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MeetUp and Social Capital: Building Community in the Digital Age

Danielle Vaughn
University of Denver

MeetUp and Social Capital:

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Danielle N. Vaughn

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Advisor: Adrienne Russell

Abstract

In order to understand the complex relationship between new media and social capital, this thesis explores the lived experiences of individuals who are actively seeking some form of connection through MeetUp.com. Through participant observation, critical discourse analysis, and semi-structured interviews, the findings of this research illuminate the myriad ways in which participation with new media platforms intersects with individuals' psychosocial well-being through the formation of social capital. While social capital has traditionally been thought about in terms of its different forms, and different benefits, this research furthers the literature by demonstrating that the values of social capital are not limited to their particular manifestations, rather their psychosocial benefits are often indistinguishable from one another. As such, an inductive approach is needed in order to better understand the ways that people evaluate and make meaning from their experiences in MeetUp.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

"Every time you move somewhere you uproot yourself and then when you replant yourself it takes time for your roots to entangle around soil. Realizing that my soil right now is very thin, I recognize that there is a level of desperation there. And so then I want to attenuate that because I recognize also that desperation is something that pushes people away. So you have to pretend as though you're not desperate when you really are." –Carl

Last year, in 2014, Peter organized a surprise birthday party for an individual that he met through MeetUp.com. In recounting the story, Peter explained how his friend, Brady, had been hospitalized for mental health concerns. Having an intimate understanding of what his friend was going through, Peter decided to continually check-in on Brady in order to show his support and to reassure Brady that he had people who cared about him. During that time, Peter learned that Brady's birthday was approaching, and that Brady felt like he didn't any friends with whom he could celebrate. Knowing the importance of helping Brady feel cared for and supported, Peter began to "call out the dogs" and activated the MeetUp group's network.

In describing the experience, Peter explained that he sent out a message to a half dozen people through the MeetUp website. After receiving the message, one woman reserved a room in her apartment complex, and soon after, things began to fall into place. Friends began inviting their friends, who then invited their friends and, "by the time

things rolled around and the party happened [...] there [were] close to thirty people that showed up." This experience was only one of the many examples of the ways in which this MeetUp group provides support to its members, namely through the networking of weak ties. Since many of the individuals at the man's party were either acquaintances or strangers, it raises questions regarding how beneficial a party largely composed of weak ties could be.

Robert Putnam, one of the leading scholars on social capital— the idea that relationships have value—has conceptualized social capital as two distinct forms: bridging capital and bonding capital. Putnam's articulation of *bridging capital* built upon Mark Granovetter's concept of *weak ties*—the heterogeneous, surface-level connections shared between acquaintances—and asserted that, similar to Granovetter's analysis in *The Strength of Weak Ties* (1983), these relationships, although not providing emotional support, did provide "a broader set of information and access to opportunities" (Johnston et al. 2012, p. 25), and thus were a powerful form of social capital.

Conversely, Putnam's concept of *bonding capital* referred to the strong ties between individuals—the homogenous, personal and deep relationships between individuals who were intimately close—and described the process in which these relationships "[...] determine[d] the types of social capital formed in these networks" (Johnston et al. 2012, p. 25). As such, *bonding capital* carried significance with regards to the norms governing the functions of day-to-day life and reciprocity between members.

Central to Putnam's research was the argument that social capital was declining, and in a sense, that community was declining. While Putnam attributed this partially to

suburbanization and generational changes, the main culprit was the primary medium of his time: the television. To Putnam, the television had privatized individuals' free time, so rather than being at community meetings, individuals were in their homes watching their screens (Putnam 2001).

Due to the proliferation of social networking sites (SNSs), scholars have vocalized arguments similar to Putnam's, namely asserting that individuals are using media in ways that either connects or disconnects them. This is where MeetUp.com becomes especially interesting, as it is an online platform that was created to build social capital in the public realm. Moreover, unlike many SNSs that are based upon connecting people with pre-established relationships (e.g., Facebook), MeetUp.com is designed to connect individuals who do not already know one another.

