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Abstract: Social Software such as social networking sites (SNS), have become very useful in recent years, helping its users to derive value from these platforms due to their features that encourage virtual community formation and strengthening. To explore factors that encourage community formation and strengthening on SNSs, this essay highlights features of popular SNSs; Facebook, Snapchat and Tumblr. This essay collected evidence from various scholarly platforms and the SNSs themselves in order to prove this assertion. From this, it is proven that Facebook provides value to Aboriginal Australian's by encouraging social interaction through its identity confirming affordances, secondly, Facebooks and Tumblr's features afford its users value by encouraging collaborative communication, lastly, Snapchat provides value to its young users and how Facebook has provided value to its grieving users, through encouraging efficient and intimate exchange of information that matter to users personally. The findings in-fact support this assertion with little to no refutation.

According to Porter (2015), a community is defined as a group of individuals or an organization that can interact in virtual and/or offline space, with the members interactions being able to be mediated through any networked technology. Porter further states that a community is an entity that places value on giving "members the ability to participate in key decision-making processes, encouraging members to collaborate with other members in value-creating activities and convincing members to make contributions that matter to them personally" (Porter, 2015, p.169). Community building in the virtual world is encouraged by social software which is defined as "a set of tools that enable group-forming networks to emerge quickly" (Fuchs, 2010, p.775) as this software "facilitates social interaction, collaboration and information exchange" (Fuchs, 2010, p.777). Furthermore, Social software includes "software which supports, extends, or derives added value from, human social behaviour - message-boards, musical taste-sharing, photo-sharing, instant messaging, mailing lists, social networking" (Fuchs, 2010, p.773). With this, social networking sites (SNSs) such as Facebook, Tumblr and Snapchat are inherently social

software as they “(1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.” (Ellison, 2007, p.211) Thus providing its users with value by encouraging community formation and strengthening. Therefore, it can be confidently asserted that social software, such as SNSs, have provided value to its users by encouraging virtual community-formation and strengthening through their various affordances. This assertion will be illustrated firstly through assessing how the SNS Facebook has provided value to Aboriginal Australian’s by encouraging social interaction through its identity confirming affordances, building community, secondly, through discussing how the features of the SNSs Facebook and Tumblr have afforded its users value by encouraging collaborative communication, also building community, and lastly, how the SNS Snapchat has provided value to its young users and how Facebook has provided value to its grieving users, through encouraging efficient and intimate exchange of information that matter to users personally, strengthening their “stabilized” community.

SNSs have encouraged social interaction due to the features of these platforms, which facilitate virtual community building between individuals that share commonalities, thus providing value to its users. SNSs facilitate virtual community as they are public spheres where members identity is confirmed by social interaction and where the decision-making processes are communal. A perfect example of an SNS that does so is Facebook as its user base was “over 800 million in March 2012” (Forman, Kern & Gil-Egui, 2012, p.1) and is still growing. Therefore, this platform provides fertile conditions for virtual community building. According to Atkinson (2010), Aboriginal culture in Australia has diminished due to their community being depleted through centuries of abuse, dehumanization and separation resulting from European colonization. However, a silver lining to this tragic treatment is that their power to revive their largely diminished community has been somewhat restored as “Facebook provides possibilities for extending community, for establishing connectedness and cultural belonging, through networking aspects of pre-contact culture, language, the sharing of practiced rituals, information about kin or mobs that may have been lost, photographs, stories and so on.” (Lumby, 2010, p.69) Facebook users who have affiliations to the Aboriginal culture can use the platform to find and join online communities in the

form of “pages” or “groups” that have relations to their culture and that host offline events. “Pages” are public spaces that can be “liked” to join and “share” or “post” information in the space. “Groups” are private spaces with one or a few admins and thus require users to “request” or be “invited” by the host/s of the group to “post” or “share” information in the space.

Therefore, constructing their online identity is often required to be integrated into these spaces as “the performance of Indigeneity is necessary for the subject position to be taken seriously, and for recognition to occur in a meaningful way.” (Lumby, 2010, p.71) A popular way for users to do so is by utilizing Facebook’s identity personalization features that allow users to make highly customized “profile pages”. Some users with an Aboriginal background thus actively customize their personal “profile pages” to indicate this heritage by having photos on display of the Aboriginal flag and/or other Indigenous symbols. Another way for Facebook users to ensure their identity is confirmed is to “friend” other people that they can identify as possessing a desired identity that are part of a specific community, this “requires validation by as many as possible.” (Lumby, 2010, p.71) Facebook’s networking affordances also work to connect potential similar users by “recommending” friendships that have “mutual friends” to the user, so therefore “because Facebook works to increase ‘friends’ exponentially, a user can ‘collect’ a number of potential verifiers.” (Lumby, 2010, p.71)

Furthermore, Facebook not only allows “a recomposition of space” (Lumby, 2010, p.73) for the disbanded Aboriginal community, but provides a place where members can “instate their own hierarchies of Indigenous identity which can be re-deployed “on the outside” if (and only if) they perform credibly in the Facebook sphere of activity.” (Lumby, 2010, p.73) Here, key decision-making processes are left up to the members of the community, instilling power back into their culture through social interaction and identity confirmation encouraged by Facebook’s sizeable user base, collaborative culture and technological affordances. Thus, adhering back to Porter’s (2015) definitions of community, it is clear that SNSs such as Facebook have facilitated community building among Aboriginals in Australia, thus providing them with value.

