workings of Instagram's algorithmic systems (Pasquale, 2015) even though his bread and butter is data analysis, a field closely related to algorithms. Yet he created his own 'algorithmic imaginaries' (Bucher, 2018) in pursuit of constructing what he thinks to be a better social profile, one that can help him socialize more effectively with some "genuine" people through

their “authentic” engagement with him. He had, therefore, strategized what he does on Instagram in accordance with this aim.

One might wonder whether such detailed consideration of strategic actions is only for the likes of Flora, Katherine, and Baker, who have a motivation to build their own profile/brand, and so need to be more conscious of managing their social image (Goffman, 1959). Baker did point this out himself: “you may not care that much [about planning your posts] if all your Instagram friends are your actual friends.” However, it has turned out that such a tendency to be strategic is manifest, in different ways, across virtually every interviewee, regardless of their scale of social circle or level of activity. For instance, as already documented in Chapter 6 some interviewees endeavor to ‘work around’ the algorithms in their social life (e.g. Colin, quotation 6.26) for different reasons. Most of all, even interviewees like Rachel with a comparatively small number of ‘friends’ and/or ‘followers,’ most of whom are friends offline, also displayed a similar strategic disposition embedded in their activity. Rachel only has 31 followers on Instagram and her account has been kept private from the time she started using Instagram, yet she still notes:

[7.22] If I post a pic and don’t say anything about it . . . [and] if I don’t post often enough, my friends will still follow me but they’ll lose interest [in my online profile and activities].

Rachel made clear that she was not concerned about being forgotten by her friends (probably this would not happen) or about not receiving enough likes and comments (generally she does not receive many of them anyway), neither did she worry that her life would stop being a matter of interest of her friends. Yet she said she felt that, without enough elaboration of her photos, such as using hashtags, geotagging, or description of photos itself, her posts might not appear enough on her friends’ feeds and, especially, might not be recommended to some specific friends who would likely be interested. This did not mean Rachel did not post spontaneously at all, but she was conscious of this logic – of how to be and do social more *effectively*.

Meanwhile, somewhat relatedly, Josh noted that for him posting on social media was not a necessity, but was something that (would) facilitate living his social life. He gave an example:

[7.23] One thought I had a couple of minutes ago is like, ‘you know what, I will post later, after this interview. I’m so done with this [social media]. I just interviewed a PhD student

asking me questions about social media. I'm now depressed [by realizing how heavily I use social media]. I'm done with it. I'll let others know I'm done'. And I was going to post this [on Instagram]! Am I an idiot?

For Josh, posting on social media could work like an official announcement (to his followers and friends), an important interaction with others that needs to be done in order to clinch his determination in his social life – again, certainly not compulsory but facilitating what he wants to do and achieve.

Meanwhile, there are other surprising instances in which activities, appearing to be undesirable or even unethical in others' eyes, were actually strategies of the social, as a more effective way of networking and developing social relationships! One of the exemplar instances of this case comes from Aaron, as follows:

[7.24] There was a time when I reposted other users' pictures, like cool photos, something hipster . . . I thought this might help boost my profile. But frankly this isn't a big deal and I didn't give it much thought . . . And this guy [an influencer whose picture Aaron reposted] got really mad at me. He DM [direct message]-ed me saying, 'you're committing a theft'. Hello? I'm a lawyer. If I'd committed a theft, I would've known that . . . He and I got off on the wrong foot, but I did get more likes and followers.

Aaron, at first, did not realize the risk involved of potentially upsetting others by reposting their posts; to him it was neither illegal nor harmful but merely a helpful activity to help build his profile in the way he planned (although Instagram app does not have an in-app function to repost and people need to use workarounds). He believed that downloading the third-party apps for reposting was a small price to pay for "more likes and followers:"

[7.25] We all know how much work we have to do to build a proper [social media] profile. It's laborious. It's time-consuming. It's all about going on to social media and hang around, and [yet] it may end up having nothing in return . . . [Reposting] is like a shortcut, a valid, legit shortcut for getting more likes and followers easy and quick.

The stories of every interviewee, as I have shown with a few examples, vary from one to another. Yet they all have it in common that they act out their own strategies *so as to be social*

– except for Gavin, the unemployed, who only used LinkedIn in the public library for work-related purposes, as he had no smartphone or laptop in his daily life and, as noted himself (quotation 6.17) he would not do something to increase his visibility because of the worry about aspects of his profile going viral (although the possibility of that happening is presumably very limited). Yet if we reverse that comment, it means Gavin also knew that he *could*, or in fact *should*, do something if he were to have a more visible profile.

Is this disposition among the interviewees to be strategic in their social life limited to social media? In real-time and offline social living, this inclination to being strategic may not be so deeply engrained in their thinking. People may socialize more spontaneously, be able to retract and correct more easily topics they are commenting on; be less anxious about the possibility of their conversations being monitored or eavesdropped, or whatever they say going viral. However, when I pointed this out to Josh, he replied that his offline activities these days may also be imbued with a similar disposition.

[7.26] Well, you said, your other interviewees think things are uncertain on social media, but that's not new. Everything was always uncertain. For example, when you were buying music CDs 20 years ago you didn't know whether it was gonna be good, it's trial and error. But the difference is, you know, [today] people are willing to trade off this experience of surprise for some confirmation. It's kind of a shame because you'd know already what to expect before you get it, you aren't surprised anymore . . . You know what I mean? I mean, part of it [our everyday experience] was trial and error back in the days, before social media. [Now] It's not.

Although Josh clarified that he would not insist this happened just, or primarily, *because of* social media, he still found that people were, to an increasing extent inclined towards trading off their time, efforts, and advance research with the joy of surprise. In these processes, social media is a helpful resource. Josh elaborated on this, suggesting that this kind of trade-off and investing time and effort to achieve a better outcome is not confined to buying CDs, but it is also about interacting with other people. Today, in his view, people would research someone on social media usually at the early stages of knowing their acquaintance, in particular on Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn, before they would be willing to take their relationship to the next level. Moreover, with the assistance from algorithmic systems, this process has become even easier. Josh himself admitted that such research is nothing special anymore, but

just something that he would do habitually, normally even without contemplating why he was doing it.

However, even though this disposition of being strategic in his social life “strips something off” his experience, such as the joy of being surprised or getting to know others, Josh did not see this change as necessarily negative; neither did he prefer to have no algorithms or social media technologies. In his opinion, this was not only because returning to the pre-social media time would be impossible, but rather because such change had been assisting him in more effectively managing social relations (e.g. by learning about the person beforehand), saving time, and pre-empting potential risks that might have been involved. This is a point echoed above by Baker’s attempt (quotation 7.21) to take time to search for genuine and authentic others for social engagement, neither of which carried a negative nuance.

From this exploration of interviewees’ varying accounts of their social media actions, occurring against a backdrop of our social-algorithmic context, we have found an increasing tendency that managerial strategies have come to underlie people’s ways of being and doing social. While this may appear akin to an art of impression management, hence a new set of skills for the social life, difference is made at a deeper level where those strategies seem to be applied to interviewees and their actions dispositionally, rather than occurrently – that is, this is not just something that occurs *when* people take certain actions, but is something that comes to give *a priori* a scaffolding within which people take these actions, showing a prefiguration of what the expected result will be. Metaphorically speaking, this is like providing a mold in which people’s actions can gel, thereby articulating the social and the actors within it.

7.4. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown how people seem to consider social media and their algorithmic systems as essential for managing their social lives, indeed, as if they were a fundamental ‘infrastructure.’ Its platforms are regarded as essential in many respects, not just because of connections they allow for, but also because they facilitate people’s being and doing social, for example by aligning what they do with prefabricated functions such as ‘likes,’ and by adding values to what they do. This did not suggest people were always happy with how social media and algorithms worked, nor that they had no issue with this new configuration of the social.

Over the course of this change, in addition, being strategic and competent seemed required as new assets for being and doing social (competence not just in terms of social skills, but something that was ingrained at deeper, mindset and habitual level, lying beneath the consciousness).

What remains to be done in the empirical analysis is to explore how such reconfigurations of ways of interrelations and the tensions that arise in creating overall social interdependence. As was observed in this chapter, there are several ways in which interdependence can be built, for instance around people's voices on social media; but this seemed to remain highly contingent, rather than being supported and actualized by, any material basis. This is the concern of the following chapter, which is also the final empirical chapter of this thesis, where I will delve further into the issues surrounding interdependence, to see in what ways and under what circumstances (or whether at all) the markers of interdependence become more prominent with the possibility of materialization.

CHAPTER 8: REBUILDING INTERDEPENDENCE

8.1. Introduction

In examining participants' stories of how their social lives have come to involve social media and algorithms in varying and complex degrees, Chapter 7 encompassed an empirical investigation of the *social* consequences of social media and algorithmic systems, in particular regarding the consequences of social media for sociability and the ways that people come to be interrelated.

This chapter continues to explore ramifications of this, but with a more specific focus on relations of interdependence based on ever-increasing complication of interrelations. It does so by identifying the potential basis for interdependence and, more importantly, against what backdrop relations of interdependence emerge (or do not emerge). Hence, this chapter principally concerns the sub-research question: *Are there any markers of interdependence in contemporary social life? If so, in what ways, and on what basis, are they made realizable, intensified, and (potentially) durable?*

This chapter thus extends and shares the concerns developed in Chapter 7, revisiting the notions discussed in the preceding chapters but with renewed importance, as part of understanding the conditionality of people becoming interdependent. The data analysis aimed at interrogating each reported action among the participants, and the ways they experience reciprocity, distance and visibility among others, so as to unpack the related role of social media in reconfiguring the social (material) basis for congealment of certain actions in situations of interdependence.

This takes place according to two stages: the first reviews the principle of reciprocity and mutual exchange, and how these, once considered as lying at the core of actions of solidarity and building relations of interdependence, are experienced by individuals within the context of social media. Then I move on to show the instances indicating the potential for materializing interdependence and illustrate how that was made possible (or not). By so doing, this chapter will answer the final sub-research question outlined above, and complete the arc of empirical investigation that the theory chapters implied, thereby laying foundation for Chapter 9, the final

chapter of the thesis, where the insights of the study will be brought together to address the main research question as proposed in Chapter 2.

8.2. Reviewing Reciprocity as Contextualized by Social Media

Although the strategic attitudes discovered among the interviewees did not seemingly involve a large degree negativity, sometimes there were instances in which the strategies did reconfigure, if not entirely compromise, the act of exchange that is at the heart of interdependence. Creation and maintenance of relationships of interdependence have long been considered as hinging on the exchange of things such as words, kinship, economics, recognition, emotions or communications (Durkheim, 1919; Mauss, 1954; Lévi-Strauss, 1967; Sahlins, 1972). Yet in a social-algorithmic context, the act of exchange between individuals does not always appear to be ongoing.

In Chapter 6, for example, Colin and Luciana intimated that the relationship of an ordinary user like themselves compared to an Instagram influencer, or simply those who have followers get a large amount of comments and likes, is likely *asymmetrical*, and this may ultimately erode the reciprocity of exchanging acts. Colin noted that a famous user – fame being evaluated typically by numbers of followers, likes, comments, etc. – might not reply to them or follow them back, even though “following is a social thing [and so] not following back is rude” (quotation 6.29). In a similar fashion, Luciana also mentioned that she would not click ‘like’ on posts that already had too many likes, not least because her feedback “wouldn’t add much value.” Such lopsided dynamics of reciprocity were also noticed by Andrew, the 22-year-old personal trainer.

[8.01] You know immediately if you’ll get any reaction back [or not]. The numbers [of followers or friends].

To this extent, metricization seems to be involved in people’s social life and more insidious than ever (Beer, 2016: 91), pre-figuring the reciprocity in interactions, creating an uneven

dynamic, and thereby partly limiting our ability for being and doing social. In other words, the relationships between individuals are imagined partly in quantitative terms here.⁴⁵

Yet, the interviewees' narratives in fact revealed a greater diversity of reasons than metrics alone, as to why they might not reciprocate an action, in part or in full. Some, like Bernadette, who did not "want to leave comments for everyone [e.g. her non-targeted audience] to see" were worried about surveillance; while others such as Alyssa believed that clicking on 'like' has lost its validity as an indication of popularity, if it ever was: "I used to think clicking 'likes' means something [but started wondering if] this person is actually reading my post." Rather, in her opinion, it merely came to form a useful dataset for data mining and advertising agencies, a point noted by Josh in Chapter 5 (in section 5.2.3.). Furthermore, according to Chloe, the meaning of 'like' and reciprocation of action would remain ambiguous, because:

[8.02] You'll never find out [without asking directly] if someone didn't 'like' [your post] because he didn't actually like what you uploaded, or he read it but forgot to 'like', or missed it cuz, you know, because of algorithms [rearrangement of the feed] . . . [also] if you disagree with what others have posted, you don't say 'I disagree,' you don't speak out.

For this reason, some interviewees felt that commenting would be a superior form of feedback to a 'like,' as a comment seemingly denoted a paid attention and *proper* reaction as opposed to clicking on like, an action which is sometimes even impulsive or habitual, as Charles noted in Chapter 6 (section 6.3.2). This resonates with the investment type of language interviewees used in the preceding chapter, that they need to invest time and effort in being social. The greater the degree of effort expended, the more meaningful social actions and reactions become.

Yet, as Amanda and Baker showed in Chapter 7, many comments appear also just as mechanical carrying little meaningfulness, or worse, appear to serve as an impediment to reciprocation. Amanda put it succinctly that, when she faced this sort of comment, she would not know "how to respond to this kinda comments" (quotation 7.17). Baker depicted them more radically that (quotation 7.21): "You don't want those intended to dupe the metrics by liking

⁴⁵ Instagram, having faced criticism against likes as a form of engagement, recently began an experiment that would hide the number of users who had 'liked' a picture, in an effort to create less stressful social media experience and 'allow users to focus on content rather than feedback' (The Guardian, 15 November 2019). However, expecting this to pave the way towards further feedback and interactions is somewhat naïve, as this chapter will show.

everything or sharing some rubbish like ‘OMG and heart eye emojis’ . . . that person’s probably doing the same with a number of other users.” In these cases, even if the users who left dull comments had intended to interact properly, the reciprocation was more to social media than to Amanda or Baker (at least from Amanda and Baker’s perspective).