The story of Brady's surprise birthday party illustrates one way in which bridging capital can occur through participation in MeetUp. According to Putnam and Granovetter, the network of weak ties present at the party would not have emotional benefits for Brady or the other participants. However, recent research conducted by Matthew Lieberman (2013), neuroscientist and professor at UCLA, reiterates that our brains are wired to connect, so much so that the same parts of our brains are activated when we experience physical and social pain, even if the social pain is produced through interactions with unfamiliar others. The presence of pain suggests that it may be possible for strangers to also activate the pleasure pathways in our brains and consequently, to some degree, fulfill our needs for social connection, needs that are intimately related to our emotional well-being.

The opening metaphor of a plant's roots being disrupted and replanted is demonstrative of the primary reason that people join MeetUp, because in some way or another, their soil is thin. In that regard, many MeetUp participants have felt like their social needs are not being met and have joined MeetUp in order to connect with others and build community. This thesis explores the extent to which MeetUp participants have been able to receive psychological and social (hereafter, *psychosocial*) benefits through the formation of social capital and participation in MeetUp.

In particular, this study examines the ways that individuals create social capital through MeetUp interactions, and subsequently, if those connections are perceived as strong or weak relationships (i.e., close friends or acquaintances, respectively). Next, this research explores the ways in which individuals experience the benefits of these forms of social connection, particularly with regards to their psychosocial well-being. As the participant in the opening quote noted, many times there is a level of desperation that motivates individuals to join MeetUp, so this paper also examines what happens when those needs for social connection are not met. Finally, this thesis analyzes the lived experiences conveyed by MeetUp participants in ways that interrogate the traditional ways that scholars have described the benefits of social capital, thereby demonstrating that an inductive approach is needed in order to better understand the value of both strong and weak relationships and moreover, what it means to build community in the digital age.

Methodology

MeetUp and social capital literature— In order to begin investigating the relationship between MeetUp, social capital and psychosocial well-being, I first explored the pre-existing literature specifically over MeetUp and social capital. MeetUp.com is an online platform that was created in response to the 9/11 attacks with the objective being to "[use] the Internet to get people off the Internet," (Heifermann, 2009) and therefore build social capital in the public realm. Within three years of its inception, MeetUp attracted 1.5 million users, a number that has since been dwarfed as current statistics estimate approximately twenty million users worldwide (Sander, 2005; MeetUp website, 2015). Within Denver alone, between the years 2012 and 2013, membership numbers increased by 76%, the eighth largest increase in the nation (Zaleski, 2014). This trend is occurring world wide, so the phenomenon is thriving.

Given the popularity of the organization, I was surprised to find that the majority of research on MeetUp has largely been in response to the Howard Dean campaign—a presidential campaign where the candidate used MeetUp to raise money and organize volunteers—and consequently, the political impact that MeetUp can have (Conners, 2005; Sander, 2005; Sessions, 2005; Shen & Cage, 2013; Pack 2008; Wolf 2004).

A few years after the Howard Dean campaign, the academic research on MeetUp largely faded, as new forms of connecting became more prevalent. The proliferation of social networking sites (SNSs) permeated the social sphere, radically influencing the way that individuals connect with one another, and in doing so, largely dominated the academic literature. However, there is a clear distinction between SNSs— such as Facebook— and MeetUp, because while the former facilitates connections that occur

largely online, the latter facilitates connections both online and offline by encouraging members to use the website as a conduit for offline relationships. Despite the significance that this distinction has for social relations, the majority of coverage on MeetUp has been relegated to the occasional news article that either promotes an upcoming event or discusses its usefulness in terms of startups and professional networking (Spencer, 2014).