Community formation is a collaborative endeavour that creates value for those individuals involved. For young people especially, SNSs such as Facebook and Tumblr often act as catalysts in this process. Hodkinson (2015) states that these types of SNSs have become the most popular spaces in which teens can efficiently congregate with large groups of their peers. However, merely congregating in these spaces is not enough to ensure community building, and thus value being derived. This is because as understood above, community formation is aided through identity construction to form virtual boundaries. However, young people often try to remain social with as many people as possible which means young SNS users “are suited to communication with a wider number of superficial acquaintances, or ‘weak ties’.” (Hodkinson, 2015, p.7) For young Facebook users, then, its primary interface, or the “news feed”, “acts as the primary conduit for communication.” (Hodkinson, 2015, p.8) This is because it enables “individuals to communicate simultaneously with numerous peers” (Hodkinson, 2015, p.8), a driving reason behind them using this social software. While these weak ties were found to be a driving force for young people when they start using social software, it has been found that it is common for users’ “friends-lists tend [to] gradually stabilize as people move through adolescence, coming to form a relatively predictable and consistent part of individuals’ communicative spheres.” (Hodkinson, 2015, p.16-17) Collaboration is encouraged by the features of this SNS during this stabilization process due to “the properties of social media, creating boundaries around these online spaces is far more difficult.” (Hodkinson, 2015, p.10) Therefore, users must collaborate through “interpersonal relationship management to negotiate who shares what about them, who does what with their information, and how their reputations are treated.” (Hodkinson, 2015, p.19) This to ensure that the virtual space is a personalised community where members can create and derive value comfortably. Value is derived from the ability that Facebook affords its users to make a “group chat”. This feature allows users to make a private communication interface where up to “150 people,” (“How many people can I message at once on Facebook? | Facebook Help Centre | Facebook”, 2018) can be invited to “chat”. Here, members can derive value through; organising group activities/ projects, depicting how they want to be viewed on Facebook or just general chatting with their closest “friends”.

This is quite similar to the SNS Tumblr, another platform popular with young people as “Tumblr blogs, although often publicly accessible, are (...) frequently regarded by users as ‘safe spaces of self-expression’ whereby interaction is oriented to relatively discrete and limited sets of trusted followers.” (Hodkinson, 2015, p.24) Tumblr affords its users the ability to create an account under a pseudonym and post/ share images/ gifs they like. This gives them the option to disclose their private creative space to whomever they like, forming a mutual trust between the users, providing value to their creativity. Thus, it can be seen that Facebook and Tumblr’s affordances have given young people the ability to collaboratively build communities through “the informal encoding of communication so that meaning is discernible only by a limited group” (Hodkinson, 2015, p.18) so that value can be created and derived between members.

Virtual communities of SNS users have continued to derive value from SNSs that afford its users efficient and intimate exchange of information that matter to them personally, thus strengthening their stabilized community. This has been particularly facilitated by “the rapid growth of newer platforms explicitly oriented to intimate conversation with smaller groups of friends.” (Hodkinson, 2015, p.23-24) A good example of a newer SNS that does so is Snapchat where “interactions tend to involve groups of friends considerably smaller than most Facebook friends-lists and that, together with the ephemerality of content on which the platform centres, this leads such conversations to have a particularly intimate feel.” (Hodkinson, 2015, p.24) This platform allows its users to send photos with words attached to a single or multiple people in their social circle, a malleable means to send intimate information. According to “Snapchat Support” (2018), the platform allows a maximum of 31 users in a “group chat”, delegating a more intimate “group chat” than Facebook affords. This feature enables Snapchat users to derive considerable value from the platform as their group chat will likely only comprise of immediate members of their stabilized community, thus strengthening their stabilized community.

As previously mentioned, “groups” on Facebook are private places where members need to “request” or be “invited” to join. These “groups” can be used to express grief within a stabilized virtual community in the wake of a member of their offline or virtual community passing away. This type of intimate information exchange usually entailing stories,

memories, photographs and/or details of various death related rituals like funerals or wakes can be shared privately in a “group”. This aids in the community strengthening process because “death builds community, as mourning and the associated cultural rituals provide order, acceptance, and a space for mutual support to those who are grieving.” (Forman, Kern & Gil-Egui, 2012, p.1) Not only can people derive value from engaging and posting information about the loss of a community member, but they can also derive value from this multi-purpose process as “expressions of grief aid the process of mourning, as they show, to the deceased and to others, the importance of the life that is gone.” (Forman, Kern & Gil-Egui, 2012, p.1) Therefore it can be seen that Snapchat and Facebook provide features that adequately encourage efficient and intimate exchange of information that matter to users personally, therefore providing value to its users and strengthening their stabilized community.

It has been substantially proven that social software, such as the SNSs mentioned, have facilitated the strengthening and building of virtual communities’. This has been illustrated by discussing how the Indigenous population in Australia have been afforded the ability by the SNS Facebook to confirm their identity through personalizing their Facebook profile pages with indigenous symbols in order to be accepted by groups/ pages and to socially interact and participate in key decision-making processes with those who are also indigenous to Australia efficiently, thus providing them with value. The thesis was further reinforced as it was proven that the SNSs Facebook and Tumblr encourage collaboration between young people to build their communities, deriving value from this process as their online social interactions will be more rewarding. Subsequently, discussing how Snapchat and Facebook have strengthened virtual communities by encouraging users to exchange intimate information that matter to them personally between their stabilized community, providing them with value. Therefore, it can be confidently asserted that social software has facilitated virtual communities as it has promoted online network-formation through its various affordances which in-turn has provided value to its users.

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