Other factors that impede reciprocation are that people may not be in a situation to immediately respond as they may have turned off their notifications. Charlotte, for instance, during her Think-Aloud practice showed me an app called *Forest*, which is designed to enhance people’s productivity. Charlotte walked me through the app, explaining that users of *Forest* are required to stay away from their smartphone during certain set time periods, and by so doing, earn virtual credit to purchase and plant real trees across the world.

[8.03] No, I don’t really think this app will help save environment, but that isn’t what this app is about. I want to live my life, without distractions . . . [by the same token] I always turn off all notifications [for any social media app], so I don’t know if someone messaged me on Instagram, or someone ‘liked’ my Facebook posts. [Researcher: Aren’t you worried you may miss something important? Like a dinner invitation?] If it’s urgent they’ll ring me.

This sense of retreat from social media is relatively rare across the interviewees’ answers, but not completely unusual. We have already seen in Chapter 5 where Edward was talking about him taking “social media detox” on an irregular basis, for a few days or week (quotation 5.06). What is intriguing is that there he noted social media to be so important for his life that he “[couldn’t] imagine a world without social media,” a point echoed by many of the other interviewees. But by characterizing a social-media-free period as “so quiet and peaceful,” Edward seemed to imply that the potentiality of being notified of others’ actions or reactions could be a factor at odds with his own social life, no matter how paradoxical this might sound. From this perspective, reciprocity is pre-empted by the fact that he closed off the channel for further communication through his retreat in the first place.

Charlotte was not as extreme in her outlook as Edward, but she admitted that, when she went back online, she sometimes forgot to respond to the messages or comments that had been left; and even if she did, she would think others might not get back to her. Yet she was not bothered by this as she would not necessarily want to initiate a conversation on social media: “if someone comments back [on my post] I’ll respond back. If nobody does, that’s fine.”

At this point, however, I want to clarify that these stories do not necessarily indicate a ‘lack’ of reciprocity *as a whole* in the interviewees’ social lives, especially if we adopt a wider view that sees what they do through social media as situated within their overall everyday life. It is not surprising that every interviewee holds face-to-face communication, uses or prefers Facebook Messenger or WhatsApp for interacting with others more directly, with a greater expectation of reciprocity of actions. Also, many interviewees still rely on notifications in order not to miss out on potentially crucial updates. Jasper, for example, used Twitter throughout almost the entire day for his work purposes (quotation 6.06). How are these two apparently ambivalent facets of reciprocity to be handled? Chelsea’s remark below may better unravel this complication:

[8.04] I don’t believe my followers, even friends, they will ‘like’ or comment back. I mean, I expect them to, but at the same time I don’t. [Researcher: Could you expand a little more?] I don’t know, it’s hard to explain, it’s just how things are like . . . I’m not sure my friends will ‘like’ back, actually I don’t know if they will definitely see what I post.

From this statement, a more plausible explication is that reciprocity occurs *contingently*, as it does not pervade what interviewees do through social media. The issue at stake is *not* the lack of reciprocity or act of reciprocation in the interviewees’ social life, but rather the (biased) way they experience reciprocity as contextualized by social media where they are prone to the conditionalities of context that do not necessarily encourage the acts of reciprocation *between individuals*. Note that I use the phrase ‘between individuals,’ because reciprocity of the individual with social media seems to occur regardless, for examples as Facebook rearranged the feed in Chloe’s (quotation 8.02) case; or as they all receive notifications from social media, the reaction from social media that could be a source of discomfort for Edward and Charlotte.

Perhaps Nicole’s words well explain this situation. At one point, she mentioned a similar thing to what Chelsea said, that the probability of being able to see all updates from her friends seemed to be declining. I then raised a further question, suggesting that she could still just go and visit their own page or account anytime she wanted, to which Nicole replied:

[8.05] Sure [put cynically], when was the last time you reached out your friends to see if they’re suffering? If they’re having some big life events? . . . I don’t really chit chat

everyday [except for with a very few best friends]. You don't have to, cuz, you get to know roughly what's going on in their [i.e. the majority of her social network] life [by looking at their updates].

Nicole's thoughts suggest that in a way, this situation contextualizing social media pre-empts the needs for *further* interactions, a point which was also implied in what Jasper said in regard to the role of algorithms in helping him notice information relevant to him (quotation 6.19), that if certain things are "important enough it'll appear somewhere else, if not that's fine." Does this appear to suggest that our ways of being and doing social are coming to assume a 'monitorial' aspect?⁴⁶ In other words, is being monitorial essential for the social life contextualized by social media *over* reciprocity which, arguably, had been considered as more important for interdependence? That is, is there possibility to carry out exchange and form interdependence through monitoring? Or, does this mean that people will become, if they have not yet, aloof, atomized or, to use Putnam's (2000) words, 'bowling alone?' Consider the following example for this question.

During the interview, Jean showed to me an app she regarded as a kind of social media, called *Snow*: a Korean-developed camera app, using augmented reality algorithms, with which one can add virtual stickers, emojis and beauty effects to selfies and share them with others. She said that the reason for her using this app was that it helped her be sociable with people she had not met before:

[8.06] It's [i.e. *Snow*] like Snapchat but with more filters and super cute emojis . . . fun to share these [decorated] images on social media . . . it's trendy, lots of people do it . . . It's like being sociable, I feel like having small talk with strangers in public and getting to know them [when she finds others are sharing *Snow*-edited photos].

Jean said that this sharing of images did not necessarily put any pressure on other users to give an explicitly reciprocative action, and that she would continue sharing app-edited images

⁴⁶ This idea of 'monitorial' originates from Michael Schudson's (1998) concept of 'monitorial citizenship,' which is a form of civic engagement in which people collect information about their surroundings, or track issues of local or personal interest to build sufficient knowledge about public affairs and so improve their communities and pursue justice. Schudson described this form of citizenship as 'defensive rather than proactive' (1998: 311), not necessarily in a negative fashion but rather foregrounding how such forms of engagement help build one's identity as a political citizen.

voluntarily. Yet her actions seemed to serve as a gesture through which to foster greater sociality, creating a sense of association with others who were using this particular app, thereby creating a *temporary* sense of doing things together (Carey, 1989), if not through any actual, conjoint digital participation (such as co-editing a Wikipedia entry). This yields a more subtle sense of interdependence, where Jean feels fairly loosely associated others thanks to her sharing and monitoring activity with other users.

Whether this association can be made durable is not something that can be proved through her story along, however. This is not least because, although this digital mode of sharing or participation seems to encourage a sense of companionship (Shirky, 2008), here Jean also relies on what she considers as social media to form the conduit through which that potential relation of interdependence becomes feasible. But then she noted that she would “not want them [other fellow *Snow* users] to respond back [to her pictures], as [she] would feel obliged to reply back.”

So, although a sense of obligation to reciprocate is *still there*, this temporary form of coming-together rendered realizable *through* social media would unlikely bring further, tangible consequences, and would be more likely to remain fleeting. This view is one in part echoed by the stories of other interviewees, such as Chelsea’s YouTube ASMR channel where she would find an imaginary locus where she can find a sense of community around her and other listeners for the channel. Yet as with Jean, Chelsea stated that she would not much expect an ongoing conversation between her and other listeners, and what she does there is normally limited to leaving comments to ASMR YouTubers and reading others’ comments, with little directly reciprocal dialogues or direct reaction to the other users. What helped Chelsea to feel a sense of interdependence, through imagining a community, was thus not so much an exchange of communication, conjoint experience of participation, or the information she received, as what she did through this particular social media.

On this point, I would like to reiterate that these cases did not nullify familiar forms of mutually exchanging, say, sentiments, kinships, interest, and dialogue among others, offline or on social media either. There were plentiful of examples from the preceding chapters such as Calvin’s case (quotation 7.12) on receiving *mutual support* through social media; Tiffany and Casper’s cases (quotation 5.13) of *mutually sharing news* as a means through which to learn about others and enhance their experience of the social; Robin’s political *dialogue* with like-minded individuals to cheer herself up (quotation 5.19), and so on. What I hope to show instead, is that

social media do not seem to always work in a manner that builds interdependence on the basis of reciprocity. As Jean and Chelsea's cases illustrate, some signs of interdependence seem to emerge more from their own actions, and come to take on a special meaning when conducted through social media. In the following section, I will discuss more related examples of forms of interdependence from the interviewee's stories.

8.3. Materializing Forms of Interdependence

We have already seen how the majority of interviewees are carrying out much of their social actions through distinctively social media- based activities, such as getting support and 'phatic tabs' from others, entrusting friends' birthday reminders to social media, and the like. In a similar fashion, during her Think-Aloud practice, Amanda showed me a *Story* from her Instagram archive which she posted some time ago, which went follows:

[8.07] Not been feeling the greatest lately and I think it's important to talk about that openly. Life can be really challenging and at times many of us need help and support. So seeking out that support and talking to people is the best first step you can take. Instagram gives me a great sense of commitment as the group of friends I have made here are just awesome.

As Calvin noted earlier (quotation 7.12), Amanda emphasized that she could build friendships on social media and receive emotional support accordingly. While she explicitly and openly expressed her feelings offline too, for instance to her close friends and family, she did not necessarily prioritize one over the other, and would rather take both offline and social media as channel of similar weight. Certainly, one could not replace the other, as they had their own value, status and appeal in her social life *overall*, enriching her options for relating to other people.

This tendency, to regard social media as part of one's overall social life, was echoed by most of the interviewees, including Alyssa who, as a British Chinese, felt she once experienced a form of racial discrimination and then used Instagram as a platform to express her feelings.

[8.08] I was complaining about it [discrimination she experienced], all three of us showed the ticket that said PREM [Premium Economy]. He [the staff] looked at it and still asked

to go back [to our waiting area]. We said we are PREM three times. I was really annoyed and posted about this on Instagram. Then there was this person, messaged me and said like, ‘So you went through racial bias at the airport and came to social media to complain instead of asserting and confronting the issue? Causing social divide?’ What the XXXX [slang]? Of course I complained [at the airport], I will do so formally with XXX [cf. name of the airline removed at the request of interviewee] too, but I also have a platform to get people’s attention and I will use it. Because I can. Also the other two women were tweeting. We are not causing social divide. Because this day, that’s the fastest way to raise attention!

Alyssa was upset by this person on Instagram who, apparently, accused her of causing a ‘social divide’ at the expense of her opportunity to file a complaint. But as Alyssa made clear in her remark, for her social media was not something displacing real life, but constituted an *additional* conduit through which to communicate with others and help herself attain a given end. But as her characterization of social media as “the fastest way to raise attention” also suggested, social media is not just *another* channel, but the one that takes the top spot in terms of effectively, having potentially the largest influence over her relations to the airline (and other people too). What was paradoxical, but also highly interesting, was how Alyssa felt her approach was doing the opposite of causing a ‘social divide,’ and was merely taking the most direct route to solving a problem. To this extent, social media has become part of the fabric of our social lives, extending from the personal to the practical.

Indeed, this notion is something that was also supported by the other interviewees; for instance, if we look back at Sally’s comment on geo-tagging (quotation 6.10) she said that not checking-in to locations online while physically participating in protests might strip something important from her experience of that participation. By geo-tagging she could be co-located *across* social media *and* the actual site of participation. This reflected a concern about the meaningfulness of her actions, as has been noted already, but we may also be interested in how this co-locating of the self may have been attained. Without social media as a conduit to connects her and other individuals, the relation of interdependence that Sally had enjoyed over the course of the protest would not have happened.

In a similar vein to Sally, Chloe (the 30-year-old teacher in London) showed me a sentence that she tweeted while she was taking part in an anti-Brexit march: “If you’re watching this [live] video [of the ongoing protest in which she is joined], I just want to say I’m so proud in

this family and I hope someday you'll experience [this protest]." Chloe was speaking to (or *thinking* she was) those who were not able to join the march in person, utilizing Twitter as a vehicle through which to engage *simultaneously* with the ongoing offline event *and* social media users online witnessing the event beyond her immediate surroundings. It was through Twitter that Chloe could manage this 'doubling of space' (Scannell, 1996), without disrupting her sense of orderliness in what she was doing and while vitalizing her relationships across different spaces.

One thing to note, however, is that Chloe's neatly-coordinated experience of this double space was not as seamless as expected, as things were disrupted when she noticed a person who was on some kind of live streaming platform (Chloe suspected YouTube but was not certain). Chloe did not pay much attention to them at first, as live broadcasting at a protest is, she thinks, "perfectly normal" today for many people; but later she fell under the impression that he was not taking the march itself very seriously, and was not even live broadcasting for anti-Brexit purposes, but was rather focused on entertaining his viewers. Thus, he "was not in solidarity with" those who were physically proximate, i.e. other fellow protestors. Although Chloe did not know in the end why he came to the march, she noted that:

[8.09] Some people don't really give a dang about this [protest]. They want to attract more viewers, subscribers and perhaps money . . . It's like, they crash the party for the sake of broadcasting live, bragging about . . . thinking they'd look mint doing it.

This 'multiplication of space' (Moore, 2012) – a problem highlighted to Chloe *by* another person who brought in a live streaming platform into her experience – seemed to have disrupted how she was experiencing the march and what she was doing. In her opinion, there was the time, in the early days of social media, when people were more reserved about what they would do and say; but she was feeling that nowadays many people have become more interested in building their profile and presence online. If Chloe is right, then this shift would seem to refer to that people are becoming less interdependent on each other, and more self-centered. But is this really the case, given her (and Sally's) experiences with co-locating the self across various social spaces and feeling connected with others? This is a question that remains to be answered.

Meanwhile, some interviewees said that, if what Chloe described was true, that could be ascribed to a few causes, including monetary compensation for number of views and

subscribers offered through social media platforms. But the majority of interviewees also pointed out that this down to the fact that social media made it very easy to find like-minded people. In the words of Robin:

[8.10] It's [social media] brought me together with so many online communities I would've never have encountered before. For example, there's a community called the natural hair community. This is a movement online . . . for black women to stop straightening their hair and wearing extensions and instead start, kind of, just have their hair naturally . . . I would've never done it. I always wore very long extensions. Even if I go outside my house I wouldn't see anyone else who is doing it [natural hair] . . . [But] in the last five years, just by being constantly exposed to people posting about these things is actually a huge thing. I feel part of this community online that even though I don't ever say anything to anybody. I rarely message, like, 'the natural hair people' [air quotes]. It's [this community] not like everyday kind of replying back and forth to messages. But I do feel connected to something bigger than myself. That's the core of social media, you can find [certain type of] people easily.

