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The Experience of New Social Media

Master's Thesis

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## Statement

I hereby declare that I have written this diploma thesis solely by myself and I agree with its eventual publication in print or electronic form. All sources and literature have been properly cited. This work has not been used to obtain a different or the same degree.

Prague, June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2019

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## 1.1 Introduction

I first became interested in studying the effects of social media while in my first year at Charles University. We were learning about civilization studies and modernization theory, but would often digress upon topics of globalization and the spread and concentration of wealth. I began to realize that information can also be characterized by wealth in the world today, and that topic didn't become clear to me either until I was writing this thesis. As a westerner, millennial, and foreigner in the Czech Republic, social media is a huge part of how I interact with friends and family all over the world. During my studies, my social media habits became interesting to me as a tool through which to spread information, and I realized that other people's social media habits were even more interesting than my own, since I was certainly much more privy to my own motivations and background information than to others'. Being an immigrant, or 'expat' as Americans typically say, in the Czech Republic, and working and studying in international environments, I started to wonder if other expats were using social media for the same purposes as I was. My family, mother, father, and sister, talk constantly throughout the day in a WhatsApp group designated just for us. Although I'm thousands of miles away from them, it helps me feel closer to them when I can see what they're talking about having for dinner or which bar they've decided to meet in for drinks at the end of the day. I wondered if all expats had their version of a family chat that allowed them to feel closer to family and close friends without being next to them physically.

Initially, I wanted to interview as many American expats as I could find in Prague and listen to what they had to say about communication with their family and close friends, or, ‘intimate relationships’ as I originally described it. My initial research questions were:

- How do users experience interacting with social media, and have their individual life experiences growing up with internet communication affected their current experiences?
- Are there differences between how American expats communicate with loved ones abroad and how they communicate with others?
- Do users know what impact their presence on social media has on themselves and others, if any?

During the interviews, however, I began to realize that discussing communication with loved ones was not as interesting to my respondents as I’d hoped. Thankfully, what interested them to talk about was also interesting to me. I tracked down four Americans living in Prague long-term. The respondents I got were fantastic. Each of them was different, but no less talkative than the one before. I let each of them choose a place for the meeting, a system I learned to do in Grounded Theory, to help the interviewee feel that they were being interviewed in an objective place. And, I hoped to decipher some external information about each respondent and their individual interests along the way.

All respondents quickly related my original topics of social media and communication to themselves, and all of them talked to me openly about their individual experiences. To start this paper, I look at specific authors within the Media Sociology field, and discuss how they inspired my research questions. I will also examine the ways in which these authors helped me to focus my attention on the user experiences later, and also helped in my eventual explication and interpretation of results. Also in the theoretical section of this paper, I explain how I carried out this study using the phenomenological method of qualitative research. In the Findings section of this paper, I note what was most uniquely relevant about each respondent individually and what was interesting about their experiences collectively. Although I had only four respondents in this study, it was clear to me that every individual person has their own experience and asserts their own social importance on those experiences as such. For this reason, I chose not to delve deeper into the realm of American expats in Prague, as I found that through my interviews with each respondent, there was enough data to apply to the many discussions regarding Media Sociology proposed by Marshall McLuhan, Pierre Bourdieu, and Howard S. Becker, as well as many aspects of Historical Sociology, specifically in regards to discussions of etiquette, globalization, and economic implications of social media modernization.

In the thesis that follows, I aim to look at theories from both historical sociological texts and media sociological texts and relate them to the experiences of social media users today. I conducted this study to uncover and learn about these individual experiences, and make applied connections between the theory and concrete

reality of social structures within social media. As mentioned above, I chose the phenomenological method to get in-depth interviews with a small number of respondents. I felt that it was the best fit for the research I wanted to do in learning about individual, concrete experiences (Hycner, 1999).

## 2.1 Theoretical Background

As a researcher, I found that many different disciplines and theories aided my interest in pursuing a study about user experiences and new structures of social media. Several authors have presented theories of the media and society, and their theories can be useful in understanding the structures of new social media as well. I will now examine them critically, and try to see in what extent these theories still apply to the new realities. For this study, I focused primarily on Media Sociology, User Experience, and Phenomenological Methodology, and how these authors' works helped me formulate my research questions and interpretation of the interviews conducted.

Throughout this theoretical section, I explain some the media theories that helped shape my research questions and interview interpretations. I will dissect authors of Media Sociology, namely, Nicole Cohen and Dallas W. Smythe and their arguments about the commodification of users' leisure time. I will also look at Pierre Bourdieu and his interpretation of tastes and influence within society, which I will relate to the taste and influence structure of social media using cultural and social capital within media structures. I also examine Howard S. Becker, and explain how his methods and ideas

were influential in how I conducted this study. Next, I look at Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton's critique of the common habit of looking at media impacts to be too powerful and influential on society. Looking at this side of the theoretical argument is important in this study because they argue that to search for damaging impacts of media on society is to give media too much power. After looking at the Lazarsfeld and Merton critique, I will define and examine the new interest in user experience as a discipline in the technological world, and how the theory within technological development relates to the study of user experience of social media as a whole. Finally, I will present how the phenomenological methodology I used for this study was carried out, and how I explicate the data from the interviews.

## 2.2 Media Sociology

Although many sociological disciplines are related to the topic of social media usage and communication, one of the best ways for me to introduce the importance and interest in this topic is through discussion of specific theories of Media Sociology. During my time studying Media Sociology, I became interested in how society shapes media, which I discuss in the section through a selection of authors. Something I felt is really missing in the discipline, is also how media shapes society, and how individuals experience this shape.

One article that I looked to as a way to study new media is Howard S. Becker's *Studying the New Media*. In the article, Becker warns against latching onto the idea of

studying how media can negatively affect users. He discusses many cases in which specific studies are meant to only find the negative effects of media and “do something about the evils of the medium in question” and how unfortunate this goal is (Becker, 2002). These studies are not only revisionist at best, and politically charged at worst, according to Becker, they’ve never truly found anything of consequence. Causality, as Becker writes, is hard enough for sociologists to find, and may not even be the right way to think about uncovering clues about social structures at all. This is what I also attempt to do in this thesis by examining individual, concrete experiences of the users I interview. It’s important to note that although I believe it’s important to look at the impacts of social media on society, in this study I will focus only on the individual experiences of users based on how they engage with social media as a whole. In this study, the users’ engagement is more important.

Also in the article, Becker warns against using the “impact” paradigm, which assumes that the public is an inert mass only reacting to powerful commercial organizations and representatives of dominant social strata (Becker, 2002). This is exactly the method I try to espouse throughout this thesis. I argue that not only is the public *not* an inert mass passively gathering information from social media, but the public is an active part of usage and creation of experiences online. This is why I choose to use the term “users” throughout this thesis, which I hope connotes that the users are actively engaging and “using” the media they experience.

Next, it’s important to note the economic influences on the social media that users are engaging with on a daily basis. In Nicole S. Cohen’s article, *The Valorization of*

*Surveillance: Towards a Political Economy of Facebook*, she takes a look at Facebook, and how its structure inherently relies on society's dual role of both media consumer and media producer, and how Facebook commodifies users' time and social spheres to make and save money. In Cohen's paper, she discusses the importance of viewing a prominent social medium, in this case, Facebook, and how it built itself into the structure of modern capitalist development. She argues that Facebook is no longer a social medium with a passive audience, but instead has leaned toward the commodification of time spent on the site.

Cohen aptly uncovers the capitalist nature of the site, ostensibly calling itself a social medium, aimed to help people stay in touch with one another. To users, Facebook is probably both. It's a social media site, strangely addictive in nature, and extremely good at constantly showing us a stream of new information, new people, and new advertisements. It's a place where "excitable youth post too much information about themselves, risking exposure to stalkers or surveillance by employers, parents, and the CIA." (Cohen, 2008). On the other hand, Facebook is also a place where users enjoy their leisure time and passively scrolling past the constant inflow of advertisements. Users scroll, companies advertise, and Facebook provides the platform for this to take place, without necessitating any marketing campaigns itself. Meanwhile, users enjoy their free time, they are also accidentally providing free labor, essentially being exploited and advertised to constantly, and providing free marketing for Facebook via expanding social circles.

As Dallas W. Smythe writes in *On the Audience Commodity and its Work*, “If we would understand the full audience contribution to producing their own audience power in a capitalist system, we must start by asking what value the system places on that audience power.” (Smythe, 2012). In this case, it’s probably clear that Facebook relies heavily on the users to make money. Of course the company makes money through third-party advertisements presented to users on the site, but without the users themselves the site wouldn’t be successful. Here, we can see that the power of users of social media is very strong in dictating the economics of media structures.

One example of user presence on social media and its impact is Cohen’s point of “offload[ing] labor costs onto customers” (Cohen, 2008). It is an old explanation for a new structure of social media, one that has roots in Post-Fordism lean production and cost-cutting of businesses everywhere thereafter. (Cohen, 2008). Crowdsourcing, audience labor, new business. All of these are examples of audience work, which users engage in and help to catapult new social media like Facebook into the realms of modern capitalism.

One of the most interesting things about Cohen’s article is her analysis of a speech given by Mark Zuckerberg, the creator of Facebook. In the speech, he discusses the “social graph”, the way information is spread between connected people. As this graph grows, communication between one another becomes more efficient when two connected people don’t have to spend time paying attention to one another simultaneously, and face-to-face. Connection is much more effective when we can review our connections and information from those connections in our own time (Cohen, 2008). One of the key

features that Facebook created to allow this kind of at-leisure catching up with friends was the news feed, created in 2006. This news feed was a way to keep constant tabs, or “surveillance” as Cohen writes, on your friends and family, no matter where they were, no matter when they last signed in to Facebook. This was an unobtrusive method for watching what people were doing, without having to interact or pay attention to an actual human being in any way.