While the academic literature on MeetUp is scarce, there are a few studies that have examined the relationship between MeetUp and social capital. In the majority of the studies, the research concluded that MeetUp is effective at increasing bonding capital—29% reported gathering with other participants outside of events and 31% reported that they had made new friends—yet this occurred at the expense of a decline in bridging capital (Sander, 2005; Sessions, 2010; Shen and Cage, 2013). The explanation that Sessions (2010) provides for this conclusion is that individuals who attend MeetUp events become closer to one another, and as such, they begin to exclude the individuals who do not participate. The exclusivity that can occur through becoming familiar with other MeetUp participants has been further substantiated in an ethnographic case study on MeetUp that explored how online and offline interactions combined to create a sense of belonging for expatriates. Participation in MeetUp led to the "creation of a category of belonging around *being international* [...]," which invoked a sense of pride in being able to identify as an expatriate (Polson, 2011, p. 160). As a result, members began to become 'encapsulated' within their community of expatriates by drawing closer to one another, rather than to their local communities.

This literature has been tremendously fruitful with regards to contextualizing the ways that MeetUp has been utilized in order to foster relationships between people and institutions. In that regard, the literature reviewed thus far have provided the conceptual frameworks used to guide this research.

Participant observation, interviews and self-reflexivity— In order to understand how MeetUp participants were receiving psychosocial benefits through the formation of social capital, I needed to gain a first-hand experience of what it was like to participate in a MeetUp group. During the months of June 2014 through September 2014, I immersed myself within the MeetUp culture and participated in various MeetUp events. After this three month period, I found that I could accurately predict how the respective events would unfold. While there were slight variations between activity-based groups (e.g., "Strange Yoga" and "Cheesman Pavilion Yoga") and more socially-based groups (e.g., "Girl Meets World"), the general format remained the same.

For qualitative research methods, reaching a point of *saturation* is often used to determine when enough data has been collected. This point is described as occurring when "no additional data are being found whereby the (researcher) can develop properties of the category" (Glaser and Straus, 1967, p. 65). Since I could accurately predict how events would unfold, I proceeded to the next stage of my research.

The three months of participant observation allowed me to build rapport with individuals while collecting qualitative data. Using the relationships that I established with individuals, I began to schedule semi-structured interviews with MeetUp participants (see Appendix A for a list of common questions). From September 2014

through March 2015, I conducted ten interviews with ten participants, three of which were with group administrators. While the length of the interviews varied, ranging from approximately thirty-five minutes to ninety minutes, the average interview was around fifty minutes long.

The participants that I interviewed represented a diverse array of backgrounds and demographics. While the majority of individuals have lived in Colorado anywhere from one to six years, there were four individuals who identified as native Coloradans. Demographically, there were an equal number of male and female participants, with the ages ranging anywhere from 22 through 51 (three were in their 20s; three were in their 30s; two were in their 40s; and two were in their 50s). These individuals represented a variety of occupations such as, but not limited to, the following: therapists, librarians, students, theater technicians, mentors and volunteers, and the unemployed. Similarly, the interview participants also reflected a wide array of interests, as many MeetUp members were actively involved in multiple groups (see Appendix B).

While the majority of the interviews were conducted from groups that I was a participant observer in, there were some that were conducted from groups that I was not a participant. This decision was largely due to self-reflexivity, namely realizing how my own biases influenced the selection of groups that I participated in. As an introverted individual who has the tendency to become over stimulated and overwhelmed in social situations, I tended to gravitate toward groups that were newer and smaller, and to groups that were more activity-based, similar to the experiences of many of the interviewees.

Interviewing participants from groups that I did not attend helped ensure that my understanding of MeetUp groups would be more representative and complete.

Additionally, because the emphasis of this research is on the lived experience as conveyed by MeetUp members, my participant observation served primarily as a mechanism to better understand the range of experiences described by participants in the MeetUp community (as opposed to an in-depth case study on one particular group). For example, upon reviewing my field notes, I realized that many of the subjective components of my experience were directly resonate with that of my interviewees. Because of this, I believe that I am in a position whereby I can accurately represent the experiences of the participants from a more emic perspective, even if I did not have a direct role in their groups.

These interviews constituted my primary research tool, as they revealed a tremendous amount regarding how MeetUp participants are building social capital and how they are experiencing the benefits of those relationships. By paying specific attention to the way that individuals spoke about their experiences, namely the vocabulary that they used, I was able to analyze the interviews based upon the most salient themes.

