Does Social Media Make Our Understanding of Community More Individualistic?

by

Amy Robertson

B.A., Briercrest College and Seminary, 2007

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

in the
School of Communication
Faculty of Communication, Art and Technology

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
Fall 2018

Approval

Name:	**Amy Robertson**
Degree:	**Master of Arts**
Title:	**Does Social Media Make Our Understanding of Community More Individualistic?**
Examining Committee:	**Chair:** Ahmed Al-Rawi Assistant Professor
	Alison Beale Senior Supervisor Professor
	Richard Smith Supervisor Professor
	Stuart Poyntz Supervisor Associate Professor
	Frederik Lesage External Examiner Assistant Professor School of Communication Simon Fraser University
Date Defended/Approved:	December 6, 2018

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Abstract

Given the ubiquity of social media today, it is important to consider how their use might affect our communication and relationships. This study explores the question of whether social media, given their self-focus, lead us to define community in more individualistic terms. A literature review provides a starting point for addressing this question, touching on themes such as the ubiquity of individuation within modernity, traditional and modern communities, changes in North American communities over the last several decades, characteristics of social media, and cases for and against technological determinism. Building on this review, interviews with 10 subjects help explore the question in a more focused way. Findings suggest a positive correlation between substantial social media use and a largely individualistic understanding of community. I then discuss the implications of this relationship, as well as the roles of education and public policy in facilitating understanding of the potential of social media.

Keywords: Social media; community; modernity; individualism; individualization; individuation

Dedication

For Caylen.

His love and support for me throughout this project triumphed over his disdain for social media—somehow.

Thanks.

Acknowledgements

Does anyone succeed alone? I've never witnessed it.

Thank you to Alison Beale for your endless patience, support, and thoughtful, well-timed feedback. Thanks also to my thesis committee members, Stuart Poyntz and Richard Smith, for your wisdom and encouragement, and to Jason Congdon, who made the process of tackling this degree program, from admission through to completion, far less intimidating. You have a gift for inspiring confidence. The School of Communication would not be the same without you.

Thank you to Caylen for giving more support and encouragement than you know. The countless meals you prepared, the dishes you washed, and everything else you said I could let go of are only the beginning. You made me a better version of myself—someone who believed she could (and would) do this. I love you.

To my colleagues, who believed this was a worthwhile endeavour, and who gave me the space I needed—thank you.

To my loved ones who both cheered me on and walked with me through the discouragement—Mom, Dad, Josh, Lisa, Tia, Paige and others—you helped me both fight the impostor syndrome and take the next step. Thank you.

To Nathaniel and especially Eddy, thank you for your fresh eyes, and for your encouragement and assistance. Thank you also to Chantale Pamplin for your generous and careful copy editing. You helped me over the finish line.

To Joel From, who introduced me to the powerful force of individualism in our modern age more than a decade ago—thank you for teaching me to see the world differently, and for helping inspire this journey.

Finally, thank you to my interviewees. You gave generously and selflessly of your time and were kind enough to share your stories, your journeys, your thoughts and your opinions—even some of your vulnerabilities—all just so I could learn something. I can't credit you by name, but you know who you are.

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Chapter 1.

Introduction

Social media platforms have long been associated with a number of questions about human connection. Are social media spaces really communities, as so many seem to assume? Do they bring us closer to one another? Do they foster social isolation? Can they change how we see people and ourselves? The answers are far from simple, because human processes are never as straightforward as an either/or question. Indeed, scholars including Rheingold (1994), Wellman (1999), Gulia (1999), Donath (1999) and Turkle (2011) have been discussing the pros and cons of online human connection and community since the Internet became mainstream in the 1990s. Given the ubiquity of social media in the modern age, questions of how they may affect the way we communicate and build relationships with one another are vital.

1.1 Research goals

This study will explore a specific question about social media and community in the digital age: Have social media—given they are so often assumed to facilitate community, and given their focus on the self—caused us to define community in more individualistic terms? Note that several scholars have written at length about social media's self-focus. Relevant works include *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era: A Conversation on Youth, Learning, Commerce, and Politics* by Jenkins, Ito, and boyd (2016), Bakardjieva and Gaden's "Technologies of the Self" (2012) and Turkle's *Alone Together* (2011).

My question is not simply whether online community is more individualistic than its offline counterpart (though the two are layered today), but whether the practice of online networking and community-building—using social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram to foster social capital[1]—have fundamentally changed how we understand community, making it more individualistic than it was 60 years ago. I've chosen a roughly 60-year periodization for my study for a few reasons: because it

[1] Putnam describes social capital as "connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (*Bowling Alone* 2000, para. 152). In simpler terms, social capital is like credit you build up with people in your life via social give and take and relationship building.

mirrors Putnam's comparison of bowling leagues in the 1960s versus the small groups of today (*Bowling Alone* 2000), and because this is approximately when Giddens' "late modernity," ushered in by technological and social changes, began. We can think of "late modernity" as another term for the digital age, or the information age, which also began in roughly the 1960s or 70s ("A Brief History of the Digital Revolution," n.d.), and eventually introduced social media and the related practices I examine in this study.

1.2 Key terms

Before proceeding, I will note that by individualism, I mean the principle that prioritizes being independent, self-reliant and self-actualized, and that places the desires and goals of the individual over the interests of the state or a social group. Individuation and individualization, related terms, both reflect the principle of individualism. Individuation refers to the process of self-actualization through focus on the self, self-development and self-expression. Individualization is part of individuation, and refers to the process of distinguishing oneself as unique.

For the purposes of this study, I am defining social media as dialogic social networking sites and tools that facilitate dynamic, two-way communication, as opposed to one-way, broadcast-oriented communication mediums. This was reflected in my interviews, in which I spoke to people about their use of Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, three of the most popular dialogic social networking platforms at present.

For a definition of community, it's important to note that the definition itself is one of the questions under investigation in this study. I am seeking to understand how social media may change individuals' understanding of community—not compare their understanding to a "correct" definition. Given this, as well as the fact that definitions vary widely, my preference is to defer to my interview subjects' descriptions of community in Chapter 4. That said, I acknowledge the impossibility of remaining entirely objective during the course of this study. It will be apparent throughout that my preferred understanding of community is influenced by the work of Sherry Turkle and Joseph Walther.

Turkle writes that online, self-focused gatherings are not communities. She refers to the experience of a woman named Molly as a case study. Molly says she has found community of "good people" online, but Turkle writes that what Molly describes as community is not actually a community:

> Although she claims that on confessional sites she has "met good people," when she gets feedback she doesn't like, Molly leaves the site so that she does not have to look at the criticism again. Communities are places where one feels safe enough to take the good and the bad. In communities, others come through for us in hard times, so we are willing to hear what they have to say, even if we don't like it. What Molly experiences is not community (2011, para. 4569).

Turkle notes that Molly's view of community "is skewed by what technology affords" (p. 238). Walther speaks to this perceived limitation of technology in his work on social information processing. He notes that computer-mediated-communication eliminates non-verbal communication codes such as tone of voice, facial expressions, and other non-verbal relational indicators (1992, p. 53). This reduced information, of course, affects people's interpretations and perceptions of the communication, which can affect their relationships and ways of being together.

I agree that something is lost in computer-mediated communication—while relationships can certainly exist in an online space, potential for things like passing empathy, communicating care and building trust are diminished. In Molly's case, there was no trust at all—she simply rejected feedback she didn't like.

Turkle further unpacks her definition of community:

> Those who run online confessional sites suggest that it is time to "broaden our definition of community" to include these virtual places. But this strips language of its meaning. If we start to call online spaces where we are with other people "communities," it is easy to forget what the word used to mean. From its derivation, it literally means to "give among each other" (2011, para. 4572).

Here, Turkle alludes to a question that informs this study: Whether attributing new meaning to "community" by using it in an online space can ultimately alter its meaning in an offline space. Regardless of the answer, I generally subscribe to Turkle's community definition, which prioritizes not only personal benefit, but also giving to others for their benefit. I will delve more into these concepts in Chapter 2 and beyond.

Chapter 2.

Literature Review: Social Media and Community

In this literature review, I discuss the contributions of key scholars to the primary themes in this study: the ubiquity of individualism in the digital age, the concept of community, differences between online and offline communities, the shift in the way North Americans have experienced community of any kind between the 1960s and 2018, and, finally, technological determinism.

Most scholars agree that community of some kind is possible online, though there are certainly some differences in how people build and experience community in offline and online spaces. Additionally, there is a relatively general consensus about the fact that North American communities have changed since the 1960s. A number of scholars also agree that communities are more individualistic than they used to be given the rise of individualism within modernity. The crux of my research question is whether social media platforms have influenced this shift in a meaningful way, or whether they simply mirror a more individuated society. There is little discussion of this idea among scholars, though I have observed some convincing evidence suggesting that social media have, in fact, helped drive a shift to further individuation.

2.1 Individuation and individualization

As I noted above, individuation and individualization, which are closely related, are key concepts for this study. Individualization refers to the process of becoming free, distinct or separate from others (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). This is very similar to the more complex concept of individuation, which refers to the process of instituting individualism, or developing one's own individuality or identity as a form of personal development (de Toqueville, 2012; Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler & Tipton, 1985; Giddens, 1991) According to Jung, the goal of this differentiation process is developing an individual personality, or identity (1971, para. 757, 762). Both individualization and individuation, sometimes used interchangeably, can be understood as forms of self-actualization.

Before we can observe the roles that individuation and individualization play in social media and/or our communities, we must understand them as phenomena that are tied inextricably to the modern age—that the individuated and individualized person, is, in fact, is a consequence of modernity (Beck & Gersheim, 2002, para. 23).

2.1.1 Individualization and individuation through history

de Toqueville, writing in 1835, unpacked the concept of individualism while studying the effects of democracy upon settlers in America. His definition of individualism was relatively simple, referring to a process or act of becoming separate or distinct from society:

> Individualism is a mature and calm feeling, which disposes each member of the community to sever himself from the mass of his fellow-creatures; and to draw apart with his family and his friends; so that, after he has thus formed a little circle of his own, he willingly leaves society at large to itself (volume 2, 2012, p. 79).

This cultural phenomenon grew as American society matured, evolving into something like Bellah et. al.'s concept of "expressive individualism" (1985, para. 1271):

> In its own understanding, the expressive aspect of our culture exists for the liberation and fulfillment of the individual. Its genius is that it enables the individual to think of commitments—from marriage and work to political and religious involvement—as enhancements of the sense of individual well-being rather than as moral imperatives (para. 1276).

Their term "expressive individualism" is more complex than de Toqueville's original understanding of individualism. For Bellah et. al., the process of becoming distinct isn't just about separation from society, but development of the self, or becoming truly fulfilled. For example, rather than marrying because society expected it, as de Toqueville's individuals may have done, Bellah et. al.'s expressive individuals might marry because it contributes to their sense of identity and well-being. This aligns with Giddens' understanding of individualism—the institutionalized, self-actualizing behaviour established in the West in the 20th century (1991).

2.1.2 Late modernity

Individualism, nearly ubiquitous in the modern age, gained significant traction with industrialization in the early 1900s. A look at the following 100-plus years in North

America demonstrates that this age has been extremely dynamic, ushering in great waves of change very quickly. According to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002, p. viii), individualism is particularly important within "second modernity," which refers to the latter half of the modern age—or roughly the last 60 years—in North America. While "first" modernity, referring roughly to the first half of the 20th century, was affected by external forces, making its progression linear and predictable, second modernity has been more complex and dramatic in its development.

2.1.3 Changes in late modernity

According to Giddens, several elements explain the dynamic development in late modernity. One is the disembedding of social institutions from traditional contexts (1991, para. 332). This refers to the fact that the institutions we need to survive have moved from local and community-based to larger, more centralized and less personal contexts. The ways in which we care for the needy and approach marriage, for example, illustrate this. A century ago, local church parishes or neighbours brought food to needy families, and marriages took place in the community church. Today, we largely depend on government for these matters, which means we spend less time in contact with traditional communities.

Another factor leading to change within modernity is the concept of reflexivity. This refers to the fact that the individual is an active, dynamic participant in second modernity (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. xvi). As society changes, we learn and grow along with it. At the same time, society adapts to reflect these changes, and we, in turn, adapt again in an ongoing process of transformation. The back and forth is key in this concept of reflexivity—we do not just reflect society; nor does society simply reflect us. The reflexivity goes both ways, which accelerates the process of change.

Globalization and digital technology, which remove limitations of time and space (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 25), feed this process of change even more. Change isn't limited by locale because we are no longer bound in the same way by geography or time zones. Additionally, nearly instantaneous communications processes mean that change in Western Canada can very quickly become the norm across North America and Europe, illustrating the fact that no one is immune to this reflexive process of change (para. 400).

2.1.4 The evolution of individualism

Giddens points out that individuality, while valued in pre-modernity, is more complex today. In pre-modernity, individuality was valued in the sense of being self-reliant and independent. Working to become the best version of one's self was not commonly valued until late modernity. Giddens writes that today, “We are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves” (para. 1352). We engage in self-interrogation and self-actualization and prioritize being true to oneself as an organized endeavour—a "project of the self" (1991, para. 112).

This values change is due, in part, to the dramatic changes modernity introduced, which produced principles of difference, exclusion and marginalization (Giddens, 1991, para. 123). Today's individuals search for intimacy as they search for self-fulfillment. Again, marriage helps illustrate this change. In pre-modernity, people married in order to have children and carry on the human race—it was necessary and expected. Today, marriage is less common ("Marriage in Canada," 2012); it is a choice rather than an inevitability. People marry because they wish to—perhaps because being a spouse helps construct their identity, and because it meets their need for intimacy.

Individuals also exercise more autonomy in relationships today than they did pre-modernity or in early modernity. Thanks in part to technological advances in transportation and electronic communication, we as individuals are no longer limited to building community with those in close proximity (Giddens, 1991, para. 1570) or tied by necessity to our geographical communities. Lash, writing a foreword in Beck and Beck-Gersheim's work, describes this element of late-modern individualism as “place polygamy” (2002, p. xii). That is, we may be at home in a variety of different contexts.

Rather than being born into their lifestyles and staying there, late-modern individuals must consciously choose their lifestyles, piece by piece. They are not anchored by external forces such as family and physical location, and they commit to their relationships out of their own volition (Giddens, 1991, para. 1663) rather than necessity. Guided by their chosen commitments, intimacy, morality and authenticity, late-modern individuals find meaning in the stories they write for themselves (para. 3992). This might look like a passionate young musician from rural Alberta setting his sights on a special program at Julliard in New York City—not just in the pursuit of excellence, but the pursuit of belonging, and carving out a different and unique identity. Perhaps the young musician doesn't feel quite like himself among a cattle-ranching

family—perhaps he feels like the odd one out. Thanks to the opportunities afforded by late modernity, he can write a new story for himself about a brilliant, young, urbanite musician who plays in jazz clubs rather than driving cattle.

Individuals' choices may be further complicated by the fact that individuation is often both a push and a pull from internal and external factors (R. Smith, personal communication, September 29, 2018). As referenced above, individuation is commonly understood as a personal search for the self. It is important to note, however, that the self is not the only driver of individuation. Corporate entities encourage individuals to express themselves—usually so they can tailor products and experiences accordingly. This marketing practice speaks more to control and surveillance than support of self-actualization (Pridmore & Zwick, 2011, p. 269). In the digital age, however, it is virtually impossible to escape practices like these—this pull from the outside. Using digital products therefore becomes a trade-off: if we want to use Facebook to connect with people, for example, we must lease the platform owners our personal information. Thus, providing this information for marketers, for others and allegedly for ourselves—so our online experience is more personalized—becomes yet another choice, and another way for us as individuals to identify and express ourselves.

In addition to having greater and more complex choices than people of earlier generations, late-modern individuals also make choices very quickly, with little reflective distance—like reflexes instead of carefully reflected-upon choices. This further develops the term “reflexive,” mentioned earlier. Such rapid reflexivity helps construct an individual narrative made up of a variety of different, often quickly chosen pieces—a “bricolage” of sorts (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. ix). Lash writes, “[The individual] puts together networks, constructs alliances, makes deals. He must live, is forced to live, in an atmosphere of risk in which knowledge is precarious” (p. ix). Life lived quickly creates any number of unknowns.

Today, self-identity is also “mobile.” It is diverse and segmented, belonging to a variety of different settings (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 162). We are “at home” in more than one context—perhaps with our biological families, our friends, our colleagues and people we meet in passing. This self-identity reflects far more variety and complexity than it would have before the modern era, and while it can feel freeing and empowering, it can also lead to confusion or a splintered sense of self—hence the continued journey of individuation.

It is important to note that individuation is not simply linear movement on an axis, where the individual becomes more and more independent, and more and more him or her "self." People live their identities, making a series of choices. They go back and forth, sometimes appearing to grow and progress, and sometimes appearing to plateau, stagnate or even regress. It is imperfect and unpredictable—yet constant.

2.1.5 Identity as performance

In addition to being a project that ebbs and flows, identity-making may also be understood as a performance. Schwartz and Halegoua help explain the concept of identity performance in "The spatial self: Location-based identity performance on social media":

> We recognize the display of physical activities on social media as particular expressions of the “spatial self.” The spatial self refers to a variety of instances (both online and offline) where individuals document, archive and display their experience and/or mobility within space and place in order to represent or perform aspects of their identity to others (2015, p. 1644).

Social media have helped foster this process, in which individuals take self-development from a project they work on for themselves to a process they document and express for others to see and comment on. Pre-social media, individuals documented their lives in photo albums for their loved ones to enjoy. In the social media age, we document our journeys on Instagram—but often only the version of our journeys we want people to see and draw conclusions from. Our lives are carefully curated for the mobile screen, much like a gallery show or a play—a performance.

2.1.6 Individualism: A powerful current in late modernity

This discussion has led up to one overarching theme: the fact that individualism is reflected in nearly every element of the way we live today. Beck and Beck-Gersheim sum this up with these succinct words:

> We live in an age in which the social order of the national state, class, ethnicity and the traditional family is in decline. The ethic of individual self-fulfillment and achievement is the most powerful current in modern society. The choosing, deciding, shaping human being who aspires to be the author of his or her own life, the creator of an individual identity, is the central character of our time. It is the

> fundamental cause behind changes in the family and the global gender revolution in relation to work and politics (2002, p. 23).

If this self-fulfillment is the most powerful current in modern society, then, as I mentioned near the beginning of this chapter, any attempt to understand modern Western community must begin with the recognition that individualism is part of its fabric (p. 23).

2.1.7 Individuation and the search for community

One of the changes I identified as a consequence of second modernity is the breakdown of large institutions. This has led to the reinvention of many social services, because people must perform a variety of important functions on their own—for example, forming relational bonds, creating families and building careers. In early modernity, such functions were pre-established, largely by institutions. Going it alone creates "new" challenges and needs. Indeed, Beck and Beck-Gersheim write that the freedom of first modernity did not deliver empowerment. Modern individuals are often isolated (2002, p. 33) because becoming self-reliant separated them from resources such as a place to belong—perhaps a home church or neighbourhood.

Before modernity, the nuclear family was a necessity, and communities were about mutual dependence (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 89). Individuals were bound to their church and family communities not by choice, but by birth, geography, and cultural and family expectations. Today, families still exist, but we do not rely on them in the same way—we spend time with them if and when we choose to. Individuals may live across the country—or the ocean—from their biological families, leading to the creation of de facto families. The popular sitcom *Friends*, which ran from 1994 to 2004*,* illustrates this phenomenon: A group of six adult friends chose to live their lives alongside one another, essentially choosing one another as family. People also choose their communities: They may belong to a variety of part-time communities at varying times, such a weekly yoga class, a mother-and-baby group, or a temporary volunteer opportunity, which they choose based on their perceived needs and desires.

These communities are often quite different than traditional communities of the past. When late-modern individuals come together in search for community, they seek not necessarily solidarity, but encouragement (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. xviii)—ironically, often to mitigate the loneliness that came as a result of their move to complete-self-reliance. Community members' common ground is not a mutual passion or

cause, but a shared struggle. Sometimes they share little else. They may not be drawn together by a love for tennis, art, or God—but simply by the fact that they are struggling, and in need of human support or connection.

These new part-time communities and provisional families can lead to a corrosion of citizenship, as Putnam wrote in *Bowling Alone* (2000). The public space is filled less with public concerns, and more with individual concerns. Sharing this intimacy and struggle becomes a method of building a sort of community. A seeming contradiction here is that people are still bound to certain institutions—for example, the legal system. Yet institutions, such as they are, still encourage a dependence on the self given that so often, people access them only on an as-needed basis, on their own terms—for example, religion, the medical system and the above-mentioned marriage, which is becoming less and less important given the legal benefits and protections offered to common-law partners, who need do nothing more to formalize their union than co-habit.