Here, Robin's subject was the naturalness of her own hair, but she stressed that the same experience of finding likeminded users could happen regardless of the topic (just as she used the #MeToo hashtag across her social media platforms to bring about a stronger sense of empathy [quotation 5.19]), no matter how minor the topic. This is, to paraphrase her words, a way to feel empowered even *without interacting* or expressing a voice.

It is not surprising that people may become bolder when they are together; and it is also natural that they do not wish to be alone in their opinions. Noelle-Neumann (1984) well demonstrated how, when people feel there are fewer opinions alike to their own, they likely retreat into silence and seeming conformity. So in Robin's case, what social media did was not simply help connect her to others who were interested in the same subjects as herself, but also allowed her to imagine another community through social media, one that previously would not have been possible, as there were few specific channels through which to realize it (the natural hair community).

Meanwhile, Josh and Bernadette's experience of receiving certain topics on their social media feeds may further confirm Robin's insights above. While Josh talked about a group of people

called ‘flat earthers,’ Bernadette mentioned the difficulty, following the election of Donald Trump as the US of finding subjects on mainstream media that she was interested in.

[8.11] It [social media] made things very personalized, but that doesn’t mean segregation. It’s [made things] more accessible. It’s like *democratization of media* [Josh’s emphasis]. [Researcher: What does that mean?] I mean, there’s stuff I read on Twitter. Like, have you ever heard of flat earthers? They’re people who still believe the earth is flat today. I couldn’t believe those people exist, this is something like, what could’ve been covered by the BBC Radio [only] . . . something most people wouldn’t care for. But now you get [this kind of story] in real time thanks to things like Twitter and Facebook . . . social media can give you [easily] what you want to hear based on the data gathered from you, you know, in some behavioural economics sense.

[8.12] [Mainstream] media is so predominated by stories about Trump. It’s not easy to find about the Gaza energy crisis [the topic Bernadette was interested in]. But when I went on Facebook to look out for the issues, I promptly found some articles related to this, some people were talking about it. It’s interesting that they [Facebook] seem to know my interests, probably they can see what kind of events I’m going to, what kinds of opinion I and my [Facebook] friends have, and [they must have] made speculation. This is a great shift, really helpful for us [ordinary people].

There is thus a potential to build another layer of interdependence but not necessarily through reciprocal forms of interaction. People seem to recognize others’ need for giving. Social media provide algorithmically curated textual and visual contents that, in theory, are what people want to see and interact with; and intriguingly, this exposure also potentially carries a consequence for our social lives, in a way different from what the filter bubble argument may suggest – building interdependence not through information *per se*, but rather through the provision of certain forms to realize engagement.

To be clear, however, this does not suggest that social media only works in such positive ways, neither that people find greater intimacy with like-minded people online than they do with their offline friends and family. James’s remark describes this quite clearly:

[8.13] It's [social media] politicized people who I didn't feel particularly, or when I knew them at college or school, I didn't feel like they were pretty political people. I actually don't think they are really politicized either. I guess they're feeling empowered to talk about things, because they feel they've consumed media which has informed them a lot in a certain way, and they find more and more allies [cf. other like-minded individuals], if that makes any sense.

Nevertheless, it is still striking here to find that, if we look carefully at James's statement along with those of others about feeling more empowered – either in a real or illusory way – does not necessarily entail any explicit interaction or reciprocation of action, other than receiving a message, having consumed much information, or just knowing that certain enclaves of people exist. As I will illustrate more in the following section, initiating interactions in a more visible, reciprocal and full-scale way, leading to signs of interdependence, requires a different set of approaches.

8.3.1. Distancing the Self: the Conditionality of Interdependence

[8.14] In the early days of using social media, maybe I was a lot more judgmental . . . I unfriended people quite a lot because I'd see them doing something and I'd think, 'we don't have the same view, there's no point in continuing to be connected' . . . [Now] I wouldn't unfriend a lot of people cuz it's possible I could've misunderstood them. It's not that I ever discuss this with them. I'd just be like, 'well, we obviously don't share the same views but [still] I made a connection here.

This is from Robin, wondering about whether she used to cut her connections with others on social media mistakenly. As she noted, this does not mean she no longer disconnects, mutes or blocks people at all, or brings her ideas to the front for discussion, but she started considering whether she may have acted in a hasty and premature manner when it comes to building forms of relationships.

This type of thought was found in virtually all interviews, although the reasons for thinking as such varied from one another. For instance, in the case of Cindy, she said during her Think-Aloud practice how she *used to* (but not any longer) more “carelessly” engage with people she

did not know. There was more of a thought that she was engaged in their life to some extent, but that engagement did not seem to be mutual in character:

[8.15] [Pointing at a picture from the past] When I was going through these pictures of people I didn't know, but see, my friends tagged them, I think like, I know something about them even though I don't know anything about them. I used to comment on those pictures, because I was thinking I was taking a small part in their life, watching the pictures.

Conversely, other interviewees like Josh sought to act more carefully before taking any action, not least because he was aware of increasing dataveillance and its ramifications for himself. He replied to my question about why he did not discuss political issues on social media, saying:

[8.16] Doesn't help, it doesn't happen. I don't know the outcomes. [Researcher: What do you mean by outcome?] . . . what I meant was, I don't want to voice my opinion in public too much anymore, especially political opinion. Not because I think it's very controversial or wrong, but I'm afraid of repercussions. I mean, you never know why, how, it might be stored and used one day, like by some social media company or government. What I did could be used against me.

As a professional working in a data mining company, Josh was reflexively aware that he was part of a big data system of which social media forms a vital part. This nudged Josh to take on a more reserved attitude before he started engaging with other individuals.

In other instances, some interviewees showed hesitance or reluctance towards building relationships through social media because, oddly enough, they were skeptical of the validity of information they found on social media. Consider the following statement by Luciana:

[8.17] People are good news sources . . . but it [whether the news is valid] depends on the source. I don't really believe anything I find on social media even if that's posted by my friends or family. I always cross-check . . . [for this reason] I'm not quite sure whether I want, or I need more people on my list of [Facebook] 'friends'.

It is intriguing to see how Luciana made a somewhat arbitrary 'correlation' between the validity of news and information and her 'friend' list. Normally, in the media context, consuming news

and forming, expanding social network would be considered as different aspects of life. But when her social life was contextualized by social media, apparently the boundary between news and information she received and the updates from her social media friends seemed blurred, as they occurred on the same newsfeed. In other words, Luciana's management of social relations was in part conditioned by what are *prima facie* non-relationship related issues.

Meanwhile, consider Tiffany's comment, made in a similar fashion, but bearing in mind that she was a person who believed in the value of sharing as the factor which made social media "triumphant" (see section 5.2.2.).

[8.18] I do a little check whenever I see something that makes me think, 'oh, what's this?' Say, for example, when I was scrolling through my feed earlier on [during the Think-Aloud practice], a colleague of mine posted an article about climate change. I didn't quite recognize its source, the website. But it was quite specific kind of climatology information so I trusted her . . . [whereas] if it was a friend of mine for example who posted that, that wouldn't be quite the same thing. So, the first message: credibility [of information] depends on the source of news but also who is reposting . . . surely not [credible] when it's from a previous [Facebook] friend of mine, who I know that just loves to get into fights on Facebook [laughter].

Note the last sentence about how what one of her previous Facebook friends may have posted would not be believable to Tiffany. I asked for why 'previous,' and Tiffany responded that she had to unfriend him because he was "contaminating" her feed with what seemed to be suspicious claims, overshadowing other reliable and useful sources of information; that is, her being in need of others, trying to depend on credible information sources, was compromised by this unwanted (ironic, because he *is* her friend) relations. Tiffany made clear that she did not believe her friend had any malicious intent behind the sharing, but still came to realize that she had to be selective in forming her network of relations on Facebook and distance herself adequately from certain people, as was directly germane to her own needs.

Compare this, then, to Rachel's comments about how she was also trying to maintain certain distance before engaging with others, but perhaps for different reasons:

[8.19] Like 7,000 people liked her picture. The person in the picture was a really gorgeous woman. And she said, ‘I’m going to be 47 in September’ . . . I started following her for a while, left some comments, I wanted to figure out how she was keeping so young. And on some of her pages I found, there were replies like, ‘You’ve done this before. Why are you lying about your age? You’re in your 20s’. And she was replying like, ‘if you don’t want to see it just block me’. Oh gosh. So that was an example of a recent thing where I kind of got carried away and engaged [socially] without verifying [information] . . . Now I’m thinking like, when I see people who don’t show any relationship status [on Facebook] they are probably married [laughter].

This was the moment Rachel started to become skeptical of most general information and content she finds on social media. She did not think that the woman who lied about her age was trying to deceive and deliberately take advantage of others, and considered it more in the vein of “playing some kind prank” (though she did not know for sure). But the consequences of what the woman did, came to impact on Rachel’s modes of social engagement, as she came to cross-check content she saw from others more carefully; and might withdraw from engaging with others at the outset. Skepticism over validity of content seemed to have nudged her in the direction of taking a more reserved attitude, putting on a dispassionate face and maintaining her distance before deciding whether to be associated with someone. As such, Rachel’s social life organization was directly affected by this woman’s behavior, though the effects would be unlikely to be mutual.

All three of Luciana, Tiffany and Rachel’s stories revealed an attempt to retain distance from others, paradoxical as this may sound, precisely *in order to be* social, and if needs be, would temporarily withdraw themselves from a large part of their social lives. Of course, maintaining a certain degree of distance from others does not signal any form of alienation (Simmel, 1950b), and in psychology, it is construed as an effort required for developing healthy relationships between individuals, allowing people to avoid the over-closeness that may result in codependency.

But when people’s social actions are contextualized by social media, a sense of distance from the *general* social life (even if intermittent and temporary) seems not only a desirable quality for being and doing social, but also something that may encourage people to remain distant

from others. Consider the following comment from Nicole, about what might happen if she found views she disagreed with in any of the Facebook groups she belonged to:

[8.20] There're often things especially in that threads I disagree with. But I guess my approach in most cases is to disagree quietly and privately. There's no need for me to try and convince the other person that this is the right way to do this or doing it the wrong way . . . you know that no one's really going to change their mind, and arguing about it here on your Facebook page isn't going to influence . . . I don't think I have the duty to try and convince anybody else. And that's probably why I don't get into conflict so often. Because I disagree quietly.

In this case, Nicole seemed to be adopting what Simmel (1950a) called a 'blasé' attitude, keeping a proper distance and reserving the 'individuality of [her] existence in the face of overwhelming social forces' (1950a: 409), remaining distant from others rather than coming out to engage with others in order to avoid any conflicts. This is not to argue that she would have been inclined to act as such in her entire social life, as she might behave differently at her workplace or in other physical spaces. But at least in a social media context, this being (intermittently) reserved made perfect sense.

Jasper noted similarly that people seemed to be more "detached" on social media, even though he did not have experiences to match those Tiffany or Rachel (in which he could have felt duped) and would retain a critical attitude towards information and content he found on social media. Perhaps it was because of his training as a professional journalist, but Jasper noted that he would imagine most people today seemed to be increasingly vigilant about what they encountered on social media, with a rising public perception of social media and digital platforms as being uncertain and potentially risky spaces suffused with fake news, heavily under surveillance, and so on. Jasper then suggested this dangerous image had reached something of mythological proportions, like that of "the Loch Ness Monster," an idea so strong in itself that people find it hard to argue with.

But although such stories seem to go against the grain of the pessimistic arguments that people in today's capitalist social media context are merely perpetuating idle gossip, without being critical or reflexive (e.g. Dean, 2009; Miller, 2017), and even if we presume Jasper was right, it still remains unclear as to what extent people *can be* critical when their everyday actions and

experiences are necessarily taking place *through* social media, contextualized by them and their algorithmic systems. We have seen a number of instances in preceding chapters that illustrate how social media do not work purely at a symbolic level, e.g. various interviewees were seeking to take control over the way they managed their relations with others *through* social media; and were critically aware of the underling algorithms and were trying to work around them accordingly, again, *through* social media; and in many cases these efforts could not be realized through the individuals' actions alone.

Related to this, indeed, there are factors that further complicate the issue of social distance at stake, especially in ways that *directly* affect the development of relations of interdependence for the individual's needs, reciprocity and/or mutual orientations. Consider the below stories from Anthony and Casper, both of whom were wary of how social media might be imposing certain relations upon them:

[8.21] I can only see the content of some, certain people on Facebook. That's different on Instagram, maybe because I don't have that many followers [on Instagram]. But Facebook . . . I didn't see this person's [pointing at screen] post for a while so I wondered maybe she stopped posting. But actually, she still does, that just didn't appear on my feed. [Researcher: It's probably because of algorithms?] Yeah I get that, but I feel like Facebook's imposing some relationships selectively and that bothers me. This may not be the best platform [for building relationships].

[8.22] If I don't post anything for a while [on Instagram], I notice my recent posts get some likes from someone, sometimes from a totally random person but mostly from someone I know, I follow. First, I thought this guy probably saw my post late, but this [sudden liking] happened more than a few times and I'm starting to think if Instagram's complicit in this. Every time I don't post for a while, like a week or two when I'm really busy, someone suddenly clicks likes, [so] I get to pay attention.

Here, Anthony and Casper's remarks bear a slightly different nuance, with Anthony more 'worrying' about the situation and Casper more 'curious.' Yet both agreed that, in some ways, social media platforms try to force them to remain engaged in social media (resonating with what Hindman [2018] argued about social media's attempt to increase 'stickiness.' Casper also noted that he was fairly sure the algorithms were the cause of the sudden likes, e.g. by letting

his content appear on a random person's feed, seeing algorithmic systems as a 'trap' that help to fixate people on to social media (Seaver, 2018), with an objective of enticing him into a potentially more enduring usage of Instagram, but without Instagram necessarily coming to the fore as the interlocutor in this process. It is this random person who is given (temporary) prominence by Instagram in Casper's network of relationships as the person towards which Casper should orient his attention; although it is possible that person might not have been conscious of this (temporarily) renewed relationship between him and Casper.