According to Cohen, this was the ultimate moment for advertisements to come into play. People could log on to their Facebook profile and scroll through their news feeds to see what their friends were doing, but were immediately blasted with non-stop advertisement. Because of the news feed, it’s clear that Facebook is not a purely social space; its ability to get users to create information, share it, spread it to others, spread it to companies for profit, and view constant advertisements according to the content created and shared, solidified its place among the capitalist realm as well as the social one (Cohen, 2008). However, quantitative studies show that most people sign up for Facebook to keep in touch with friends and family, which shows us that the users either don’t know the capitalist structure behind their chosen method of communication, or they just don’t care about it that much. (Jones and Soltren 2005; Cohen, 2008).

One of the things that inspired me to study this topic of user experience with social media was Pierre Bourdieu’s *On Television*. Although this was published in 1998, Bourdieu’s quote, “Television enjoys a de facto monopoly on what goes into the heads of a significant part of the population and what they think,” can be aptly applied to social media in the case of American Expats in Prague today (Bourdieu, 1998). Because none of

the respondents in this study have access to Czech television or news within their homes, and if they did, the language barrier would be enough for them not to truly be exposed to it, they need to find their news elsewhere. Often, elsewhere is Facebook's news feed that I mentioned above. Because news outlets also have Facebook profiles and other social media accounts now, it's easy to scroll through your news feed or similar medium and see the sensationalist headlines, one after the other, and absorb them without thinking twice. Even if you don't click on the individual news stories, journalism has adapted to create specific headlines for posts that are inherently "clickbait"<sup>1</sup>. Sensationalist media can be directly reapplied from television to social media in this case. According to Bourdieu in 1998, the social world was becoming closer and closer to being described in terms of television, and in this thesis I aim to find insight into this idea within the realm of social media (Bourdieu, 1998). This idea influenced my initial research questions greatly, and was influential in the way that I attempted to interpret the results later in the study.

Bourdieu also inspired me to take the economic discussion of social media a bit further, and think of social media in smaller pieces. During this study, I also attempt to dissect the largely economic field surrounding all media into different pieces of capital as he suggests. Of course, we cannot discuss social media without discussing the commodification of users' time, content, and social spheres as is the case with Facebook. The economy of social media is important, but it does not determine everything.

Applying what Pierre Bourdieu writes in *Distinction*, alongside economic capital, which

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<sup>1</sup> "Clickbait": something (such as a headline) designed to make readers want to [click](#) on a hyperlink especially when the link leads to content of dubious value or interest (Merriam-Webster, 2019)

is specifically money and financial assets, cultural capital and social capital are some of the most important factors in regard to influencing taste in any society, which is largely done via social media today. By cultural capital, it is understood that Bourdieu means abstract experience like education, travel, or experience with other cultural nuances that are not defined specifically by finances. Social capital, on the other hand, is all about who you know, or who is in your direct sphere of influence (Bourdieu, 1984). If you have a good social connection, a friend who works for a company you want to work for, as an example, you have the social capital to possibly be employed at that company in the future. At the very least, you have more social capital than someone who doesn't know someone already working for that company.

Bourdieu argues that people with higher social and cultural capital are the ones who are more influential in setting trends, solidifying a societal taste for things. These tastes can then be used to create inequality among the groups of people who can afford, or have the economic capital, to recreate these trends. The other classes, however, are force-fed these tastes and trends. The other classes are unable to create their own tastes and trends, because either their tastes don't have enough practitioners, due to the lower social and cultural capital, or their self-imposed tastes are so defined by the tastes set by the people with higher social and cultural capital, that they're still related to the tastes set by those higher capital-holding folks (Bourdieu, 1984).

This model of non-financial capital being influential in taste-making throughout society can be directly related to social media as well. Social media and internet communication, like chatrooms, online gaming forums, dating applications, and websites,

are all subject to this distinction proposed by Bourdieu. It may seem that social media could have a neutralizing effect, because, behind a screen, a person can be anyone they want to be. To some people behind a screen, status doesn't matter, economics doesn't matter. But, social media all have a way to bring social capital into the equation. Reddit, self-proclaimed "the front page of the internet", claims, "Reddit is home to thousands of communities, endless conversation, and authentic human connection" (reddit.com). Although they are marketing themselves as an authentically communicative and connective platform, and where most users aim to remain anonymous, the system of "upvoting", "downvoting", and "earning karma" are just a few of the ways that social capital comes into play. Users "upvote" or "downvote" original content, which is all content posted on the site. Original content can be a meme, gif, story, photograph, or any other user-created post. Users then vote whether to push a post to the top of the Home page, or send it to the bottom, where it's buried with millions of other posts, hidden from the 21 billion average monthly views (reddit.com). This tells us that even social media that boasts anonymity, users with capital can still dictate what the trends and tastes become. As users of the site see what kinds of posts are getting "upvotes", they learn what kinds of content to post and what will get them the most karma from these "upvotes", following in the steps of the ones who were successfully promoted to the top of the page before them. Social and Cultural capital are also the reason "influencers" on Instagram have millions of followers, set popular trends, and make thousands of dollars from posting a single photo containing a specific product they're sponsored by. It's also the reason celebrities' children have a higher chance of being celebrities themselves, and

why children who are taught to have good social skills as children, grow up to be more successful than children who aren't taught good social skills. (Jones Greenberg & Crowley, 2015).

While some social media are concerned with individual oversharing and some are preaching anonymity, one of the major positions of Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton in their essay, *Mass communication, popular taste, and organized social action* is a lack of adequate control over media. They write,

“Many are alarmed by the ubiquity and potential power of the mass media...It is widely felt that the mass media comprise a powerful instrument which may be used for good or for ill and that, in the absence of adequate controls, the latter possibility is on the whole more likely.”  
(Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1971).

Of course, at this time, Lazarsfeld and Merton were discussing mass media in terms of radio, television, film, and news instead of social media, but, their critique of these scared people still stands today.

Lazarsfeld and Merton were wary that mass media had the enormous effects that other people “magically” thought the media possessed. The widespread concern about the effects of these media have a truly Bourdieusian basis, according to Lazarsfeld and Merton. They suggest that many people are “fearful of the ubiquity and potential power” of the media and its goal to appeal to the masses, thus lessening the societal tastes to the

group controlling all media propaganda. People fear the homogenization of taste and interest, and that society will become too accepting of propaganda and stop thinking critically about what's being presented to them (Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1971).

Trying to find an answer that would appease the people who fear the widespread negative effects of media, they argue that comparing society with and without mass media is not the way to finding the “effects” of mass media on society. They discuss the invention and ubiquity of the automobile, which they argue did more for society than the invention and development of the radio. While in 1971, they were probably right, I disagree that this specific argument still holds. “[The automobile’s] sheer existence has exerted pressure for vastly improved roads, and, with these, mobility has increased enormously” (Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1971). I cannot disagree with this statement, but I can assert that social media has done for communication what the automobile has done for mobility, at least in 1971. They might tell me now that communication via social media is leisure, not necessity; it’s an “avenue for ideas, which can be avoided by withdrawal, deflected by resistance, and transformed by assimilation”, they might say (Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1971). But to imply that any kind of social media or online social network is not worthy of discussion as an important and impactful form of communication would be wrong in my opinion.

Reformers throughout modern history have fought for more leisure time, and the fact that people use their leisure time on media instead of cultural events and blaming mass media for it, is a scapegoat, they argue (Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1971). This point interested me greatly, and what influenced my goal in listening to the experiences of

users, rather than assuming that they're being affected negatively by social media. If people want more leisure time as a means to increase their cultural experience, or cultural capital, it must be noted that it is possible now with social media to do just that.

Everything is available on the internet, shareable through social media. Lazarsfeld and Merton assume that people feel betrayed by mass media because it robs them of their leisure time, which doesn't put much trust or value in the opinions of the people who are consuming the media in the first place. This assumption and lack of trust is what I aim to begin reversing. I aim to give credit to the users of media, and listen to their stories.

Throughout the rest of the theoretical section of this paper, I will continue in the discussion of ideas that influenced my research goals and questions, and explore the methodology that helped me to achieve them.

### 2.3 User Experience

Throughout my time with this study, I started to make parallels between my original research questions and the application of questions I ask myself every day at work. I work as a Technical Writer for a software company, which means I write articles for users on the internet to help them understand how my company's software works. I always have to think ahead about what kinds of questions users will ask, and try to answer them before the users even think to ask. I have to pay very close attention to how users navigate and interact with a screen in front of them. UX, or User Experience, by vague definition, is a "dynamic, context-dependent, and subjective" experience that a

user has when they are interacting with a digital interface (Law & Hassenzahl, 2009). Although the term lacks a specific definition, it encompasses emotional, experiential, and aesthetic value within a human-technology interaction (Law & Hassenzahl, 2009). By bringing my work into the theoretical background of this thesis, I can also say that I am bringing the concept of UX design and writing into the explication of my respondents' experiences. I am constantly thinking about interactions between technology and its users. I think about design, word choice, formatting, readability, and how the user will arrive in one place from another. Everything that users experience while face-to-face with technology is a user experience, and how a user experiences what is in front of them, how they understand it, and what they do with it is something that I am passionate about from many different disciplines, and in this paper, I attempt to answer the questions, "How do people interact with social media?" and "What is this user's experience?" in the same way I do it every day as a Technical Writer.

## 2.4 Methodology

For the interviews I conducted, I performed a phenomenological type of qualitative interview. In this section I will explain why I chose this method, as well as explaining my methodological process, including who my target respondents were, how I found my respondents, the method I used to gather data, how the data was stored and how I explicated the data I used from the respondents' interviews (Groenewald, 2004). I chose this method because I wanted to know how individual people, in this study, American

expats in Prague, use and experience social media. I also wanted to know how they understand their own usage, and if they could explain their understanding of how they use social media as well.