Critical discourse analysis— I utilized the methods provided by critical discourse analysis (CDA) in order to understand how the structure and content of the website influenced individuals' experience of MeetUp, particularly with regards to the "(re)production and challenge of dominance" (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 249). The methodological framework designed by Polson (2011), whereby the website content

represented performances of "methods of presentation of self and group identities" (p. 151), was central to understanding the power dynamics and "dominant social codes" (p. 151) present within MeetUp groups. Knowledge of the relationship between performances of self and social codes became important for this research because many MeetUp participants discussed the discrepancies between the ways that groups/individuals represented themselves online and the way they were actually perceived in face-to-face situations.

Given the seamless convergence of the online with the offline that is encouraged by MeetUp, it is important to acknowledge the ways that MeetUp.com augment people's face-to-face interactions. While the online and offline have traditionally been conceptualized as separate environments, Jurgenson (2012) contends that scholars must overcome digital dualism and instead recognize the ways in which "our reality [is] the byproduct of the enmeshing of the on and offline" (p. 84) what he refers to as *augmented reality*. As such, Jurgenson asserts that,

> the physicality of atoms, the structures of the social world and offline identities interpenetrate the online. Simultaneously, the properties of the digital also implode into the offline, be it through the ubiquity of web-connected electronic gadgets in our world and on our bodies or through the way digitality interpenetrates the way we understand and make meaning of the world around us (p. 86).

Similar to how Jurgenson has applied the concept of augmented reality to social movements, thereby creating the concept of *augmented revolutions*, the contents of this paper examine what I will refer to as *augmented sociality*: the ways in which our relationships are the result of our online and offline social interactions.

Conclusion

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While the past nine months have certainly challenged and stretched me in new ways, I found the research process to be enjoyable, engaging, and enlightening. Beginning the interview process was particularly daunting, but I quickly "eased into it," similar to the way participants described relaxing into the events. The interview participants candidly shared an intimate part of themselves, and I feel honored to be entrusted with giving a voice to their stories.

In order to contextualize their stories within the current discourse, Chapter Two provides the theoretical orientations that have largely shaped the discourse surrounding the relationships between media, technology, and society, as well as a broad historical overview of the evolution of social capital. These relationships are then explored in greater depth, with specific attention to how new forms of connecting are influencing the fabric of sociality.

Building upon the notion that the fabric of sociality is shifting, Chapter Three discusses the ways that the virtual and physical aspects of participation in MeetUp augment one another. This chapter then provides an overview of the types of social capital formed through MeetUp in order to examine the value of those relationships. Through an analysis of the formation of social capital, this chapter concludes by presenting the psychosocial benefits described by participants, as well as the potential drawbacks to participation.

Finally, Chapter Four discusses the implications that participation in MeetUp can have with regards to the formation of social capital and psychosocial well-being. The traditional ways of thinking about social capital, and the inherent value therein, are both

interrogated and expanded upon in ways that acknowledge the power that even a 'weak'

human connection can have in alleviating social pain.

Theoretical Approaches to Media, Technology and Society[1]

In order to understand the relationship between MeetUp, social capital and psychosocial well-being, it is important to contextualize this particular area of research within the broader theoretical constructs surrounding media, technology and society. For decades, communication and media theorists have grappled with trying to understand the complex relationships between media and society. During the early days of communication studies, individuals focused heavily on the content and power of media messages, thereby drawing conclusions about the overall effectiveness, or ineffectiveness, that media have on individuals' actions, thoughts and behaviors. Emphasizing the importance of what media can potentially do to an individual, this era was dominated by the limited effects paradigm, a perspective that discounted the notion of media as all-powerful forces within society due to the lack of empirical evidence. Instead, research during this era focused on the microscopic and minimal effects of media, while taking into consideration individual differences and personality traits (Baron & Davis, 2006).