The question at hand at this point is whether such juggling of distancing and engaging can lead to a potentially more *persistent* form of interdependence of reciprocal orientation and/or needs while interrelations between individuals and their forms are contextualized by social media.

Carl, 22-year-old undergraduate in film studies living in Reading, for instance, wanted to plan more strategic ways to associate with others based on his own needs. Specifically, he was strictly trying to reserve Instagram for his friends and family, Tumblr and Instagram for interacting with the artists and musicians he liked, and Twitter for getting to know the ins and outs of the film industry and receive news updates as relevant. This is reflected in his diagram on the structure of social media world he drew during the mapping exercise:

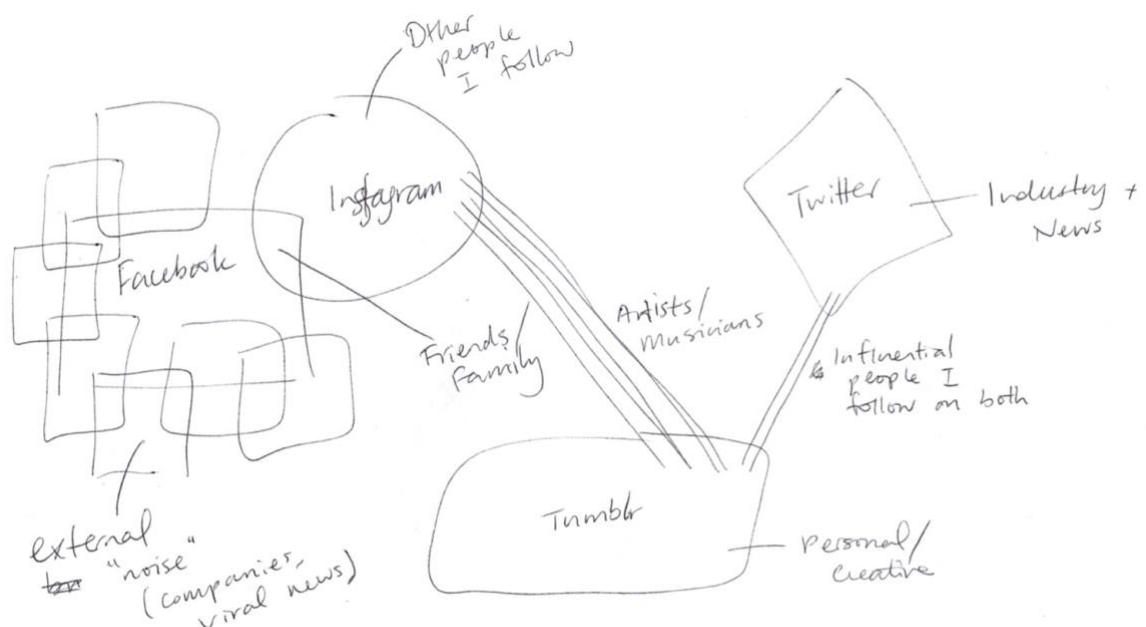


Figure 8: Carl's drawing

In theory, the idea was that, because Carl had his own specific conceptions of social media, just as the other interviewees did, he was thinking how each platform would be the most effective space for each of his (social) life purposes. But Carl made clear, for instance, by showing external noise such as the viral news that made it difficult for him to engage effectively with others at times, this diagram is how he *had planned* his engagement through social media and something he hoped would happen, rather than the reality of his ongoing situation. This sometimes made him withdraw from certain platforms (notably Facebook) to focus on the others.

What is implied throughout the interviewees' stories we have seen thus far in this chapter, from noticing the forces of algorithms to monitoring others, or putting announcements on social media for greater public attention and open critique, all refer to a simple basic fact of human life. That is, they were preceded by the perception of what happens and how that happens. If, for instance, Casper had not noticed the sudden likes he received (quotation 8.22), would he have thought of how Instagram algorithms were barging into his network of social relations? If Chloe did not notice the other person using what appeared to be YouTube at the protest for his own ends, would she have felt her overall experience was being disrupted (quotation 8.09)? Also, considering that the same act of clicking 'like' or leaving a comment might mean different things to different people, would what can be seen not matter even more in terms of developing relationships? What we see, or perceive, in general matters in our lives, because they 'contain[] many things . . . all of which have in common that they *appear* and hence are meant to be seen, heard . . . to be perceived by sentient creatures endowed with the appropriate sense organs' (Arendt, 1977: 19; italics in original).

With the media being implicated in expanding our realities beyond people's immediate horizons of senses and knowledge, many have discussed how managing visibility has become a key part in the organization of one's social life (Brighenti, 2010; Bucher, 2012; Thompson, 2005). Would it not be fair to say, then, that the 'threat of invisibility' (Bucher, 2018) in the social life as contextualized by social media works in a detrimental way for people's development of relations of interdependence? The following section will explore this, illustrating how the interviewees endeavored in their experience to buffer against potential invisibility within the social-algorithmic context, not just for the sake of self-promotion or self-

branding (Duffy and Pooley, 2019), nor even because of a struggle for recognition (Honneth, 1996); but also as a means for managing their lives and social relations. The processes of being visible do not in themselves assure or help materialize interdependence, but they are an essential first step.

8.3.2. Efforts Towards Visibility Management

There were cases here where the interviewees understood that, within the mediated horizons of social media, visibility is not a given. Dean (quotation 7.02) explicitly recognized this fact when wondered about whether algorithms would be implicated in selecting people to show his Instagram *Story*, but others including Rachel (quotation 7.21), Anthony (quotation 8.21) and Casper (quotation 8.22) mentioned this involvement of algorithms in the organization of their social life and affairs through control of what would appear on their social media feeds.

Some, such as Jasper, believed that if something was “important enough it [would] appear somewhere else” (quotation 6.19), but many interviewees still made efforts to manage their visibility, being aware of how their social possibilities may have been conditioned by algorithms (e.g. quotation 7.02 by Dean; quotation 7.04 by Josh). For example, some interviewees worked to engage selectively or manage their friendship circles, as a means for ensuring that they could see what they needed or hoped for while minimizing the risks of missing out on things they were interested. This included deleting people deemed ‘less relevant’ to themselves, as in Flora’s case:

[8.23] So there’re people from my hometown who I feel have very different views to mine. Something I should mention is that every now and again I go through my friends list on Facebook and I unfriend everybody who I felt I’ve grown apart from because . . . I felt like we just have nothing in common . . . I like keeping it [friends list] compact . . . then I’ve got friends from uni who are obviously from lots of different backgrounds. They follow me but I feel sometimes that it would be really rude to for me not to follow them back. But we just have nothing in common.

As Flora’s comment shows, this process of managing one’s social life is, however, not entirely a smooth or linear one, and certainly not a mechanical process. She has to deal with her feeling

of not following certain conventions, for example that not following may potentially be considered as rude, yet she still wants to organize an environment where she can feel more at ease. Relatedly, other interviewees made efforts to ensure access to what they see as potentially more relevant content. See Becky's statement below:

[8.24] I remember at one point, Instagram were sending a lot of recommendation to follow some people, like my friends . . . [but since I started following them] I had to subscribe to their notifications [to receive update alert for the new posting], cuz otherwise I wouldn't see them [my friends' posts] and I was a bit like, I do sometimes wonder why I never see some people's post on my feed. It's just really weird.

Like Anthony said above (quotation 8.21), Becky came to wonder if this issue would somehow connected be to, if not caused by, Instagram's algorithmic system for arranging personal recommendations. More specifically, Becky said that she suspected Instagram might be collecting the data from outside Instagram, for example her smartphone's contact/address book app, to push forward a list of people from her contacts she had not yet followed. Nevertheless, once Becky added those people, Instagram did not necessarily bring their posts to the fore; in fact, some of them she never got to see. Becky felt perplexed, as her Instagram appeared to be interested in expanding its users' social network, but how it was doing so remained unintelligible.

Not every interviewee had such a sophisticated understanding of how algorithms might work as much as Becky (and those who worked in the related fields like Josh and Baker) or endeavored to outmaneuver them. Nevertheless, those with less specialist knowledge, or relatively little consideration of algorithms, all tried to manage what they saw on social media. Even interviewees like Charlotte, who, from time to time, used the *Forest* app to stay away from her smartphone and, by extension, social media notifications, acknowledged that this did not mean she would not care what she saw on social media. Contrarily, *because* she did not pay attention to social media all the time, she felt it compulsory to manage carefully what she did see:

[8.25] I heard people saying [social] media is like a window to the world. I don't really concur. I mean, I get lots of information on social media . . . [but] it's your job to make sure you see the world you want to see through that window.

This is the same for Jasper, who noted that, although whatever he was missing out on would be less relevant (quotation 6.19) or even not worth reciprocating on, he always “set up specific alert systems, enable[d] notification on that topic [on which he worked on] anytime they tweet, [to] get pop-ups on [his] phone . . . [and] to deal with the fear of [missing] information.”

Such a disposition towards strategic organization of what content they saw on social media, by cherry-picking different kinds of information, news or content, was a thread running through all the interviewees’ answers. Granted, the kinds of content interviewees considered to be paramount varied from one to another (e.g. some prioritized friends’ posts, whereas others preferred to see contents intriguing or pertinent to them). However, managing visibility in such fashion in this social-algorithmic context seems to have changed the way they act in building and managing relations, associating and engaging with others.

However, knowing that interviewees themselves have a responsibility to deal with social media to secure their own particular experience, also suggests that sometimes social media and algorithms may play a disruptive force in our social lives, too. Flora, for example, in Chapter 6 pointed out that algorithms must be rearranging her social media feeds and, as a result, this might be erasing certain voices from her feed [section 6.3.2]. This view also resonated with the experience of Becky, who suspected that she was missing out on her friend’s *Story* because of algorithmic curation of her feed, and/or too many adverts on that feed:

[8.26] He said he hasn’t seen my *Story* in a while, and I felt the same. I think the Instagram algorithms think he doesn’t like my *Stories* [and vice versa] . . . nowadays there’re lots of advertising between *Stories*, he must’ve missed my *Stories* while fast skipping advertisings.

Becky did not say, however, that she would prefer to go back to a time when everything was chronologically ordered. Instead, the way to help her better manage what she could see could be achieved by having a better functioning, more enhanced algorithms that better reflected her wants and needs – a point echoed by the majority of interviewees. But until that moment came, she would have to strive to achieve her aims through her own efforts.

8.3.2.1. *Non-reciprocal Nature of Visibility*

Meanwhile, Becky further noted that she “want[ed] to be seen [by others] . . . [because] we need time to develop relationships.” What this short phrase seems to indicate is that, just as what she sees on her social media is not a given but something that needs be managed, so it is not a given that whatever she posts will appear on someone else’s feed; visibility in this context does not necessarily work in a reciprocal or automatic manner. Seeing others and being seen, unlike in an offline setting, are related yet fundamentally separate things.

A more specific instance of this recognition came from Angelo’s Twitter use. He used Twitter for personal reasons such as talking with other friends, rather than for receiving breaking news and information (see section 5.2.2 for this discussion), and stressed that being on Twitter would not in itself impel him to engage in meaningful activity, and he would have to take certain steps himself, because:

[8.27] Only some people talk [on Twitter], continue talking and I get to see lot more tweets from them even when others talk. So I guess using Twitter isn’t enough [in itself], you gotta *be active, even proactive* [my emphasis], keep tweeting and retweeting . . . to feel belong to there. Twitter’s not like that computer game communities [cf. he mentioned this earlier which was a closed Internet community he was a member of]. You shouldn’t muck around [on social media].

As with Rachel, Angelo did not say that not continuously tweeting or posting on social media would lead to him being forgotten by others. Nevertheless, his remark implied two important things, first that algorithms are likely implicated in setting level of visibility (“I get to see lot more tweets from them [who continuously talk]”); and second, tweeting (posting) is not just a way to increase the visibility of oneself, but is also a means towards leading an active social life (“to feel belong[ing] there”).

Rachel made a related comment here that, it is not any special actor but can be an ordinary individual, like herself, whose presence may potentially overshadow others through their social media activity. Elaborating on her previous comment (quotation 7.22) on her recognition of the importance of being and doing social *effectively*, she showed me one of her closed Facebook groups and talked about what was happening:

[8.28] Unless there're just a few people [within a social media group], don't expect to say anything in this group chat and have anyone reply, because the dynamic is very much oriented towards a couple of key players. I've seen certain people post and get ignored. And that's just how it goes.

The “key players” Rachel mentioned here were those who were extra active, frequently posting and raising issues within the group. The situation differs from a more conventional scenario in which a few elite, A-list Internet users dominate the sphere of discourse (Hindman, 2009), to the extent that the higher visibility in this Facebook group seems purveyed primarily by being more active, rather than by social fame or status.

So, this does not just concern the issue of asymmetrical power dynamics, it also bears *practical* relevance for people's social lives and what is required as a precondition for a livelier social life with greater possibility for what they do and say to be reciprocated. Perhaps this offers an explanation of why some interviewees, who are much more conscious of privacy than others and prefer to use ephemeral platforms (e.g. Josh and Darren whose posts are mostly disappearing contents such as Instagram *Stories* and Snapchat) are *still* in the pursuit of elusive ideal of visibility. That is, visibility of oneself is not just an individual asset for better self-promotion, but is also ingrained in the fabric of social life, and being cognized as a potential interlocutor.

In this social-algorithmic context, interviewees generally agreed that it is difficult to make sure that they, or what they post, is seen by others. This has a double nuance: first, as to whether what is posted will appear on others' feeds, and second, whether it will receive the proper, undivided attention to be read and its contents absorbed, rather than being skimmed over. I will touch on the second outcome shortly (section 8.3.2.2., especially cf. quotation 8.37) and focus on the former here. It should be noted that what the interviewees were generally trying to achieve here was a feeling of overall *presence*; that is, that they wanted others to cognize they were doing *something*, rather than expecting every single post or comment they uploaded to be seen by others.