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) call this new way of living together "institutionalized individualism," but caution us to not oversimplify. People still need each other—just differently than before. They write,

> Certainly the stereotype in people's heads is that individualization breeds a me-first society, but…this is a false, one-sided picture of what actually happens in the family, gender relationships, love and sex, youth and old age. There are also signs that point toward an ethic of "altruistic individualism." Anyone who wants to live a life of their own must also be socially sensitive to a very high degree (p. xxii).

Indeed, people are still social. When they choose to build communities, they must exercise their sensitivities in caring for others—because to get the affirmation and encouragement they need from communities, they must also contribute. There is still a give-and-take dynamic, whether unconscious or transactional.

2.2 Online "communities"

The fact that people crave community has not changed much since de Tocqueville, whom Putnam called the "patron saint of community" (2000, para. 273), first identified it as a value: "The most natural privilege of man, next to the right of acting for himself, is that of combining his exertions with those of his fellow-creatures, and of acting in common with them" (de Toqueville volume 1, 2012, p. 155). People through time seem to have instinctively understood that that life is somehow better, or easier,

when lived with others. Even through the challenges and losses ushered in during late modernity and the digital age, people continue to search for opportunities to connect—and the concept of easily accessible online community seems promising.

2.2.1 Community: Possible online?

Rheingold, an early Internet adopter, was one of the first to embrace the notion of online community in *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (1991). He learned about the potential of online groups, or gatherings, through involvement in an early message-board system called the WELL (short for "Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link").

He predicted that these online gatherings would become more commonplace, giving those who preferred written communication to spoken communication the outlets they needed to connect with others (Rheingold, 1991, p. 23). Though perhaps unconventional—could communities where no one was *really* together truly be "real" communities?—he called these gatherings “communities.”

Rheingold suggests that these virtual communities could be a way to “rebuild the aspects of community that were lost when the malt shop became a mall” (1991, p. 26). That is, technology evolved to allow people to connect online in the 1990s and early 2000s in part because users were ripe for a new way of communicating after the changes of the late-modern age. This desire for connection is a key part of community. Rheingold was referring to the effects of globalization, individualization and individuation, which, as I mentioned earlier, include people forming connections far beyond their geographical proximity, and in far larger and more varied social arenas. These effects also include a need for connection that may have been lost when traditional geographical communities became fragmented.

Given the ubiquity of online and computer-mediated communication today, as well as the widespread acceptance of the term online community, it would seem Rheingold was, at least in part, correct. Whether something has changed about North American communities between today and when Rheingold wrote in the early 1990s remains to be seen.

Several other scholars use the term "community" to describe online gatherings. In their chapter of *Communities in Cyberspace*, called “Net Riders Don’t Ride Alone: Virtual Communities as Communities,” Wellman and Gulia**,** who have studied both online

and face-to-face communities, set out to prove that online communities are, in fact, communities. After some exploration, they determine that online communities provide a sense of community, offer support to their members and create a feeling of closeness. Based on this, they conclude that online communities meet "any reasonable definition" (1999, p. 22) of community, and that “it is the relationship that is the important thing, and not the communication medium” (1999, p. 181). In their chapter of the same book, Kollock and Smith echo Wellman and Gulia's conclusion that online communities are, in fact, communities. Their rationale is that online communities provide support and facilitate a sense of belonging for its members (1999, p. 169), which fulfills a reasonable definition of community.

In “Imagining Twitter as an imagined community,” a brief article in *American Behavioral Scientist* (2011), Wellman, Takhteyev and Gruzd analyze Wellman’s Twitter followers to determine whether Twitter has the potential to facilitate online community. They refer to a few definitions of community in their discussion. One is as follows: “A set of people who share sociability, support, and a sense of identity. Indeed, even when people are in loosely bounded networks, they will often identify themselves as part of a more define group or community” (Wellman et. al., 2011, p. 3). Another, which they call “the traditional definition,” is as follows: “A spatially compact set of people with a high frequency of interaction, interconnections, and a sense of solidarity” (p. 4). They note that the “Internet-era” definition suspends the requirement for spatial connection.

The authors also refer to prerequisites for what Jones calls a “virtual settlement”: interactivity, multiple communicators, a common public place to meet and sustained membership (Jones, 1997, p. 6). Jones’ term may help in communicating that while virtual gatherings or networks of people may become a community, they are not necessarily communities by virtue of the fact that people have gathered. “In other words, the fact that there is a system like Twitter that allows people to get together and exchange messages does not necessarily make people feel as if they belong to a community. For that, they need a sense of community” (p. 6). That is, it needs to *feel* like a community, where people feel they belong, are supported and are on a trajectory of some kind, whether toward self-actualization or the fulfillment of a cause.

After performing a detailed analysis of Wellman’s followers and how they are connected to one another, as well as a content analysis of 600 tweets, the authors conclude that Twitter satisfies Jones’ prerequisites and does, in fact, have the potential to facilitate community for a few reasons, particularly the following: the fact that there is

potential for mutual support and the fulfillment of needs, as well as the fact that users have a sense of community.

2.3 Social media and changing communities

Several scholars suggest support a shift or change in the definition of community. Bugeja writes, “The term community in the Internet age is likely to mean network as hometown” (2005, p. 3). People may use the word community to refer to online gatherings, but the meaning of the word has evolved, taking on several different and broad definitions. Users may not mean community in the traditional sense, but something else entirely. In contemporary urban societies, "community" may be less a geographic area than a person’s social network, which may be scattered across borders.

Wellman and Gulia also seem to support a new understanding of community. They criticize scholars who create a dichotomy between online communities and their traditional, romantic ideal—the “pastoralist myth of community” (1999, p.180). For them, the key is the "myth" of community is just that: a myth. Realistic communities are imperfect and often fragmented—particularly in today's urban settings, where people report feelings of isolation rather than a strong sense of community. The authors argue, “There is so little community life in most neighborhoods in Western cities that it is more useful to think of each person as having a personal community: an individual's social network of informal interpersonal ties, ranging from a half-dozen intimates to hundreds of weaker ties” (p. 186).

Michael Wu hesitates to even use the word community for online gatherings, instead preferring “social network.” His distinction between communities and networks is as follows: In communities, individuals’ common interest or place is central (2010). In networks, the individual is central. By this definition, then, social media "communities," which are often united by an individual rather than an external factor, are actually networks.

Determining how communities have changed since the advent of social media is a complex task due, in part, to the fact that many communities in 2018 are neither exclusively offline or online. People use online communication tools, including social media, to connect both with people they know and people they do not know, often in the same spaces. There is typically a great deal of overlap. In the words of Wellman and Gulia, “The Net is only one of many ways in which the same people may interact. It is not a separate reality” (1999, p. 169). Thus, while the following sections will explore

trends and shifts that have taken place as communities have moved into online spaces, it is important to bear in mind that most online communities are not exclusively online.

2.3.1 Individualism and community

Communities that rely on social media have several outstanding characteristics. One is an increased focus on individuation, which often manifests as self-actualization and promotion, or casting the individual as the "main character" of the community. Online communities are also characterized by hyper-localization and constructed environments.

Above, I noted that after a study of Wellman's Twitter followers, Wellman, Takhteyev and Gruzd concluded that Twitter can facilitate community. Some of their evidence requires further discussion, however. For example, they noted that many tweets volunteered useful information to others, often in the form of links to other websites (2011, p. 19). They also observed a high number of questions and answers. On the surface, this may suggest that Twitter users are an altruistic community of people dedicated to helping one another and sharing information. Indeed, information access is a key component of why people join so-called online communities (p. 19). However, it is important to consider potentially individualistic motivations for such information sharing. For example, organizations and individuals make significant use of Twitter for self-promotion. Additionally, the “helpful” information shared in a tweet often functions as an advertisement to visit one's website, or provide some affirmation by liking or re-tweeting. Some Twitter users may not even be fully aware of their motivations when sharing a post. What users might see as a resource designed to help others might actually be a signal meant to build their own identity or reputation.

We share on social media platforms for a variety of complex reasons. Some seem to lend themselves to serving a community. For example, will my "friends" find this useful? But there are also many other questions we ask ourselves—perhaps not even consciously—before we share. What will my friends or followers think about me when I share this? Will it make them laugh? Will they agree? Do I want them to know I agree with what it is saying? How many self-affirming "likes" or comments will I get? (Jenkins, Ford & Green, 2013, p. 13) Many of these benefit the tweeter rather than his or her audience.

Something similar can be said about Wellman, Takhteyev and Gruzd’s (2011) assertion that the frequent use of humour on Twitter may constitute an emotional

connection with an audience. It may. A Twitter user's use of humour, however, may also serve himself. A funny tweet will lead to favourites and re-tweets, which will affirm his sense of self, and help him establish his identity as someone with a good sense of humour.

2.3.2 Networked individualism, virtual togetherness and a search for belonging

Social media users are, in fact, trying to connect with one another, but these users are different from community members of the past, which were more like "static neighbourhood or family groups" (Wellman & Rainie, 2012, para. 3164), where the focus was on the group and not the individual. Wellman and Rainie refer to these new online communities as "personal communities" and members of these "communities" as networked individuals, explaining, "This new world of networked individualism is oriented around looser, more fragmented networks that provide succor," or benefit. That is, "The individual is at the autonomous center just as she is reaching out from her computer" (para. 346)—for connection, for intimacy, for support or for comfort. Her network is valuable because of what it provides.

Networked individualism as a term may seem contradictory, but it is fitting of social media users who are always connected, yet focused on themselves. The individuals in question perhaps aren't quite the same "rugged individuals" that de Tocqueville was describing when he wrote that individuals drew away from society to an inner circle (de Tocqueville volume 2, 2012, p. 79). Rather, today's individuals have such a need for human connection that they look for it almost constantly—they text, tweet and check Facebook throughout the day, multiple times a day, often in an attempt at self-care. Yet they keep their connections at a distance—literally at arm's length (the phone at the end of their arm).

Rather than relying on a tight inner circle, many tethered individuals—that is, people who are perpetually tied to a digital device or network—strive to meet their needs by engaging with a variety of different networks of people who may have limited connections to one another (de Tocqueville, volume 2, 2012, p.12). In addition to these structural differences, today's community members' motivations for joining groups are different than they were before. Rather than belonging to a community for the sake of a cause or a sense of duty, for example, members search for community because it is how they feel most fulfilled.

This raises a couple of questions: Is less involvement in face-to-face community groups a sign of social isolation? Does the connection people experience online pale in the comparison to the "good old days"? Wellman and Rainie contend that this is not the case. While people function “more as connected individuals and less as embedded group members” (de Tocqueville, volume 2, 2012, p. 12) they are not necessarily socially isolated (p. 13). Fragmented networks were becoming the norm long before the Internet, but “the revolutionary social change from small groups to broader personal networks has been powerfully advanced by the widespread use of the Internet” (p. 8).

There may, therefore, be some value in moving toward a new understanding of the way we relate to one another in online communities. Writing in "Theorizing Web 2.0" (2010), Wu Song says:

> Epitomizing what Wellman (2003) termed “networked individualism,” these newer community websites represent a shift, altogether in conception of community from bonded groups to loose shifting networks, from shared identity and space to social clusters around the individual (p. 267).

She observes that the way we use online communities has become more individualistic even since the late 1990s. In comparing sites such as Geocities and discussion forums that were popular in the 1990s to social networks we associate with Web 2.0 such as Facebook, she noted the following:

> In these early community websites, the online community was essentially a public space dedicated to the ideal of fostering interesting conversations and debate. These communities aspired to be virtual spaces in which individuals would “hang out” and discover an alternative to traditional public spaces…The latent hope was always that friendships and meaningful relationships might grow from these otherwise unlikely encounters across time zones, states, and even countries (2010, p. 266).

In contrast, since 2001, Internet users have been using networking tools to integrate their online and offline lives rather than creating entirely new, separate realities (p. 266). Wu Song goes on to say that earlier communities were more “intent on fostering a sense of collective identity and membership than the latter ones” (p. 266). In more recent online “communities,” individual identity is becoming more important than group identity—particularly in communities in which user-created content is important (p. 266). One example of this is the online beauty community, which is driven by women and men who make their living by creating videos about makeup and sharing them on YouTube, a

popular video-sharing platform. They are commonly known as "influencers." Content creators construct and perform these influencer identities by making and sharing videos in which they star, posting beauty-related content on other social media platforms, and engaging with their subscribers—who may number in the thousands or millions. This identity performance generates an income, and fosters their sense of self, value and connectedness (Anarbaeva, 2016, p. 1).

Even in light of such a display of self-celebration, however, Wu Song cautions against a simple understanding of individualism in the context of Web 2.0. She writes that the trend of hyper-connectedness is too widespread for “radical individualism” to be an accurate description of networked culture (2010, p. 268). Ideologically, social media users seem to want to be less isolated and less individualistic, which is why they grasp at human connection whenever they can. But they’re far more focused on themselves than those who affirm the traditional sense of community. Wu Song suggests the term “personalism” as an alternative to individualism here, defining it this way: “Personalism is a form of individualism that stands outside the conventional contrast between the authority of individualist self-fulfillment and the authority of communal will” (p. 268).

I believe Wu Song is correct in saying that online communities have changed, and that today’s users integrate their online and offline lives. Her observations about the purpose of older online communities raise a few questions, however. The individuals who used online chat rooms in the 1990s may have believed their primary motivation was learning and participating in interesting conversations. Is it possible, however, that their motivations were more complex—more individualistic—than that?

In 1996, Slatalla wrote in an article for *Wired* magazine: “Community is as close as your keyboard” (p.1). To illustrate this, she shared the story of a woman named Sally whose husband was suffering from Alzheimer’s. She began to feel isolated and alone as his caregiver. One evening, Sally logged into a message board service and was able to find a group of people who understood what she was going through. Through these online conversations, participants like her were able to find the strength to make difficult decisions or cope with a loved one passing away.

Sally’s online support group was not described a community where she could generate greater awareness of Alzheimer’s, contribute to education, or learn about the disease in an intellectual sense, as Wu Song’s statements about the early web might suggest. Rather, Sally was searching for a group of people who would understand and support her, be compassionate and make her feel less alone. Sally’s group may have

constituted a community of sorts, but it was not a community in the traditional sense. Sally was focusing primarily on herself. Perhaps she was as individualistic as many of today's social network users.

In the first chapter of *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era: A Conversation on Youth, Learning, Commerce, and Politics*, Jenkins, Ito and boyd discuss the reality of Wellman's "networked individualism." Writes boyd, "I want to believe that networks result in healthier communities, but I also think that they promote a form of egocentrism" (2016, para. 710). She goes on to point out that Wellman's "networked individualism" stands in contrast to more traditional social structures such as families and neighbourhoods. Social media allows people to cultivate their own networks and communities, which boyd describes as "super convenient," but also "seriously narcissistic" (para. 711). Jenkins agrees that social media platforms stress individualism, but noted that networks aren't completely individualistic—they form around shared goals and values (para. 714). Ito also challenges boyd, questioning whether tools could "determine a value set" (para. 722). She continues, "We can't blame the tools, only ourselves for not taking them up in ways that conform to our values" (para. 727). boyd responded that although technology doesn't force individualism, social media sites are designed for people to be "individualistically minded."

In a different work, boyd further observes an extreme from of individuation on social media platforms:

> If we accept that technologies mirror and magnify everyday culture, what do social network sites say about society? While we may wish that they shine a positive light on us, the most insidious practices on SNSes [social networking sites] highlight how status-obsessed and narcissistic we are as a society….Social network sites provide opportunities for ordinary people to showcase themselves as pseudo-celebrities (2014, p. 113).

Indeed, albums of "selfies" and strings of status updates reporting details about users' activities, feelings and opinions show an unquestionable focus on the self. Though the showmanship and narcissism that boyd observes may better describe what de Tocqueville calls "egotism" than true individualism, her observations suggest a society rife with individualism.

In *Internet Society: The Internet in Everyday Life,* Bakardjieva asserts that individuals use the Internet to meet a need (2005, p. 134). She identifies several "use genres" (p. 134)—that is, themes she's observed in why people use the Internet. The

most relevant use genres to this discussion of online community are isolation, where people feel lonely and look to fill the void; global spread, where people are separated by distance from friends and loved ones; and dispersed communities of interest, where users reach out to others in search of companionship, support and self-esteem. These genres, in turn, shape future use of the Internet (p. 118).

Later in the book, she introduces and examines a concept she calls “virtual togetherness.” Acknowledging the debate between scholars about whether community online is comparable or inferior to face-to-face communities, Bakardjieva asserts that the debate is unproductive because online communities play a different role in the lives of users than face-to-face communities. I believe she is correct in her observation that the dichotomy between online and face-to-face communities is false given most Internet users experience considerable overlap between online and offline interactions with others (2005, p. 167). However, I disagree with her statement that the debate is unhelpful. Many make the assumption that “virtual togetherness” is community. But in light of what we've discussed, are they truly equivalent? I would suggest they are not. Certainly, assuming that "virtual togetherness" is equivalent to community may lend itself to a changed understanding of the concept of community. If people believe that what they experience on Facebook is true community, this may alter their expectations and understanding of face-to-face communities.

In light of this, it is fitting that elsewhere in the chapter, Bakardjieva draws attention to the need for a clarified definition of community: “The Internet is being mobilized in a process of collective deliberation and action in which people engage from amid the private realm. Whether an analyst would decide to call the electronic forums in which this is happening communities or not depends on the notion of community with which she is operating” (2005, p. 166).

2.3.3 Technologies of the self

In their essay "Technologies of the self" (2011), Bakardjieva and Gaden make several observations about individualization within Web 2.0 technologies, which typically refer to recent online content-sharing and social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The authors argue that Web 2.0 technologies fit the profile of Foucault’s “technologies of the self” (2011, p. 399). Foucault’s reference is to technologies that aid the individual in self-improvement, self-policing and care, as well as technologies that the individual “finds in his culture and which are proposed, suggested

and imposed on him by his culture, his society and his social group" (Foucault, quoted in Bakardjieva and Gaden, 2011, p. 400). Indeed, platforms such as Facebook provide nearly limitless opportunities for self-reflection and self-care: "About me" sections allow users to build an identity surrounding favourite books, movies and quotes; photo albums allow users to upload any number of "selfies" or other photos on which their "friends" can comment; and status updates perpetually ask, "What's on your mind?" inviting all manner of communication with the individual's network—each piece of which helps construct and reinforce an identity of the individual's choosing.

2.3.4 Other characteristics of online communities

Another characteristic of online communities is hyper-localization. In "Net Surfers Don't Ride Alone," Wellman and Gulia make a key observation in this regard: "People are usually based at their home, the most local environment imaginable, when they connect with their virtual communities" (1999, p. 186). If online communities are based at home, this literally places the individual at the centre of his or her online community. These differ from more traditional communities, which placed some kind of commonality, such as a goal, passion, or geographical location at the centre.

Yet another characteristic of online communities is a constructed environment, or artificial habitat. Bugeja has a helpful contribution here, writing that communities are a place to self-actualize:

> Communities provide opportunities for acceptance, serving as "gathering place" or "proving ground." We meet friends, partners, merchants and neighbors there. Through our interactions, we learn "people skills" and develop values and character. We thrive in real habitats (2005, p. 2).

The problem he raises with electronic communication is that it doesn't constitute a "real habitat." Technology creates a gap between people he calls "the interpersonal divide," which has been "eroding communities" (p. 20). He asserts that our understanding and expectations of communities have been changing with the advent of every "technological wonder" (p. 84).

Though media have always affected how we talk to each other (Bugeja, 2005, p. 81), digital media are unique because they blur the boundaries between real and virtually real (p. 82). We are virtually surrounded by friends when we socialize online—but we are also alone in our homes or on the street as we tap on our smartphones.

Bugeja writes, “We now live in cabled enclaves. Too many of us feel anxious not because we fail to communicate—for we do communicate too frequently with each other electronically—but because of fundamental high-tech fallacies” (p. 23). These fallacies tell us that we are connecting with others—but can we connect through a screen in the same way that we can connect when we make eye contact and observe body language and tone?

Bugeja suggests that the tools we use for tasks can alter processes, which affect thought patterns, perceptions and expectations. He writes, “The characteristics of communication metamorphosed to suit the new medium” (2005, p. 87). Can we then conclude that social media networks, which are undeniably self-focused in their functions and language, will almost inevitably encourage a greater focus on the self? If so, might this affect our understanding of our other communities?

Donath raises a helpful point about the importance of environment in online communities:

> The online world is a wholly built environment. The architects of a virtual space—from the software designers to the site administrators—shape the community in a more profound way than do their real-world counterparts. People eat, sleep, and work in buildings; the buildings affect how happily they do these things. But the buildings do not completely control their perception of the world. In the electronic domain, the design of the environment is everything (1999, p. 52).