The phenomenological method allows in-depth interviews with a small number of respondents in order to learn deeply about their concrete experiences, which is exactly what I wanted to do. Despite the criticisms of phenomenological research, namely, that it is difficult to present exact instructions on how to do it, I felt that it was the best fit for the research I wanted to do (Hycner, 1999). I learned about this method from an article online entitled, *A Phenomenological Research Design Illustrated*, written by Thomas Groenewald in 2004. I modeled this methodology on what he adopts in this article. In the article, he explains phenomenology using an idea that fit with my goals in this research and my research questions. He illustrates how to create a phenomenological study, with the main objective being the arrival of certainty using only immediate and internal experiences of the respondents. By using these individual experiences, we can more easily see the world as a collection of concrete experiences and reality (Groenewald, 2004).

The first step in my research was to define who it was I wanted to interview. To do this, I used my own personal experience and interest in social media usage as an American expat living in Prague. Again, aligned with Groenewald's article, I selected participants using my own judgement and relation to the phenomenon to be researched- social media communication between American expats in Prague and their friends and

families around the world (Kruger, 1988). Based on this alignment and goal, I knew that I needed to find people who fit this category.

In my view, the most appropriate way to do this for my specific research goals and questions was to find them through social media. I operated under the assumption that finding respondents via social media would ensure that the eventual respondents I found were already interested in and using social media for some purpose in their lives. To find an appropriate way to appeal to strangers, I first accessed Facebook, a commonly used social media application and website among expats in Prague. I searched for groups with “Expats”, “Americans”, and “Prague” in the names. Using the English spelling, “Prague”, I assumed to get access to more expats in the groups that Facebook suggested to me. To bolster this initial search, I asked other American expats in Prague who I knew, which Facebook groups they used, if any, they used to connect with other expats or foreigners. Many Facebook groups were suggested, but in the end I posted a request for respondents on a popular Facebook group for foreigners, where people go to have their local questions answered by other people around Prague. The group’s name was called, “Crowdsauce CZ”<sup>2</sup>, and I posted there asking for people who might want to be part of a qualitative study about social media communication. I chose this group because it boasted the highest number of people compared to other expat groups for similar purposes, at over 11,000 members. I had also used this Facebook group as an expat and researcher in the past, using it to find an American who once served in the Peace Corps

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<sup>2</sup> No doubt a play on the term “Crowdsource”: the practice of obtaining needed services, ideas, or content by soliciting contributions from a large group of people and especially from the online community rather than from traditional employees or suppliers (Merriam-Webster, 2019).

for another research task I conducted in the past. My original post was directed toward American Expats living in Prague, and in the post I mentioned the research topic was “personal experiences communicating via social media and the internet”.

I found two of my four respondents through this post, and the other two were friends of people who saw the post and “tagged” them in the comments of my original post, a method of writing another person’s name and attaching it to the post. These respondents then received a notification that their name had been mentioned under my original post. I wrote to the individuals whose names were either tagged, or explicitly stated by their own volition that they would be interested in the project.

To contact the respondents, I sent individual private messages to each respondent individually via Facebook Messenger, a private-messaging service available with a Facebook membership. In this message, I explained my research topic again, then asked them to propose a place where our interview could take place. For this, I left the decision up to the respondents in hopes that it would also give me an insight into how and where these individual respondents were most comfortable speaking openly. The only thing I suggested was that it be reasonably quiet because the interview would be recorded. According to the research design within Groenewald’s article, I next ensured the respondents agreed upon the following:

- Individual identities would be protected. I agreed to change names and all identifying details in the transcriptions, notes, and research findings, without sacrificing the truthfulness of their experiences.

- To be truthful and not misleading in any way for the relevance and validity of the research, in exchange for anonymizing their identifying information.
- Interviews would be recorded, and these recordings or transcriptions would not be shared.
- All meetings would be voluntary on the side of the individual respondent.
- To discuss the topics presented, which were not explicitly presented as my own individual research questions as a researcher. (Groenewald, 2004).

All respondents represented in the study findings sections below agreed upon the aforementioned points before continuing with the interview process.

Initially, before I sent the points, I spoke with 2 other respondents, but they did not agree to the aforementioned points, nor did they elect a meeting place. Therefore, I agreed to interview the four respondents who did confirm the points above and elected a meeting place. In Groenewald's article, he refers to *Phenomenology the method* by C.O. Boyd, and the notion that 2-10 qualitative interviews are a sufficient saturation for a phenomenological interview (Boyd C.O., 2001). This supports my choice to interview four respondents out of the possible 5,940 Americans in the Czech Republic, according to the Ministry of Interior (Scott, 2011). As I will discuss later in this paper, there were significant individualities in the interviews, as well as eventual overlap that helped me decide to discontinue looking for more respondents after the four presented here were completed.

At the same time the respondents agreed upon the points above, we discussed the meeting place. Two of the respondents chose a neutral location. The first was Hanoi Vietnamese restaurant in Prague 2, the second was at La Qila Indian restaurant also in Prague 2. One of the respondents asked me to their home, and one of the respondents chose to join me in my home office after denying to choose a place on their own, and settling on my office from a list of places I provided.

At the beginning of each interview, I reminded the respondents of my research objectives, and helped them to begin. I posed my interview questions:

- How do you use social media and what can you say about your relationship with it?
- What throughout your life has shaped this relationship do you think?

These questions were asked to respondents to help them begin discussing their usage of social media, to encourage detailed expression in how their experiences have been formed, and how their experiences helped form their current relationship with social media. These were my main initial questions for respondents, which were meant to help me make some sense of the following:

- Phenomenon: User experiences of social media, and the social structures, new and old, that can help to interpret them.
- Research Questions:

- How do users experience interacting with social media, and have their individual life experiences growing up with internet communication affected their current experiences?
- Are there differences between how American expats communicate with loved ones abroad and how they communicate with others?
- Do users know what impact their presence on social media has on themselves and others, if any?

From the outset, I understood as a qualitative researcher, that my respondents' experiences may not help me to answer my questions. In this regard, I left the presented questions as they were, and didn't ask any more questions during the interview, unless the respondent was completely finished with what they were telling me. Then, I asked them to expand more on a thought they already expressed, so not to lead them in a specific direction after they had already begun. This was also modeled on Groenewald's article. I conducted "unstructured, in-depth" phenomenological interviews, where both the respondent and researcher were subject to reciprocal dialogue (Groenewald, 2004).

At the beginning of each interview, I set up a recorder, again confirming the respondents' permission. I recorded the interviews and ensured the appropriate battery and charging tools were nearby, in the case that the recorder's battery ran out. During the interviews I took various field notes according to the respondents' narration, so I could refer to these notes later when dissecting the interviews (Groenewald, 2004).

After the interviews were complete, I transcribed the key passages of the interviews. I kept both the recordings and the transcripts labeled with the dates the interviews were conducted, and assigned each respondent a new name that only I knew. As Groenewald writes, referencing the importance of field notes in a study, after transcription I created theoretical notes. Groenewald writes, “field notes are already a step toward data analysis” (Groenewald, 2004). Therefore, I will continue with my interpretations in my theoretical field notes in the findings section of this paper.

I stored the data on my computer in a folder containing separate folders for each respondent. In each respondent’s folder, I stored:

- The notes I took during each interview.
- The transcription of key passages from the interview, including the version without theoretical field notes that I sent to each respondent for approval.
- An audio recording of each interview.
- Theoretical field notes used to analyze the interviews from my point of view.

While all appropriate pieces of the interview were stored on my computer, I also stored them in a personal Google Drive, used for my own purposes as a backup.

Once the data was collected, it was time for the “explication” of the data, a term preferred by Groenewald while citing R.H. Hycner’s *Some guidelines for the*

*phenomenological analysis of the interview data*, to the term “analysis”. Hycner mentions in this article, “The research data, that is, the recordings and the transcriptions, are approached with an openness to whatever meanings emerged.” (Hycner, 1999). Instead of looking for my own interests in the interviews of my respondents, I began listening to my interviews, one at a time, referring to my notes and the transcriptions. I decided to follow a similar path that both Groenewald and Hycner illustrated, by explicating the data using the following steps:

- Bracketing
- Identifying significant of meanings and their frequencies
- Interview validation
- Interview themes and composite findings (Groenewald, 2004; Hycner, 1999).

The first step, as Hycner refers to as “bracketing”, helped me first notice linguistic themes and patterns that stood out in regard to the phenomenon I discussed with my respondents. The second step in the process helped me take these themes and patterns discovered, and narrow them down to specific findings and how often they came up within a specific interview. Next, I wrote a summary of my key points for each interview and sent the notes and transcribed key parts to the respondents themselves. This gave each respondent a chance to add or modify anything that I denoted as something

significant to discuss in this paper. No further modifications were made. The fourth step of this process is what turned into the Findings section of this paper.

This method was integral in my focus on individual experiences of the respondents, and allowed a more in-depth discussion of experience rather than using a more standardized method like Grounded Theory. Although I began the interviews with the idea that Grounded Theory would have been a perfect form of qualitative study for this study, I found once the interviews were underway that to code and ground the respondents' experiences in any way was to deny the full significance of each user's experience.

### 3.1 Findings

In this section, I will present my findings first by individual respondent and the interpretations of their experience, then I will focus on a summary of the commonalities between them. These findings are based on the steps mentioned in the Chapter 2.4 – Methodology section of this paper. Specifically, these findings are based on the 4 steps that I completed in the explication of data, and the findings that follow are a results of the last step, “Interview themes and composite findings”. I present the findings in this way, from each individual, because I was able to discover something unique about their experience in relation to the phenomenon of social media shaping the way that American Expats in Prague communicate with friends and family internationally, and how this relates to both historical and new social media topics. Also in this section, I will focus on

the description of each individual respondent, as my goal here was to understand the phenomena from the point of view of my respondents. I aim to describe as accurately as possible, each individual narrative as it relates to the phenomenon that I set out to explore, plus the links to Media Sociology and Historical Sociology that validate them where relevant.