In theory, one could ask whether others have seen what s/he has uploaded, but how many would these days chase up others to get confirmation of this kind (cf. quotation 8.02)? Instead,

people's efforts to ensure they are seen by others, engage also with algorithms as part of securing the desired outcome. In general, it is true that level of media savviness and algorithmic literacy, as well as the willingness to deal with algorithms, vary from people to people (Klawitter and Hargittai, 2018), yet the awareness that they *had to* engage with these systems for greater visibility commonly understood, if sometimes implied. Even interviewees like Nicole, who thought discussing an issue with others on social media was a "huge waste of time" (quotation 5.20), at least *understood* the basic idea that using hashtags, mediated and processed by algorithms, could potentially help people reach a wider audience, so that it would be useful if one were "to make it [issue] as public as possible, to build a resistance movement."

However, no interviewee was certain whether what they did was actually being seen by others, and so had to rely on metrics, in particular the number of likes and what they considered to be *meaningful* comments, as a proxy of being seen; even though none of them really believed clicking on 'like' to be a meaningful activity (e.g. quotation 5.14 by Colin). The point being that likes are meaningful *to the extent* that they serve as a proxy for people seeing their posts, but did not mean much more than that. Luciana's thoughts suggested the same, as follows:

[8.29] So, the content of what you post, the city you live, all matter in how much I'd be heard. If a post doesn't get enough likes, I'd think, people don't care and I'd be reluctant to post [about the same topic]. Not that I think it's ['like'] any significant, but what're the other ways [to find about reactions]?

Colin (quotation 5.14) and Luciana here, thus seem to talk about a different kind of 'meaningfulness' from how a social action would be meaningful. For instance, with the case of sending flowers as a gift being seen by others as a gesture of affection, so both the gift-giving activity and the flower itself symbolize something; whereas in this case, people's actions towards an outcome have little or no meaningfulness. But at least metrics are an intuitive and straightforward way of gauging a reaction from others, giving people a rough idea of how visible they are, without having to initiate a direct dialogue. So in this case, it would be fair to say that people's idea of being seen by others are imagined from the standard and relatively stereotyped, quantified toolkit purveyed in part by social media.

Nevertheless, this idea of being visible *does* seem to carry some powerful consequences, as Chelsea's remark suggests.

[8.30] My boyfriend doesn't 'like' my posts [on Instagram]. I thought he didn't 'like' them just because he's not using it that often, but I found out, here [showing the mobile screen], on this [*Following*] tab,⁴⁷ you see, he liked others' photos and comments. I know, it's just Instagram, I'm not bothered. But I feel like, why, why he's liking other people's pictures but not my own?

Chelsea wanted to make clear that she was *not* grumbling about her boyfriend, but she was still curious about why he would not click on 'like' her posts but others. But compare this to her above quote (quotation 8.04) where she mentioned that she was not sure whether her posts would appear on others' feeds. She understood that this *could* happen, and was also aware that algorithms might play a part in delimiting what people can see. She still attributed the reasons for not receiving 'likes' to motivations on the part of her boyfriend, rather than thinking about the possibilities of algorithmic configuration of her presence.⁴⁸ But either way, we see that Chelsea's finding out whether she can be seen or heard is (partially) reliant on the metricization of reactions.

Or consider the following story from Jamie on how an unanticipated relationship could be brought into existence because of a 'like' itself.

[8.31] There was this time, I saw she [Jamie's friend] 'liked' this magazine on social media page. I won't reveal the name [of the magazine] but I can say this magazine's pretty racist, especially against Latinos [like himself]. And I found this disturbing, really, that my friend 'liked' this page. I was thinking, 'should I cull her from my friend list'? But she's a good person and a good friend of mine. Maybe she hadn't realized it was racist?

As a response to his story, I asked whether Jamie told his friend what he saw and why she clicked on 'like' on the page of this magazine. Jamie's responded that he did not bother to, but happened to ask when they met in person later; and it transpired that his friend 'liked' the page because of a particular article serving her interest which had nothing to do with race, ethnicity

⁴⁷ This is a feature on Instagram that allows users to see how other users they follow are engaging with their content, e.g. what picture they clicked 'like' on, what comments they left, etc.

⁴⁸ As of October 2019, the *Following* tab has been removed as a response to soaring criticism that it allows for a kind of digital stalking. Yet it is still possible to check whether others have clicked 'like' on people's posts.

or other related topics, but rather Spanish music. But this background context in which she clicked ‘like’ was not available to Jamie at once, potentially creating a serious misunderstanding between them.

8.3.2.2. *Displacement: Interdependence, for the Sake of Visibility*

In some relatively rare yet more extreme cases, the aim and means are transposed, that is, being visible becomes an *end* whereas being interdependent becomes the *means*! Kenzi and Abigale told me stories about how both had at one time ‘purchased’ likes and followers, through a third-party app, for their Instagram account. Kenzi, during his Think-Aloud practice, showed me an app called *Hot Hashtags* and explained about how it works.

[8.32] Did you know you can buy likes and followers? See, this is the app, it’s called *Hot Hashtags*. It shows what the popular hashtags [for different categories] are . . . [Also] you ‘like’ these random people’s posts [shown through the app], then someone likes my posts in return for free . . . [but] it’s got in-app purchase too. Let me show you . . . you pay this, £2.99, choose one of your posts, and you’ll get 100 likes for it.

Kenzi further elaborated that there were plenty of apps that functioned in exactly the same way, to allow an Instagram user to get or buy likes and followers. These apps are often denigrated by social media companies as an unacceptable user attempt to ‘game the system’ (Petre, Duffy, and Hund, 2019). But Kenzi assumed that these apps were, at least, not illegal, given they were still available for purchase on the App Store. Most of all, Kenzi made clear that he decided to buy some likes *not because* he wanted to “show off.” Not only was he aware that many of those ‘purchased’ followers would potentially be fake, but he also paid for them in an attempt to boost his appearance in the short-term. Kenzi, and all the other interviewees, understood that their visibility and presence on social media was configured in large part by the popularity metrics of likes, comments, or followers, and Kenzi simply wanted to boost his profile for a while. He could then later remove the fake followers. In his own words:

[8.33] I know, it’s great to have a small yet active community rather than having a huge number of followers you’d never interact with. I don’t intend to keep them for good. I just want to make sure I can be seen . . . [this is] like using the Tinder Boost. When you pay,

Tinder sends your profile more frequently to your potential matches. It's just like that simple.

So, from this Kenzi seems to understand the value of an active community and of having more closely-knit social interactions. But connection, no matter how doing so may appear to others, is for Kenzi a conduit that would lead him to a community.

Another case where the aim and means are displaced is through the use of what Instagram users call 'engagement pods.' Baker and Daniel, two interviewees with huge numbers of followers on Instagram (cf. both have more than 3,000 followers) both mentioned these 'pods,' which are a sort of informal syndicate of users who band together to purposefully increase engagement for each other's content; for instance, by persistently committing to clicking on 'like' of each post, leaving comments, or tagging others every time they post. According to Baker, the idea behind these pods is based on the assumption that Instagram algorithms would prioritize content from accounts that already are highly engaged, and for this reason, through the pods users can "game the algorithms, no matter what the content," with the primary objective to boost the profile of those who are involved. Daniel went on further to say:

[8.34] Being in just one [engagement] pod isn't enough . . . [also] each pod has different target audience in different regions of the world. If you think the time and efforts you're putting into your pod isn't paying off, just *ditch it* [my emphasis], move on, spent more time in the right pods. That's how I got much more likes for each picture and got to know more people [in the wine and service industry where he works].

We can see from Baker and Daniel's comments that through these 'pods,' what otherwise could have been acts of socializing such as clicking 'like,' tagging, or commenting are utilized as a way to show the engagement and strength of people's relationships stamped in public view, both for users and for the platform itself, thereby achieving a greater visibility. The greater connections and interdependence between those involved in the pods is a requisite for greater visibility, rather than the other way around (although the relationship between the two could be mutually constitutive, alternately reflecting upon one another).

From de Certeau's perspective (1987) this could be considered as a means of dealing with the mechanisms developed by social media companies (e.g. tagging), in an attempt to form a

collective resistance against the ‘threat of invisibility’ (Bucher, 2018) in more organized and coordinated fashion (O’Meara, 2019). It is also possible that a higher degree of interdependence may result from such pods as they band together for a certain purpose.

However, note also phrases like “ditch it” (if your time and effort are considered not sufficiently rewarding) or “no matter what the content.” This seems to suggest that such form of interdependence may be ephemeral in nature, if the relations can be ditched if needed, without contemplating the consequences. But also here seems to lie an implication that calculation of the potential risks, investment and returns, together with the need to utilize algorithms, being active and having specific plans, hint at a need to be strategic if one is to advance one’s relationships; as if that would become a new mantra of being and doing social.

Of course, there is still a possibility that through their engagements people would develop more social, rather than transactional, modes of bonding. Yet that possibility would still remain contingent on chance, rather than supported or stabilized by those forms of engagement described here. To this extent, what people do – liking, commenting, etc. – may not help articulate a material basis for solidarity. It is thus not just what people just *do* that matters, but also how and where what they do are contextualized, especially on social media, where what most people do is constructed from the relatively limited repository provided by social media companies.

In fairness, I want to clarify that buying likes or followers or joining in engagement pods was not a strategy common to all interviewees; it was only Abigale, Kenzi, Daniel and Baker who mentioned that they had either purchased followers or joined in these kinds of pods. The majority of interviewees did not, so far as I am concerned, distinctively trade money or actions for greater visibility in this way. Yet what remained as a common factor was that all the interviewees did continue to pursue the ideal of greater visibility, to differing degrees, in their being and doing social.

It is worth mentioning that there are some dissonant voices. Consider, for instance, what Nicole said about why she would rather not engage with others or build relationships on or through social media, as follows.

[8.35] There's so much news, there's so many sources, there's so many opinions on Facebook. Everybody's fatigued by a constant stream of everything. So, I'm aware of that fatigue and feel that it's important for people not to feel fatigued by my presence. So I guess that would impact how people want to engage . . . I don't use social media or the Internet to create relationships with people I've never met.

However, what is noteworthy is that Nicole understands, by flying under the radar on social media, she would be risking her presence online, *by not pursuing* visibility on Facebook. She then expanded on this:

[8.36] I live out quite visibly, my queer life. I'm, I work in the domestic violence sector, but my specific professional work is with the LGBT community rights. But because of the connections I have with my community and the connections I have with my parents and family, I don't post that stuff [LGBT rights] . . . I think, if there was no social media, I would be living in a different way. I'd be very unheard right now [on social media] but I think I have a really vibrant network in my [overall] life . . . I don't think my main goal or concern is that people will see it [my posts]. Though I think a side effect of doing that is, it ensures that someone else is seeing it. But I think it's more of like, having a performative aspect, or say, I want to post something I want to do a dialogue about with this person.

For Nicole, therefore, visibility is still pursued elsewhere, so that her *overall* visibility is not in decline. But at the same time, her use of language like “performative aspect” or “unheard” seemed to imply that the public gaze was potentially important for her social life, especially if she were less socially active elsewhere.

Meanwhile, another impediment to being seen, or more properly being paid attention, is a general characteristic of social media to which interviewees agreed, that feeds are fast-updating and algorithmically sorted, and much content (e.g. *Stories*) are fleeting to the extent that they either disappear automatically after a certain period of time, or can be taken down if a user desires, or the social media platform decides to. This resonates also with why the interviewees wanted to organize their feed so as not to miss out on potentially important and relevant items. But also, as the sum total of human attention is necessarily limited (Goldhaber, 2006) several interviewees understood that it would be physically impossible to get involved with all the content they saw, even if they wanted to. Skimming through and selectively engaging was thus

seen almost as mandatory. Cameron, for instance, said that it takes some time to fully read content and respond to others, but his social media feeds are being updated and refreshed so quickly that “nobody really pays [full] attention to anything on social media, especially [on] the likes of Instagram,” the visual-driven platforms.

[8.37] So once I read [on Instagram] a lengthy post about, war is part of human nature. I didn’t agree with that, but it was nicely written so I sent him a text about it. Then he replied like, ‘oh so do you read everything you see?’

There is an implied difference between *understanding* and *seeing*, and with the possibility of the latter not translating into the former situation contextualized by social media. This case was more vividly highlighted in the case of Katherine:

[8.38] I assumed he [the person Katherine was talking to] knew what I was talking about because he saw my *Story* [about the topic they were talking about], but he didn’t remember that. Turned out, he was just flipping through but didn’t pay any attention! That’s how I started losing interest in this viewed list [who viewed her *Story*].

As an entrepreneur running a small start-up in cosmetics, Katherine once was hoping to use *Story* as a channel, supplementary to her account, to boost the profile of her products. But she came to realize through the above experience that unlike herself (or others like Josh who treated *Story* as a ‘community’ and so *might* pay more attention there) many would take *Stories* less seriously and simply consume them as if they were watching an entertainment show. Perhaps for this reason, the purpose of uploading a *Story* is even targeted not at other users as potential audiences, but rather at the social media platform *itself*, as a strategy to achieve visibility, as Colin noted by Colin:

[8.39] I know people wouldn’t read whatever my stuff thoroughly, they’d just be flicking through my *Stories* cuz they’re bored. But they’d know I am active . . . [also] Instagram knows I keep posting, it should think, Colin is a heavy user that should be recommended more [to those who’re potentially interested in his post].

One interesting observation is that, although people *do* care about the consequences of their posts on their relationships with others (as in the cases where people are worried about what

may happen as a result of over-achieving visibility), that ‘others’ seems to have encompassed social media platforms, as well as individuals.

To sum up the section, here I have sought to present eclectic narratives from interviewees’ experiences in their efforts to achieve visibility, sociality and interdependence as a way of showing how people tend to juggle distance and visibility, and how this vital to understanding different relations of interdependence, some of which are not grounded in reciprocity. Seeing others and being seen by others are also considered two separate spheres rather than being strictly reciprocal (as in, say, face-to-face offline communication). But what I have hoped to emphasize through these examples is how social media have become deeply ingrained in how people are being and doing social, especially because they entail certain relations which may be unconscious, and what people do *through* social media *goes through* the various scaffoldings social media platforms provide. Developing social relations, expanding networks and being interdependent hinge on these complex processes, and whether what we do provides a material basis for solidarity should be considered in light of this.