Donath is attuned to importance of the medium in communication—it affects how we think about the nature of our communication with others. On major social media platforms, communication is typically focused on the user, who is at the centre of his or her social network. In creating our online identities, we fill in blanks on screens to tell members of our network who we are and what matters to us. In facilitating communication, the networks ask us, first and foremost, to speak about ourselves. On Facebook, the question asked in the status update bar is “What’s on your mind?” On Twitter, the question in the tweet bar used to be “What are you doing?” (It switched to a somewhat less user-centric “What’s happening?” in 2009, presumably to better reflect how people were using the platform.) In essence, designers began to embed individualistic values into social media sites through user experience design (Jenkins et. al., 2016, para. 728). Of course, such questions and prompts effectively tell the user that the medium is largely about them. If this is what communities model, a user's understanding of "community" may evolve as a result—even unconsciously.

2.4 Community in the digital age

As online communities have developed, physical communities have also changed. Putnam's *Bowling Alone* (2000) explores this community evolution. He writes that community has changed since the 1960s, when bowling leagues were common. Today, Americans are more socially isolated—they bowl alone. For Putnam, this is a metaphor for American life. He links a rise in individualism with a significant decrease in civic engagement that began in the 1960s.

2.4.1 Implications of digital technology: Psychological neighbourhoods

Putnam predicted that the Internet could play a significant role in the movement away from traditional community. Like the telephone, the Internet could foster a "psychological neighbourhood" (Putnam, 2000, p. 168). He shares a story about a 1977 power outage in Manhattan to illustrate his point: Most people who lost power said they felt isolated, but some said that it made them more likely to visit friends in person. That is, although people were less likely to visit others when their telephones were working, they still felt connected thanks to the "psychological neighbourhood" that the telephone helped them create (p. 168).

When Putnam published *Bowling Alone,* Internet use had been common for only a few years. Yet he writes, "it is hard to avoid speculating that the implications of this new technology of communication may dwarf the effects of the telephone on American society" (2000, p. 169). Putnam's "psychological neighbourhood" term may be an ideal description for popular social media networks and the relationships they help users create and maintain. But what kind of community is this "neighbourhood"? Putnam suggests that what is happening in online networks parallels what began happening in physical communities in the late 20th century. While membership in traditional civic organizations declined, membership in "small groups" climbed. Rather than emphasizing things such as religion, community service and voting, these groups are concerned with self-concept. Putnam quotes Wuthnow to make his point:

> The kind of community [these small groups] create is quite different from the communities in which people have lived in the past. These communities are more fluid and more concerned with the emotional states of the individual…The communities they create are seldom frail. People feel cared for. They help one another. They share their intimate problems…But in another sense small groups may not be fostering community as effectively as effectively as many of their

> proponents would like. Some small groups merely provide occasions for individuals to focus on themselves in the presence of others (Robert Wuthnow, quoted in Putnam, 2000, p. 152).

Putnam's work in 2000 could function as foreshadowing for today, when 60 per cent of Internet users have a social network, and, according to one source, the average American spends nearly eight hours per month on a social network ("Social Networking Statistics"), where they communicate about themselves. (It is worth noting that this statistic may be quite low. When I circulated a survey to recruit interviewees for this study, the vast majority of social media users reported using social media for an hour or more each day.) Perhaps online social networks are today's small groups, fostering opportunities for self-growth and social support. They are a community of sorts, but the definition has certainly changed.

A follow up to *Bowling Alone*, Putnam and Feldstein's *Better Together* (2003) illustrates the ways in which Americans come together through a series of case studies. As Putnam writes in *Bowling Alone*, community participation has been on the decline over the last several decades. In *Better Together*, he and Feldstein write that while they have not observed a reversal in this trend, "people are making progress on the perennial challenge of re-creating new forms of community, adapted to the conditions and needs of our time" (Putnam & Feldstein, 2003, p. 6). Their use of the word "adapted" here is significant. Simply put, we have changed the definition of community to suit us—now it is more about us. The authors make several other noteworthy observations about this new social capital: One, it is necessarily local—it depends on physical connections (p. 9). Two, the "Internet and the World Wide Web, though much in the news as technology that would transform community and relationship, play a surprisingly small role" (p. 9). Three, these new networks were partially a result of urban sprawl and two-career families (p. 4).

2.4.2 Modern friendship

In his brief piece on the nature of modern friendship, Deresiewicz (2009) explores how friendship has evolved with the rise of modernity, individualism and social media. While Putnam saw this kind of change as a movement away from community and toward social isolation, Deresiewicz saw the change as a movement away from true friendship, which is an essential factor in community.

He begins by noting that friendship is everything to us, yet it has been reduced to a list on Facebook or our phones—we're friends with "everyone now," so no one is special. He contrasts this to friendships in ancient times, which were hard-won and rare. He attributes this in part to modernity: "Now we can see why friendship has become the characteristically modern relationship. Modernity believes in equality, and friendships, unlike traditional relationships, are egalitarian. Modernity believes in individualism… Modernity believes in self-expression. Friends, because we choose them, give back an image of ourselves" (Deresiewicz, 2009, p. 4).

Deresiewicz also attributes the new "faux friendship" to industrialization, which took people from their families and "traditional communities" and packed them into cities. He writes, "Friendship emerged to salve the anonymity and rootlessness of modern life" (2009, p. 5). He also comments on the nature of the new friendship. Rather than offering "moral advice and correction," we expect friends to accept us unconditionally. Friendship is changing "from a relationship to a feeling—from something people share to something each of us hugs privately to ourselves in the loneliness of our electronic caves" (p. 9).

He compares this new friendship to Bellah et. al.'s "therapeutic" relationships. "In its pure form," they write, "the therapeutic attitude denies all forms of obligation and commitment in relationships, replacing them only with the ideal of full, open, honest communication among self-actualized individuals" (1985, para. 2047). Deresiewicz then notes the changing understanding of circles of friends, which came into vogue in the 1960s with communes. Today, while we may have a number of friends, they're disconnected. They're not true friend circles, but lists on Facebook convince us that they are.

The language we use to describe friendship is both inconsistent and powerful. We are "clinging to the word," although the meaning has changed. We speak of cultural communities, for example, when they are not. We've replaced actual community with the "sense" of community that our faux friendships give us. And friendship is taking the same path—we now have more "friends" than friends. "Scanning my Facebook page gives me, precisely, a 'sense' of connection," Deresiewicz writes, "Not an actual connection, just a sense" (2009, p. 9). He believes social media has exacerbated this tendency. Studies show we have fewer close confidants than we used to, and he is confident that moving our friendships onto our phones has contributed to this.

2.4.3 The new loneliness

While Putnam and Deresiewicz explore changes in society and suggest that online platforms may play a role, Turkle goes a step further and connects our move toward individualization, isolation and even a growing lack of empathy to computer-mediated communication, including social media platforms, in a very real way. In *Alone Together* (2011), using primary research, Turkle explores how social media and smartphones have affected relationships. In contrast to Wellman, who asserts that online communities fulfill any "reasonable" definition of community when compared objectively (Kollock & Smith, 1999, para. 16), Turkle looks to what is missing from online relationships and, by extension, online communities. Thanks to the ubiquity of the smartphone, we are constantly tethered to our network connections—a friend or acquaintance is never more than a tap or click away. In a technical sense, the potential for community building is astounding. But Turkle observes that we are less social and less communal than we were in the past, highlighting the ways in which our social interactions differ when mediated by technology—and how this affects our relationships, which take place both online and off. "Technology proposes itself as the architect of our intimacies," she writes (Turkle, 2011, para. 1). As users, we may not draw a critical distinction between "talking" to a friend or acquaintance online or offline. In fact, the same conversation may span a text exchange, Facebook post and face-to-face interaction. We can't deny that, especially among the younger demographic, more and more social interactions are taking place via smartphone. It is difficult to imagine that such a fundamental change to socializing wouldn't have an effect on how we perceive and are perceived by others.

While people are in constant contact because of their smartphones, rather than drawing closer to their friends and acquaintances, they tend to keep them at arm's length. A handful of Turkle's interview subjects admitted they dislike phone conversations because of the time and commitment involved, but also because of what they demand emotionally. Face-to-face interactions come with high expectations.

> Hugh says that recently, when he does get private cell time, he comes to regret it. By demanding that people be sitting down, with nothing to do but chat with him, he has raised the bar too high: "They're disappointed if I'm, like, not talking about being depressed, about contemplating a divorce, about being fired." Hugh laughs. "You ask for private cell time, you better come up with the goods" (Turkle, 2011, para. 204).

Certainly there are a number of so-called online communities where people feel cared for and supported, or gather around a valuable cause or interest. But if members sign on and off at will and respond only as quickly and with as much care and detail to which they feel inclined in that moment, how thick and deep is the community? Is something missing when participants offer only as much effort as they can contribute while commuting to work or eating dinner? Furthermore, why do we reach for these low-cost, low-commitment relationships? Turkle offers this explanation: “We are lonely but fearful of intimacy. Digital connections and the sociable robot may offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship. Our networked life allows us to hide from each other, even as we are tethered to each other. We’d rather text than talk” (2011, para. 1).

Online communities and smartphone-mediated friendships no doubt feel good—but surely something is lost when our screens protect us. Our smartphones and the social platforms for which we use them allow us to hide from each other, performing only the bits of our identities with which we’re comfortable at that moment. Certainly we are more connected than ever before. Yet, as Turkle’s studies have suggested, we are no less lonely. The question we’re left with is this: How can we be so surrounded by connections, yet so lonely? And what are we afraid of? Perhaps the sheer volume of social connection and interaction afforded by our tethered-ness has left us overwhelmed, and we distance ourselves from one another, using screens as coping mechanisms. As we see others model the same behaviour, it becomes normal—even desirable.

Another possibility is that overindulging in these communities that ask and offer only pieces of ourselves has left us wanting, yet we’re so out of practice that we can’t remember for what or why. To our communities, we give quick, tapped reactions, or edited, polished responses developed over the course of a few days, while we consider the “right” thing to say. We may offer criticism or care, yet there is little risk when we wear our screens as masks or when our audience becomes a mass of Twitter followers or an unnamed cartoon avatar.

There is self-protection, self-regulation and an element of identity performance here. As Turkle writes, “Networked, we are together, but so lessened are our expectations of each other that we can feel utterly alone. And there is the risk that we come to see others as objects to be accessed—and only for the parts we find useful, comforting, or amusing…These are the unsettling isolations of the tethered self (2011, para. 154).

So we commune, but are isolated—and Turkle's choice of "unsettling" is fitting. The web certainly offers opportunities to foster community—but in what kind of community? And how are we defining (or re-defining) community in these conversations? I will explore these questions in subsequent sections.

2.4.4 From conversation to connection

As a result of keeping people at arm's length—on our phones—we have traded face-to-face conversation for mere connection. Turkle writes, "We are being silenced by our technologies in a way, cured of talking" (2015, para. 143). She notes that this has taken away our ability to empathize. It has also affected our personal development and functioning in other ways. People fear intimacy and vulnerability, shying away from "unedited" conversation. They'd rather text or email because it enables them to get it "right" (para. 200). One of Turkle's interview subjects revealed that his communication—even in face-to-face contexts, such as a classroom discussion—has become troublingly similar to the performance-like communication of his social media posts:

> You would try to say something brilliant—something prepared in advance. And then you'd sit back and wait for your responses. You didn't have to really engage. The idea of saying something as it occurred to you and getting a conversation going, that was gone. And you didn't just do this new thing in classes, you did it with your friends. Now, you'd say what you [had planned] to say. And then, you'd get your responses (para. 2105).

Professionals whom Turkle interviewed observed that in addition from avoiding face-to-face meetings, employees—particularly younger ones who grew up in "the digital age"—required far more support and encouragement to accomplish tasks. Growing up with Facebook, where posts result in the immediate gratification of a "like" or comment, they came to expect a similar "thumbs-up" boost (2015, para. 1086). One result is that relationships have become more about personal affirmation. Adam, another one of Turkle's interviewees, revealed this in talking about a former girlfriend: "When she writes… 'you are great,' she is saying 'I have a need and you met it'" (para. 3175).

2.4.5 A new understanding of community

Turkle's work has important implications for a new understanding of community, particularly if Deresiewicz is correct and "faux friendship" is really the new community, and if small groups, meant to build community, are really just an opportunity to focus on

ourselves in the presence of others (Putnam, 2000, p. 152). If our interactions with others aren't authentic because we're afraid of vulnerability, and fixated on "getting it right" for the sake of how we will be perceived, community will necessarily be affected. Its purpose is to bring people together, yet the digital generation is afraid to get too close. They've also learned that communication and relationships are all about them. Is it perfect enough? Will my friends "like" it? Are my needs being met? Surely this warm, cuddly feeling will also infiltrate community—we now commune with others not for the common good, but because it makes us feel good. Hence my question about social media and our understanding of community—does the former affect the latter?

Here, it is appealing to move from correlation (of the rise of social media use and the individualistic trends discussed above) to causation. That is, it is tempting to conclude that we haven't simply replaced face-to-face talk with electronic talk because we have changed, but that the use of electronic conversation has changed us. Turkle seems to agree, at least partially: "But of course, with technology, we have a tendency to take what begins as a supplement and turn it into a way of life. Text messages weren't meant to disrupt dinner table conversations, but this supplement to talk became a substitution" (2011, para. 2610). She calls these changes in the way we relate and communicate "unintended consequences" (para. 254).

2.5 Technological determinism

We cannot properly explore the ramifications of Turkle's "unintended consequences" or answer the question of whether social media have effected cultural change without first engaging meaningfully with he the concept of technological determinism. Technological determinism is a theory that says *technology* creates change, or "drives culture" (Wise and Slack, 2015, p. 26). Cultural determinism, or social construction of technology, is the alternative, suggesting that *people* create change. We can also consider the two ideas from the perspective of control. Technological determinism suggests that technology controls people. Cultural determinism suggests that technology is controlled *by* people (Giotta, 2018, p. 136). In *Culture and Technology: A Primer,* Wise and Slack note that according to this way of thinking, "culture causes technology" (2015, p. 50).

In the context of this study, we could say that pure technological determinism suggests that social media is responsible for changing how people practice community. Conversely, we could say that pure cultural determinism suggests that people have

changed the way they practice community, and that social media are simply a reflection of this change. I do not subscribe fully to either theory, though I think both are valuable for this study. Pure technological determinism minimizes human agency, self-efficacy, creativity and many more human factors. Indeed, history is full of examples of objects that people use for something other than their intended purpose. But pure social constructivism underestimates the power of marketing and modeled behaviour. When Facebook is touted as a great way to keep in touch with friends, and Twitter as a great place to discuss politics or the latest, hottest TV show, users "show up" and observe how the tools are being used. In keeping with typical social etiquette, they, in turn, begin using the tools accordingly. Given how relationships and conversations flow effortlessly from online to physical spaces and back, it seems vey plausible that social media habits will likewise become social habits.

McLuhan's famous expression "the medium is the message" in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964), is relevant to this discussion. Although the social media user chooses how to use the platforms in self-construction and transformation, I believe it is important to note that the media—and in this case, the media platforms—dictate, in part, how the user will transform himself. Facebook's individual-centred questions, endless quizzes that allegedly tell people who they "really" are and encourage them to share, and public profiles created through a series of "likes" may teach the individual that this is the information on which he should be focusing his energies and communications. And when networks of “friends” model the same behaviour, lenses and worldviews may evolve.

Bakardjieva and Gaden provide some other examples of how change may occur: "The drop-down menu is going to be the mode through which the self is presented to his or her group of friends; these friends will be counted and quantified in precise ways and the interactions between and among individuals will unfold on a highly visible public stage" (2012, p. 410). Similarly, Facebook’s relationship statuses may become important indicators of offline relationships. Facebook’s “friend” labels may change the way people understand the nature of friendship. Ultimately, we learn to perceive one another differently—and perceive our communities differently.

Wellman and Rainie maintain that we, not our technologies, foster change, writing, "[T]echnology does not determine human behavior; humans determine how technologies are used" (2012, para. 179). And yet in the same paragraph, they write, "The internet and mobile phones have facilitated the reshaping of people's social

networks, enabling them to be larger and more diverse" (para. 179). If the technology facilitates change, we must acknowledge the possibility that technology itself has some influence, and some power—and that our world would not be the same without it.

Several other scholars seem to acknowledge this power: Bugeja asserts that communication morphed to suit new mediums—not the other way around (2005, p. 87). Giddens says that "media do not mirror realities, but in some part form them" (1991, para. 496). Jenkins believes that social media networks "stressed" individualism (Jenkins et. al., 2016, para. 714), and boyd that they promote "egocentrism" (2014, para. 710).

Wellman et. al. also comment on whether media reflects or constitutes reality. In a piece about the internet and networked individualism, which refers to the way in which individuals are connected through digital technology rather than social groups, they make two observations in this regard: One, that the Internet in itself is not technologically deterministic. Other social, land-use and technological changes in North American society have moved people away from traditional communities and social groups and toward networks that place the individual at the centre (2003, p. 24). That said, however, they later acknowledge that

> changes in the nature of computer-mediated communication both reflect and foster the development of networked individualism in networked societies. Internet and mobile phone connectivity is to persons and not to jacked-in telephones that ring in a fixed place for anyone in the room or house to pick up. The developing personalization, wireless portability, and ubiquitous connectivity of the Internet all facilitate networked individualism as the basis of community (p. 26).

Wellman et. al. have a keen understanding of the fact that digital technologies that facilitate computer-mediated communication are unlike previous legacy technologies—they foster two-way conversation that is responsive and dynamic. They also foster a kind of isolation by quite literally changing how we connect with one another and reducing the number of people with whom we connect. Young people no longer have to call a land line that a parent will answer, and have an exchange with the parent before speaking with the friend. Wellman et. al. are also aware of how these communication changes necessarily affect the practice of community. A key basis of community is, of course, communication—they even share a root word.

Wellman et. al. also say, "The technological development of computer networks and the societal flourishing of social networks are affording the rise of networked

individualism in a positive feedback loop" (2003, p. 28). "Affording" speaks to both allowing and facilitating by providing the opportunity. Social networks have provided opportunities people would not have had before—perhaps even opportunities they wouldn't have imagined or considered without seeing the possibilities in motion. How, then, could social networks not be in some way responsible for cultural change? People often follow the masses—and aren't always aware of why they do what they do.

Wellman et. al.'s "positive feedback loop" concept is also helpful here. It speaks to the fact that the concept is not a simple one, and that change happens gradually and reflexively. Social media networks changed gradually based both on how users used it and on developers' vision. Likewise, people changed not only because of on their own desires, but also because of how the platform directed them and how they saw others using it. One could not happen without the other.

Lewis also discusses the effects of the Internet—if not effects, then perhaps aftermath—in his 2001 work *Next: The Future Just Happened*. He notes that some called the Internet "nothing more than a fast delivery service for information." He likens this to a baron who has just been blasted out of his castle saying that cannons only speed up balls—nothing more (p. 13). In other words, he is saying that this is a simplistic way of looking at the Internet and what its power allows people to do. He writes, "Marshall McLuhan famously said that new technologies tend to become less visible as they become more familiar." At the time of Lewis' writing, the Internet had been mainstream—certainly more than familiar—for nearly a decade. Given the familiarity and ubiquity of the Internet, it is easy to dismiss it as simply a tool we use as we choose—but perhaps we shouldn't be so hasty.

Lewis understood that "the technology of the Internet was far less interesting than the effects people were allowing it to have on their lives, and what these, in turn, said about those lives" (2001, p. 14). At the time of Lewis' writing, the Internet presented people with new opportunities for communicating across borders and accessing information at the stroke of a key. They didn't need to board planes, visit libraries or even use their voices on the telephone. Certainly, it is possible that people were simply primed and ready for a new way of being in the world. Lewis writes, "If they were using the Internet to experiment with their identities, it was probably because they found their old identities were inadequate" (p. 15).

Similarly, Urs E. Gattiker in *The Internet As A Diverse Community: Cultural, Organizational, and Political Issues* writes that

> It is not so much the technology as the way we use the technology that will shape our information future. A community creating and managing a site or a virtual space will succeed or receive support and/or public or private funds only if there is a demand for its services and content by the larger community out there (2000, para. 3090).

Using a table, Gattiker outlines both opportunities and risks within "cyberspace culture." For example, with the advent of digital media-enabled visual and audio experiences comes the risk of a loss of touch with reality. With the opportunity for instant knowledge transfer comes "too much of too little information and productivity" (para. 4250).