As the research within this era continued, individuals began to criticize the limited-effects paradigm, claiming that it was merely a form of reductionism. As such, the pendulum began to swing once again to the notion that media were indeed powerful forces, and that the scientific method was not a reliable way to examine the complexity

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[1] Paragraphs 2-8 have been taken from the author's prior paper, "A Historical Overview of Medium Theory," written in October 2013.

inherent in media. Consequently, this led to the era of cultural criticism, in which researchers explored the way that dominant, hegemonic ideologies were embedded within media messages, and ultimately, to the moderate-effects era, in which individuals began to realize that media can play a role—both positive and negative—in cultural change (Baron & Davis, 2006). However, the primary difference between the moderate-effects era and the preceding eras was the emphasis placed on the audience. Rather than viewing the audience as passive consumers of media messages, researchers began to acknowledge the "active audience that uses media content to create meaningful experiences" (Baron & Davis, 2006, p. 15).

At the same time, individuals also began to turn their attention to the medium of communication. While the focus on content, understandably, was explored throughout each of the eras, it was during this betwixt and between paradigmatic shift that researchers began to focus their efforts on exploring how the medium itself plays an important role with regards to both the delivery and reception of the message.

Drawing upon the work of Harold Innis and his assertions that technology had played a pivotal role in shaping society, Marshall McLuhan researched the ways that different media, broadly defined as anything that impacts human relationships and the way in which individuals connect and communicate—from language to print to computers to money, and everything in between— had created significant shifts in society (West and Turner, 2009). Formerly known as medium theory, this theory asserts that the "medium is the message" (McLuhan, 1994; McLuhan & Fiore, 1967; West & Turner, 2009), and thus the medium through which communication occurs is of more importance than the actual message. Seen through this lens, medium theorists hold the

underlying assumption that we live in a connected, inescapable mediated environment, which consequently shapes our thoughts, behaviors and actions, and therefore media inherently have the power to impact society on structural, social, political and ideological levels (Lum, 2006; Strate, 2006; West & Turner, 2009).

Given the admittedly deterministic nature of medium theory, namely that the introduction of technology directly leads to societal changes, McLuhan and early medium theorists were largely dismissed as technological determinists, as critics argued that the theory placed all of the power of social change on the medium, thereby neglecting human agency and their control over social processes (Chandler, 1995). Yet even amidst the deterministic criticisms, the scholarly community could not ignore the important implications and insights that medium theory provided, namely that a specific medium *does* play an important role in society. Rather than strictly adhering to what was traditionally viewed as a linear form of causality, medium theorists began to recognize the importance between structure and agency. As such, medium theory began to undergo a significant transformation as Neil Postman applied the metaphor of *ecology* to media studies (Salas, 2006).

What resulted was the field of *media ecology*, the study of media as a physical environment. As such, it is viewed that whenever a new medium is introduced, the culture will undergo a shift that is largely dependent on the societal forces that influence how members of society respond to the new medium (Postman, 1985). Therefore, what was previously viewed by critics as deterministic and medium centered, emerged as a theory that negated claims of determinism, while placing greater emphasis on the audience and their specific uses of media.

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Given the technological environment of today, this paper focuses on new, digital media, defined as any medium that contains more than one of the following characteristics: it fosters many-to-many conversations; it is inherently interactive and participatory; it enables anonymity for both senders and receivers; and it blurs the lines between producer and consumer (Croteau, Hoynes & Milan, 2012). In particular, this study will focus primarily on social networking platforms and the role that they have played with regards to social connections. Due to the ubiquity of mobile devices that enable individuals to be in frequent and near constant communication with one another, *new media* will thus encompass mobile devices and/or other digital technologies that allow for this constant connectivity.

This convergence of technologies, namely the ability of a mobile phone to perform multiple functions that were once isolated to separate devices, has influenced the way that we interact with one another. Though, as Jenkins (2006) contends, "convergence does not occur through media appliances, however sophisticated they may become. Convergence occurs within the brains of individual consumers and through their social interactions with others" (p. 3). As such, what becomes important for the sake of this study is exploring how individuals are utilizing the affordances of this technological convergence in ways that support the notion of augmented sociality.