8.4. Conclusion

Extending the concerns from Chapter 7, this chapter addressed the research question seeking to derive markers of interdependence from individuals’ actions and experiences as contextualized by social media, to learn more about the background against which those markers become more prominent. The first part of the chapter discussed, through a wider analytical prism – situating what people do through social media within their everyday social lives – various ways in which the interviewees experienced reciprocity. Reciprocity itself did not seem compromised or in decline as such, but the ways it is understood, formed and practiced had been significantly complicated by the role of algorithms, and individuals’ understanding of them. Practicing reciprocity was also partly dependent on the varying social media contexts, and this at times caused tensions in appreciating mutual orientation between actors.

The second part of chapter was concerned more with the material basis needed for various relations of interdependence to emerge, and whether such a basis might be stable enough to potentially turn these relations into a more ‘solid’ form of interdependence, namely solidarity.

There were several occasions in which signs of interdependence were observed, not necessarily through mutual exchange or orientation but rather through interviewees monitoring of other users' online activities, exploring the social world beyond their immediate surroundings, and concomitant feelings of self-empowerment. What was fairly common here was how being social was considered by the majority of interviewees as requiring certain effort – effort that did not always necessarily involve (direct) interactions with others, but rather investing time and resources to be strategically more effective in being and doing social. Over the course of this analysis, it became evident that many people relied on, either consciously or unconsciously, the functions and tools provided by social media. But whether individuals' actions and experiences as reconfigured in a social media context, or the associated algorithmic systems, offered sufficient material bases for interdependence to persist remained doubtful; this is because people's attempts better organize their social lives (often by exploiting algorithms and social media) are often at odds with these bases.

This chapter, having addressed the last sub-research question, completes the overall arc set out in the theoretical framework of Chapter 3. Based on the empirical findings examined in the current and three preceding chapters, which inform my attempt to understand and conceptually revise social solidarity within the context of social media and its algorithmic systems, wider reflections and theoretical insights will be made in the following chapter: the concluding chapter of this thesis.

CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSION

In the introduction to this thesis, I recalled the personal experiences of global news events and their repercussions in social media that sparked my interest in social solidarity, the question which this thesis has sought to address. I wondered then what it means to have, show, or develop solidarity with others, and what is the relation between a basic social sense of solidarity and other forms of solidarity that result in specific forms of action.

The journey to find an answer to this question was, initially, inspired by reading Giddens's (1994: 125) claim that: '[t]he renewal of social solidarity is a conservative problem . . . but it does not admit of conservative solutions.' This made me keen to explore how, whatever form contemporary social solidarity takes, and however these forms develop, they remain robust and durable, compatible with the forces of individualization, globalization, detraditionalization, and importantly, new forms of mediation, as they must be if they are to survive.

Building on this, the main premise of the research question was set out in Chapters 2 and 3: arguing that the extant framework for understanding social solidarity cannot be applied straightforwardly; an empirical analysis of social solidarity, within the context of a social world in which social media use is ubiquitous, necessitates a newly-revised framework that goes beyond a functionalist approach that understands society as an organic whole *qua* a legally, linguistically, and geographically bound form of totality. Instead, this thesis sought to make explicit the underlying significance of *what people do* in developing social solidarity, to illustrate how individuals *themselves* come up with a sense of *orderliness*.

This does not, however, negate the importance of structure. On the contrary, this revision carefully took into account the critical roles of (social) media as enacting a new form of mediation and connection structure, reconfiguring our modes of everyday social life and thereby giving a (different) shape to the ways in which people are interrelated and become interdependent on one another. It was this effort of 'de-centering' social solidarity, conceptualizing social solidarity as revolving less around a bounded notion of society and more as being formed through social experience, on which this thesis stands.

This final chapter aims to revisit the aims of each individual chapter, to address the thesis' main and four sub-research questions. First, it distils the overarching empirical findings and

conceptual insights to offer a synthesized answer to the main research question (and its four sub-research questions), which I repeat here:

- **How does social solidarity develop today where much of people's actions are contextualized by social media (and their algorithmic systems)?**
 - *How do people articulate their experiences of the social through social-media related actions?*
 - *In their attempts to manage social life, how do people act towards, deal with, and get informed by, social media and their algorithmic systems?*
 - *Are there any markers of interdependence in contemporary social life? If so, in what ways, and on what basis, are they made realizable, intensified, and (potentially) durable?*
 - *To what extent do people rely on social media and algorithms for the social (life)?*

The chapter then presents my key contributions to the debate surrounding social solidarity, foregrounding the necessity of a material basis and the benefits of deep engagement with (social) media as the means to draw a fuller picture of how social solidarity develops in the contemporary context of mediation and communication, as contextualized by social media and their algorithmic systems. It also makes clear how understanding a revision of social solidarity can be an important condition for building understanding of the development of other forms of solidarity, such as political solidarity, that marshal specific actions among individuals. It is, after all, political solidarity that in everyday talk many people mean by 'solidarity', and yet political solidarity cannot be disconnected from the more basic social preconditions for something like solidarity. I do not however mean to imply that political solidarity cannot exist at all without social solidarity. But if the social, as the common ontological ground for our everyday lives has been reconfigured through this context, and similarly our *forms* of interrelations and interdependence, this reconfiguration likely also feeds into the forming of political solidarity, especially to the extent that such solidarity can be sustained in the long run. I reflect further on this in what follows.

Finally, I end this chapter by reflecting on the limitations of the study, and point to avenues for future research.

9.1. Articulating the Social

At the core of the conceptualization of ‘social’ solidarity, as defined in this thesis, is the centrality of individuals and their reconciliation within a wider social structure of what they do and experience, much of which is now unfolding through a new kind of space – social media. If we are to understand the broader development of social solidarity, it is important to explain the role played by social media in the (re)making the *social* life. This underscores my first sub-research question: *How do people articulate their experiences of the social through social-media related actions?*

In addressing this first question, in Chapter 5 I identified first the variegated perceptions and usages of social media with apparently few common underlying patterns. All participants thought about social media differently as, for instance, a mere tool, a vital part of their social life, public space, personal diary, etc., and this informed differently the way they used social media. A common thread instead was that, no matter what their understanding of social media, it was increasingly considered to be an ordinary part of the participants’ lives, as a backdrop against which much of their actions were being organized. On the one hand, social media were routinely present for practical and occupational reasons: for Sally, for example, social media was the conduit by which to remain connected (at all times) with the LGBTQ communities in London and NYC beyond her immediate surroundings. For Jasper, social media, especially Twitter, were part of his occupation and a means to stay in touch with what was going on in his industry and around the world. For Luciana, meanwhile, social media were simply always ‘there.’

On the other hand, others went further, suggesting that social media were perceived as a taken-for-granted part of their social lives, without which the meaning of what they did in their everyday lives could be quite different. Edward’s remark on the periods in which he took a “social media detox” seemed to feel like a “holiday” rather than what this might ordinarily imply, and later in Chapter 6 (quotation 6.09) he also mentioned explicitly that without social media something feels “different.” Moreover, Sally thought holding a digital presence while participating in demonstrations or protests was important for her and made her experience more meaningful, even though she would certainly be able to participate in such events, even without having to make them digitally mediated (quotation 6.12). All these interviewee stories demonstrated that, in spite of different perceptions and usages of social media, they all

incorporated them into patterns of their social lives, in different ways. This deep embedding of social media life, in turn, gave (in part) a new shape to their experiences of social life, letting them migrate different parts of what they did from offline to online. But this also further *complicated* the way that participants were articulating their experiences of connection, actions and interactions with others. Sometimes, this originated from the fact that, independent of the type of actions participants wanted to take, they all had to be conducted through the relatively limited repertoire of functions and settings purveyed by social media, clicking on share, like, comment, and so forth.

At first glance, these kinds of influences seemed to create certain frictions or misunderstandings. Consider Josh, for example, and his quarrel with his girlfriend about the perceived meaning of ‘like.’ For Josh, a professional working at a data mining company, ‘like’ meant almost nothing in terms of his social life, and formed only a useful data point for marketers, advertisers, and analysts; whereas for his girlfriend, clicking ‘like’ was a sign of care and interest in her personal life. Josh’s *not* clicking on her updates on Instagram, thus sometimes resulted in some small conflicts between them. In other cases, it was ‘sharing’ articles, news and information that became the issue, as with people like Tiffany and Casper, sharing was a key part of using social media, especially when they were using it to catch up with the news. For them, to quote Tiffany, sharing was what made social media successful, and it was natural to share things they considered interesting or useful, while for others surfing across social media without participating was perfectly normal. Similarly, for participants like Colin and Kenzi, clicking share was felt to be a redundant action, inclining them to keep their distance from social media. Kenzi, in particular, thought that the action of sharing, no matter what the intention behind it, was causing unsolicited content and information to intrude in his personal space, something he found heavily undesirable and made him cynical about social media activity. In this way, people’s actions through social media denoted not only that what they were doing was being stretched across different sites of their social life, but also that it would potentially entail unexpected consequences for them, in terms of diverging perceptions of their activities.

Relatedly, unlike the instances of news and information circulated through the mass media which help to form a sense of community or bond, whether by encouraging people to imagine community as linguistically bounded (Anderson, 2006), conjuring up the image that everyone in the same community is reading the same kind of news (Schudson, 1998), or stabilizing the

mass discourse of morality (Alexander, 2006), news and information through social media did not seem to offer a concrete experience of social living, or provide any great feeling of connectedness.

Instead, as Angelo and Kenzi noted, what was observed was something closer to a spectatorship in irony (Chouliaraki, 2013). This is not to say that social media made them mere spectators, and a few of the participants noted how they had come to perceive YouTube's specific ASMR channel and Instagram *Stories* as a kind of community, or a force that could help to strengthen their local community by (re)producing a sense of place. But whether or not there was a strong sense of conjoint participation involved, the fact that remained was that availability of content *in itself* was far from sufficient for conveying a sense of reality and hardly mattered in terms of narrowing the reality of distance between people, be it cultural, geographical, or other.

In addition, the fact that individuals adopted different modes of action through different sites of life, including various offline locations and social media spaces, suggested that the participants were building their own, specific ways of practicing certain activities in a particular manner. Consider, for instance, Gabriel's episode with his friends. While they were self-identifying as a political activist and generally shared similar positions on important social and political issues such as Brexit, they shared quite different thoughts about how their political self-expressions should happen online. Gabriel did not think that sharing events, opinions, or information about politics on social media was meaningful, as it would worsen the problem of information overload. For him, social media was built primarily for what he would consider to be social or interactional purposes, and political debates or exchanges were things that should take place offline. By contrast, for his friends, this was not the case. Social media represented a powerful platform for any form of self-expression, and they suspected if Gabriel was acting as he was because he was overly worried about his personal views unexpectedly being exposed to third parties, calling him an "inactivist." In the end, they settled their concerns by talking about it openly when they met, but clearly there was fertile ground for misunderstanding, *regardless of* whether individuals held the same values or opinions.

To be clear, this did not suggest that people showed a complete aversion to others online, nor could they accept people's other ways of carrying on at all. It was rather that each participant's *formula* for carrying out actions came to vary from one to another. But as we have seen, this does reconfigure the way people experience the world, not just through what they see or find

on social media, but also through how they go about their social life. Moreover, there emerged a shift in this formula in a way that potentially engendered conflicts. What could be a proper way of practicing an action, like news consumption through sharing content, might appear to others to be a contamination of content, even though neither had any malicious intent in their actions. It is to this extent that social media can be said to complicate participants' ways of articulating their experiences of the social life. Being a 'generative site' (Kallinikos, 2010), social media do not seem to cast what people do into a specific form of outcome, hence the diversity of formulas and rules for what people do; but these different arrangements and reasons may not be fully perceivable for others, at least not as realized in the participants' understandings. So, while the observed facts of what people do on social media remains important, a more vital insight in regard to our understanding of the social is what is really going on *underneath* these more visible shifts.

To recap on the first sub-research question; first, participants all showed different ways of articulating their social lives through taking actions across various offline and social media platform locations, in varying manners and in varying degrees. This was (in part) informed by their varying perceptions of the nature of social media, its practicalities, necessities, etc. There was little observation that either online or offline actions were given complete or partial priority over one another. But the scattered actions, in tandem with the generative character of social media, seemed to give a different shape to the participants' overall social life. This sometimes led to friction and disputes based on the different arrangements and formulas of actions taken in each individual case, the reasons for people's behavior not being necessarily intelligible or appreciable to others, and so potentially carrying unexpected consequences for their social lives.

9.2. New Infrastructure of the Social

The presence of such different formulas of social action and their unexpected (and potentially unknown) outcomes begs the question as to how individuals *actually* seek to manage their social relations within a context of social media. In addressing this point, however, it was important to note another key element in the mix for social media practice, something which serves as an 'informal source of regulation' (Amin, 2008: 16) that may reconfigure, however subtly, our actions and experiences on an ongoing basis: the algorithmic systems. Therefore, Chapter 6 dealt with the second sub-research question: *In their attempts to manage social life, how do people act towards, deal with, and get informed by, social media and their algorithmic*

systems? At the same time, in the course of answering this question, this chapter partly addressed another sub-research question, exploring how knowledgeable participants were on social media and algorithmic systems.

In Chapter 6, I thus sought to clarify how deeply implicated social media were in the participants' social lives; *so deep* in fact that the ways they managed their social proximity, relations, and activities necessarily hinged on social media, *even if* many of them believed that they could stop using social media or 'disconnect,' at will. What I found in this chapter was how this management of social life was, therefore, full of tensions and paradoxes. For starters, a number of participants, for example Kenzi and Colin in Chapter 5, noted that their connections with others on social media and the overflow of content and information resulting from those connections sometimes intruded into their social space or inner social circle, making it difficult to secure the distance they wanted. This formed a potential source of irritation for them. But even those who *apparently* held an opposing view, speaking in favor of social media and their facilitation of content sharing, such as Tiffany, also admitted that being connected on social media would, from time-to-time erode their comfort zone. From an analytical standpoint, participants were indeed describing, although in an implied manner, an experience of connectivity – being in a state of continuous connection – as something potentially detrimental to their social life.