Gattiker is correct about the dichotomy of both positive and negative consequences one we may not anticipate, understand or even be aware of. It would be unwise to underestimate the effects that choices can have on people without their knowledge or intent, or the effects of the technology that allows and perhaps even drives those choices. It is even more vital to examine these choices and the technology behind them given how quickly and dramatically technology has changed even since 2001, when Lewis published his work. Facebook was invented in 2005 and Twitter in 2006. Apple introduced the iPhone in 2007. People began making choices to communicate with others via text message and Facebook rather than the telephone because it was convenient and safe. Telecommuting became feasible for more people and companies. It was no longer necessary to email family members with photos of grandchildren; Facebook was far more convenient. It was no longer necessary to call a friend and ask about his or her day; Facebook and Twitter updates provided what we needed to know. It was no longer necessary to brave a face-to-face or voice-to-voice conversation about a difficult topic; texting minimized the discomfort. We made choices for our own safety and convenience, but did we really know what we were doing? And when Facebook becomes the *de rigueur* method of keeping in touch with friends who no longer "have time" to call, what real choice does that leave us with? It may be simplistic to subscribe to old-fashioned technological determinism, but it is also simplistic to say that the unintended and unanticipated change resulting from Internet, and later, social media use, are entirely our own doing.

de la Cruz Paragas and Lin pick up on this problem. They draw attention to the need to revisit technological determinism in light of new, interactive media, which function quite differently than "legacy," one-way media such as television. Additionally, drawing on Lewis, Gattiker and numerous other sources, they seek to reframe the discussion of technological determinism using several social theories. They argue an

either/or debate between technological determinism and social constructivism is simplistic. Rather, it is both/and: "TD [technological determinism] and social determinism constitute a continuum, rather than a dichotomy, of theories about the relationship of technology and society" (2014, p. 1528).

de la Cruz Paragas and Lin also point to a more nuanced way of looking at technological determinism, distinguishing between both "hard" and "soft" determinism. Drawing on both Soderberg and Gunkel, they write,

> Hard determinism, according to scholars, ascribes technology with omnipotence in shaping society. Soft determinism, meanwhile, locates the power of technology with respect to other social and cultural factors.... soft determinism understands technology to be a key factor that may facilitate change (2014, p. 1529).

Later, they write, "It is argued that today society and technology reflexively determine each other" (p. 1541).

Rejecting the stigma of technological determinism, subscribing to "soft determinism," and acknowledging the reflexivity of societal reality and technology have a great deal of merit. "Soft determinism" helps us understand that we cannot use technology for our own purposes without also being shaped by it. North Americans certainly embraced technologies and social media because they were hungry for them. But the very act of representing friendship on a web page or with a digital app will, sooner or later, change the way we perceive friendship, if only out of habit, and because we see so many others doing the same. We will forget what it looked like before—and Facebook "friends" will become the new norm. We chose the technology, but the technology also facilitated our choices, and changed us in subtle ways that we do not yet fully understand.

2.6 Next research steps

We go back to my research question: Has social media use made the North American experience of community more individualistic? To supplement my literature review findings, I decided to conduct a series of interviews because further research is required to answer my question adequately.

Rheingold suggests community is possible online, paving the way for an evolved understanding of community. Wellman et. al. offer the term "networked individualism," indicating that social media communities are, in fact, more individualistic than traditional,

in-person communities of the past. Wu Song echoes this idea, noting that social media communities are more like "social clusters around the individual" (2010, p. 267) than traditional communities. What neither Wellman nor Wu Song discuss is how the practice of social media community-building, steeped in individualism, might influence traditional communities. Turkle comes closer to answering my question, writing at length about how computer-mediated communication, including social media, have contributed to greater isolation even though we are perpetually connected—hence the title of her 2011 book, *Alone Together*. Still, she doesn't touch specifically on community. Putnam's work, *Bowling Alone* (2000), addresses another piece of my question by demonstrating that a more individualistic understanding of community isn't limited to the online space—in-person communities have become more individualistic as well. His work does not relate to social media, however.

I want to draw a connection specifically between social media, how it may influence our thinking, and whether the denotation of social media spaces as communities, including how we use them, might influence our understanding of community overall. Therefore, in my next chapters, rather than studying what researchers think about community, individualism and social media, I will examine people's experience firsthand using interviewing as an additional research method. I will look for commonalities in how they define community, including its purpose, as well as for trends in what they value about their communities: perhaps an opportunity to learn, grow and focus on the work of the self, a place to have important needs met, or an important cause or interest. Then I will assess differences between social media users and non-social media users to determine whether there is a pattern.

Chapter 3.

Research Methodology

3.1 Rationale

My hope was that a series of interviews with both social media users and non-social media users, all of whom consider themselves part of a community of some kind, would provide a clearer answer to my research question than my literature review alone. Geertz uses the term "thick description" to describe the information that qualitative methodologies such as interviews can provide (1973, p. 312). More simply put, rich conversation and situational observation provide far different information—and, in some cases, more helpful information—than an entry on a survey form or a census.

This mixing of methodologies, called triangulation, is common in academic research because different methodologies will provide different ways of examining a question. Olsen's thoughts are helpful here. She writes that "triangulation is not aimed merely at validation, but at deepening and widening one's understanding" (2004, p. 1). Thus, series of interviews will allow me to grasp the possible answers to my research question in a richer, more nuanced way.

Silverman suggests that one's research method should be informed by the question (2014, p. 9). This brings me to my second reason for selecting interviews is the subject of my research question: To understand what and how people think about a topic such as community, it is vital to speak directly to people and not only read about others' conversations and research.

My interview style fell broadly within the naturalist approach Silverman describes: "Naturalists argue that "experience" can best be understood through empathetic, open-ended interviews which establish a dialogue in which deep meanings may be transmitted through rich, spontaneous talk" (2014, p. 24). In an attempt to glean rich meaning from my respondents, I began with a basic list of questions, but conducted the interviews like conversations: I listened carefully to my respondents, asking them to explain and give examples, and picking up the threads of their answers to ask further questions in order to learn more. There is always a risk of “anecdotalism” (p. 21) when asking interview subjects about their experiences—that is, there is a risk of generalizing a simple,

personal story rather than recognizing it for what it is: an anecdote. I sought to mitigate this risk by asking for more than one example from respondents and by using a variety of follow-up questions to add to my understanding of their experiences. Additionally, I interviewed several subjects to find meaningful patterns.

I used discourse analysis with a focus on spoken language to examine my findings. Taylor describes discourse analysis as "the close study of language and language use as evidence of aspects of society and societal life" (2013, p. 4). It looks at themes, descriptions, expressions, word choice and other uses of language as evidence of individuals' reality or belief. As I analyzed my interviews, I focused on linguistic themes as well as behavioural descriptions that suggested how my interview respondents think about, experience, understand and construct the concept of community. I used the same approach to examine how their concept of community may or may not reflect individualistic themes such as personal growth, building independence, self-discovery, self-expression and self-actualization.

3.2 Respondent selection and overview

I planned to interview people in two categories: People who use social media, and people who do not. By asking all my participants the same list of questions about community, I planned to observe differences—or lack thereof—in the answers of social media users and non-social media users.

Initially, I planned to interview about a dozen subjects from a broad range, thinking that a variety of perspectives would help enable me to generalize my findings. I realized after a few interviews, however, that this approach would be problematic—too broad of a demographic range might skew my findings unnecessarily. For example, my initial interviews with subjects in their early 20s, or people who do not remember life before the Internet and social media, were quite different from interviews with people over 30, or people who do remember building relationships and communities before the Internet. To increase the likelihood, then, that differences in people's answers would relate to social media use and not other generational and cultural factors, I decided to limit my interview subject pool to people in their 30s, 40s and 50s. As a result of my decision to focus my research by excluding interviewees in their 20s, my interview pool narrowed from 12 to 10.

To further ensure that variability in my interviewees' answers related to their social media use, I ensured that all of my interview subjects were Canadians and

working professionals. Most were from urban areas. I was also intentional about choosing a mix of men and women.

My final interview subjects also had a number of other things in common, which may help further strengthen a case that answer variation may relate to social media use. Though these characteristics were not an intentional part of my recruitment process, those who provided interviews were all Caucasians, have all lived in Canada for several years, and all fall approximately within the middle- to upper-middle-class category. Many have children and are married or with long-term partners, and many identify as Christians. These similarities, many of which I share, may be attributed to my recruitment process—that is, I drew largely from my own network.

To select my 10 participants, I used SFU FluidSurveys to ask questions about people's ages, social media use and willingness to participate in an interview. My survey questions are listed in Appendix A. I distributed the survey via SFU email, social media and word of mouth in my personal network. This is a form of snowball sampling, in which a study's subjects help recruit other subjects, making the number increase in size like a snowball. It is sometimes also called chain sampling (Frey 2018).

I received approximately 30 responses to my survey. I ultimately screened out people who did not wish to participate in an interview and who were either younger than 30 or older than 60. I also screened out casual or occasional social media users, as well as people who recently "quit" social media. I wanted to compare non-users—people who have never used social media or who haven't used it for at least a year—to power users, or people who indicated in their surveys that they use social media for an hour or more each day. My premise, as mentioned above, was that the marked difference in social media use would provide a greater likelihood of variance in discussions about community. If such differences existed, I wanted to increase my chances of observing them.

At the end of my interview respondent selection process, my chosen respondents were as follows. For the purposes of the discussion and analysis in Chapter 4, I have assigned them pseudonyms:

Social media users

- Two men in their 30s, Mark and Patrick
- A man in his 40s, Andrew
- A woman in her 40s, Sarah

- A woman in her 50s, Rose

Non-social media users

- Two women in their 30s, Isabel and Lily
- Two women in their 40s, Grace and Rachel
- A man in his 30s, John

3.3 Interview and coding processes

I did a mix of in-person and video interviews. I avoided telephone interviews because I wanted the benefit of a face-to-face connection to facilitate a richer, more natural conversation. With a couple of exceptions with respondents who were very brief or very talkative, interviews were approximately 30 minutes long. I started with the following list of questions, and added follow-up questions as I felt I needed to for clarification. My primary focus was on the community questions—I asked respondents to speak as much as they could about their communities, how they experienced them and why they found them valuable.

Interview questions:

1. Tell me about your social media habits.
2. How do you define community?
3. How do you find it? Experience it?
4. Tell me about a community you belong to.
5. When did you realize it was a community?
6. What is important to you in your communities?
7. What do you look for?
8. What do you contribute to your communities? How?
9. What proportion of your community/relationship-building takes place online?
10. Can community exist online?
11. Do you experience it online?

I used a transcribing service called Rev to transcribe my audio files. I then coded the data using a qualitative data analysis tool called NVivo to help uncover patterns. As I examined the transcripts and re-experienced the interviews, I observed several themes and categorized blocks of language representing an idea into the following themed categories, or nodes:

Nodes:

1. Collective or commonality
2. Communication
3. Connection

4. Intentionality
5. Need
6. Passion or values
7. Trust
8. Individualization, individuation or individualism[2]

If respondents were discussing the importance of shared values within their communities, or the fact that they chose to build communities with people of similar interests, I coded the language as "Passion or values." If they were discussing the importance of living or being in common with others, I coded their language as "collective." If they mentioned the importance of mutual need in a community, I coded the block of language referring to that idea as "need"—and so on.

Individuation was the most important code in my analysis process because I was looking for language, themes and ideas that reflected individuation throughout my interview process. To help clarify language or themes that I would define as individualistic, and to make my coding process more consistent, I ensured that language fell into one of the following descriptive categories, all of which describe a process or characteristic of individuation:

1. Feeling loved or cared for
2. Personal development or growth
3. Building personal independence
4. Self-discovery or self-expression
5. Self-actualization
6. Feeling personally supported, or having one's needs met

[2] Due to space constraints, this node is represented in the charts below with the word "Individuation."

Chapter 4.

Discussion and Analysis

In this chapter, I will examine and analyze each interview individually, starting with non-social media users and moving to social media users. I will note, analyze and discuss key themes and patterns related to individualization, individuation and individualism within each, and then summarize my overall findings at the end of the chapter. For the purposes of this part of my study, I will observe and describe individualism in respondents' answers terms of degree, or placement on a spectrum with individualism at one end and collectivism at the other. This is informed by Hui's "Measurement of individualism-collectivism" (1988).

4.1 Non-social media users

4.1.1 Lily

Lily, a woman in her 30s, is not a social media user. During her interview, she defined community as people outside her immediate family whom she sees on a regular basis, whose lives are intertwined with hers, and who are trustworthy and supportive. In her words, "You're going to them with issues, and you're actually expecting a certain level of trust from them, and respect from them." Lily differentiated between a network and community, saying that networks, according to her understanding, are something she might just use, whereas a community is more "give and take"—that is, something to which she contributes in a meaningful way. Another essential community element for Lily, and perhaps the most important, as I will demonstrate below, is an element that community members intentionally share, whether goals, values or interests.

Lily experiences community with the people at the barn where she boards her horse, with her colleagues at work, at her church and, to a certain extent, with her online classmates, with whom she interacts as she works on a university degree. She considers these groups communities largely because of what she and the members share. Among Lily and her colleagues, who work in the medical profession, there is a shared passion for their work of helping others. "Something about it is a little different than working at McDonald's," she said. "We've come from very different backgrounds, but all of us are really actually united in that one goal: patients. That makes a big

difference." She strives to contribute to this community by sharing the load and helping her colleagues succeed with their work:

> I think I just really try to be there. Like, I just think if personality-wise, and who I try to be, as a person. I just try to be help…just trying to be that person that says yes, knowing how difficult it is to ask for help and wanting people to have that reassurance, like, "Yeah, we can do this. Let's get it done."

This dedication to her colleagues helps demonstrate Lily's priority within this community: she chooses to articulate her commitment in terms of the goal of helping patients. On the individualistic-collectivist spectrum, this value is more collectivist, or group-oriented, than individualistic.

Lily also finds community at the barn where she boards her horse because she and the other boarders share a deep love of horses, as well as a similar way of working with horses. Lily said that she once left a barn community because there weren't shared values in terms of what others thought her passion for horses should look like—for example, how often she rode her horse or whether she decided to compete. Shared values, passion and mutual support were vital for Lily's sense of community. None of these suggest a particularly individualistic understanding of community.

Among Lily's church community, there are shared vales and morals, as well as a mutual commitment to what she calls "spiritual growth," referring to a strengthening of her Christian faith through activities such as Bible study, discussion and prayer. For Lily, "spiritual growth" may be similar to personal growth and reflect an individualistic worldview, but it is important to note that she described her commitment to spiritual growth within the context of the group—it seemed as important for the other community members as it did for herself, which suggests a slightly more collectivist understanding of community.

Lily noted that she is very involved with her "small group" at church, a group of 10 people who meet regularly and intentionally. She also noted that she contributes as much as she receives to the group: "As much as it is about spiritual growth for me, it is really about sharing my experience with others so that they can take whatever parts of it that they need for their growth."

For Lily, the strength of the community seems to correlate with the perceived importance of the members' shared values. That is, the shared commitment to Christian values and morals binds community members tightly together, and takes precedence over personal comfort and preferences. It is noteworthy that the values exist beyond

their group, and for Lily, seem certain, objective and authoritative, as is evident in her reference to the Christian Bible:

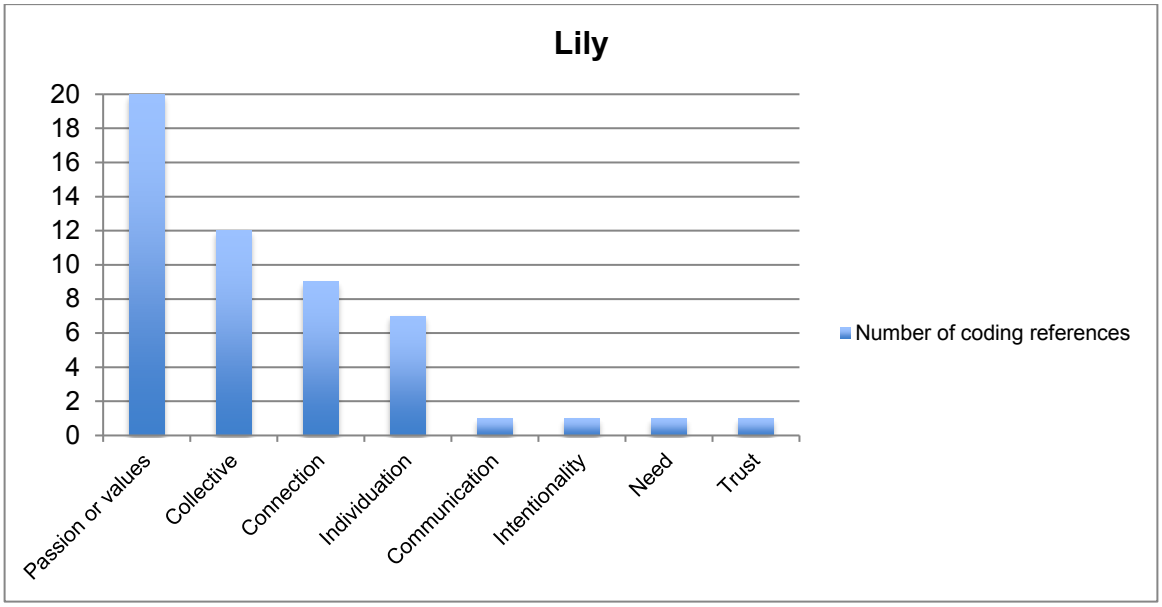
> No one's, sort of, picking the values, like they've been...like, we are just saying these are the values, and they're written, and they're true…I find that we are not all just making our own values and saying, "Well, you know, yeah you can do that so long as you're not hurting me..." kind of thing. I just find that there's this extra step up of, "Okay, we are all actually conforming to these values we agree with. And that tends to, somehow, just, blanket everything else. It just takes some of the abrasion of some of the personalities [away]. Because I think you are reminded, "Ugh, this person is so annoying, but you're like okay, but Jesus..." And it's so prominent. Like you're either sitting in church or you're with your small group, and that's what you're talking about, so the reminder is constantly there.

This further suggests that Lily's understanding of community is more collectivist than individualistic.

Graph 1[3] below breaks down Lily's references to the themes I listed in Chapter 3. It notes 20 references to shared interests or values—by far the most common theme in our interview. This is followed by 12 references I coded as "collective" and nine as "connection." Examples of these codes are her discussions of what she has in common with her colleagues. There were seven references to the individualistic ideas I mentioned above such as personal growth, and one reference each to communication, intentionality, need and trust—themes that surfaced in my other interviews.

[3] Note that the absence of a node in a graph indicates that the interviewee did not say anything coded to that category.

Graph 1: Lily



This breakdown suggests that shared ideas and values are foundational to Lily's understanding of community. Is also suggests that Lily's understanding of community is largely non-individualistic, and more oriented to the community's or group's health. Individualism focuses on self-expression, self-actualization and development. Lily's communities, by contrast, prioritize something outside the community members, such as a shared passion or value set, as well as the strength of the community itself. I cannot definitively attribute Lily's non-individualistic view to her lack of social media use, but analysis of subsequent interviews should reveal some helpful patterns.

4.1.2 Rachel

Rachel, a woman in her 40s, is not a social media user. Before defining community during our interview, she said that for her, a definition is challenging because the word has lost some of its meaning due to being used in so many different ways. She did some up with a definition, however, after reflecting on the etymology:

> If I think about the word itself, and the associated words like communion...I'm assuming the "comm" is something like "with," and unity, so it's living together in some kind of unity. Not necessarily a full agreement, but unity still. As I translate

> that into life, I think it means having some kind of significant relationship that can stand the test of time.

Rachel's understanding of the value and purpose of community is informed by her theological perspective: "If I'm created in the image of God, and God is triune, and there are multiple persons within the Godhead, then I think the best way to reflect that image is also in some kind of community." In essence, Rachel values and wishes to live in community because she believes God, a higher, other power, created her to do so. This is reflected in what she values about her church communities:

> Part of it is, again, that coming back to the theological perspective of valuing a connection to the community of God, and that this particular body is able to welcome people in and provide a place of rest. So, those are things that are important for me. But they're not just important for me. I hope...I can't be sure of this. I hope it's not just an individualistic, consumer kind of approach to it. I think it's also important for the health of people more broadly. And so, because...to be able to be part of a group that can provide a context that can contribute to health more broadly is something that's important to me.

There are signs of both individualism and collectivism here. In addition to being connected to the "community of God," Rachel also values being able to contribute to a broader community of people by being welcoming, offering rest and contributing to their health. It is noteworthy that she acknowledges that an individualistic drive to feel welcome and affirmed may be part of why she values her church community, but her language suggests that she values the community for what it is and does for others at least as much as she values what it accomplishes for her.