All of these theoretical perspectives are demonstrative of the primary ways that researchers have examined the relationship between technology, media and society. However, recently scholars from these disciplines have merged together in order to contend that these theoretical constructs are impinging on individuals' abilities to

productively contribute to the discussion. As such, Gillespie, Boczkowski and Foot

(2014) have called for:

> Researchers of media and technology [...] to move their own inquiries beyond the obligatory rejection of technological determinism (and beyond an uncritical embrace of societal constructionism), and to begin reclaiming the centrality that understanding media technologies should have in the fields of communication [...] (p. 16).

The theoretical framework that Gillespie et al. (2014) orient themselves toward is

described at length in the following passage:

> They have fended off the slippery presumption of technological determinism and legitimated media technologies as a worthy object of scholarly analysis. They have made the case that the study of media technologies, to be compelling, must contextualize the technology historically, culturally, and systematically, and explicate the social, material, and temporal dimensions of how technologies are produced, deployed, configured, and used. They have grappled with the conceptual changes made salient by digital, networked media: decentralization of production, ubiquity of access, the disintegration of the mass/interpersonal distinction, the resurgence of the amateur, the modularity and opacity of software, the fluid shape of networked knowledge, and the laterally connected practices of social meaning. They have brought the intellectual tensions between structure and agency, control and resistance, and change and stasis—so fundamental to social and cultural theory of the last century—to the fluid technological landscape of this one (p. 5).

What becomes central to the current discussion of media and technology's

relationship to society and culture, is an understanding of the tensions still present in

today's media environment. While the environment has shifted, the tensions remain the

same, and as such, a thorough understanding of the symbolic and material aspects of

media technologies is of utmost importance.

The Evolution of Social Capital

In addition to acknowledging the ways that the discourses surrounding the

relationship between media, technology, and society have shifted, it is also important to

contextualize how social capital is related to these discussions. Similar to how the theoretical constructs regarding media and society have evolved, the literature on social capital has also gone through many revisions.

To Bourdieu (1986), social capital was "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition [...]" (p. 88). As such, an individual's social network was seen to provide access to myriad resources. Coleman (1988) built upon this definition by asserting that social capital consisted of social structures that "facilitate[d] a certain action of actor within the structure" (p. S98). Or stated another way, social capital "[could] be considered as a byproduct of social relationships resulting from social exchanges in structured social networks" (Johnston et al. 2012, p. 25), and therefore the resulting *capital* would facilitate things like societal norms, interpersonal trust, cooperation, and reciprocity, all of which are important in order for people to feel a sense of belonging to their social networks and to their communities.

In his seminal work, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2001), Robert Putnam presented longitudinal research that demonstrated the markedly sharp decline in social capital beginning in the 1950s. Putnam's assertions were based on empirical evidence that supported a decline in the nation's civic life, which he determined by analyzing data collected through surveys that measured variables related to voter turnout and participation in community organizations. Putnam's most famous example was that, while individuals were still bowling, they were no longer bowling in leagues, rather they were "bowling alone." As such, *bowling alone* became an umbrella

term for the observable lack of public participation in community organizations; for the privatization of activities that were formerly communal; and for the emphasis placed on individualism over community.

Although Putnam received criticism for the ambiguous ways that he described social capital—namely, the contradictions within his findings and a lack of analysis as to the causes and consequences of the findings (Durlauf, 2002; Fischer, 2001)—his contributions to the social capital literature, and indeed for raising the awareness of its increasing importance and urgency, are quite notable. In particular, Putnam's distinction between bridging and bonding capital have helped clarify different forms of social capital while demonstrating the inherent power within these forms of connecting.

Additionally, researchers have added another form, *maintained capital*, which refers to the value inherent in relationships that have preserved throughout the years, regardless of geographical proximity, something that has become increasingly easier with the ubiquity of digital and mobile technologies (Johnston et al., 2012).

Scholars who are currently researching social capital have built upon Putnam and Granovetter's definitions of bridging, bonding, and maintained social capital. While there has been a lot of variance in the way that researchers have conceptualized and operationalized social capital—its forms and values—this paper explores the way that MeetUp participants form bridging and bonding capital, and the value therein. While these networks of relationships have an impact on democracy, politics, economics, health and many other pertinent areas related to our everyday lives, this paper is concerned with the value that social connections have with regards to individuals' psychosocial well-being (Leyden, 2003; Johnston et al., 2010).