### 3.2 Respondent 1 – Don

I found Don, a soft-spoken, 31-year-old American man through word of mouth. The snowball effect started with my social sphere and I spread the word that I was looking for respondents in the study. That, combined with my Facebook post, which many of my friends on social media saw, helped me get in touch with Don. We first began to speak through Facebook messages and I admired his response to my invitation to be a respondent. At the outset, He mentioned that although he doesn't talk too much about his social media usage, he was excited to be a part of a study that would grant him the space to explore his own feelings about it. Automatically, this response interested me because as a user of social media it seems as though he would certainly be able to find the space somewhere on the internet to say whatever he wanted to say, whenever he wanted to say it. Already I knew that I had made the right choice in meeting with him, and that through my social media post and his response, we were certainly on the way to a face-to-face conversation. His excitement at that prospect before the initial meeting was exciting for me as well. It was clear to me after that that although he was an avid social

media user, he used social media as a means to get involved in real life, a perspective that none of the other respondents explicitly shared. Social media and “virtual reality” were not enough for him. He craved the face-to-face contact of a physical friends and was critical of social media in itself. I asked him where he’d like to meet me for an interview, and he chose a Hanoi, a Vietnamese restaurant in Vinohrady that he’d been wanting to try. Having been there myself, I knew it was a quiet place, perfect for an interview, and I admired his willingness to step out of his comfort zone in so many aspects at our first meeting

At the beginning of the interview, Don was tense. In a qualitative interview it’s never easy to begin, and this was no different. He was tense, quiet, choppy in his speech, and clearly uncomfortable. After a few minutes however, he began speaking about social media in a clearly supportive way, perhaps having known that my research was about social media caused him some difficulty in trying to remove some of the bias in his responses. Initially, he was supportive of social media in the sense that its use helped him achieve what he ultimately wanted, physical closeness, or “in-real-life” relationships.

The idea that someone like Don craves closeness in his perceived practice of friendship was also evidenced in the way he spoke about communicating with his family in the United States. He said, “I feel a little bit closer to my family being here because I talk to them in a more serious way when I’m actually interacting with them.” He also mentions that the pressure of formally catching up with them through social media creates an atmosphere of intimacy that was previously lacking while he lived at home with them. Don told me he was a solitary man growing up, not too social and didn’t get

out of the house much. At one point he stated regret for taking physical closeness for granted when he had more of an opportunity for it. Keeping in mind this was in the beginning of the interview, it's clear that Don was supportive of usage of social media through achieving the closeness that he craves in relationships. However, once the interview went on he began to change his position from supportive to concerned the deeper he started to think about it. His fear of the unknown was evident.

In Prague, social media is a good way to keep up with people because the Expat community is small, and people seem to know everyone, which makes it feel even smaller. When it's easy to have a group of people with similar interests, lifestyles, careers, and backgrounds your real life social network becomes very large. Your sphere of influence is huge, which makes it difficult to see all the people you want to see as often as you want to see them. For Don, this is the first problem with social media. According to him, posting events on Facebook is one of the best ways he can keep in contact with people in real life. Posting an event is an "effortless" way to not only make friends, but to keep in contact with people you don't see that often, making you feel closer to them than you normally would otherwise. There's no "social maneuvering to do, you can just show up and be social, and because of the information that you've already been provided on Facebook you know that someone will be there". Social media is a means to a physical end in his case and already it's clear to see that for Don, social media is not enough of a tool to help him truly feel close to others, unless it's being used simply as a means to a physical end.

Another interesting thing that Don discussed in his interview is the idea of re-creating the self. He mentioned in his interview that the internet is a way to be whoever you want to be, and he wasn't my only respondent who felt that way. The internet is an ideal place for anonymity, and social media specifically is a pathway to manipulation of others if that's what you want to use it for. In regards to invitations to events on Facebook, Don was especially enthusiastic because he stated that inviting your Facebook friend list to any given event is a perfect way to "Feel out who's responsive and who's not responsive in general without any pressure." Throughout the interviews, Don was not the only one to discuss social pressure of face-to-face interactions, but he was especially interested in discussing the relief of social pressure through the social media diffuser. For Don, social media is a diffuser of face-to-face situations. Although he feels much closer to his family because of social media and living abroad, he uses social media as only a means of discovering closeness and intimacy in a physical setting. He even mentions the ability to "bond" with people by liking Facebook statuses or photos and how it can be misleading, with clicking of a button can seem like real intimacy: "Oftentimes I'm scared of that because I think it can easily become a replacement for actual deep bonding, and you can get by on that." What this says about users of social media is that while Don is a relatively self-aware user, privy to the common culture of social media curation and inundation of digital connection, it's easy to mistake knowing what's going on in a person's life, via newsfeed on Facebook or other social media platform, for intimacy and connection. In this case, intimacy and closeness with other people is actually completely one-sided and lasts for a second rather than enjoying a

conversation for an hour face-to-face. But, because it's common to engage with social media in this way, it feels like fake connection based on highly curated content that people post. This was the first indication that Don was critical of social media usage in general. He felt that it was a self-perpetuating cycle of competition that glorifies a platform of inauthenticity and fake content. Although this is a user's prerogative, to post what they are compelled to post and to create a sense of who they are in the digital world regardless of what's real or not. For Don, the individuality that social media encourages, is fake. Because of the push of individuality, it has become the social norm to be different from everyone else, to be unique.

This same idea of creating who you are on social media is mirrored in Anthony Giddens' book, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love & Eroticism in Modern Societies*. In this book, Giddens mentions the openness of self-reflexivity and the all-important question in gender identity, "Who am I?", which he attributes to Betty Friedan. But, he goes further in saying that the search for identity is not *only* a search for sexual identity. In modern society, it's a search for expression of the self in general. In this sense, Don's interpretation of "social norm" in social media is apt, because not only is online content posted according to an individual's prerogative, but can also be explained using Giddens' guiding questions of self-identity, "Who shall I be?" "How shall I live" (Giddens, 1992).

Don's push toward expressing individuality in this way can also be interpreted by analyzing Erving Goffman in his study of individuals in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. In this book, Goffman discusses the performative nature of the self

and the self's behavior in public. In the book Goffman discusses individual behavior as the behavior that's left over after trying not to embarrass oneself or others, which leads us to so highly curate our behavior and interaction with others that it doesn't seem authentic anymore (Goffman, 1956). He takes into account every aspect of acting and the stage. He likens individual behavior as a performative art, which he calls the "dramaturgical analysis" and in which he discusses that all public behavior is a performance and all individuals are actors. One actor or individual is performing while others watch, and the viewers of an individual's play become the actors themselves in another. It's a reciprocal show in every sense. Although the book was written in 1956, the theory within can also be applied to social media in almost every way. If Goffman had written the book in 2018, he surely would not have been able to leave social media out of the equation of "face-to-face" interaction, because social media dictates a large number of interactions we engage in each day.

At the same time, Don acknowledges social media's ability to provide solidarity to individuals in a different way. This idea of solidarity through anonymity is also present in Don's interview when talking about online communities. Don expresses his struggle with identifying with his physical body while he was growing up and not really accepting himself for who he was until later in life. Anonymity on the internet gave him the space to do that. Physical interactions with other people for him used to be simply a space for people to assert their power over each other, whether it be through beauty, intelligence, or social status. Through the internet, he was comforted with the ability to detach from his physical body and the physical world in order to truly explore

what was out there. For him, music was a savior, and online he was able to explore that freely without the physical pressures of being in a group of people who were all competing for attention and social status, and ultimately become the tastemakers in a Bourdieusian sense. Online, there are no interruptions; only space to explore and solidarity of others who are doing the same thing.

Solidarity through individual identity is a huge part of Don's interview that he grappled with. Throughout the interview, I could see the proverbial light going on in his head being able to discuss and express these thoughts to me, because I was there to listen and extract his thoughts on the subject. On a few occasions he mentioned "wow, I've never been able to really discuss these things before so deeply", which from a sociologist's point of view is quite interesting to think that someone so passionate about a topic has not given himself the physical space or time to discuss it.

This thought of his was actually made stronger when he expressed himself like this:

Social consciousness is totally different than being alone. Feeling like someone else's consciousness is pressing upon you is this terrible kind of animal fear. When you're with another person, of course there's going to be this kind of filter, a filter that goes up because that's what we are, you know, we're animals. We have sort of built-in fear and need to deceive others and be a certain thing to push our own values and push our own agenda. But when you're just by yourself in front of your computer it's completely different because it's like a

writer being in a room by himself or like an artist or something it's just you and your thoughts and your space.

Here, Don is exhibiting an analysis of his own experience via the conflict paradigm. In this moment, he sees that people are animals that are pressing upon each other to push their own agendas, but as a society, people are always pushing and being pushed to be socially confined to fit within a specific realm. The internet is different. Online, people are anonymous and operate without the added stress of being confined in a specific, physical social space. At the same time, there is also the latent, aforementioned social normalcy of pushing your individuality online through social media, and developing your own curated profile representing you that everyone can see.

On the other hand, Don is wary of becoming too dependent on the space the internet provides for those struggling with their identities. He mentions that social media can actually add to a feeling of disconnection rather than connection because it's a fake, fleeting feeling of happiness and connection rather than a deep bond. We get addicted to these small moments of happiness and connection that give us validation for what we present on social media, and that can actually be a very unhealthy thing. Getting "20 likes" on a comment or post on social media provides a sense of validation, but it's not a deep connection to other people. This feeling of reliance on social media rather than face-to-face communication is emphasized by Don like this:

I think now people are more prone to just dipping a couple of toes in the water, and if it doesn't work out then you can just kind of skate away and go somewhere else now. I mean the pool of people in your life has gotten more diluted and exponentially bigger.

He compares this to the feeling of being younger, before social media, when he was forced to be close to the people around him because that was the only option. Now, with such a wide range of people to choose from our connections to others are actually weaker, despite their availability to us through social media.