Why, then, did these individuals keep using social media? Here, the reasons varied from person-to-person. Some, like Jasper, as noted in the previous section, needed social media connectivity for his job. Others, like Daniel and Gavin, saw social media as important for building their social network, and perceiving themselves as having less social capital in their offline lives, felt the need for this (online) connection to better maintain their overall social lives. To quote Gavin, using social media was thus "not a matter of choice." Or, in case of Flora, she had to join Facebook because her friends had started hanging out extensively on social media. But in general, most others whose case did not correspond to such needs and necessities, such as Aaron, who self-identified as a social media addict, expressed that he *did not have to* disconnect himself from social media, because he could do so at any time if he so chose. Likewise, many participants reported that they would not have to disconnect, as they could still manage their social life through the functions provided by social media, for example through changing privacy settings, blocking, muting, and unfriending/unfollowing.

From this perspective, it seems that participants were not always fond of their experiences of being and remaining connected through social media; yet at the same time, they believed that social media were offering the means to tackle the issues stemming from that connectivity, and thereby were helping to take care of their social distance from others directly. In other words, social media were serving *simultaneously* as remedy and poison for their social lives, by ushering in both pros and cons of connectivity and ways of managing it. So for the majority (if not all) of participants, the crucial thing was not to completely resign from social media, as doing so would forfeit the benefits of connectivity, but to strike a balance *by exploiting* what they had in hand. From this standpoint, disconnecting from social media was not even a sign of ‘digital resignation’ (Draper and Turow, 2019), but entailed an attempt to better manage their social relationships and sometimes claim agency over social proximity in cases where they could not change the overall connectivity background against which their actions were organized. One example of this was seen with James, who unfriended some of his friends on social media, not because he did not like them or gave up communicating with them, but contrarily precisely because he wanted to retain his relationships with them by not seeing political content uploaded by those holding different (political) opinions from his own.

Coming to strike such a balance with social media usage might sound obvious in some ways, but it involved more complication of social experience than anticipated in many cases, because the ways through which people sought to manage their social relations and lives might, unintentionally, be at variance with the further possibilities of the social. More will be noted on this in the following section on Chapter 7 and 8, but consider first the case of Robin, who ‘muted’ people, without any hard feelings but just to streamline her social media feed, without realizing explicitly that doing so might preclude certain possibilities in the future.

Meanwhile, it was fairly striking that every participant was clearly aware of how algorithms were at work in (re)delineating their social media environment on an ongoing basis. To be clear, this did not mean that they had advanced technical knowledge as to the internal logic of algorithms, but merely knew that algorithms were implicated in their everyday use of social media. This was an understanding arrived at from different angles, and based on varying degrees of technical expertise. For instance, Charlotte and Cameron had uncanny experiences in which they were respectively given adverts and suggestions on coffee beans and yoga on their social media feed, things they felt would not be known to anybody but themselves, and so had searched for how this could have happened. For Kenzi, who moved back to the UK after

having lived in Australia, he noted that the kind of content, including adverts, he was receiving on social media had changed in line with his move. Similarly, Anthony suspected from Instagram's showing him animal fight video that somehow algorithms were involved in classifying his personal data and giving back this content as a recommendation. So, every participant was familiar with the term, using it as part of their everyday conversation, and were often able to document the workings of algorithms at play beneath the social media surface.

This did not mean the participants were always happy with, or did not find peculiar, the workings of these algorithmic systems. In fact, as Gavin and Josh noted, many were uncertain about how they would work, not knowing (and not being able to grasp) what resided *within* the algorithmic 'black-box' (Pasquale, 2015). The majority of participants also acknowledged that algorithms were necessarily uncontrollable, and were bound to sometimes produce unpredictable results (as in Anthony's case of the animal fights). Nevertheless, most if not all participants did not show much aversion to the algorithms; on the contrary, even when the outcomes were less than satisfactory, they sought to find ways to embrace them as part of their social lives. Flora and Jasper, for instance, noted that, although in different ways, they would not expect the algorithmic filtering of results or suggestions to be perfect, but nor would human beings; Gavin and Kenzi also mentioned how algorithms helped them find new possibilities for their work and social life by making recommendations they would not have foreseen by themselves. In the end, participants generally agreed that what they would want was better, more efficient algorithmic systems, *not* the removal of the systems from their lives entirely. To this extent, it appears that algorithmic systems have become tightly woven into the basic texture of the participants' social lives, joining the familiar contours of their social realities.

At times, these systems were even considered 'incumbent' on the participants' social lives. The manifestations of algorithms, such as hashtags and especially the associated metrics, were increasingly being considered *facts* of life, reflecting their thoughts and behaviors and who they were – even if these manifestations were not entirely pleasant. Angelo made the most radical remark in this regard, saying that if his social media feed did not seem interesting, that was probably a reflection of his own life being boring. Others did not go to such extremes, but many still relied on algorithmic systems in their social lives to a certain extent, as Baker monitored his followers and likes in order to gauge his social media performance, and metrics often proved a useful and more visible way of understanding the success of their broader social lives. Moreover, as Colin and Chris hinted with their remarks on potentially changing what he

would do based on the results of social media metrics, given that algorithms and quantification underpinned them, the algorithmic systems seemed to carry the power to dramatize otherwise mundane events, and thus nudge people to *congeal* actions in a certain directions in the long run.

Although this did not suggest people were abiding by, or submitting themselves to, what the metrics among other algorithmic manifestations presented, nonetheless these systems were increasingly becoming a fact of life for the interviewees, something they just had to deal with, independent of whether or not they fully enjoyed the outcome.

To recap the findings of chapter 6, in their attempts to manage their social lives, I found that most if not all of the participants were aware of, and able to reflect on the (materially) invisible social structures – or infrastructures – of social media guiding their lives, even while their lives were being reconfigured by the algorithmic structures. This goes against the grain of some assumptions in the literature that the working of such algorithms cannot be known. On the contrary, the participants' stories revealed clearly how, if not directly comprehensible or accessible, social media and algorithmic systems were deemed an important and inevitable fact of their social life.

To this extent, social media and algorithms might not qualify as a social infrastructure as such – if that term would signify something like a welfare system for giving universal access to basic goods. However, it can be said to form an infrastructure for the basic operations of social living.

9.3. Reconfigured Interrelations, Interdependence, and Unstable Bases of Social Solidarity

The final two empirical chapters (chapters 7 and 8), against the backdrop of this reconfigured sociality by social media, sought to explore how the ways people become interrelated and the ensuing interdependence were complicated. This aimed at understanding how and under what circumstances (or whether at all) the markers of interdependence become prominent or tend towards the possibility of solidification. In so doing, these chapters together addressed the two further sub-research questions, in support of the main research question as to how (or whether) social solidarity as durable forms of interdependence arise in the context of social media.

- *Are there any markers of interdependence in contemporary social life? If so, in what ways, and on what basis, are they made realizable, intensified, and (potentially) durable?*
- *To what extent do people rely on social media and algorithms for social (life)?*

Here, first, I found that participants, either through having read news articles, enjoyed conversations, or had uncanny experiences while using social media, were well aware of the fact that algorithms were involved in demarcating the boundaries of their social life and associated actions, making their social lives to some extent algorithmically bounded. Examples of this included Dean's mention that he always ended up seeing only 20-odd Instagram *Stories* out of more than 800 followees; or Anthony's case of assuming how a woman he knew had stopped using Facebook while, in fact, the algorithms were selectively showing him certain content over hers. Whether they perceived algorithmic systems as positive or negative varied from participant to participant, in line with their varying levels of technical knowledge and social media skills. But what ran in common was how, in this context of necessary implication of algorithms in their social possibilities, the *disposition* towards a strategic organization of their social life was shared among all the interviewees.

Over the course of these explorations, what was congealed here against the backdrop of this social-algorithmic context was a belief in the necessity of 'competence' for being and doing social, by exploiting certain management strategies. This competence does not just refer to media literacy or social media skills, or the art of communication, as the difference was made at a deeper level, where strategies seemed to be applied to interviewees and their actions *dispositionally*, rather than occurrently, meaning that the mindset and habits were reconfigured in ways to involve algorithms at a deeper level, e.g. one's ability to accept and deal with them as a fact of life. This was common independent of the level of activeness or scale of social circle; even those users with a smaller number of followers and who used social media less often like Rachel (31 followers on Instagram) and Gavin, were conscious of this logic of being and doing social more *effectively*.

Several tactics were in evidence here among the users to organize what they can see or to ensure what they uploaded might be seen by others. This was not simply an attempt at self-promotion or impression management, but based on a realization that algorithms were implicated in their

social domain and visibility was not a given but rather something that had to be obtained (e.g. because of impediment to being seen, such as fast-updating and algorithmically sorted feed). Yet individuals' new ways of being and doing social are hardly dissociable from social media and their algorithmic systems, strong practical relevance was also evident for people's social lives. Angelo, for instance, made it vividly clear that one needs to be active on social media if s/he wants to have an active social life: "to feel belong[ing] there" (quotation 8.27). This might be why those who were more conscious of privacy than others and preferred using ephemeral platforms like *Story* and Snapchat were still in the pursuit of the elusive ideal of visibility, because it was a means for being and doing social. Certainly, no participants knew exactly whether their efforts would be effective or rewarding enough, but at least their belief in the need to invest time and effort and be strategic to get greater attention was clear. This type of social self-existence and action is thus dependent not just on other individuals, but also on social media and their respective resources.

Relatedly, I also identified that people's approaches to maintaining presence in order to become *more effectively* social was further complicated not just by algorithms, but also by their own attempts to be social. For instance, Tiffany, Robin and many others engaged, from time-to-time, in reorganizing their social network by, for instance, cutting out those considered as less relevant to themselves, or sharing less common interests; or, by blocking/unfriending those whose content might overshadow other content that was more needed for themselves. The level of this cutting out varied from one to another, but the implication that calculation of the potential risks, investment and returns, together with the need to utilize algorithms, being active and having specific plans, hint at a need to be strategic if one is to advance one's relationships. Most of all, it is not always because people cut out others or pay less attention on the basis of actively disliking others. Sometimes skimming through or selective engagement, or not paying attention or using *Story* was not due to people being passive and bored or not being empathetic. It is *also* a strategy to be better at the social. No single participant directly expressed that they *relied on* in terms of social media or algorithms in their social life, but the implication was clear, even across all their diverging stories.

Concerning the markers of interdependence, there were several occasions in which they were observed. Familiar forms of mutual exchange of sentiments, kinships, interest and dialogue were found in many interviewees' stories. Moreover, in Chapter 7, Calvin among others showed a strong sense of sharing affect and sentiment through social media, as a result of long-

term interactions with others, through which he had got to know the details of people's lives and events. They had not weathered hard times together, or met as often as offline friends, but knowing what was seemingly going on in each other's lives over a certain period had helped them build familiarity together, allowing for a chance to become more interdependent.

In addition, there were other occasions when people displayed a clear sense of interdependence not necessarily derived through reciprocal exchange, as in the case of Jean and Robin. Instead, they illustrated, respectively, how sharing images in public through social media could help create a temporary sense of doing thing together without conjoint digital participation, yielding a subtle sense of interdependence whereby Jean felt fairly loosely associated with these others. In the case of Robin and company, it was through knowing that like-minded people existed in the world beyond their immediate surroundings that allowed them to *imagine* a community through social media, even without interacting with them. There were also other similar instances, such as Josh's fondness of Instagram *Story* as a kind of close-knit community, or Chelsea's liking of the YouTube ASMR channel, despite neither of them necessarily going beyond monitoring what was going on.

Does this suggest that monitoring can perhaps form a way of building interdependence in the social media sphere? Potentially. However, at a closer glance, it is not simply monitoring that is going on in the cases mentioned above. A deeper exploration of the stories showed that what *also* mattered was whether people could prefigure what they do (through social media) and potentially carried certain tangible and specific consequences that were *perceptively materializable* rather than simply cognitive – the consequences that are the potential of developing ties, exchanges of affects or what have you. In the view of the majority of interviewees, social media *in itself* did not make this explicit. This does not mean that such consequences may never occur on and through social media, as the case of Calvin and others demonstrated; but in the end it was only Calvin's long-term action (of sharing affect and monitoring) and interaction with others that led to the development of certain associations, rather than the social media themselves. Whether that could actually happen, however, seemed largely *contingent* for the majority of participants. What was needed, in the implied view of many interviewees such as Jasper, Jamie and Daniel, for the materialization of interdependence, were certain 'social features' that Simmel (1971) would have called 'good forms,' to serve as the necessary vehicle. Such social features were typically associated with social spaces such as churches and social clubs, which on social media, they encompassed much more than face-to-

face interactions between individuals – as evidenced in Luciana’s discomfort from constant attention from others (strangers especially), and Baker and Amanda’s disapproval of meaningless comments, all of which at times hampered the materialization of these materializations. In these cases, ‘clicking like’ or making a ‘friendly gesture’ (apparently) were sometimes deemed a cause for concern rather than what might otherwise have been a clearly phatic gesture (as in the case of Calvin).

In addition, people’s biased ways of experiencing reciprocity (for instance, as pre-affected by the metrics and so resulting in lopsided interrelationships), or the ephemeral, fast-updating nature of social media spaces were not particularly helpful in this instance, either. From this perspective, what Josh, Jean or Chelsea implied – that they could feel or imagine a sense of community on *Story*, *Snow*, or YouTube channel – would not necessarily ascribe to social media’s ability to connect them with others, and may have been a contingent outcome of circumstances that might not otherwise have come about. The features of social media found in participants’ stories, from lack of agreed norms and perceptions, ephemerality, implication of algorithms, etc. would not undermine by themselves the willingness to communicate or act together, but might impede the sustained and stabilizing forms needed for taking interdependence to the next level.

Against this backdrop of the social as (re)contextualized by social media – when people’s actions and experiences are occurring within a context reconfigured by social media – there seems no *guarantee* that the observed markers of potential interdependence can, or will, translate into a more durable form, i.e. solidarity. Those that often were seen to be assisting in this process, e.g. reciprocal exchanges, mutually being visible, proper distance, did not really help, as they were experienced rather differently.