From the premise that social connections have value, the term *psychosocial well-being* will refer to the extent to which MeetUp participants perceive the benefits of their involvement with MeetUp as influencing their emotional health. The relevant literature that pertains to new media and psychosocial well-being have largely measured psychosocial well-being through self-reported indicators of psychological and social health that gauged the following attributes: self-esteem and other social anxieties; a sense of belonging and community; companionship; depression, loneliness and overall life satisfaction (Henry, 2012; Johnston et al., 2010; Wellman, Haase, Witte & Hampton, 2001). These attributes are especially important with regards to this thesis because, even though I never directly asked about psychosocial indicators, themes related to sense of belonging, community and companionship quickly became salient among interview participants.

Relationship Between New Media and Social Capital

Given the relationship between social capital and psychosocial well-being, Putnam's assertion that social capital and community have dramatically declined (2001) is concerning. While Putnam acknowledged the roles that suburbanization and an overall lack of public gathering spaces have had on the decline of social capital, his main culprit was the proliferation of the television. Putnam asserted that television had become "a more habitual, less intentional part of our lives" (p. 224) and as such, had "[privatized] our leisure time" (p. 229) to the extent that individuals were no longer connecting at community meetings and therefore, social connections were adversely affected.

However, since Putnam's publication, the media landscape has shifted to include new, digital media that encourage sociality in new and different ways. Because new

media have allowed us to form and maintain connections more easily, many believe that new media are resolving the isolation, anomie and need for community that many feel due to the infrastructural fragmentation, while at the same time strengthening individuals' interpersonal relationships and psychosocial well-being (Adams & Adey, 2008; Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Henry, 2012; Johnston et al., 2012; Lee & Lee, 2010; Meyrowitz, 1985; Rheingold, 2003; Shaw & Gant, 2002; Shirky, 2008; Tapscott, 1998; Wellman et al., 2001).

Conversely, similar to Putnam, others argue that we have actually become less connected due to the abundance of new technologies that are ubiquitously vying for our attention, or as Sherry Turkle (2011) famously stated, we have become "alone together." During the early days of the Internet, this led scholars to examine questions such as, "does more time spent online lead to better well-being the way offline social connection does? And how does time spent online affect our social connections in the 'real world'" (Lieberman 2013, p. 255). Overwhelmingly, these studies concluded that "individuals who used the internet more decreased communication with their families, had shrinking social networks, and reported increased depression and loneliness" (Lieberman, 2013, p. 255; as cited in Kraut et al., 1998; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009).

This was especially true for introverted personality types. The findings of Kraut et al. (2002) support what has become known as the "rich get richer" model, namely that "Internet use was associated with better outcomes for extraverts and worse outcomes for introverts" (p. 58). The explanation that Kraut et al. (2002) offered was that the results may be due to the different uses of the Internet by extraverts and introverts, namely that extraverts are more likely "to use the Internet for communication" and to "reinforce ties

with those in their support networks" (p. 58). Other scholars have noticed this trend and have also found that "while the rich get richer, the poor also get poorer" (Williams, 2007, p. 404), what they refer to as an amplification effect.

What becomes interesting is that "a few years later, a strange thing happened—all the new data was starting to show positive effects of Internet usage on social connection and well-being" as "people started using the Internet differently" (Lieberman, 2013, p. 255-256). It appeared that individuals who used media for social purposes were more likely to feel a greater sense of community and connection with others, and consequently, to receive greater psychosocial benefits (Henry, 2012; Johnston et al., 2010; Lee & Lee, 2010; Wellman et al., 2001). Rather than using the internet in ways that kept the offline and online worlds separate and distinct, individuals began to use new media platforms, such as Facebook, in ways that augmented one another, whereby an individuals' offline social connections were complemented by their online usage and vice versa (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007; Grieve, Indian, Witteveen, Tolan & Marrington, 2013; Steinfield, Ellison & Lampe, 2008).