As an American living in Prague, it is clear that Don has left his comfortable home life to live among relative strangers. Against all odds has left his habitus, cashed in his social capital, and created a life that differs from almost every American still in the United States. His sphere of influence has widened, leaving him overwhelmed by opportunity, choice, and privilege that is unique to his situation. It's important to keep in mind that the respondents in this study are all in this unique position and are inundated with larger choice of connection through social media than their American-dwelling counterparts.

One of the most interesting things that came out of the interview with Don was this idea of the extension of the self. He posed a question, "When your phone breaks, why does it feel like an extension of you and you feel lost without it?" People have become so attached to their mobile phones and social media that upon inspection it feels that our brains can't hold any important information anymore. All the information we

could ever want is held in an external part of us, an external hard drive in the shape of a small black box with a touch screen. Don is critical of social media. He is nervous about the concept that after you are no longer your physical body anymore, everything you ever posted, liked, commented, or looked at on the internet is still there and it's still a part of you because you engaged in it. Don views his relationship with social media as a spiritual connection. Social media is what allows him to maintain close relationships with his family members across the world because it enforces the old principle of quality conversation over quantity. But, for Don, social media also imposes a huge spiritual risk on the user. As the interview went on, it seemed that Don was having an existential crisis before my eyes as he delved deeper into his thoughts and relationship with a virtual social reality that seems to be taking over our lives.

This moment in Don's has theoretical significance. At this moment, he was mirroring of some of ideas from *The Global Village* by Marshall McLuhan and Bruce R. Powers. In Don's interview, he discusses immortality and content produced by users for the internet being an extension of the self. In the *The Global Village*, McLuhan makes the same case when he discusses re-presentation, "The function of art is to provide some livable distance. All media are a reconstruction, a model of some biologic capability speeded up beyond the human ability to perform". In this sense, Don was exactly right. All the personal content that a user puts into social media is simply a representation and therefore an extension of one's self. But to McLuhan, this distance is a necessary function of art and life, to Don it is a function of competition in immortality, a way to live while

your physical body has died, with the hopes of asserting that your evolutionary self is stronger than someone else's.

Toward the end of the interview, Don transitioned from the discussion of extension of the self to immortality. In his view, part of his motivation for engaging in social media at all is the idea that what he's done virtually will be present long after his physical body is gone. He admitted this, and also the fact that it scares him. His concern for the effects of social obsession with anti-aging technology exacerbates his points even more. We are animals, after all, and as social creatures we are constantly in a state of evolutionary competition with others to stay alive above all else. Social media is no break from that, although it distracts us from physical reality.

Overall, Don was intriguing; aware of his interest in social media, his concerns with it, and their relationship to evolutionary biology. He was certainly influenced by the negative notions of social media, echoing the warning from Lazarsfeld and Merton that to be too terrified of technology, is to give it too much power to it overall (Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1971). In the end, he summed up what we know about social media and human beings in a harsh, albeit not entirely wrong quote:

“We're literally just monkeys playing with shit we don't understand and it's fucking with us but we're happy with it because we're monkeys and we don't think beyond our base feelings or base happiness. But it's definitely shifting values in a drastic way. Social values, social identity, friendship

bonds, we're becoming even more disconnected even though we have more ability to connect.”

### 3.3 Respondent 2 – Chuck

I met Chuck the same way I met Don. Through Facebook, snowball effect, and word of mouth, which eventually led us to meet. Facebook seemed the best way to find my initial respondents, as I assumed people interested in social media were already involved engaged in social media. We initially discussed our plans to meet over Facebook messenger, then slowly switched to WhatsApp, which felt already a little more intimate than Facebook messaging with a stranger. The sharing of phone numbers and the nuances that accompany it made the interactions feel much more intentional than reactionary based on the situation. When I asked where he'd like to meet for the interview, suggesting that it be someplace quiet for the sake of the recorder, he suggested I choose the place, and was very open to traveling to meet me. I asked him if he felt comfortable coming over to my apartment, where I had a small office set up to teach and write. He confidently agreed to come to my office, and expressed his interest in discussing the topics at hand.

Chuck's confident tone never subsided during the entire interview. It was clear he either had experience speaking about his experiences with social media, or had thought about it a lot, and in a very critical and complete way. He started the conversation with a

concern for the fact that in our modern society, he felt we were losing the “old ways of communicating” to social media. He asserted that the connection we feel with other people is less intentional, therefore cause for concern. The old ways of communicating he was referring to, I confirmed with him, means writing letters, calling people on the phone to chat or making plans to meet someone specifically. He expressed that this loss of intentional social interaction has led to a generation of social awkwardness, and lack of basic social etiquette, like how to shake a hand or look someone in the eye. These practices in social etiquette that Chuck was describing can tell us that civilization and society are still changing, if we look at this opinion through Norbert Elias’ *The Civilizing Process*. As Elias wrote, these gestures of etiquette and manners are a key ingredient in asserting social standing to more “inferior” groups (or nations) (Elias, 1939).

From the first moment that Chuck was expressing the idea that social media is somehow affecting the manners of face-to-face interactions, it seemed that he was viewing social media as having a “barbarous” effect on people. Instead of viewing social media as a technology that moves communication into the future, he looked to it as ultimately moving “civilized” society into a more barbarous state (Elias, 1939). Chuck’s interpretation of social media in this way also tells us that Lazarsfeld and Marton were correct in saying that a general fear toward the power of the media is prevalent and also, possibly, unfounded.

Throughout Chuck’s interview, he was also interested in discussing the irony that although we can contact any person in the world at almost any time of the day, it doesn’t

mean we're close to them. Here it is necessary to discuss the dual meaning of the word "close". With this word, I refer to the discussion of mental closeness with "intimacy", rather than the physical closeness of "proximity". While he talked, he spoke a lot about the illusion of connection, which was highly reminiscent of Don's interview in which he discusses the fake connection that people have with one another, based on fake and highly curated content. Chuck was adamant that a feeling of intimacy with another person has nothing to do with physical closeness at all, which to him, is the reason why social media plays such a huge part of his life as an expat abroad. He can still talk to his family in another country, who are not physically close to him, and still feel an intimate connection with them. He can look at pictures that his best friends in another country post on social media, not interact with the people or the photos in any way, but because he is aware of what they are doing in any capacity, he still feels intimately close to them, even without proximity.

From this discussion on intimacy vs. proximity in terms of closeness for Chuck, he goes further. He expresses that maintaining an intimacy with others, however illusory it is, via social media is still categorized as feeling "close". However, maintaining this intimacy is ultimately for the sake of using other people to your advantage. In Chuck's perspective, the people who you maintain intimacy with can actually be used for business contacts, references, referrals in the future, without actually maintaining a try-hard relationship. This practice and point of view can tell us that even in a new technological environment, social media, the labor of other people can still be exploited. In a sense,

Chuck is saying that by purposefully maintaining a relationship via social media, he can cash in his social capital and exploit the labor of the people on the other end of the screen. By viewing Chuck's social media usage in this way, we can see that even though Social Media is a relatively new phenomenon in society, Karl Marx's *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* is still applicable. The fact that Chuck's goal in maintaining relationships with people for future economic gain is a materialist use of social media in a very specific sense (Marx, 1904).

On the other hand, Chuck justifies his point of view by delving into a discussion about the public nature of social media. He wonders aloud if reaching out to people for future economic gain is an invasion of privacy, especially if you have "liked", "shared", or "reacted to" any of the content shared by the other users. Although users of Facebook have private profiles, if two people are still connected with each other as "Facebook friends", a user can see anything that their friends allow them to see. Because Facebook includes a myriad of user and privacy settings, one can assume that everything you see from a specific user is already configured to allow or disallow any person from seeing it in their public news feed. Privacy settings, plus the Public Sphere according to Jurgen Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, tells us that the public sphere is a "specific domain", differentiated from the private, and can be seen as press, media, or organs of the state which "provide communication among members of the public" (Habermas, 1989). When we look at Chuck's dilemma in maintaining relationships via social media for future

economic gain, we can also see that acknowledging a relationship that exists in a public space is not really exploitation at all. In fact, it is just communication among members of a public space.

Chuck continues this train of thought by discussing his interpretation of romantic intimacy and the awkwardness of transitioning from stranger, to Facebook acquaintance, to a romantic relationship. He suggests it's easier to not know any information about them through social media, and to "play dumb" to help quell the urge to try to find them on Facebook and look at their profile without them knowing. This practice, commonly called "Facebook stalking", is typical when you know someone you're interested in dating.

A similar practice, "Googling", is used by businesses around the world to try to find more information about a prospective employee. Chuck discusses this as well, and is very opposed to the practice. In the discussion of public vs. private sphere, he is against the idea of Facebook stalking or Googling someone to find publically available information, but is not against using the publically available profiles of influential people to gain economic status in the future. This tells us that even in something as seemingly dichotomous as public and private, there is still an assumed grey area in which social media exists.

Next in the interview, Chuck began to evolve his conversation of public versus private life into a discussion of individualism. He explained to me that although he feels

somewhat disconnected from his family and friends in the United States, he doesn't feel completely disconnected emotionally. He begins with a longing for his childhood when he could test different personas online during his formative years without constantly changing his real-life persona to people that surrounded him on a daily basis. But, he can't do that much anymore because it would be misleading to his family and friends, and now is interested in passively keeping in touch; he knows what they've been up to, they know what he's been up to, and they have a mutual understanding that intimacy is not based on physical closeness. He expresses that it was very clear to all the people he cares about in the United States that he is not the type of person they can count on to video chat every week. He's just not that guy, and expressed this self-awareness explicitly. Like Don above, this is a good example of the self-reflexivity and identity that users of social media possess (Giddens, 1992). But taken a step further, it's not only Chuck's decision about who he is or wants to be, it's also about a mutual understanding of a relationship between loved ones. In this case, it is both Chuck's decision to choose who he is and how often he will communicate, but also conforming to his internal demands (Beck, 1995). By creating his own communication boundaries with his loved ones abroad after uprooting and moving to a new country, he needed to create a set of rules and methods of communication. This tells us that the individual loved ones who are communicating with each other from abroad have the obligation and allowance to standardize their own methods and frequency of communication with each other as long as everyone is in agreement.