In discussing another community, a small, faith-based college where she was employed for a number of years[4], Rachel spoke about the importance of shared values and passions, and about the fact that mutual commitment to those passions and values helps bind the group together. Her college community members wanted to see young people trained in critical thinking and biblical literacy, and learn to live in community themselves. "I think, to some extent, this abstract concept of community, at this point in history, is often driven by these shared values, these shared priorities that we place in life," Rachel said. "And then, because we can work on them together, there's this commitment to each other in that." In her definition of community above, Rachel mentioned relationships that "stand the test of time." This suggests that long-term

[4] Disclosure: I am a graduate of this college, and was also employed there for a number of years.

commitment to one another and the cause is part of what adds to the longevity of a community.

In addition to mutual commitments and values, Rachel also spoke at length about mutual need and dependence within community. In fact, she used the word "need" in our interview 26 times. Here is one example:

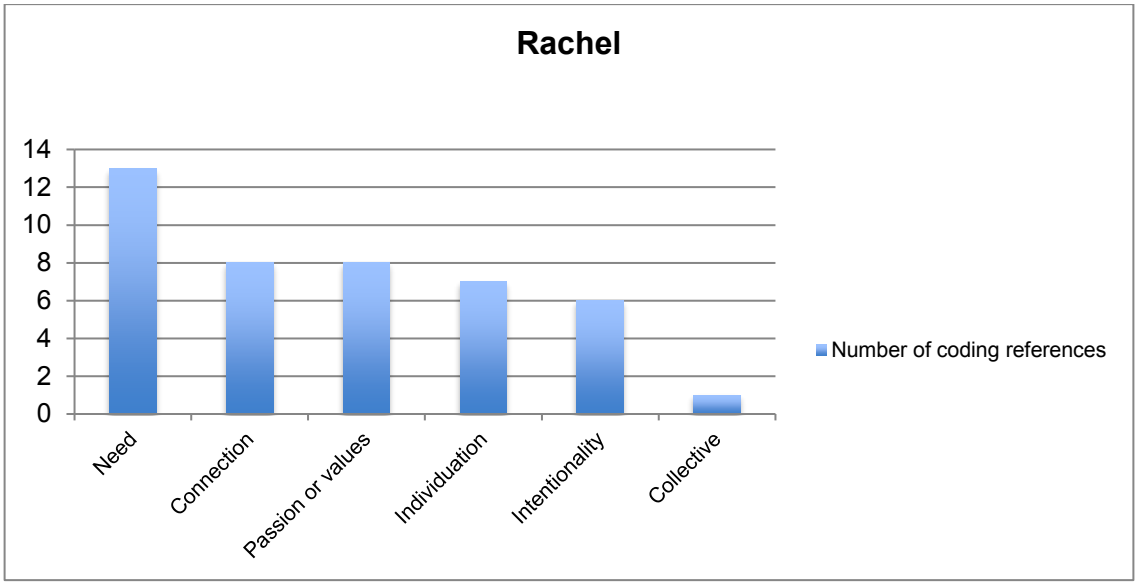
> I think, to some extent, where the strongest community comes from is when there's actually a real need for one another, and a recognized need. Because if we don't feel that we need one...if there isn't actually a need...Not just feel, but an actual need for one another, a recognized need, then I can walk away at any point and not really feel like I'm losing anything. But if there's truly need, then that draws me into a relationship with people who I might not agree with, that I might not have similar views on a whole bunch of things, but because of whatever reason, I need them.

Rachel noted that both need and choice also characterize her communities, noting a group of her friends in particular: "[T]here are four of us who make really intentional efforts to stay in touch with one another and get together occasionally, because the relationships are important and we recognize that we need one another." Rachel noted above that without mutual need, something would be lost in leaving the community. She also affirmed that need changes a community's tone. This suggests that for Rachel, strong communities are both self-selected and need-based in addition to being based on mutual passions and commitment. There are shades of individualistic thinking here given the focus on personal choice and on meeting personal needs. However, it is telling that Rachel spoke not just about the importance of meeting her own personal needs, but also the fact that members of the group need one another. This suggests value in and of the group as a whole.

The nature of the shared values and commitments in Rachel's church and college communities are also noteworthy. They relate to some greater cause or higher purpose—something beyond the people in the community—rather than just the growth of the individuals within the community. These themes suggest more collectivist or group-oriented thinking.

A breakdown of my coding references from Rachel's interview, captured in Graph 2 below, reflect the themes of mutual need, shared passion and values, intentionality, and individualism in our conversation, and provide some insight into their importance.

Graph 2: Rachel



I coded six references to individuation, including Rachel's reference to why she valued her church community, above, as well as the fact that she makes conscious choices about her communities due to personal preference rather than the greater good of the community. I coded 13 references ideas depicting need. In the context of Rachel's interview, it is difficult to classify references to need as either individualistic or not given the references to need were largely mutual, but certainly individualism cannot be separated entirely from the idea of meeting needs. References to non-individualistic ideas were as follows: connection and shared passion or values were coded eight times each, intentionality six times and collective once. In light of the previous discussion and these numbers, it is clear that Rachel's use of language reflects an understanding of community that is both collectivist and individualistic—neither one is clearly dominant.

4.1.3 John

John, a man in his 30s, said he has not used Facebook or Instagram in over a year, and that he was never a "heavy" social media user. He describes community this way: " I guess to me, a community would be like a group of sort of like-minded individuals, or a group of people who are sharing an interest."

All of John's examples of communities relate to a shared passion or interest. His primary example of community is a group of people with whom he meets with to play

Dungeons and Dragons, a popular role-playing game that must be played as a group. He said this particular community is valuable for him because it is a shared pastime that allows him to be social with people face-to-face, unlike his video-gaming hobby. Being with other people in person is important to him. Additionally, creating something is important to him. He said,

> I like the idea of getting together with a group of my friends, where we all share this similar interest in this hobby, and we're all interested in collaborating together to help create a sort of improvised, group storytelling experience, you know?...We're all playing different characters of sorts, and we're all kind of doing our thing. And I find that to be very valuable...Another analogy, you can think of it like making a band to play music. You know, like everyone kind of brings something different to the table. So I think that's a big reason why I really enjoy it. Because it's creative, it's collaborative, it gives me an excuse to get out of the house and socialize.

On the surface, John's description of why his Dungeons and Dragons community is important to him suggests simply that he enjoys being able to participate in an enjoyable activity with friends. This is an important element, but I think there is more at play here because it is clear that he does not just value what he gets out of the experience as an individual. Each member contributes something to create a story and a memorable experience. This act of collaboration and creativity, as well as the product, are important to John. This suggests an understanding of community that may lean more collectivist than individualistic.

Some of John's other thoughts on community suggest the same thing. When I asked John why shared passion or values are important to him in his communities, he responded,

> I value having people in my life that share my interests or that feel good to hang around with. I don't care about community in the sense of like, having a wider group of people. So that might be why I lost interest, or wasn't really that interested in Facebook and Instagram from the get-go. Because I don't place a lot of value in, or I don't want to place a lot of value in, getting a lot of likes or re-tweets, or any of that sort of stuff. Like, that doesn't really interest me. I prefer getting to know people and having...Sort of like, you know, when you meet individuals there's like that kind of click and you can kind of talk to them about stuff you're both interested in and excited about and that sort of thing.

His reference to people who "feel good" to hang around with does suggest an element of individualism in his interactions with others. It is interesting, however, that immediately following his reference to "feeling good," he said he was disinterested in the self-

affirmation that likes and re-tweets on social media platforms provide. He is more interested spending time with people who share his interests in and excitement about a topic.

John made brief mentions of other communities with which he is involved, including his work community, and a community of people he is connected to through his personal trainer. There is some cross-over between these communities: some of the people he works and exercises with also play Dungeons and Dragons. But in each community, a shared passion or interest binds members together: Within John's personal training community, it is a commitment to fitness, and within his work community, it is a passion for the creative and technical work they do and the products they create. Community in these cases is not just about feeling good in one another's presence, or about growing as people, though growth is certainly part of the process. Here, community is about a commitment to the group via a passion for something bigger than the group, and beyond the group. This is more characteristic of collectivism than individualism.

In discussing why he values investing in shared interests with others, John mentioned growth in the form of a changed perspective as a benefit:

> I guess that's one of the other nice things about the, sort of like, finding a common interest, like a group of people that have something that you're interested in, but they probably have other things that you don't really know about. So like, you go to a life-drawing session, you start chatting with someone there, and you're both interested in life drawing, but maybe their side interest is they're really into Russian ballet, I don't know, or whatever. And you get to know that sort of mind, that sort of perspective, I suppose.

This reference to the value of growing as a person is an individualistic idea. It is worth noting, however, that the very brief time John spent discussing this element of community suggests he may see it as a side benefit rather than a primary benefit. He offered this idea only when I prompted him about what he might look for in seeking another community after answering several other questions about his current communities. He soon returned to the idea of shared interests and connections with others.

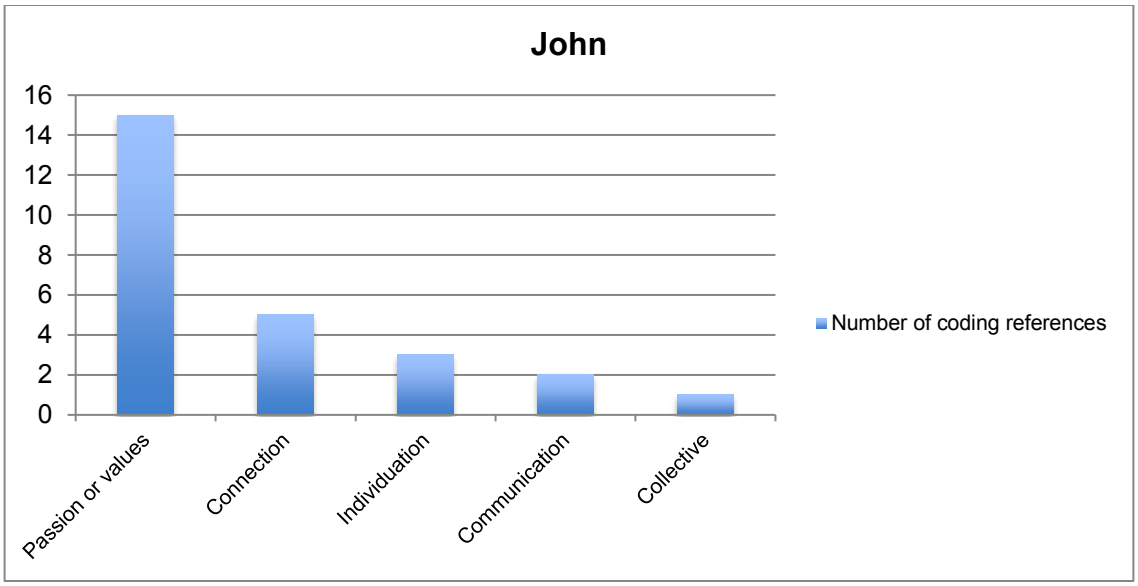
John also referred to care for other people in our conversation about what community means to him:

> I don't place a lot of value in trying to keep up with a lot of people, honestly. I'd rather meet a few people and kind of foster much deeper connections, in the sense that I like kind of like learn...you know, having similar interests, sharing a similar sense of humor is very important to me. And getting to know things about the people over time, you know? Like, what sort of stuff excites them, what are the happy moments of their lives, and often times also finding out like, what are some of the tragedies in their lives? You know, the various different ways they've had their hearts broken.

When prompted, John talked about valuing others rather than feeling valued. Prioritizing feeling valued and affirmed is part of individuation; thus, this description of his community preferences further suggests he does not have an especially individualistic understanding of community and its purpose.

Looking at the themes that arose from John's interview in aggregate, represented in Graph 3 below, is further evidence for this hypothesis.

Graph 3: John



Like-mindedness, or shared passions and values, was the most dominant theme in our discussion, with 15 total coded references. Connection was a distant second, with only five references. References to communication arose twice, and collectivity just once. There was some overlap in these ideas. For example, a statement about a shared interest in a particular video game and convening to play it was coded to both shared passion and values and collectivity.

I coded only three statements or ideas related to individuation in John's interview. Two are mentioned above: his references to feeling good while spending time with people, and widening his perspective. A third refers to personal reward from pursuing his interest in Dungeons and Dragons with friends: "It's very much a hobby where you get out of it what you bring to the table, so to speak. So like, the more energy and interest that you kind of put into it, the more reward you'll kind of get out of it, you know?" This is a subtle reference to individuation, and depends on one's interpretation of personal reward. If John is referring to the personal satisfaction derived from creating a high-quality story or storytelling experience or becoming a better storyteller, which he may well be, this relates to personal development and self-affirmation, which are both part of individuation. Certainly, John's experience of community is not completely free of individualistic tendencies—that would be surprising given his cultural surroundings. Given the proportion of time he spent discussing non-individualistic ideas by comparison, however, it is reasonable to conclude that his understanding of the concept of community is largely non-individualistic.

4.1.4 Isabel

Isabel, a woman in her 30s, is unusual for her age in that she has never been a social media user, with the exception of using Twitter occasionally as part of her employment several years ago. She prefers to cultivate relationships and community via the telephone and face to face. Her initial definition of community was very general: "A group of people with some sort of commonality." She said she had not spent much time considering the definition before, though it is a familiar term; its use is common in her church circles.

When she spoke about her communities during our conversation, the most common themes were commonality, and shared passion and values. Of course, there was some overlap between those ideas. But in essence, she said that for a group of people to function as a community, they need to have something meaningful in common. She mentioned that people who live in the same geographical neighbourhood and look out for one another could be a community, though this isn't currently her experience. During our discussion, we touched on the concept of a network, because networks often have something in common. Isabel said that the differences between a community and a network, in her opinion, are purpose and relationship. For her, a network is practical and

typically consists of people giving and receiving career-oriented help. In a community, the people are in relationship with one another, and there is more at stake.

Her primary example of a community was her work community. Isabel is a social worker, and she spoke at length about the community she experiences among a group of co-workers, and the fact that their passion for their shared work binds them together:

> [W]e have in common the same passion for this work. We have a similar way of thinking about the job that we do, a similar approach with the families that we work with...people who are excited about the work that they do and for the same kind of reasons that I am, and who have a sort of similar approach...but the people who I would feel like I'm most in community with are the people I can sit down and chat with about files. Like, "So how are you doing that, and do you have ideas?" And I know that we're relatively coming from the same place as far as our work values go.

The shared passion for protecting children and helping families, as well as the pressure, stress and heartbreak that often go with such a career, are a powerful bond. It is important to keep in mind that this work community is not entirely voluntary. Each employee is paid and required to be present. I would argue, however, that presence does not constitute a community. Showing up is not a choice, but building a community is—and Isabel's colleagues could choose to not work in community. What creates the community experience for Isabel is the relationship she shares with her co-workers. "I don't just show up and do my job and keep my head down and leave. At work, I have relationships," she said. Figuratively speaking, her colleagues are not just moving in the same direction—they're helping each other along the way as they offer support, ideas and suggestions. Isabel offered an example of this:

> Like, if I'm struggling with something and they'll be like, "Well, I just heard you say, you know, that [a parent] did this. Do you not think that you could build on that and that that's something positive?" And I don't always see it when I'm too close to it, but if I have people that I work with who I can kind of chat things through and I know that they have the same kind of values as me, I wouldn't necessarily go to the person who feels the need to apprehend every second child they work with. I would go to the people who think the same way that I do, but are maybe going to push me further in that.

There are both individualistic and non-individualistic tendencies here. She mentions co-workers offering help, and being pushed further as professionals. There are elements of self-affirmation and personal growth here, which are a reflection of individualism. I would

argue, however, that here, the non-individualistic current is stronger. She refers to shared values and passions, as well as the group's commitment to the work of helping families. These things seem to supersede Isabel's commitment to herself as an individual, which suggests an overall non-individualistic understanding of this particular community.

As mentioned previously, for Isabel, the combination of shared passion and relationship is key in her work community. This is quite different from her church community. She attends church weekly, but lacks the time to invest in relationships there, so the community feels weaker. "You know, certainly I see it as a community," she said. "I just don't really feel part of it right now because I don't feel like I'm really connecting or making that effort." This reveals the intentionality component of Isabel's understanding of community, demonstrating that for her, strong community involves making contributions to the group and not simply growing and benefitting—a nod to a commitment to the group rather than the self.

Like-mindedness is another key component of Isabel's communities, including her work community. She mentioned like-mindedness in her adoption community as well. Isabel adopted a special-needs child from overseas a few years ago, and before making this decision, she spent several years advocating for special-needs children overseas. Part of this advocacy, and of her adoption journey, was spending a lot of time online reading blogs, commenting on blogs and writing blog posts about adoption. Isabel considered her fellow bloggers, orphan advocates and adoptive parents community members even though they never physically met:

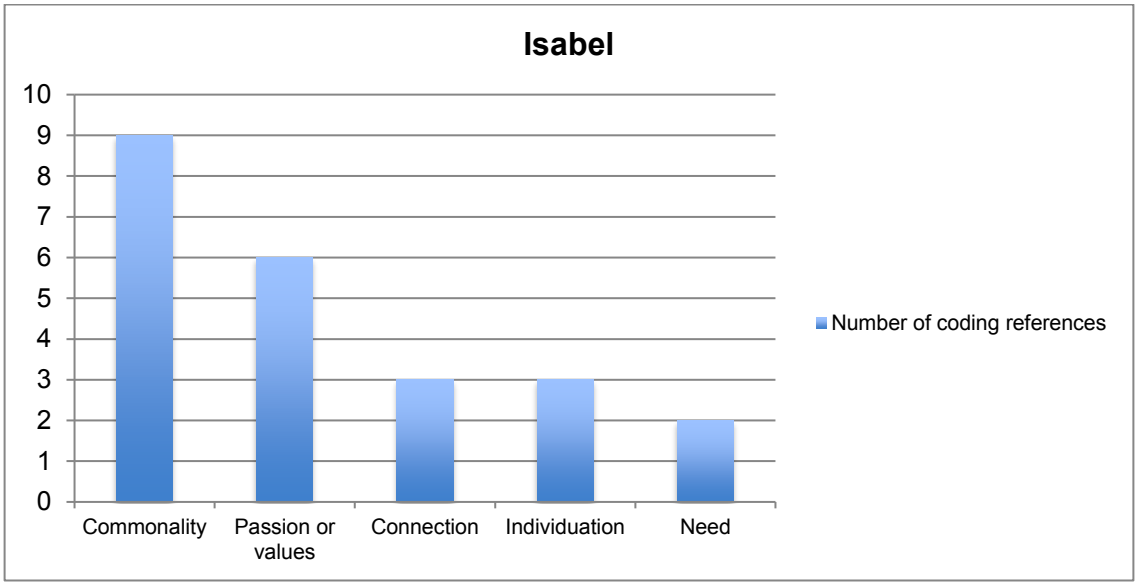
> I know that when I was adopting, if you had asked me about my community back then, I would have included an online community built entirely of people I'd never met...So people who were following my blog, or people whose blog I followed. Back then, I was commenting much more. People were commenting on mine...I was in my adoption process, and in that first year home, that was a huge part of my community...They were mostly also adoptive parents. A lot of them have children with special needs. That connection with people who had been there, done what I was doing, that encouragement from people who had been there and done it, and feeling like I had them behind me.

Her online adoption community met her requirement of being a group of like-minded people with whom she shared a relationship. Her description reveals both individualistic and non-individualistic tendencies. She refers to feeling supported, affirmed and encouraged on her adoption journey. This may suggest an individualistic mindset. On

the other hand, Isabel and the others in her community were also highly motivated by their love and concern for special-needs children who needed parents, and for their own desire to help them. This constitutes a commitment to something significant beyond the group and its individual members. It is unsurprising to see both tendencies within a community or a person's understanding of community—people are too complex to be one way or another. The challenge is in observing a trend overall, if one exists.

A brief quantitative analysis of Isabel's interview, summarized in Graph 4, suggests she leans in one direction:

Graph 4: Isabel



In total, there are nine references to commonality, six to shared passion or interests, three to connection and two to need. There are only three to individuation, which I discussed above. Even in light of the fact that there is some overlap between references to commonality and mutual passions and values, the numbers, as well as the discussion above, suggest a trend toward a non-individualistic understanding of community for Isabel.