9.4. Overall Contributions for Theory and Method

The findings of this thesis – and, I suggest its first wider contribution – is the implication for how the interrelation between social solidarity and social media (and their underlying algorithmic systems) can be conceptualized. I have argued that the fact that social solidarity requires a solid ‘material’ basis has been largely overlooked in social theories (even though the importance of action has been implied in the literature). Yet that material basis is precisely now being reconfigured within the context of social media platforms, and our usage of them. This

reconfiguration means that social solidarity (or more generally, the social relations of interdependence as experienced in everyday life) necessarily hinges on social media's role as a new infrastructure for the social. This finding also sheds light more generally on the importance of media and ways of mediation for our social lives, and thereby makes a contribution to linking media research more closely to broader social theory.

The second contribution this thesis makes is to the ongoing debates about the role of social media and algorithmic systems, and the wider sociological debate concerning structure and agency in this digital algorithmic context. This was arrived at by conceptualizing social media as an infrastructure deeply permeated into our lives and working as an 'informal source of regulation' (Amin, 2008: 16). This also in part points to the conceptual limitations of regarding social media as a purely corporate system to be resisted antagonistically (e.g. all in all, you don't resist traffic lights!): it is something more than that. My findings have, I believe, contributed to the ongoing debate about the relationship between system and individual in the algorithmic context.

Third, and methodologically, it is hoped that this thesis, by using less conventional qualitative methods, i.e. drawing and Think-Aloud practice, will stimulate further reflection on how, through empirical work, sociologists can register the workings of algorithmic systems, as often operating beneath people's active consciousness. These methods were, as with the interview, a form of self-reporting method, but they were more specialized in coaxing subtle details out from individuals' narratives, either by allowing them more time to contemplate the answers and use their abilities to capture what may have been missed by the researcher (drawing); or by giving greater chances to compare the recounted stories and more immediate reflex or spontaneous answers.

Last but not least, this thesis, through its detailed empirical findings, which have deepened our understanding of the material basis of social solidarity today (thus providing the basis for its further reconceptualization within social theory) also makes a necessary first step towards a better understanding of the possible preconditions of *other*, more specific forms of solidarity, including political solidarity. I would not go so far as to argue that political solidarity *cannot exist at all without social solidarity*. Bennett and Segerberg (2013) showed in their book on 'connective action' that short-term forms of political solidarity do emerge across networks between people and through their participation in connective actions, without more sustained

forms of social solidarity. But in the conclusion of their book, they also acknowledge that they had *not* shown how and whether those networks (of connective action) would contribute to and translate into longer-term forms of political actions and changes. So, if we hope to explore the possibilities of more enduring and potentially perpetuating forms of solidarity in the long run, we need to begin, I propose, with the insights obtained from this research, as to whether our usage of social media actually provides a firm material basis for translating forms of short-term interdependence into more durable ones.

9.5. Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

I would also like to note here some limitations of this thesis and look ahead to the possibilities for further research.

One limitation concerns the sampling approach in my fieldwork. By design, I chose to interview members of the general public rather than people who were particularly politically mobilized (although some in my sample were so mobilized). The reason behind this was my hope to contribute to the wider debate about *preconditions* of social solidarity for the general population. If within a different design my sample had concentrated on the politically mobilized, then the findings might have been different, but the implications in my research for thinking about general social preconditions for political solidarity would, I contend, have thus become more limited. Research focused more on the politically mobilized would however be valuable for the future. Similarly, it was observed in the findings that varying aspects of materiality of offline living, such as location and socioeconomic status, also seemed to feed into usage of social media. Thus, if the sample was focused on one of those aspects, it could have produced fairly different findings. Perhaps this may hint at the possibility of future comparative research.

A further potential limitation of the fieldwork was its historical situation: the fieldwork was conducted *mainly* before the Cambridge Analytica scandal broke out in March 2018, which may have had a general impact on the way most people use social media. But since the framework of this thesis remains open to new possibilities, in that it conceptualizes making of the social and following interdependence as subject to actions contextualized in systems of mediation, the fieldwork could certainly be repeated in a contemporary post-Cambridge

Analytica setting: indeed, it would be interesting to see if this new historical context had any consequences for the findings.⁴⁹

Finally, a different, more ethnographically detailed approach to fieldwork – one which would have necessitated a much smaller sample – might have yielded more detailed information about people’s offline activities and could have helped provide further clues into the social underpinnings of people’s sense (or lack therefore) of social solidarity. Again, this is a possibility for further research.

Notwithstanding these limitations, the thesis has offered a step forwards regarding the understanding of social solidarity in a context of social media and algorithmic communication, showing the benefits (indeed necessities) of deeper engagement with social media. The findings also suggest that future theoretical work in this paradigm can benefit from a renewed focus on the social as doubly articulated (Sewell, 2005) taking seriously from the outset the role of individuals as performative actors whose actions provide material bases for their social realities. While more research is required to understand the generalizability of the insights derived, it has, I hope, made a useful contribution both to media sociology and broader sociology, and towards understanding the consequences and implications of algorithmic systems in more subtle and nuanced, yet nonetheless very important ways.

⁴⁹ The research design was developed in 2016 and the fieldwork took place mainly in 2017 (but also with four interviews in 2018, after *The Observer* broke the story on the CA scandal on 17th March. The prior interviews were used in spite of this because my research did not take an overtly political approach, and the data did not seem to illustrate much difference resulting from the CA scandal. For instance, two interviewees reported that although they had reviewed their privacy settings, they did not give up using Facebook or other social media, or reduce their usage as a result; one interviewee said she did not change anything; another did not mention CA at all. But if a bigger sample had been adopted, the outcome might have been different.

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Appendix 1: Interview Topic Guide

First interview

1> Introducing the project and researcher

2> General context

1. What do you normally use social media for?
2. How long have you used them (break them into particular platform, e.g. FB, IG, TW)?
How much time do you spend using them?
3. How active are you on social media?
4. What device do you *mainly* use to access social media?
5. Is there a particular social media more important for you than others? If so, why?
6. Do you think *your use* of social media has changed over the past years? If so, how?
7. Do you think social media *themselves* have changed over the past years? If so, how?

3> Visibility

8. Who do you think can see your posts/comments on social media?
9. When you make those posts/comments, do you feel you are heard? If so, by whom?
Why them? [the meaning of ‘being heard’ is for each interviewee to define, e.g. getting ‘likes’, comments, or any general feelings]
10. What do you think matters in determining you are heard?
11. Do you think social media help you be heard more?
12. *What*, if any, would you *do* if you don’t feel heard? [if the interviewee mentions something, then ask *how* she would do it, *how* she learnt about that, and *what* the expected consequences would be]
13. Have you ever felt alone or disconnected on social media? If so, why?

4> Exchange and listening

14. Other than your family and friends, who do you communicate with on or through social media? Why them?
15. Whose, or what kinds of, content do you generally pay attention to? Why them?

16. Who do you trust on social media? Why them?
17. Have you ever had a misunderstanding of someone/something on social media? If yes, could you elaborate on that case?
18. When you post something, what responses do you expect from whom?
19. Have you ever been engaged in public discussions on social media? If so, when and how did it go? [if the interviewee says no, then *prompt*: no hashtag, re-tweeting, e-petitioning, discussion thread, etc.? If the interviewee says no again, then ask *where* they engage in such discussion]
20. Have you ever talked/discussed on social media with someone who has different views from yours? How was it?
21. What, if any, would you *do* if you don't like certain posts/comments/information and news? [if the interviewee mentions something, then ask *how* she would do it, *how* she learnt about that, and *what* the expected consequences would be]

5> Mapping exercise

Followed by discussion of drawing.

Second interview

[Think-Aloud practice instruction]: I am interested in what you are looking at, thinking, doing and feeling while using social media. Could you go on your social media (multiple media) and verbalize what you are doing as you surf through? Over the next 10-15 minutes during this activity I may give only a bare minimum of help, so I apologize for that in advance.

[Task instructions in case participants were not performing well]

- a. Please check (and use) your social media as you would usually do at this time of day.
- b. Please navigate through your *Newsfeed (or Feed)*, *Trending*, *Adverts*, *Suggestions (e.g. of friends, pages)*, and other 'personalized' spaces (cf. the choice can be limited, depending on the answers from the first interview).

15-minute break

1> Level 3 verbalization

1. How do you find your *Newsfeed (or Feed)*, *Trending* or other 'personalized' spaces? [ask about *adverts* if the interviewee does not bring it out herself]
2. Did you see anything you didn't predict to see?
3. What did you particularly like/dislike? Anything you didn't understand or made you feel confused?
4. What was the most important information you just found?
5. Do you expect others – those who are in or not in your social network – to see what you've just seen, too?

2> Algorithmic rendition of social reality

6. What do you think determine what you see on social media? Why?
7. What, if any, would you do to change what you see on social media? Could you elaborate?
8. What do you think about personalization or algorithms? [NB: In the end, this question was not asked, as all interviewees first mentioned algorithms by themselves.]

3> Communal experiences

9. Could you give me some ideas about what kinds of issues are socially or political important?

10. Where, in general, do you get information about those issues? It doesn't have to be social media. [if the interviewee does not mention social media, then *ask*. If the interviewee says s/he doesn't get information from social media, then ask *why*, e.g. trust issue? Raise issues about fake news/misinformation]
11. Do you talk (or would like to talk) with other people about those issues? Who do you talk with, and how?
12. About those issues you think as important, do you think others also notice/are aware of them? If so, what would do to increase awareness? Again it doesn't have to be on social media but in general sense.
13. Do you feel you are part of any social media group or community? If so, please tell me briefly about them, and what you do there.
14. Could you describe other ways in which you connect with communities? Or generally, how do you build your social network?
15. Do you have any own rules about using social media?

4> Wrapping up questions

16. I think we have covered quite a lot about social media so far... but are there any ways social media function in your life that we haven't covered?
17. Finally, how would you define yourself – age, occupation, city of origin, ethnicity, etc.? Is that the same as how you '*profile*' yourself on social media? [ask to show their profile, if no objection]

Appendix 2: Call for Research Participants

Hello,

My name is Jun Yu, and I am a PhD researcher at the Department of Media and Communication at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

I am looking for participants in my PhD research project, which explores how our uses of social media – from Facebook, Twitter, Instagram to other platforms – contribute to our sense of what we have in common with others [socially, civically, or politically]. If you are a user of one or more social media platform – any platform – I would love to interview you and hear about your thoughts, experiences, and insights.

Your participation involves two one-hour interviews, and they can be conducted either on the same or different days depending on preference. Your participation will be anonymous and confidential, and a small financial compensation of £40 for your participation will be given.

If you are between 20 and 45 years old, live in England and/or Wales, and are potentially interested in participating, please contact me at: L.Yu20@lse.ac.uk

Thank you for reading, and I look forward to hearing back from you!

Jun

Appendix 3: Informed Consent



Informed consent

By signing this document, I accept to take part in the doctoral research about social media use and social solidarity. I will share my opinions, views, and experiences as asked, with the researcher and interviewer Jun Yu.

I understand that this interview will be recorded and later transcribed for analysis, and that my words and biographic information can be used as a quote or data in the dissertation. My name, however, will be changed for confidentiality reasons.

Transcriptions will be used only for the research purpose, and the information collected for this research project will be treated completely confidentially. Under no circumstance will any information be passed on to third parties without my specific consent.

I have the right to stop this research at any time, without providing any reason.

By signing this form, I declare that I understand what this research is about,
and that I am participating voluntarily.

Name:

Signature:

Appendix 4: Profile of Research Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Nationality	Residence	Occupation
Aaron	Male	32	Indian	London	Corporate lawyer
Abigale	Female	33	Greek	Reading	PhD
Alyssa	Female	37	British / Chinese	Reading	Lecturer
Amanda	Female	26	German	London	Accountant
Andrew	Male	22	British	Reading	Personal trainer
Angelo	Male	34	Greek	Reading	Computer science research manager
Anthony	Male	24	British	Loughborough	Supermarket employee
Baker	Male	31	British	Cambridge	Data scientist
Becky	Female	32	Dutch	London	Real estate analyst
Bernadette	Female	28	American	London	Consultant
Calvin	Male	29	Swiss	Cambridge	Paralegal
Cameron	Male	25	Taiwanese	Loughborough	PhD
Carl	Male	22	British	Reading	Undergraduate
Casper	Male	41	Polish	Reading	GP
Charles	Male	22	British	London	Hotel employee / Undergraduate
Charlotte	Female	45	British	London	Company director
Chelsea	Female	27	French	London	Sommelière
Chloe	Female	30	British	London	Teacher
Chris	Male	26	Italian	London	Consultant
Christina	Female	41	British	Newcastle	Potter
Cindy	Female	37	British	Birmingham	Homemaker
Colin	Male	24	Italian	London	Postgraduate
Daniel	Male	27	French	Liverpool	Sales manager
Darren	Male	25	German	Liverpool	Postgraduate
Dean	Male	21	British	London	Undergraduate
Edward	Male	30	French	London	Investment banker
Flora	Female	22	Italian	Loughborough	Undergraduate
Gabriel	Male	34	Austrian	London	Creative worker / Postgraduate
Gavin	Male	25	British	London	Jobseeker
James	Male	38	British	York	Potter
Jamie	Male	20	Mexican	London	Undergraduate
Jasper	Male	37	British / Malaysian	London	Editor
Jean	Female	29	Chinese / Hong Kongese	London	PhD
Josh	Male	33	German	London	Sales manager
Katherine	Female	37	British / Malaysian	London	Entrepreneur
Kenzi	Male	40	Australian / British	London	Film director

Luciana	Female	37	Italian	London	PhD
Nicole	Female	27	British	London	Domestic violence sector worker
Norah	Female	24	American	London	NGO intern
Robin	Female	25	American / British	London	Student Union Officer
Rachel	Female	26	British	Reading	PhD
Sally	Female	22	American / Indian	London	Undergraduate
Tiffany	Female	32	Singaporean	London	NGO communication officer
Tom	Male	39	British	Cambridge	Graphic designer
Tracy	Female	25	British	Cambridge	Freelancing writer
Yvonne	Female	40	French	Dulwich	Government employee