Something that struck me the most about Chuck's interview, was when he told me a short story about his senior year in university during a large snowstorm. The story goes like his:

My senior year of university we had a really big blizzard; you probably remember this blizzard. It was during the school year. I was living on campus and we basically found out that the storm was coming and got a bunch of alcohol, frozen pizza, and just went inside and wasted time. After about 3 days, I went outside to my car and I tried to get into it, but the door handles were frozen. I pulled the door handle too far and I broke the mechanism inside the door. So it had no tension and didn't work anymore. I called my local mechanic and I said, 'Hey, I have this problem; can you give me a quote'. He got back to me the next day and he said it was going to cost like 250 dollars for the parts, labor, time, and everything like that. I thought 'Okay I don't have that [money]', so I decided not to do anything. And, I started opening my car from the passenger side door, but it turns out this is a problematic issue on the car that I owned, a 2001 Ford Focus, so the same thing happened on the passenger side door. It was a two door car, which was a big problem. So after climbing through the hatchback for about 3 days, being about 6'3" [190cm] I realized that wasn't going to fly. But, at this point, I didn't have the 500 dollars necessary to fix both my door handles. So, I went on Youtube and I asked how to fix the problem. I

watched a 10-minute video about how to disassemble the door and replace the broken part with a part that works. Then you reassemble the door and it's fine. So I watched that video and I said, 'I can do that', and I went to a junkyard that was about 15 miles away from my house, and I found a car that looked like mine. Then I ripped off the door, and I took the part out of it on each side and I went and paid 20 dollars for the parts at the junkyard. Then on the way home I stopped to get 18 Budweisers, I woke up my roommate, and I said, 'Yo, let's fix my car'. Then we sat in the backyard and we fixed my car and the whole thing cost me about 40 dollars.

After this anecdote, Chuck was very proud. He felt happy to end the interview with this story, and was happy to provide an economic interpretation of his own use of social media. What this story can tell us about usage of social media is that it's also widely used and accepted vehicle for passing on public knowledge. This can also be explained through an historical materialist lens. Because Chuck did not have the money that it took to fix his car, he took matters into his own hands. He sought out the information for free using the resources available to him, sought out the parts in a more accessible way, and sought after the help he needed to get the job done without using a business to help him. By taking the matters into their own hands, more people can now access and do things that before social media and the internet, they would only have been able to do after seeking help from professionals.

### 3.4 Respondent 3 – Cary

Cary was the first person I wrote to on Facebook Messenger to arrange a time to meet, and who had been tagged by a friend on my original post in the “Crowdsauce CZ” Facebook group. I wrote to her before she wrote to me, but she promptly replied the same day that I wrote to her. She was efficient in that way and curious about the study, which I found out later was because she had conducted similar studies in college while working on her Psychology degree. She invited me to her house the next day after I asked her to choose a place to meet.

When I arrived at her house, she offered me some coffee, then explained to me that she had a job interview after the interview with me. Right away, I could see that while she was a good host, she wanted to tell me schedule of the rest of her day—maybe so I knew I couldn’t stay with her all day in an interview. We sat in her living room with all the lights on in the house. She was a little bit nervous and apprehensive about going into too much detail, so she relied on me at first to ask her questions about her social media usage and interests. After a few questions, Cary started to open up and provide me some insight into her usage of social media.

Cary was different from the other interviewees once she started to open up, because she was very focused on etiquette, both offline and online. Offline, it was clear to me that she was interested in being a good host. She offered me coffee and the nice chair

at the dining table. The fact that she invited me to her home told me that she wanted to host, and wanted to be in a role and environment where she felt comfortable.

Online, her concern with etiquette was apparent as soon as she started to relax and freely talk about the topic. The first thing she mentioned was that with all social media that she uses, which isn't many, the first thing she does every time she opens a social media application is to check her private messages. She responds immediately, and enjoys knowing that she can use her time efficiently to communicate with whoever is writing to her, often close friends and family. She said she feels too rude keeping things unanswered. What this tells us, is that there is a social etiquette involved in how people communicate via social media. The same way that Chuck in the previous interview mentioned social etiquette, such as shaking hands, introducing yourself, etc., Cary implied that social etiquette doesn't stop being a factor in communication after you are no longer face-to-face with another person. Although she didn't mention specific etiquette that people use online, her personal duty of responding immediately to all messages implies an invisible system of social rules that she abides by. By putting pressure on herself and others to reply immediately, or as soon as possible, to private messages, she was transferring pressures in face-to-face communications to digital communication. To make this point, she used the example, "In a conversation with someone, would you just not reply and walk away without saying anything? Some people probably would, but I wouldn't, and I try to do the same thing to my family and friends with Facebook Messenger."

She also made it known that she doesn't see the need to use more than one social media. Facebook was her main source of digital communication and social media, because it was the easiest, cheapest, and most universal way to speak with her family and friends. When I asked her why she wasn't interested in using any other social media for communication, she told me about growing up without a computer, and only at the age of 16 getting dial-up internet, which blocked the phones, and didn't work well in their house which was surrounded by tall trees in Northern California. When she was applying for University at the age of 17, her mother finally invested in a Sprint Chip, a small USB that you plug into a computer to get access to the internet. This chip would only connect to the internet from her front driveway, which was the only place on the property that wasn't surrounded by trees. Because she didn't want to sit in the driveway to communicate with people, she signed in, replied to emails, checked for updates from her college applications, and didn't spend time on chatrooms, online gaming forums, or social media at that time.

This lack of interest in social media at that time had clearly informed her practices as an adult. She still displayed the efficiency of someone who was not interested in engaging much on social media, and basically performing her self-appointed duty to respond to messages and nothing more. This tells us that, like Don, her early exposure, access, and interest in online communities and communication affected their later engagement online. It's clear here that the respondents have all been influenced in their adulthood engagement of social media, based on the habitus they were born into,

including different access to social media and different environments that affected their interests in it in the first place.

Cary's past experiences without social media also likely formed her interest in physical closeness rather than online communication. Also like Don, she was adamant about her use of social media purely as a vehicle with which she could drive to a physical end, for example, writing specific questions to friends about when to hang out, or writing to family to they would know when she could call them instead of writing to them to catch up. Keeping in touch with people for Cary is difficult, because she prefers to be in the same physical space as another person rather than just communicating via social media or the internet.

Another way that Cary was different from my other interviewees was her interest in online dating applications. Thus far, no one had discussed this form of social media, but Cary's interest and usage of Tinder, a social media dating application, was especially interesting to this hear. While Cary was discussing her interest and use of Tinder, it was clear that this was the social media that she used the most. She expressed her curated appearance on the app, including mentioning that the photos she used of herself were the most flattering ones she had, and the description she wrote of herself and her interests were highlighting the things she liked about herself. She expressed that she had the same expectations of other people on the application, and assumed that everyone's best selves were represented. Erving Goffman refers to this as "Impression Management", and uses the metaphor of an actor giving a performance that only they stage. With this metaphor, Goffman explains that if a performance or impression is being compromised by any faux

pas, “unmeant gesture”, or anything that will let the onlookers know that the performer is not the character they are supposed to be, all must be complicit in ignoring it, therefore helping the performer perform the character as they mean to (Goffman, 1956).

What we can learn from this is that the presentation of a person online is not necessarily exactly who they are, but what they want you to think they are. This tells us that online communication is similar to face-to-face communication in the sense that you need to invest time and interest in someone before you really know who they are. Despite putting a version of yourself that you like on an application, or on stage to continue with Goffman’s metaphor, it’s still a version of you, just not the complete version of you. Not only is this important for etiquette online, it’s also important for online safety.

Online safety is another thing that Cary uniquely mentioned in her interview. Because people put their preferred versions of themselves on Tinder, she took great precautions in how to choose who she likes to meet face-to-face. Even though she expressed clearly that she prefers to meet and communicate with people in person, because she uses Tinder as a tool to do this, she needed to create a screening process. Her methods were extensive, and she explained her entire process to me:

1. Open Tinder and check my private messages.
2. If the person is asking me the same question every day, for example, “What did you do today?”, after the third or fourth day I usually try to break off the communication.

3. If the person is capable of having a nice chat conversation for several days, I give them my phone number and we start chatting on WhatsApp instead.
4. I make sure the messages from a person are not repetitive, because if they are, it tells me maybe they are also chatting with someone else and can't remember what we've talked about.
5. If I am not exchanging messages with someone, I "swipe"<sup>3</sup> when I'm not doing anything else.
6. When I swipe, I look first at their description. I want to make sure they're not a tourist, because it means they're probably not looking for a serious relationship.
7. I don't swipe right for someone if they don't have pictures, or their pictures are cartoons or not of themselves. I also don't really like selfies, because to me it feels too vain.
8. I like to talk to them for a couple weeks, so I can see whether or not they can have nice conversation and if they are interested in talking and getting to know me.
9. When I do decide to meet up with someone, I make sure it's in a crowded place, and usually during the day if it's possible. I also always

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<sup>3</sup> "Swiping" refers to the application Tinder. It's the action involved when you see an individual's profile, and you swipe the screen to the right to accept them. If they accept you too, you are able to chat. Swiping left on an individual's profile dismisses the profile from view, and you will not be able to chat with them.

tell my friends if I go to meet up with someone, and tell them where we're going because you never know what could happen.

This is the process that Cary explained to me when I asked her how she uses Tinder from beginning to end. She was very practiced in this process, and it was clear that she really knows exactly what she was looking for. Her process can tell us several things about how people might view interacting on social media, especially social media meant for fostering romantic relationships.