4.1.5 Grace

Grace, a woman in her 40s, has always intentionally avoided social media, and she needed no prompting to share an articulate definition of community: "Community is

people that are intentionally living in some sense of engagement, like where they intentionally engage in each other's lives for mutual benefit." Intentionality is a key part of her sense of community—she used the word twice in the above definition and an additional 12 times throughout her interview, making it her most used word to describe community. For Grace, intentionality is what separates a group of friends from a community. When I asked her about the difference between the two, she said,

> A group of friends, I would say, are just ... people that you go to the bar with at the end of the workday, work week, kind of thing. It's just there's superficiality almost about the interaction that never really gets to any level of depth. If somebody says, "How are you doing?" they don't really mean how are you doing. So I think community allows for a place where you can be very real and vulnerable and there's safety in that. At least most of the community that I've experienced has been along that line where it's just it connects more on a heart level than on a just superficial brain level. It goes deeper. It's people that actually care about you, and you care about them and the goings-on of each other's lives.

When I asked Grace what drives the intentionality for her, she said,

> I think all of it comes probably out of just experiencing God's love for me. And just wanting to provide that same grace and embrace for other people. So that for me, it's kind of a Christian answer in some ways, but I mean, it really is what drives [me]. I know I am cared for, and not everybody has that, so maybe I can be somebody that can care for people in that way.

These two excerpts help demonstrate how different Grace's experience is from the four other non-social media users I interviewed for this study. Her perspective seems more individualistic than the others. In her descriptions of community, she comes back to being able to be "real," "vulnerable" and "safe" with her fellow community members, who truly care about one another. This reflects the self-affirmation element of individualism.

One of Grace's examples of a community was a group of people she lived with in Mexico in her 20s. The group lived at an orphanage where they cared for local children. She described it as a very "formative" time of her life—and given her age at the time, this is to be expected. Grace's description of why this community was valuable for her further suggests fact that self-growth was a priority in that particular community:

> I didn't know anybody down there. So just the freedom of that was wonderful and having the chance to figure things out, but still to do it in a community where you were fully supported. There was always wisdom available to you, and people who

> mentored, and elders, so to speak—people who had walked the path were there to cheer you on in yours.

Language such as being "fully supported," "mentored" and "cheer you on" suggest a commitment to self-actualization, or fulfillment of one's potential and identity, which reflects an individualistic worldview.

It would be inaccurate to suggest that individualism was the only priority at play in Grace's experience of her Mexico community. When I asked her to expand on what binds her communities together, she said,

> At least in the communities that I've lived in, there's always been some kind of a vision for something. Like I lived in Mexico for six years at an orphanage, and we were just all there working for the same cause...I mean, we were there because all of us in some way had felt led to go there. It wasn't even so much that hey, I think it's really going to be a nice thing to do work in an orphanage and get to do it in hot Mexico. But I think everybody there felt that they had been called to a certain extent. And our vision was we were there for the kids. And we all had our roles within that.

This description reflects a commitment to a common vision for the group—caring for children who needed them. This is a non-individualistic value. Grace also mentioned calling. Given the fact that the orphanage was a Christian community, and given the other language Grace used throughout her interview, it is safe to conclude that she felt the "calling" mentioned above came from God—another mutual commitment to something larger than the community members themselves. This lends some balance of individualistic and non-individualistic tendencies within Grace's understanding of this community.

Given Grace's experience in Mexico took place in her 20s, when an individualistic mindset might have been more central to her way of being or thinking, I thought it was important to delve into some of the communities she experiences today. She described two in which she participates actively, both relating to the church. One is a community of fellow church-goers and colleagues at the church where she worked for several years, and another is a group of friends with whom she connects regularly, and which she described as sort of a home church. In describing why her church community is valuable for her, she said,

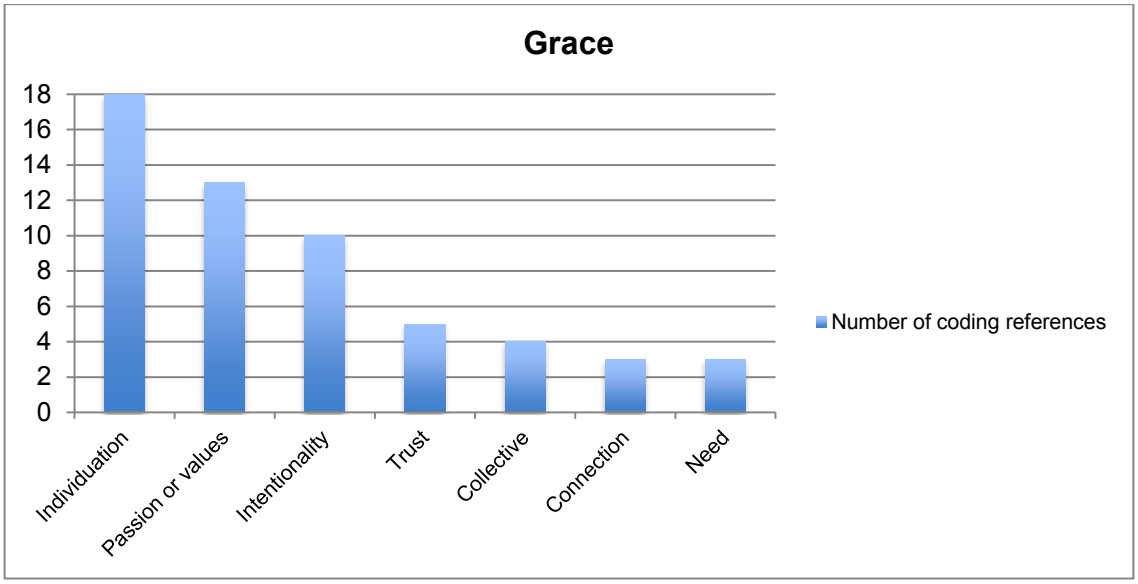
> [All] of us have different struggles and challenges and also joys along the way, and it's just nice to have somebody to share it with, just kind of walk the path with you

> ...and knows the story and knows the background without having to ask questions about where you're coming from because they know—they've been there...Obviously with the church aspect there, it was just that doing life God's way and encouraging each other and growing in that, so that was probably the big thing that ultimately bound us together and got us connected. Through young adults' group we were on the same journey of learning to live this life in authenticity. And what that looks like with all of the messes and the successes that go with that. It was nice to have a group of people that you could fail with and still be loved and embraced.

She shared many of the same ideas while describing her home church community: "When I think of three girls that we've been meeting irregularly, now more regularly, to pray together, they're my closest friends very easily. And the trust is just implicit. They know that grungiest, dirtiest, ugliest stuff about me, and there's never any finger pointing. And it's vice-versa." Many of the same values that she described in her Mexico community are also reflected here. Grace mentioned being known and encouraged, growing, authenticity or being real, feeling loved and valued and a lack of judgment. All of these things suggest an individualistic mindset of prioritizing the individual's growth and identity.

That said, it is important to note that in the community Grace described, the commitment to care and growth is mutual and communal. Grace mentioned previously that her intentionality comes from "God's love" for her. There is a suggestion of collectivism in the idea of a group or community being united by the love of God, so it is essential not to paint Grace's understanding of community with a singular, individualistic brush. The breakdown of language in Graph 5 below, however, does suggest that individualism may be a dominant theme in Grace's understanding of community.

Graph 5: Grace



In Grace's interview, the most common theme was individuation, with 18 references, many of which I discussed above. There were also 13 references to a shared passion or values, 10 references to ideas about intentionality, five references to trust, four references to collectivity, and three references each to connection and need. Individualism accounts for just under a third of her references, which sets Grace apart the other four non-social media users. I'll discuss this further after examining the interviews with my five avid social media users.

4.2 Social media users

4.2.1 Sarah

Sarah, a woman in her 40s, is an avid social media user, using it frequently both for work and for personal reasons. Her primary platforms are Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. She defines community as follows:

> Community, to me, is connecting with like-minded individuals or people who have a common interest, who share a passion or a movement or a cause that they believe in. For me, I always look at community in a very positive way. I feel like it's really empowering and brings people together.

A few things about Sarah's definition of community are noteworthy. First is the fact that, much like the non-social media users, connecting with like-minded people who are focused on something beyond themselves is paramount. Second, Sarah immediately referred to the personal benefit she derives from communities by describing them as "empowering." Within her definition of community, at least, there appears to be a balance of both individualism and collectivism at work. Third—and Sarah has this in common with most of the other social media users I interviewed—she doesn't differentiate between online and offline communities. They are intertwined. This is consistent with discussions of social media I found during my literature review, and with my own experience as a social media user. Social media is not separate from physical reality; it simply supplements face-to-face contact for most people (Wellman et. al. 2003, p. 16).

Delving into Sarah's descriptions of her own communities is helpful. She said this about her running community:

> We've come to be a community that you sign up for a race, and you're sharing it with each other, and then you know that you're going to be seeing each other...face to face. It's hugging it out, and cheering each other on, and congratulating everybody after you've crossed the finish line...What's valuable to me? I think because it's such a positive experience where I think runners naturally we're a little bit of endorphin junkies. Because we get that runner's high. It's just always an extremely supportive and positive group to connect with. I find that really empowering and just very uplifting.

Sarah's language suggests that what she values most in the community is the mutual affirmation, support and encouragement—all characteristic of self-actualization, which suggests an individualistic mindset. It is important to note that part of the reason for this focus is likely the nature of the community's shared passion: Running is often an individual sport, and the focus is being better, faster and stronger. It would be unusual for the focus to be on anything other than the accomplishment and the journey. What is more telling, perhaps, is the fact that Sarah identified this community as such an important one for her. Perhaps the focus on self-accomplishment resonates particularly deeply with her.

Sarah also talked about community among her group of friends:

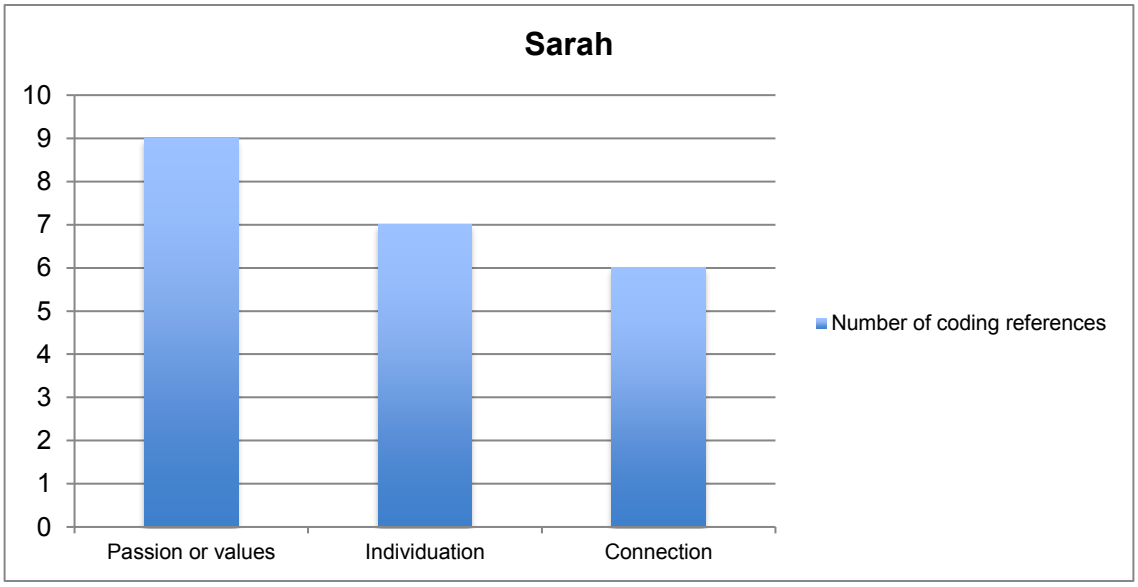
> My longest and dearest friends, we originally kept [in touch] because we played on the same soccer team...Some of us still do. To this day, there's a couple of us still

> playing, but most of them have either gone over and had kids, and they're busy with all of those activities instead. Yeah, soccer was a part of our glue, our conduit.

When I asked Sarah why this community is valuable to her, she said, "I think it's probably a sense of belonging, the feeling that it's part of the fabric of me as a person and again because the value that I put on friendship in general is really high in my world." Her reference to this community as part of her identity is individualistic: It suggests that she values her soccer community because it validates her sense of who she is: a soccer player, an athlete and a friend.

Looking quantitatively at Sarah's interview affirms the importance of individualism in her descriptions of community. As shown below in Graph 6, the most common theme in her interview, with nine coded references, was shared passion and interests—much like many of her non-social media user counterparts. The second most common coded theme, however, was individuation, at seven coded references. This is followed by connection at six references.

Graph 6: Sarah



It is worth noting that even seven references to individualism, or 32 per cent of total coded references, represents a higher proportion of total references than among the non-social media users overall. Lily's interview had seven references, or 13 per cent.

Rachel had seven, or 16 per cent. John and Isabel each had three, or 12 and 13 per cent respectively. Grace had 18, or 32 per cent, like Sarah.

4.2.2 Patrick

Patrick is a man in his 30s, and he uses social media upwards of an hour per day. His definition of community is in line with that of many of my other interview subjects: "I'd say community would be a group of people who may organize themselves around shared experiences of some kind or an idea." Again, we encounter the ubiquitous idea that community members have something in common. Patrick gave a few examples of his communities. One is his church community:

> My church community is important to me, because it is a source of support, I would say. Communities for me are places where I both give and receive said support. The church community is very, very important to me in both regards. So, yeah, support definitely, but also to have a place to exist. Where we can share experiences related to each other. Where we can get opportunities to pass empathy. These are very important. Without communities, we would be wandering aimlessly through life, in my view.

A number of things are revealed here about Patrick's understanding of the purpose of community. First, he mentions the importance of receiving personal support, which will add to his comfort level. He also mentions "having a place to exist," and otherwise "wandering aimlessly through life," which point to community as a place for him to belong and fulfill part of his personal purpose—thus helping him construct part of his identity. He also talks about sharing experiences and passing empathy, both of which add to an individual's confidence and comfort level, allowing them to function more fully as independent citizens. All of these tendencies can be attributed to individualism.

Patrick also talked about his gaming and work communities, noting that each community, for him, serves a different purpose:

> I would say that they are different parts...I would be more or less vulnerable, depending on the community. Some are very professional, some are more social, some would be more real, like I've given and I'll get very different things from my work community than, say, my family. Same with my gaming community. That one is just for fun. It's a place where I'm sure I could share some kind of need, and maybe people would be like, "Hey, I'll help you with that need," but that's not the place where I would go and say, "I've just had a really rough day at work."... So, sharing different parts of me with different communities for sure.

This description of how Patrick interacts with his communities further suggests a somewhat individualistic view. His mention of giving and getting suggests an exchange for building his self-concept. He also mentioned the importance of having his needs met and feeling supported by a particular community, which would bolster his independence. Furthermore, he talked about sharing different parts of himself with different communities. This is reminiscent of Giddens' discussion on individualization, where he talks about the fact that in post-modernity, the project of self-identity happens in pieces (1991, para. 1486). In sharing different parts of himself with gaming, work and church communities, Patrick builds his identity as a gamer, professional and church member.

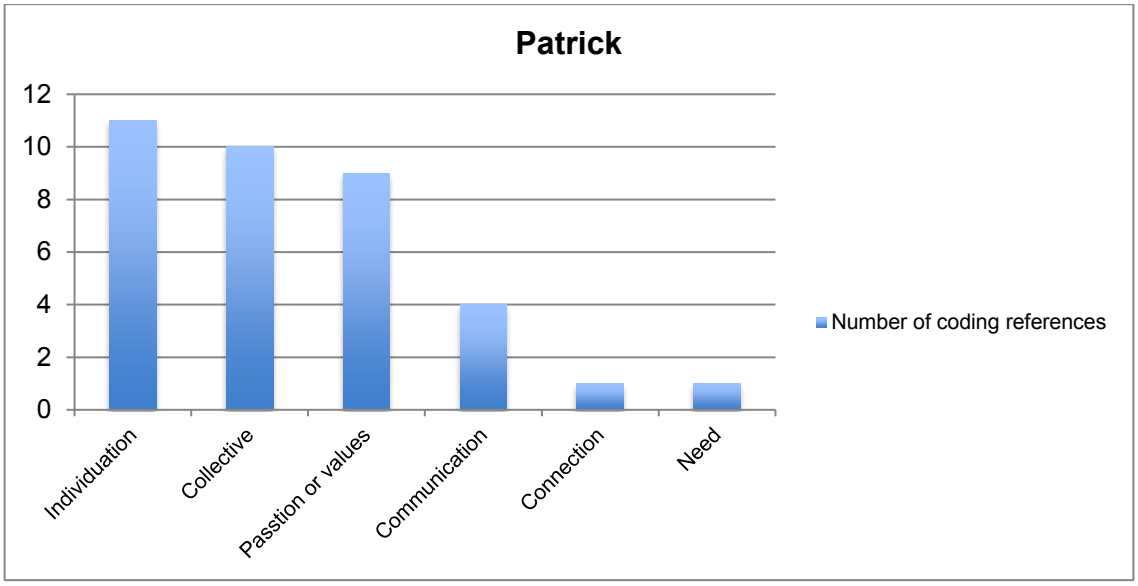
Patrick has also invested a lot into his work community. He is a social worker, which is demanding. He said,

> I went through a time where it felt like nothing [I did] was valuable at all. That was not great...I started focusing on individual relationships within my team, looking for opportunities for the group to grow together. I'm sure other people were looking to do that too. It worked out...I can learn a lot from my work community. What I've learned there, I can apply very quickly in situations that matter a whole lot...But really what's most valuable is because the community, at least in my little portion of my work, is a positive one at this point. It's a valuable place to get good feedback to learn and to get support when needed with overwhelming tasks.

Patrick mentioned that he has a more collectivist mindset than some of his colleagues due to the fact that he lived in Japan for four years. That value is evident in his language about helping the group grow together. However, individualism is also at play here. Patrick's drive to make change came, at least in part, from a desire to feel more valued. Then, he invested in relationships with individuals partly to contribute to the group's health and to their important work with children, but also to create a healthier work environment for himself. In terms of assessing the value of his investment, he noted that the community is positive for him, providing opportunities for both growth and support. All of these things contribute to Patrick's self-actualization as a good social worker. This focus on self-actualization is a key characteristic of individualism.

A brief quantitative study of Patrick's interview, represented in Graph 7 below, reinforces the hypothesis that his understanding of community may be individualistic—or, at least, more so than the non-social media users I interviewed.

Graph 7: Patrick



Individuation is the dominant theme coded in Patrick's interview, with 11 references, or 31 per cent of his total coded references. Ideas and language representing individualism in Patrick's interview are approximately the same as Sarah's and Rachel's, but considerably higher than Isabel's, Grace's, Lily's and John's.

4.2.3 Rose

Rose is a woman in her 50s, and uses social media about an hour per day. She defined community in much the same way as the others in the study: "A group of people who want to interact around some commonality of interest." Later on in our discussion, it became apparent that relationship is also a key component of her understanding of community. Rose said that her stronger communities are more relationship-based, and less significant ones are primarily interest-based. For example, she described her church community and book club as particularly important because of her degree of involvement and the relationship investment. Rose's professional community is also significant for her: She directs a satellite campus and program at a small Canadian university, and is very involved with her students. Rose later mentioned that she is less involved with her academic community:

> I have a professional network. There's people who are kind of like-minded in the legal and political world, and we go to each other's events. We might occasionally go for coffee. When there's a particular issue we need to deal with, we tend to get together and discuss it, but it's sort of more—it's an issue-based community, and new people can come into it. People will retire from it. It's across a wide variety of ages, and mixed male/female. It's more sort of interest-based.

It is possible that the high value placed on relationship is indicative of individualism, but Rose's more detailed descriptions of her experiences with these communities paint a clearer picture.

Rose's church community is her most valued: "My church community would be the strongest one. You know, it's got the people that I would call at three in the morning if I needed something. There's really nobody in the other communities that I would turn to in a personal crisis kind of situation." Rose said that this level of confidence happens through "trust and sharing." While people in her other communities see her as more of a "public figure" due to her legal and academic activities and accomplishments, people in her church see her as "Just [Rose]." She continued, "Like, I'm just somebody who can fill in for them in the nursery. They know a lot more things about my personal life and background, and see me kind of for who I am as a person, and sometimes aren't really aware of my professional life as much." This shows that Rose values her community, at least in part, because they can meet her needs. She also values being known "as a person" rather than just a professional. Both of these illustrate a need for self-actualization, which is a sign of individualism.

When I asked Rose why her different communities were important to her, she replied simply: "They feed different parts of me. They connect with different parts of who I am." She provided an example of an academic community that meets one of these needs:

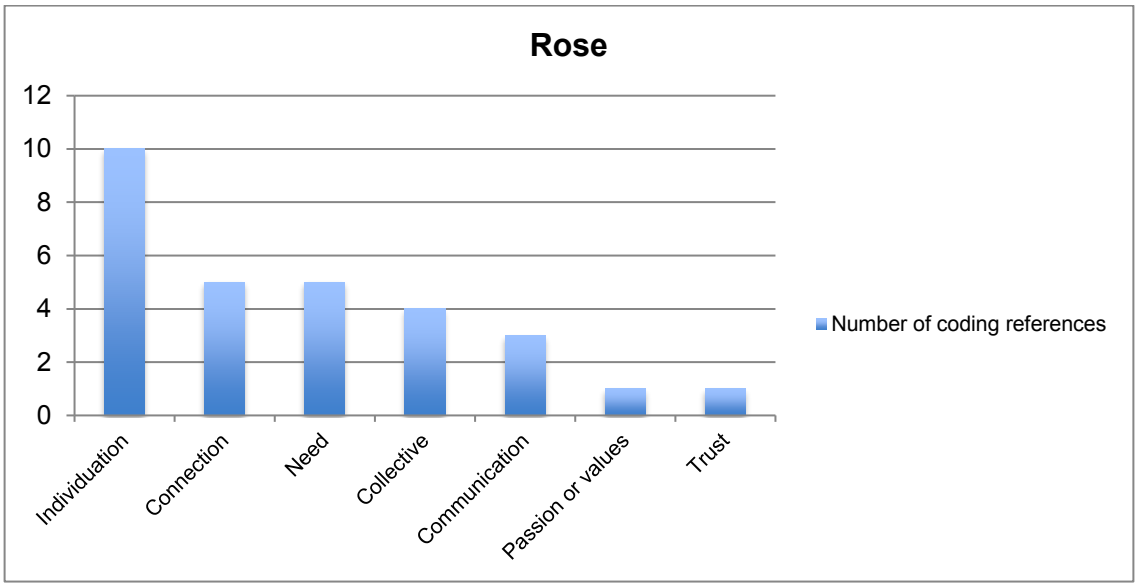
> Amongst my alumni community, there's a group that gets together once a month to discuss a Christian book, but it's a Christian intellectual book. And that really feeds my need to have Christian intellectual engagement...You have different sides of your personality, and there's different communities that are going to meet those kinds of needs.

Rose's language here is similar to Patrick's, and also illustrates Giddens' idea of creating an identity in different life segments. It also further illustrates Rose's value of self-actualization within her communities.

It is important to note that Rose doesn't simply see herself as a receiver within these communities. She also sees herself as a giver. She contributes to academic events by speaking, promotes others' events, invites people to events, and helps "raise awareness." It is also noteworthy, however, that in contrast to some of the interview subjects who immediately referred to the value of a community in terms of its cause, Rose immediately referred to the value of her community in terms of self-actualization.

A quantitative look at Rose's interview, seen in Graph 8 below, seems to affirm this analysis.

Graph 8: Rose



Individuation is Rose's most common interview theme, with 10 coded references, a few examples of which I've noted above. Individuation is followed by connection and need at five references each. Individuation represents 34 per cent of the total coded references in her interview—the most of any subject so far, though by a small margin.

4.2.4 Andrew

Andrew, a man in his 50s who, between work and his personal life, uses social media several hours per day, described community as "a group of people with like-minded or similar interests [who] communicate through various ways." Like Sarah, he does not differentiate between online and offline communities. His neighbours and co-

workers are just as much community members as the people he engages with via Twitter. When I asked him for examples of how he engages with his communities, almost without fail, he gave examples of social media interactions. Andrew described himself as an introvert, and he said social media is a way he can foster relationships with people without feeling drained.

One example of a significant community for Andrew is what he called the "Vancouver online community." He said, "There's a core group of people that just know each other and interact, and I just looked at my Twitter info the other day, and I think I've been on it since 2007." Andrew said he puts a great deal of time and thought into his Twitter posts, and his goal is "just to be engaging":

> I think people follow me for good interesting tweets and usually something that's interesting in general or something...about public relations. There are topics that I won't tweet about. People know who I am. I won't be tweeting about NASCAR all of a sudden. I'd be losing followers. So, for me when I tweet, it's going to be stuff that sort of falls in those areas.

Andrew engages in Vancouver's Twitter community not as part of his job, but in his personal time—it is voluntary. Jenkins et. al. write about why people, like Andrew, share social media posts in *Spreadable Media:*

> In this networked culture, we cannot identify a single cause for why people spread material. People make a series of socially embedded decisions when they choose to spread any media text: Is the content worth engaging with? Is it worth sharing with others? Might it be of interest to specific people? Does it communicate something about me or my relationship with those people?...Even if no additional commentary is appended, however, just receiving a story or video from someone else imbues a range of new potential meanings in a text. As people listen, read, or view shared content, they think not only—often, not even primarily—about what the producers might have meant but about what the person who shared it was trying to communicate (2013, p. 13).

The authors go on to cite the example of a viral video of a singer named Susan Boyle that was shared very widely a number of years ago. "Many people shared the video to boast their accomplishment of discovery" (p. 13).

Although Jenkins et. al. write that there was no single cause for why people share, I would argue that all of the reasons listed above relate to constructing one's identity, and self-actualizing. Andrew's description of his Twitter activity suggests that his community participation is an important part of constructing his identity. He tweets things

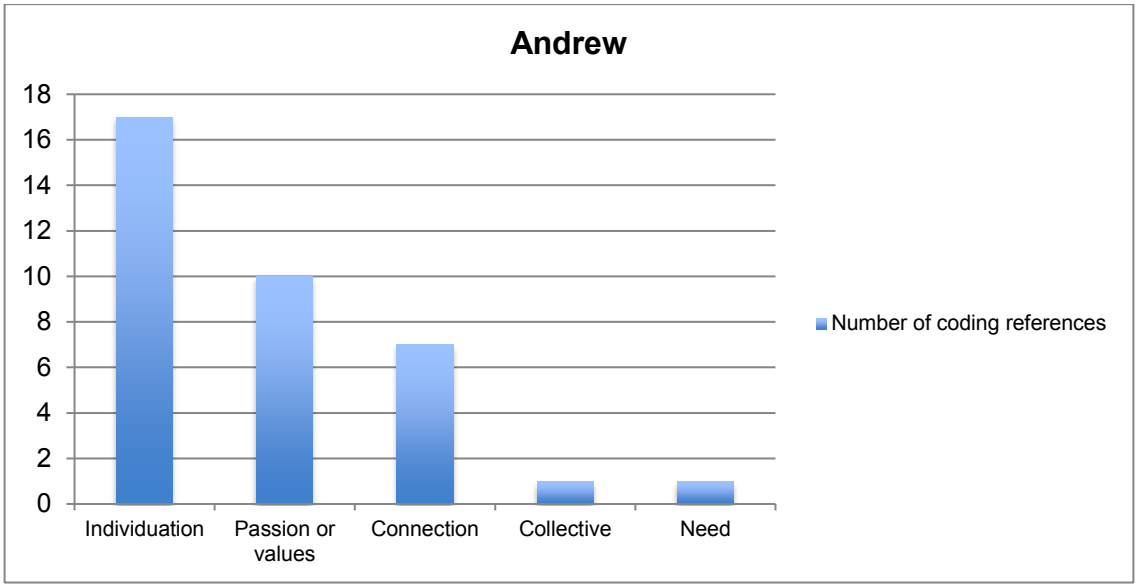
that he thinks people will find interesting because he wants them to find him interesting. He also believes that high Twitter engagement will position him as someone who knows about social media and public relations—this is important to him as a public relations professional. It is also important to him not to lose self-affirming followers, so he is careful to tweet things that he believes will encourage his community members to continue following him. Andrew is aware of this—at least to a certain extent. He said, "For Twitter, [it's] personal. It's growing my brand. It's who I am." All of this is indicative of the individualism so characteristic of the late-modern age.

Andrew also described other communities during our interview, including his neighbourhood community. When I asked why he valued this community, he said, "It's a sense of community. I think everyone wants to belong to something, right?" He went on to say that he and his wife have considered moving, but decided against it given there was no guarantee they'd have "good neighbours" or "a good community." He knows that if he needs something, he can reach out. "People want to be able to count on someone or feel like someone's got their back, and that seems to work for me here," he said.

Wanting to belong to something larger is not necessarily an indicator of individualism, which prioritizes independence. But it does speak to one's need to feel secure, which could be understood as individualistic. Andrew also mentioned that he values the fact that his neighbours can help meet some of his needs, which "works for him," and presumably makes him feel valued. This is all part of a self-actualization process.

Quantifying the themes in Andrew's interview, summarized in Graph 9, supports the hypothesis that his sense of community is more individualistic than most of the non-social media users I interviewed.

Graph 9: Andrew



Individuation was the primary theme in Andrew's interview, with 17 references to ideas that depict his value of communities that meet his needs, building his personal brand on social media, and the benefits of participating in his social media, such as increased confidence. In contrast, there were only 10 references the importance of shared passion or values. In total, individualistic references comprised 47 per cent of the total coded references in his interview—the highest percentage of any of my interview subjects so far.

4.2.5 Mark

Mark, a man in his 30s who uses social media for an hour or more per day, described community as follows during our interview, bringing in some of his academic background:

> I would define community as a group of people that have a common unity...This is some Jean Vanier [of *Becoming Human*] sort of inspiration here, but there's enough belonging together that there's also security, then, for individuals to kind of explore their own uniqueness. So you know, community is not uniformity, where we all look the same and take on the same kind of attributes as it were. Although, we are going to have enough security in our likeness that we're going to encourage that sort of diversity and expression. And I think [there are] a couple of key components, in that obviously there has to be enough sameness that glues people together so that that's the unity piece, that common kind of thread.

He referred to the thread of commonality that has been present in other interview respondents' definitions, then moved immediately to the importance of self-expression and exploring one's uniqueness—which is essentially the definition of individualism. In Mark's view, the security of community is precisely what allows this individuation. He went on to say, "We only actually define ourselves with who we are in relationship to each other. I can only describe myself as myself in relationship to other people...And so that then requires people. At least, some kind of community for me to be who I am. And to be my best." Mark is suggesting that community is a necessity for him to be his true and best self—that is, a necessity for self-actualization. His understanding of community is therefore clearly an individualistic one.

Mark also describes community in terms of its importance in meeting personal needs, which is another factor in the self-actualization component of individuation. He referred to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, including the need to love and be loved, and noted that a significant community to which he belongs is valuable in part because it meets several of his needs. It is a group of people, all of whom have children of roughly the same age, who meet weekly. They enjoy each other's company, and sometimes participate in Bible studies, marriage seminars and parenting seminars. He gave examples of the community members helping one another by providing food when loved ones are ill, caring for one another's children when needed, and helping with household tasks. "We just love on each other," said Mark. The most valuable thing about the community, he said, is knowing he has people he can "count on" if he needs help. "If things really went sideways in my life, we wouldn't be alone."

Mark also spoke about this community as an opportunity for him to fulfill his identity as a pastor or chaplain. He described some of his contribution to the community as follows:

> I'd do whatever I need to do to be with the guys and to help them out. So whether that's lugging kids around or praying for each other, I mean, that's a huge piece of me...We pray for each other every week...And I bring my brain. You know, my contribution is that I get to, I don't know, I get to challenge these guys sometimes 'cause I've studied some stuff more than them. [One of my] goals in the group is to help, kind of help them flourish in their knowledge.

Mark, a seminary student with a background in theological studies, was referring to being able to be instructive about matters such as Bible passages in the context of Bible

studies and related discussions. When I mentioned him being the "pastor" in the group, he smiled and said, "The kicker is I don't get to turn it off."

It was clear from our discussion that Mark contributes his theological knowledge to the group out of sense of calling and of care for the others in the group. It is noteworthy, however, that it is also out of a need to fulfill his own sense of who he is, and likely to have others affirm this sense of who he is. This is another component of individualism, and further suggests that Mark's understanding of community is largely individualistic.

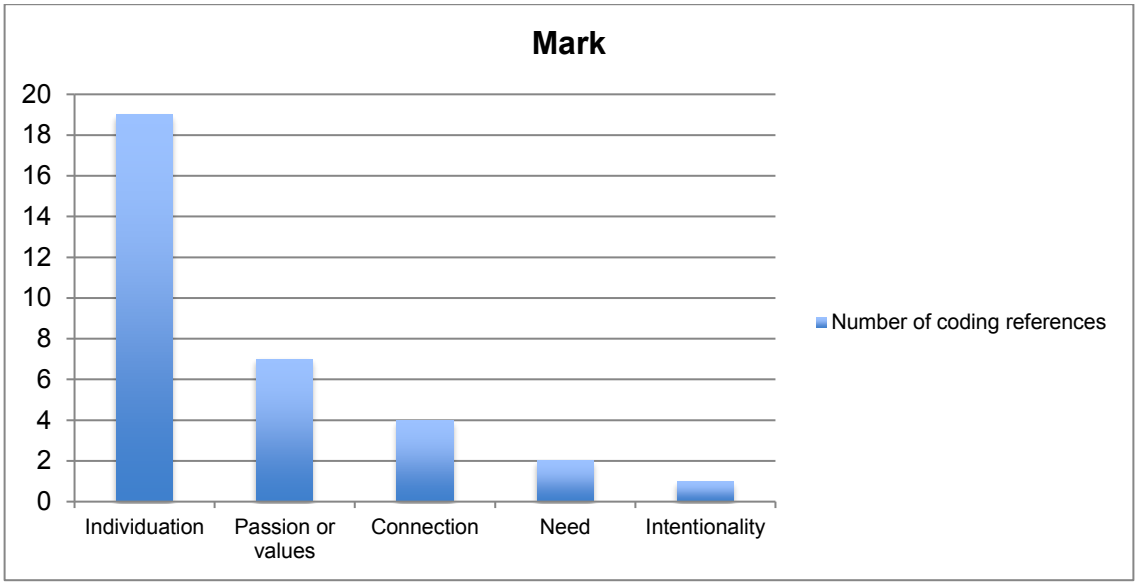
Mark also uses his Facebook "friends," which he describes as a community of sorts, to fulfill his identity as a pastor, leader and teacher, though he said this is now less significant for him than it used to be. He enjoys being able to share thoughts, quotes and book excerpts that provoke discussion. He seemed to struggle to articulate how people responded to him—my impression from our conversation was that he didn't want to appear to boast. It was apparent, however, that he would like to be seen as a leader among his Facebook connections:

> They're like...your quotes are always popping up in my news feed," or you know, "I've really just grown to appreciate what you share." And I just kind of keep looking for that. So there at least has been verbally, learners if you want to call them. Learners, readers, ministry leaders, who seem to be connected to me and to what I'm sharing... There's been a really unique shift in my own journey, that uh, I used to like ... The platform mattered because of the number of people that I could reach. I would have been really, really attracted to communities that allowed me opportunity to connect with the masses.

He noted that more recently, he has found that community requires physical presence, so his focus has shifted to his in-person community described above. Still, it is significant to note that he thought of his Facebook connections as a community—and still does to a certain extent—where he could exercise his identity and have it affirmed. This is yet another sign of an individualistic view of community.

The total number of references to individualistic ideas in Mark's interview, represented in Graph 10 below, affirms the hypothesis that Mark's understanding of community leans toward individualism and individuation.

Graph 10: Mark



Proportionately, his interview was the most "individualistic" of all 10 interviews I conducted, with 19 references to ideas with individualistic characteristics, such as the reasons he finds his communities valuable, constructing an identity, meeting needs and expressing individuality. These references represent 58 per cent of all of his coded references to community during our interview.

4.3 Findings

During my interviews, I initially had the unrealistic hope that all of my non-social media users would think about community in terms of collectivism, a greater good or shared sense of purpose or interest, and that all social media users would think about community in terms of opportunities for self-development and affirmation. Of course, humans are never so simple. One of my non-social media user respondents, Grace, was quite prone to individualistic language—as much as some of my social media users. The key lies in observing patterns of degree. All 10 of my interview subjects used some individualistic language. A closer look at the language and what may have informed it, as well as comparing the amount of individualistic language in each interview, yields some meaningful information.

4.3.1 Community definitions

First, it is helpful to consider interview subjects' definitions of community. All 10 definitions, regardless of whether the respondent was a social media user or not, were more alike than different. All were broad, and referred to people who were connected in some way or shared some kind of commonality. "Like-minded" was a common descriptive phrase. A common interest, passion or cause was important for all respondents in some form. Most respondents noted that relationship was typically important for communities to function. Only one respondent, Grace, a non-social media user, used remotely individualistic language as part her initial definition of community. I can thus safely conclude that my respondents' definitions of community reveal no difference between social media users and non-users. It is also safe to conclude that at the surface level, none of my respondents think about the definition of community in an explicitly individualistic way—individualistic tendencies come out only after delving a little deeper.

4.3.2 Comparing respondents

As mentioned in Chapter 3, I intentionally chose interview respondents with a great deal in common in the hope of increasing the likelihood that any observable differences between respondents' answers could be correlated with their social media use. All are Canadian and Caucasian, all are working professionals, and there was a reasonably even mix of men and women (six women and four men). Many are Christian and in long-term relationships, and many have children. There was an approximately 20-year spread in the ages of my interview respondents, and there were no observable patterns among people of a similar age. One might expect younger people to be more self-oriented than group-oriented, but Rose, my oldest interview respondent, used more individualistic language during her interview than most of the others.

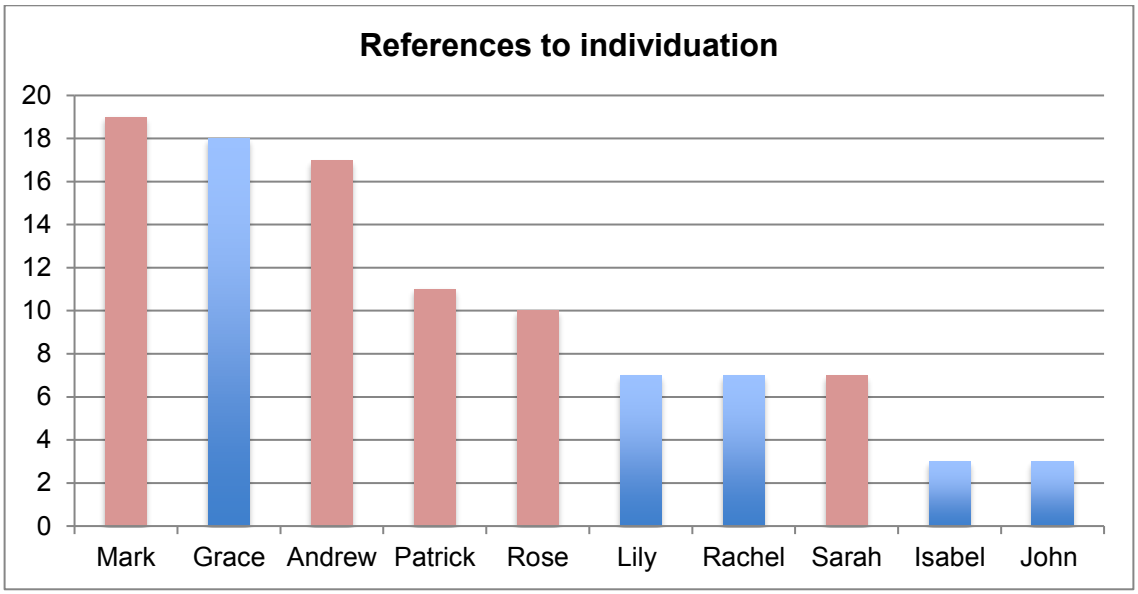
4.3.3 Quantitative data

Throughout this chapter, in addition to looking qualitatively at the language my interview respondents used to discuss their communities, I also looked quantitatively at the number of references in each interview to an individualistic idea. Given that my research process is mostly qualitative, and that 10 subjects can't establish a pattern with scientific merit, it is important to acknowledge that the numbers alone are not enough to definitively demonstrate a difference between my social media users and non-social

media users. It will, however, provide a different and high-level perspective on the data, which will be helpful when considered in tandem with the analysis in previous sections.

Graph 11 below shows the number of individuation references in each interview. Social media users are represented by pink bars, and non-social media users by blue bars. Among my avid social media users, I coded 64 references to individuation. Among non-social media users, I coded 38 references—a 40 per cent difference.