Firstly, this is the most interest that Cary showed in any social media that we discussed, which told me that different social media applications are used by different people for a variety of reasons. She told me she didn't like to be on too many social media, because to her they were all the same, or at least too similar, so it wasn't necessary for her. But, based on her use of Tinder above all others, it told me that this is probably not true. Although social media exist for ostensible purpose of communication, each individual medium probably appeals to specific people for specific reasons. Reddit could be interesting for people who want to feel anonymous online, Facebook may appeal to someone who wants people to know what they are up to at all times, Instagram may appeal to people who are interested in photography, and Tinder is likely the most interesting to people looking for a romantic relationship.

The process above also tells us that social media can be used extremely efficiently. It was clear to me from the beginning during Cary's interview that she was interested primarily in the efficiency of communication on social media, therefore maximizing the

time she spent doing other things. Her leisure time is very important to her, so she doesn't want to spend more time on social media than necessary to fulfill her communication duties and goals. Her 'Tinder Process' can also tell us that meeting someone online can often require more diligence than meeting someone in person. When meeting someone in person, we are automatically experiencing a first impression, and we get a sense of who a person is based on body language, communication skills, and individual presence. Just as Erving Goffman in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* mentions, "If unacquainted with the individual, observers can glean clues from his conduct and appearance which allow them to apply their previous experience with individuals roughly similar to the one before." (Goffman, 1956). Online, we have to create a process in which to test these boundaries and presences by ourselves. Cary created her own judgement process based on what kind of person she already thought she was looking for. For her, the process was more important than the person initially, because online it's harder to image a person's profile as a real person. Within this process, she also mentioned that she used the same "check messages first" approach as she does for the checking other social media, but said because the people she communicated with on Tinder were strangers, she didn't feel as bad cutting off communication without replying as she would if she did the same to family and friends. This can also tell us that online, a sense of duty and guilt doesn't apply as much when we're dealing with strangers rather than those closer to us.

Something interesting about this process as well, is the moment that Cary mentions after a couple of days if the conversation is going well, she will provide her phone number to the person she's talking to, and they can communicate on WhatsApp

instead. This also means that there are some social media that are more intimate than others. Where Tinder can be used as a platform to meet friends or romantic partners, it may not be the most comfortable place to communicate intimately. For more intimate communication, a phone number, which is an invitation to a private life, is used because it's direct access to another person. If a Tinder user shares a phone number with someone, there is no longer need to access a public application, and instead allows for feelings of intimacy to develop based on the direct access given to one's individual phone number; it's an invitation to accept a contract that has transformed the communication by simply sharing a more individual part of yourself.

This entire Tinder process that Cary created for herself is reminiscent of the “rule book” Anthony Giddens discusses in his text, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love & Eroticism in Modern Societies*. He presents a specific list of rules from a women's self-help manual about how to cultivate better relationships. The rule book includes rules that allow the writer to take a step back from instinctive action in a relationship, and give space to the other; it's meant to represent a meeting of equality between the two partners and autonomy on each side (Giddens, 1992). Although Giddens presents the rule book as possibly naïve and a bit silly, he also posits that by creating rules for oneself, it's effectively using self-reflection as autonomy. By looking at Cary's Tinder Process above, we can see that she has also created a kind of “rule book” for herself as well. We might think that she is limiting herself too much by imposing these rules or process, but actually, by knowing what she wants and imposing her own judgements on the process, she is exercising an autonomy that might otherwise be lost in

social media relationships. Because social etiquette is in place in real-world situations, Cary has created a sort of structure herself for her online relationships.

### 3.5 Respondent 4 – Daniel

Daniel was the final interview that I had from the group of four American Expats that I interviewed in Prague. Again, I found him in the same way that I found the others, via the Facebook group “Crowdsauce CZ”, and his interest on my original post was fun to see. Daniel studied a Bachelor’s degree in Sociology, and was an avid online gamer. He expressed interest in my post as someone already interested in the topics I was asking about, social media and communication. He very excited to meet up and talk to me about his experiences, and it was clear to me that he had thought about his internet usage a lot throughout the interview. When I wrote to Daniel to confirm the date and time of our meeting, I also asked him to choose a location. The place, I said, could be anywhere where he felt comfortable and where we could talk for however long we wanted, and where it was quiet enough for a recorder. He chose La Qila Indian restaurant in Vinohrady, which was apparently his favorite place to eat.

He ordered a beer for lunch, and so he wouldn’t feel alone, something I realized during the interview he didn’t often like to be, I ordered one too. At first, he was quiet and a bit apprehensive, and confessed from the very beginning that his use of Facebook

was exactly what he deemed to be “normal”. He said he uses Facebook primarily for keeping up with the very few people he wants to keep in touch with who he doesn’t see often. He also mentioned that he strategically follows specific news sources on his Facebook news feed so that he doesn’t have to seek out his news sources in other ways. This practice can tell us that although the news feed is a Facebook addition to help you keep up with your friends in real-time, if a user configures it to their needs, it can be used almost exclusively to find the news that you want to look at it. It’s an efficient way to view your news without having subscriptions to many different news sites, magazines, and editorials that you would have to track down regularly otherwise.

After Daniel finished his beer, he started to open up a little bit more and explain to me why he loved online gaming communities so much. He told me that ever since he was a child, he would want to play with other kids, his siblings, his parents, but that it always felt a little bit out of his comfort zone. Because of this urge to be social, but struggling with the discomfort he felt in actually physically being around other people, he started to experiment with online gaming communities. Daniel said, “When you know that there’s somebody else across the screen, you still kind of feel like they’re right next to you, or at least somewhere near you.” He expanded on this point by explaining what he actually liked about the online gaming concept:

Gaming is interactive. It’s a form of entertainment, but it’s also a social experience too. Watching movies, TV, and reading are very passive activities; the story is still there even if no one is watching or reading it at

that moment. In a game though, the story or the experience doesn't exist without the players. The game essentially stops when there's no one playing. It's the same thing with the social part of the game. Sometimes you feel like being social, and sometimes you feel like being alone, but playing with people online definitely feels social and like I'm hanging out with people. If I really want to play a flying simulator with someone else, and I sign onto the server and I see no one else is there, I will play a different game. It's because not only do I want that story and that experience, I also want the social interaction.

What Daniel's experience here tells us about online gaming communities is that although these communities aren't ostensibly created for only social interaction, but for gaming and entertainment, they can still be used as a social media. Further, that social media like these online gaming communities can actually be a placeholder for face-to-face social situations. For Daniel, communication via these gaming communities is the most fun part about them. He can sit in his own home and feel that he's being social by having a shared experience with like individuals, even if he can't see them.

Next, Daniel expands on the point of having a shared experience. We had evolved our conversation to the idea of hierarchy within the gaming communities, and he mentioned that players who are responsible for creating and maintaining a successful "clan" were typically held in high regard to others in the gaming

community. About these clans he explains to me that specific clans for specific games exist all over the internet. His example was a clan that he used to be a part of for an online military combat game. The clan is called “Shacktac”, a shortened version of “Shack Tactical”<sup>4</sup> and is run by a former United States Marine. The clan itself has bi-weekly practices, specific gaming times, and a cap on the number of people who can be involved at any given time. To become a member of the clan, you must apply to clan, and the leader will accept, waitlist, or deny your entry. Once accepted, each individual player is given a job, and the clan must work together to practice military tactics, techniques, and procedures (dslyecxi.com, 2019). The point of the clan and the seriousness the members have in regard to the military operations, is to get the full experience of the game, which is extremely realistic according to Daniel. Without the ability, time, and collective attitude, seriousness, to work together, the members of the clan are asked to leave. Dan eventually left the group, and when I asked why, he said, “If I’m joining a group like that, I want to be able to really dedicate my time to it. If I’m going to be a member, I’m going to be a member.”

Most of the time, the members of the group have no outside communication beyond the communication they have in the context of the game. Dan’s reaction to the dedication to this clan can tell us that sometimes online communities can feel real, even more real than those of clubs we’re involved in face-to-face. It also means that the players of the game should have not only the same dedication as

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<sup>4</sup> According to Daniel’s interview, “Shack” refers to an air-combat, slang noun meaning, “a perfect hit”.

one another, but also the ability to sign on whenever the clan is practicing or playing, no matter where they are. These games are an extension of the physical body as a means to connect with another person or the group online. (McLuhan and Powers, 1989).

At the same time, these players are coordinating without really knowing each other. They are cooperating as people doing specific jobs and tasks within a team. They are both the performers and the audience. The game they play is acting as a social establishment where they are surrounded by the rules and regulations of the military leader. Each player must abide by these tendencies, while also playing a part and viewing the parts of others. As Erving Goffman illustrates,

A social establishment is any place surrounded by fixed barriers to perception in which a particular kind of activity regularly takes place. I have suggested that any social establishment may be studied profitably from the point of view of impression management. Within the walls of a social establishment we find a team of performers who co-operate to present to an audience a given definition of the situation (Goffman, 1956).

As each player is a performer and audience member alike, they are cooperating to effectively role play online. They are each an individual part of a larger clan, a clan that is simulating reality, but acting as if the game wasn't a simulation at all

based on the seriousness with which each player is involved mentally, emotionally, and physically in terms of time and space.

Dan also aptly likens online gaming servers to being a regular customer in a bar where you live. As a regular in a bar, you arrive to the bar, see some familiar faces, maybe interact with people on a surface level, and then go home for the evening. As Dan recalls about his favorite online flight-simulation game:

We frequent the same places, see each other's usernames, and without knowing each other we acknowledge each other and decide to fly together. I really like that, too, because it does feel like we're regulars in a bar. But on the other hand, I can have fun with it. I can be a little goofier than I would be in real life, or try to make people laugh more than I would in real life.

What's interesting about this moment is that in the previous interviews, the respondents largely explained how social media and online communication rules and processes were different than real-life ones. Here, Dan is presenting exactly the opposite. Through this analogy of seeing a familiar face in a bar and seeing a familiar username online, we can see that even in anonymity, there can eventually be some familiarity. Further, the social familiarity and physical anonymity together can actually foster an exercise in individualism and performance. As Dan

mentions, he can act in different ways for fun to try and change the social dynamics.

#### 4.1 Collective Interpretation

Although every interview has a theoretical significance of a different kind, there are some theoretical themes that are present throughout all the respondents' interviews. In this section, I will provide my interpretation of the significant theoretical patterns present in all the interviews.

One of the main sociological interpretations that this study embodied is the relation to Pierre Bourdieu's habitus which he writes about in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* published in 1979. It can be acknowledged here as a bias, and should be noted that all of the respondents in this study are a part of the same general habitus. All of the respondents are American Expats, between the ages of 26 and 32, and have enjoyed the privilege at some point or another that allows them to live and work in another country electively. All of them have been back to America to visit at least once in the time they've lived here, and all of them have been living in Prague for 2 years or more. Despite having at least a similar habitus, the respondents have a variety of relationships with social media, although they are all certainly informed by the habitus that they share. I will also acknowledge my own bias here as a part of this general habitus. I am interpreting the interviews in at least the same habitus wherein my respondents lie, which does not allow me to be completely objective in my analysis in

this regard. However, it is also necessary to point out that although my respondents and I share similarities in a larger scope of habitus, each one of the respondents' habitus is different based on background, social class, gender, religion, and a variety of other factors not discussed in this study.

One of the biggest examples of this theoretical interpretation of habitus is of Don's interview. One of the reasons that he struggles to fully accept social media a positive thing is because of his upbringing in Northeastern America. Raised in a Catholic family in the late 1980s and 1990s he mentions that he did not have the internet until he was 16 years old. Although I didn't ask him specific questions about his childhood, I was able to glean some information based on his interview about his early life. In his interview, Don relies heavily on the spiritual and existential qualms he has with social media and the internet in general. He was open about his struggles identifying with his Catholic, Italian-American name and heritage, something I didn't realize was relevant to this topic until I analyzed the interview through a Bourdieusian lens. Because Don was raised in a specific habitus that was heavily influenced by his family's religion, he had a difficult time removing his childhood pressures of spirituality and identity struggle from his interactions with the social world as an adult. What he grew up questioning as a young person in a world he didn't identify with never truly left him. Habitus is generally viewed as internalized dispositions and can evolve over time, but Don's reaction to his habitus was what was most interesting because it seems that his disposition never changed. What this tells us about the habitus present within these interviews is that sometimes it can be a malleable set of dispositions that one can work against and defy intentionally. But, in

doing so, one can still be defined by one's habitus by actively working against it. A user's experience cannot be erased, although it can change over time.

Cary's current use of social media can be interpreted through viewing her habitus in a similar way. Because she had limited, time-restrictive interactions with the internet as a younger person, due to where her family lived geographically, she interacts with social media now in a highly effective and organized manner. She checks her private messages often, and it's always the first thing she does when opening any social media application. She feels the duty to reply quickly to family and friends who rely on these social media to communicate with her. She also engages with social media using specific processes that she has created for herself, to fully maximize the media potential in fostering romantic relationships.

In the case of an American Expat in Prague, looking at habitus can also be a benefit, because an American Expat in Prague is one habitus, comprised of individuals from different habitus. It is easy to see the similarities between members of this group, but it's harder to interpret differences in experiences that came before, which was one of the main goals of this study. In this way, the interviews can be viewed as a lens through which we examine the habitus of the past, in terms of the habitus of the present. In other words, we can see the habitus of an interviewee's past, which is something they may not have considered could be affecting their experience with social media now, because many American Expats in Prague communicate now in similar ways.

Another way we can look at the collective findings of the study, is through the discussion of technological determinism. For my purposes here, I am using the definition

expanded on by Tony Schirato and Jen Webb: “The notion that technology is independent of social contexts, and simultaneously imposes itself on to society and transforms it” (Schirato and Webb, 2003). In this study, I have focused on a very specific group of people, whose lives have been affected by social media in very specific, individual ways. However, this is not to say that this is the only side of the story that should be considered. Alongside the individual habitus that each interviewee came from and is a part of, it’s important to mention that because of the access all the respondents have and choices they had in how they communicate via social media is shaping technology from the user direction. Because all of my respondents take part in social media in different ways, social media and its creators must also take into account and adapt to users. From my interviewees, we can see that both relationships and technology can be defined at least partially by also race, culture, interest, and imbalances of power that are sometimes invisible, but nevertheless affect the social media that we use today (Schirato and Webb, 2003).

By looking at *The Global Village*, written by Marshall McLuhan and Bruce R. Powers, we can see the other side of this coin. He writes that he and McLuhan agree that “the present is always a period of painful change, every generation views the world in the past...through a polished shield: the rearview mirror” but, that in the 21st Century, society should learn how to view technology in the future without relying on the past. However, through my respondents’ interviews and anecdotes it became clear that people cannot distance themselves from reflecting on the past in this case. In fact, reflecting on the past can be an extremely useful practice for understanding usage of social media in the present

and future. My respondents all shared how their relationship to the internet, and later social media, became bigger parts of their lives over time. In this case, reflecting on the past is highly important because it shows the change that allowed my respondents to seriously view their relationships to social media now, a relationship that evolved and solidified over time just like any relationship does. While it is important to look toward the future of technology and “man’s nature being very rapidly translated into information systems which would produce enormous global sensitivity and no secrets” as McLuhan describes and adheres to, it’s equally important to look to the past in order to properly dissect the changes and patterns of the relations between users and social media (McLuhan and Powers, 1989).

Another prominent finding among the interviewees was their interpretation of social media in the way of individuality. They all noted that something they enjoyed about their experience engaging with social media throughout their lives until now is that they were able to delve into the idea of being who they wanted to be. All the respondents in this study concluded that a sense of anonymity was helpful in this regard. To them, anonymity is the key to this individuality. Essentially, anonymity is a mask that allows an individual, or group of individuals, to express themselves and manage their own impressions of themselves and their groups (Goffman, 1956).

One of the things that interested me most as a researcher while explicating data from the four interviews above, was how every respondent was a little bit negative toward the use of social media in general. I often noticed them explaining justifications

about why they didn't like social media, or why they didn't really use it for anything other than keeping in touch with people on a very specific and minute level. They were apathetic toward engaging with social media, specifically Facebook, which is one of the most common social media outlets today, especially American Expats in Prague due to the high frequency of groups, events, and social activities that Facebook helps facilitate. It seemed that they had a sense of perturbed morality in the face of social media usage, and as a researcher, it was hard to know exactly where that was coming from. It was interesting, though, as the all the interviews went on it was clear that the respondents were reacting to me as well. The social reality of the situations was that we were talking together in the interviews, sharing reactions and interactions that influenced both the person I was interviewing at any given time and myself. Because I was asking about my respondents' social media and internet usage throughout their lives, and reacting to specific things they said, wanting to know more, it's likely they were also continuing to speak to me about specific topics when they were interacting with me if they sensed I was interested in what they were saying. It's worth noting that although I was specific in wanting to hear about social media and internet usage, my respondents could have been influenced in their discussions based on what they thought I was interested in due to what my face was doing, or if I happened to make a noise that urged them to speak in one direction or another.

The apathy, or the perceived apathy, that I mention above is well-explained by author Laura Portwood-Stacer, who offers an interesting take. In her article, *Media*

*refusal and conspicuous non-consumption: The performative and political dimensions of Facebook abstention*, she illustrates that abstaining altogether from engaging in Facebook can be an act of resistance against media consumer culture and political dissent (Portwood-Stacer, 2012). And, while my interviewees were active users of social media, something that was clear from the very beginning of interviews that their apathy and constant justification for use, I argue, can actually be viewed in the same way. For example, in the first interview I present above, Don explains that before our talk, he had never explained his feelings toward social media in such a comprehensive way. I also argue that perhaps there is more to the interviewees' passive apathy toward Facebook and other social media, and can be explained as unconscious political dissent or resistance against media consumer culture in the same way that Portwood-Stacer presents. While the attitudes may be unconscious and implicit, perhaps it's because consumer media culture has a negative connotation that society is not yet willing to embrace.

## 5.1 Conclusion

Throughout this thesis I have presented theories from both historical and new media sociological bases, to help explain and validate my decision to create a phenomenological research study based on user experiences of social media. I have also presented my interpretation of "user experience" as it pertains to users engaging with social media and human interactions with the digital world. I have presented the

methodology of this study, including the respondent selection process, interview process, and explication of data in accordance with the phenomenological method. I then presented the unique, individual accounts and interpretations of four respondents – Don, Chuck, Cary, and Daniel. In each individual’s section, I have explained key passages of the interviews that I deemed to be most unique about their experiences. After that, I presented the most common themes and attitudes expressed by the respondents collectively. In this study, I have concluded that many historical authors’ ideas and warnings still hold true, even in the face of the New Media world, including Erving Goffman, Marshall McLuhan, Pierre Bourdieu, and Howard S. Becker. And many aspects of Historical Sociology also still hold true, especially after discussions of etiquette, globalization, and economic implications of social media modernization.

I conducted this study to explore individual experiences with social media, and make applied connections between the theory and the concrete reality of social structures within social media, which I have done. Initially in this study I wanted to interview as many American expats as possible, in order to hear and present their full experiences using social media while living away from their original homes. Now that the research and explication of data are finished, I believe this would be a useful undertaking in a future research study, to get a larger scope of the experiences felt by a larger group of people. I was fascinated by my own practices in communication via social media, and wanted to design a research study based on other people who, I assumed, used social media in a similar way, long-distance communication with friends and loved ones. What I found throughout the study was much more interesting than what I originally set out to

explore. Instead, I found huge differences in the ways that individual people experience social media. I also learned throughout the study that specific technologies, like social media, can be used to foster relationships the same way that society has always done it, through friendship, love, games, and even spirituality. Users interact with social media in many different ways, and often these experiences are informed by the habitus we come from, especially if our adolescent experiences are especially meaningful to us.

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