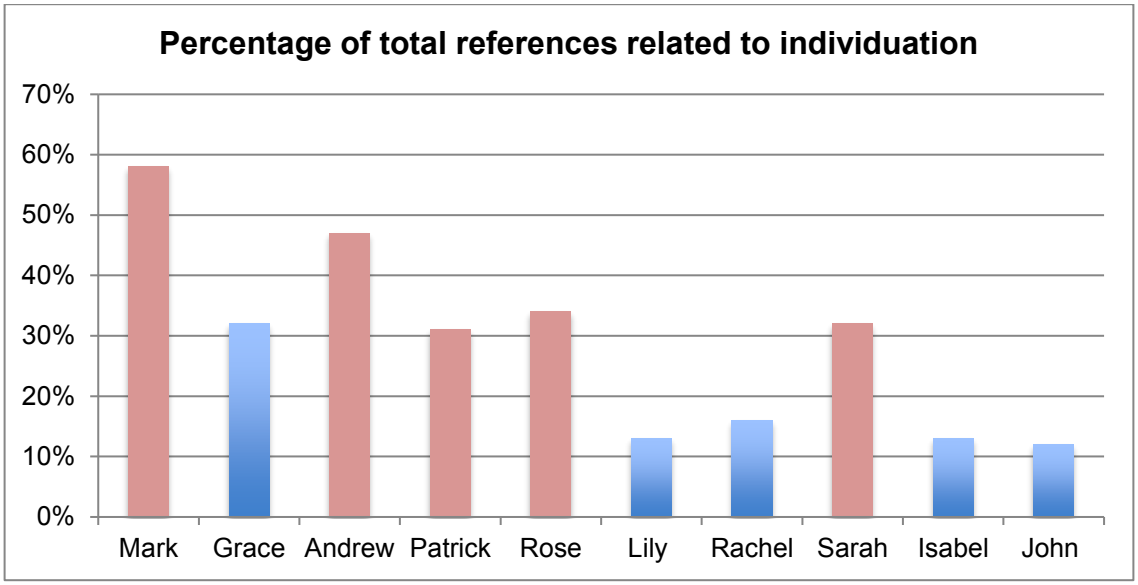
Graph 11: References to individuation



This shows that overall, my social media users used individualistic language more frequently in their discussions of community than my non-social media users.

Graph 12 shows the percentage of individualistic references compared to all other references in each interview. For example, in Mark's interview, 19 of 33 total coded references, or 58 per cent of his coded references, related to individuation.

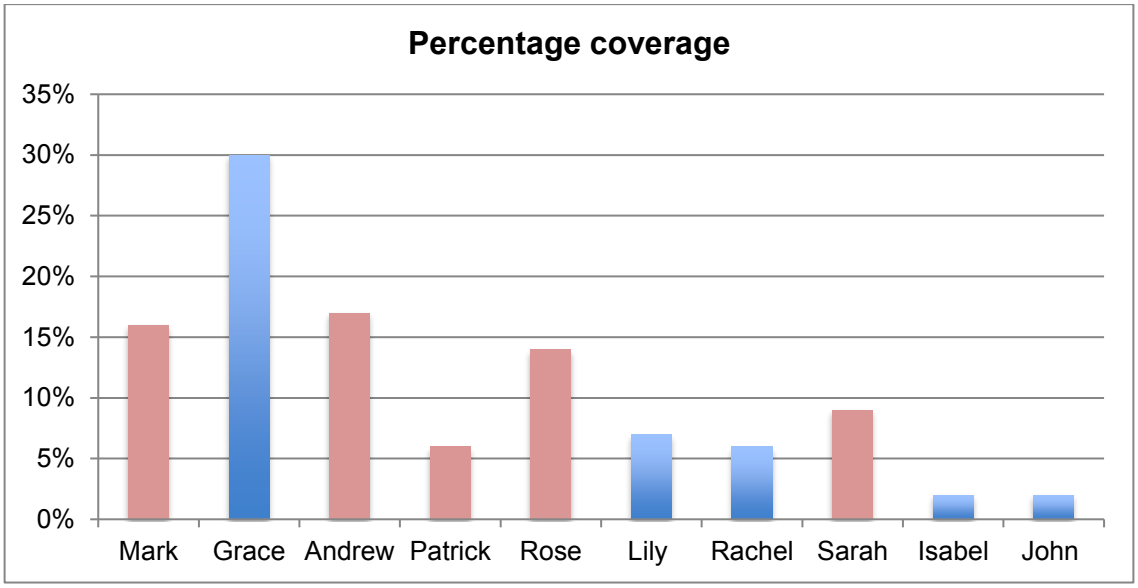
Graph 12: Percentage of total references related to individuation



A similar pattern is evident: Social media users spent more of their interviews discussing individualistic ideas compared to other ideas than non-social media users. On average, references to individuation comprised 40 per cent of social media users' interviews and 17 per cent of non-social media users' interviews.

The next graph shows yet another way of considering this information. NVivo, the program I used to code my interviews, shows the percentage of "coverage" of individuation codes—that is, the percentage of all the words in the interview dedicated to an individualistic idea. Graph 13 indicates the percentage of coverage of individuation-related codes in each person's interview.

Graph 13: Percentage coverage



Even factoring in Grace's interview, which was a dramatic outlier in its focus on individuation, on average, individuation codes in social media users' interviews had 12 per cent coverage compared to nine per cent coverage in non-social media users' interviews. If Grace's interview is discounted from this calculation due its dramatic difference from the other interviews, the percentage coverage in non-social media users' interviews drops to just four per cent. Overall, these three charts help me conclude that within the context of these 10 interviews, there is a pattern of social media users using more individualistic language to describe their community experiences than non-social media users.

4.3.4 Common themes

Table below provides a summary of the most significant communities discussed during respondents' interviews, as well as the themes that arose when they described the communities and their value or importance.

Table: Non-social media users VS. social media users

Non-social media users	
Respondent	**Significant communities and themes**
Lily	• Barn community: shared love of horses • Church community: mutual commitment to Christian values • Work community: shared commitment to patients and helping one another
Grace	• Mexico community: growth opportunities, mutual calling and mutual commitment to caring for children • Friend community: support, care, encouragement and lack of judgment
John	• Dungeons and Dragons community: shared interest and opportunity to create and socialize • Work community: shared commitment to work
Rachel	• Church community: mutual commitment to hospitality and care for others • General community: mutual need and long-standing relationships
Isabel	• Work community: mutual commitment to child protection • Adoption community: mutual passion for helping orphans, support on adoption journey
Social media users	
Respondent	**Significant communities and themes**
Sarah	• Running community: mutual encouragement and support • Friends community: care and support
Patrick	• Church community: giving and receiving support, purpose and empathy
Rose	• Church community: support and care, feeding "who I am" • Book club community: meets need for intellectual engagement • University and academic communities: opportunity to exercise identity
Andrew	• Social media community: opportunity to engage others and perform identity as a PR/social media expert • Neighbourhood community: opportunity to be supported and have

	needs met
Mark	• Small-group community: opportunity to be cared for and have needs met, opportunity to express individuality, and opportunity to exercise identity as a pastor

The most common themes among non-social media users were the importance of shared values, passions and interests. The focus was typically on the group itself, or the cause to which the group was committed. This suggests an overall collectivist, or non-individualistic orientation. The most common themes among social media users were encouragement and support, expressing one's identity and having needs met. All of these themes are part of individuation, which includes self-actualization and expression.

There is another striking theme among social media users that didn't appear at all among non-social media users—even Grace: an explicit, articulated value of expressing and building one's identity, which is a hallmark of individuation, within community. Here are the examples:

- **Sarah**, describing why her soccer/friend community is valuable: "I think it's probably a sense of belonging, the feeling that it's part of the fabric of me as a person."
- **Rose**, explaining why her communities are important to her: "In a lot of ways, they feed different parts of me."
- **Andrew**, explaining why and how he engages in his online community—his "strategy": "For Twitter, [it's] personal, it's growing my brand. It's who I am."
- **Mark**, defining community: "We only actually define ourselves with who we are in relationship to each other. I can only describe myself as myself in relationship to other people...And so that then requires people. At least, some kind of community for me to be who I am. And to be my best."
- **Mark**, explaining why community is valuable: "[T]here's enough belonging together that there's also security, then, for individuals to kind of explore their own uniqueness...we are going to have enough security in our likeness that we're going to encourage that sort of diversity and expression."

- **Patrick**, the fifth social media user in this group, also hinted at the importance self-expression, but his language was less direct than the others: In explaining how his communities differ, he said,

  > I would be more or less vulnerable, depending on the community. Some are very professional, some are more social, some would be more real, like I've given and I'll get very different things from my work community than, say, my family...So, sharing different parts of me with different communities for sure.

Together, this suggests a positive and meaningful correlation between social media use and a more individualistic understanding of community among my interview respondents.

4.3.5 Exceptions and peculiarities

In this section, I will discuss a few interview elements that do not conform to the observed pattern so far, and reflect on whether the pattern is still meaningful.

Need: Individualistic or collectivist?

In my discussion of Rachel's interview, I touched on her focus on the necessity of need within community. In my other interviews, I said that valuing the opportunity to have one's needs met within a community is part of individuation. Yet in Rachel's interview, this seemed less clear. Rather than valuing a community because of the personal support it offers, Rachel was talking about mutual need being necessary to keep a community together—for example, her need to have someone fix her car might necessarily keep her in community with someone who could offer this service. It is noteworthy that Rachel currently lives in a small, rural village where many residents attend, graduated from, or work at the college where Rachel was employed for a number of years, and where she pursued some of her education. There, the language of community is common, and the practice of community, where neighbours help neighbours and values are largely mutual, is central. It seems likely that Rachel's discussion of need is informed by this background, which suggests an understanding of mutual need that is more communal than individual.

Furthermore, earlier in her interview, Rachel shared that she felt the definition of community had changed considerably through history. This awareness coupled with the concept of mutual need discussed above suggests that in discussing need, Rachel was

nodding to the traditional, more collectivist communities that existed before the digital age allowed people to join a variety of different groups and move beyond geographical, social and economic boundaries.

It is possible that Rachel's reference to need is individualistic in nature, but the tone seems altogether different in light of what I've discussed above. Regardless, I believe the pattern I have observed stands.

Ubiquitous individualism

There are clear references to individualistic ideas even within non-social media users' interviews. I discussed these during my analysis of individual interviews in section 4.1. John mentioned wanting to build community with people who "feel good" to be around, as well as the personal reward he derives from his Dungeons and Dragons community. Isabel deeply valued the personal validation and support she received from her adoption community while she was on her adoption journey. Two points are important here: One, individualism within late modernity is ubiquitous. As Beck and Beck-Gershiem write, " The ethic of individual self-fulfillment and achievement is the most powerful current in modern society" (2002, p. 23). A lack of social media use does not preclude someone from the process of individuation. Thus, one would expect a North American in late modernity to have at least some individualistic ideas, regardless of his or her social media habits.

Two, we need to consider respondents' references to individuation within the greater context of their other ideas. In both John's and Isabel's cases, other language and ideas suggest that while individualism is present in their thinking about community, it is not the dominant way in which they think about community. More importantly, John and Isabel can be placed along a spectrum that indicates they are less likely to understand community in terms of individuation than the interview subjects who use social media.

Grace's interview challenges the pattern. As indicated above, she used a great deal of individualistic language—even more than some of the social media users. That said, it is not surprising when someone does not fit the expected mold, so to speak. In any research process, some data will fall outside parameters. In looking at Grace's language in the context of her other values, including, for example, mutual commitments

to greater causes such as caring for children and developing Christian faith, as well as in the context of the other interview subjects, my observed pattern remains.

Chapter 5.

Conclusion

In Chapter 1, I introduced the topics of individualism, community and social media, setting the backdrop for this study. Chapter 2 examined the relevant literature and presented the research question, and Chapter 3 presented the research methodology and introduced the interview subjects. Chapter 4 presented a detailed analysis of my interview findings. In this last chapter, I will revisit my major findings, assess my methodology, suggest avenues for future research and explore implications.

5.1 Summary of findings

I set out to determine whether social media use makes people's understanding of community more individualistic. My literature review provided a helpful foundation, and I spoke with 10 people to shed light on my hypothesis. My analysis of these 10 interviews in Chapter 4 demonstrated a positive relationship between substantial social media use and a largely individualistic understanding of community. There are several important qualifiers to this finding: One, this positive correlation applies only to my 10 interview subjects, all Canadian working professionals who range from their 30s to their 50s. Two, "substantial" is a relative term. For the purposes of my study, I defined an avid social media user as a person who uses Facebook, Twitter or Instagram for an hour or more per day. Three, "a largely individualistic understanding of community" is also relative. As my literature review and interview process and analysis showed, individualism is ubiquitous within modern North American culture—possibly even the most dominant value within modern society. Thus, individuation of some kind is part of everyone's community experience.

What my findings revealed, however, is that the interview respondents who do not use social media used less individualistic language to discuss their community experiences. Interview subjects who are avid social media users were more likely to use individualistic language in their descriptions of their community experience. In light of my findings, then, it is possible that frequent and substantial social media use contributes to a more individualistic worldview within the context of community. That is, an individual may be more likely to prioritize themselves over the group, and prioritize the expression

and creation of identity and self-fulfillment over the good of the group or the values that bind the group together. More research would be required to demonstrate the validity of this supposition, but my research provides a valuable starting point. I will discuss what this research might entail in a later section.

5.2 Methodology assessment

Although interviews are very valuable for delving deep into a topic, gleaning information that is immediate and has not yet been filtered and interpreted by another researcher, and studying ideas and concepts that transcend the page, there are limitations to this approach. First, interviews are very time-consuming, meaning only small numbers of people can participate in an individual study. This makes findings difficult to generalize. Second, there are always elements of interpretation and selectivity in interviews. People tell you only what they want you to know, or what they think you need to know—and may not even be aware that they are filtering, interpreting, curating and possibly even misremembering information before sharing it. Third, language is limited in its ability to represent reality completely and accurately.

Another limitation of my methodology is its inability to show causation. I was able to show positive correlation, but not causation. That is, I demonstrated that people who use social media may have a more individualistic understanding of the concept of community than people who do not use social media, but this does not mean that social media necessarily causes this change in perspective. It is possible that people who are more collectivist in their thinking, or group-oriented, are less inclined to use social media, for example. Intentional research would be required to demonstrate whether this is the case, or whether social media changes this thinking pattern.

Strengths of my methodology include the fact that I used both primary and secondary research methods—interview and literature review, which allowed me greater depth of understanding and a wider array of perspectives. An additional strength is that I was able to study the data from both a qualitative and quantitative perspective. Much like using different research methods, these different analysis methods allowed me to look at the data from several different angles and provide deeper insight into patterns and themes. Of course, my quantitative analysis of 10 interviews cannot provide definitive answers, but it helps lay the groundwork for future research with a higher number of participants.

5.3 Possibilities for further research

My findings demonstrate that my research question is worthy of further pursuit. There are several possibilities for further research. A larger research team with funding, for example, would have the time and resources to interview more people from varied backgrounds, or conduct a series of much longer interviews over a greater period of time to glean greater insight. Deeper field research in the form of situational observation would also be valuable—for example, living among interview subjects for a time, or observing and analyzing both their social media activities and offline community activities.

Additionally, studying people's motivations for using social media—or not—could help answer the question of whether people who are less individualistic simply avoid social media, or whether social media affects their perspective.

I asked my interview subjects who did not use social media why they avoided it, or stopped using it. Answers varied: Isabel felt she didn't have the time. When attempting a Facebook profile in the past, she quickly became overwhelmed by the number of people who wanted to connect and the number of notifications she received, and quickly abandoned her profile. John stopped using social media as an experiment after watching a TED Talk on social media. The TED speaker said that many people feel compelled to use Facebook, as if it is a requirement for keeping in touch—and he challenged this perspective, saying social media is not a requirement at all. John decided to see what it would be like to quit Facebook for a week. He did not miss it, and he lost interest, possibly because it was not compelling for him to begin with: "I don't place a lot of value in, or I don't want to place a lot of value in, getting a lot of likes or re-tweets, or any of that sort of stuff. Like, that doesn't really interest me." Grace intentionally avoids social media because she resists the compulsion that the TED speaker described. She wishes to be intentional about the people in her life, and how she communicates with them:

> I get to choose. It's at my beck and call—not I'm at its beck and call. And social media, so often, can become this overwhelming, dominating thing. Most of my friends are like, "Why aren't you on Facebook?...And it's like, the people are in my life are in my life...There's just an intentionality about it.

These excerpts show that there are a variety of reasons why people do not use social media. A great deal of further research would be required to uncover patterns in

motivation for social media users, which could contribute to an understanding of whether social media use and individualistic thinking have a causal or simply correlative relationship.

5.4 Implications

The final question in my study is, "So what?" What are the implications of a positive correlation between social media use and individualistic thinking in the context of community? What are the repercussions of social media causing more individualistic thinking? To answer these questions adequately, we would need to determine whether an individualistic worldview in community is a problem. Certainly, fulfilling one's full potential, expressing one's individuality and becoming self-sufficient all have many benefits. If, as Mark suggested during his interview, community provides a safe place to facilitate this self-actualization, should it be encouraged? Conversely, if time spent in community is zero-sum, and something is lost in focusing on the self more than the group and the values and causes it espouses, should individuation be checked?

Regardless of the answer, education and policy can play a role in strengthening and empowering both communities and individuals. Education about the historical value and accomplishments of communities before the advent of modernity and the digital age could help individuals think more carefully and intentionally about their own communities and what purposes they serve or should serve. Additionally, education about the potential and the outcomes of digital technology could help people—particularly young people who are adopting new technologies and influencing future use—take ownership of their lives on digital media. There is power in understanding, whether it means being able to embrace and maximize the opportunities for self-actualization on social media platforms, or being intentional about building communities that move the focus beyond the self to something greater. Educational leaders and policy-makers have an opportunity to teach people not just how to use social media, as is common—particularly in professional circles—but also *why* to use it, and what the outcomes of social media use and consumption might be. Community builders and advocates have an opportunity to consider why their communities exist, or why they *should* exist, as well as the power they might wield if they truly understood community members' motivations and desires.

Finally, tech companies and social media developers have an opportunity to consider how their ideas, innovation and responsiveness to public demand might truly change people and not just their bottom line. Facebook, by far the most widely used

social media platform, has positioned itself as a community, and implemented Community Standards designed to better facilitate community. The written policy identifies the guiding principles of the community standards as safety, equity and voice. The described rationale includes the following: "People need to feel safe in order to build community," the fact that their mission is "about embracing diverse views," and that their standards are applied "consistently and fairly to a community that transcends regions, cultures and languages." Facebook leaders assume their platform facilitates community, and their Community Standards policy suggests a desire to make that community positive. In future, Facebook might consider how their tools and features influence the nature of their communities, and how their policies might facilitate community in proactive ways. For example, is Facebook one community, as their Community Standards suggest? Or is it several? What is its focus and purpose? Does Facebook have an intentional role to play in determining how the platform is used? How does their approach to monetization—using Facebook as an advertising space—influence community?

Instagram, which is owned by Facebook, has a similarly community-oriented usage policy, which they call Community Guidelines. Like Facebook, they prioritize safety, diversity and following the law. They also ask users to "foster meaningful and genuine interactions" through a list of things not to do: no artificial likes or comments, and no contacting people for commercial purposes without their consent. It is noteworthy that the guidelines suggest meaningful interaction can be fostered through the absence of certain actions, and that they do not suggest how positive action might facilitate this meaningfulness.

Twitter's *Twitter Rules* are less community oriented, simply laying out expectations for how Twitter users are to use the platform in an open way that does not cause harm or break the law. Giving users "the power to create and share ideas and information instantly, without barriers" seems to be the top priority. Given so many use Twitter in community-oriented ways, it may be beneficial for Twitter to consider self-aware policies about community-oriented use.

Ultimately, social media creators should be acutely self-aware as they develop platforms and spaces that are such a ubiquitous part of human interaction and community building—whatever the community might look like. Users must also be self-aware. We are all creating culture and history, and we will be more likely to build the

society and the future we want if we work with the fullest possible understanding of the potential outcomes of our choices.

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Appendix A.

Recruitment Questionnaire

RECRUITMENT QUESTIONNAIRE (FLUIDSURVEY)

Social Media and Community

I am completing a Master of Arts in Communication at Simon Fraser University. For my thesis, I am conducting a research project on social media and understanding of community. I would like to speak to eight to 10 people who are willing to participate.

If you are interested, please answer the following questions. If you are still interested after answering these questions, and I determine you are a good candidate for this study, I will provide you with a formal consent form.

Do you use social media? Yes/No

Which platforms?

a) Twitter
b) Facebook
c) Snapchat
d) Instagram
e) Blogs
f) Other:

About how much time per week do you spend on social media?

a) I try to avoid it
b) A couple of times per month
c) Maybe an hour per week
d) An hour or more per day
e) Other: _____

Do you consider yourself part of a community? Yes/No

Can you provide any details about this community?

I am

a) Male
b) Female
c) Prefer not to say

Select your age range

a) Under 20
b) 20–30
c) 30–40
d) 40–50
e) 50–60
f) 60+

Are you willing to learn more about this study and consider participating in a 45-minute interview with me? Yes/No