This is most widely demonstrated by the proliferation of social networking sites (SNS) and mobile technologies that seek to connect individuals in face-to-face situations. Perhaps the most widely known example of SNSs connecting people in the physical realm are dating websites. One of the earliest, most popular dating websites was Friendster, a site that "was designed to help friends-of-friends meet, based on the assumption that friends-of-friends would make better romantic partners than would strangers (boyd & Ellison, 2008). More recently, rather than using friends-of-friends as a mechanism for finding connections, the rise of location-based, or geosocial networking

capabilities, in dating applications have allowed users to view the profiles of those who are close to them proximally. This particular design was in response to feedback such as, "a lot of people want to meet organically. [...] people tell me that online-dating seems forced. They say, 'I don't really want to meet my partner online'" (Friedman, 2013). Therefore, the logic behind location-based apps is that by allowing individuals to access information of those nearby, the unnatural feeling common to online dating would be alleviated.

That said, the most common way that dating apps (e.g., Blendr and Grindr), and other SNSs like Meetup.com, are connecting strangers is based upon shared interests (boyd & Ellison, 2008; Clark-Flory, 2011). Yet, even despite the solace that one can find in having found like-minded individuals, the overwhelming majority of the literature is highly reflective of its most fatal flaw: namely, the ability for individuals to misrepresent themselves in order to appear more attractive to potential partners. However, as Ellison et al. (2006) have found, though individuals "[strive] to highlight their positive attributes and capitalize on the greater perceived control over self-presentation inherent in the medium," the anticipation of actually meeting one another face-to-face often led people to "balance their desire for self-promotion with their need for accurate self-presentation" (p. 430). This awareness of using media in order to facilitate face-to-face meetings with potential friends and partners, as well as to facilitate the formation and maintenance of relationships, is characteristic of augmented sociality and the ways that we use media seamlessly to mediate our social connections.

This notion of augmented sociality is succinctly reflected in the way that Benkler (2006) has described the ways that we, as a networked society, have acclimatized to our

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mediated lives, namely that we are "well-adjusted, networked individuals; well-adjusted socially in ways that those who seek community would value, but in new and different ways" (p. 376). Rather than viewing the issue of technology and society from dualist terms and as separate spheres, networked individualism acknowledges that the two are deeply intertwined and ultimately afford "more freedom to individuals than people experienced in the past because now they have more room to maneuver and more capacity to act on their own" (p. 9).

Conclusion

Even amidst these new opportunities for what it means to be social, the tensions that have stimulated the minds of media and technology scholars—structure and agency; control and resistance; change and stasis— have remained the same (Gillespie et al., 2014). Although it is easy to look at the current media environment and conclude that the fabric of sociality in our society has dramatically changed, the reality is that we are still craving the same sense of connection that we always have. The only difference is that now there are more ways to connect and more ways for those needs to be fulfilled.

Chapter Three: Data Analysis

The extent to which individuals are fulfilling their social needs through new media and digital technologies is the focus of this thesis, particularly with regards to the formation of social capital through MeetUp.com. While Putnam et al. argued that technology was enabling people to become socially isolated, the creators of MeetUp decided to do just the opposite: use technology to get people off technology (Heiferman, 2009). They envisioned it as being a way to build social capital in the public realm by creating a platform that encouraged users to connect with strangers in face-to-face situations.

Six years later, in evaluating its effectiveness, it has largely succeeded in its purpose. People are joining MeetUp for a variety of reasons: some are recently divorced, some are recent college graduates, and some are just wanting to find company to do activities with. While these are only a handful of the myriad reasons why one finds themselves immersing within a group of strangers, the underlying reason is that the majority of people, in some way or another, feel like their social needs are not being met.

Participant Profiles

Many times when people first hear about MeetUp, they begin imagining the types of people who attend MeetUp events. Perhaps they imagine a group of awkward and shy individuals sitting around struggling to make small talk. Or perhaps they imagine a group of outgoing and loud people who are competing for one another's attention. Whatever the

case, it is not uncommon for people to project their own insecurities onto MeetUp group participants—to *other* them— rather than realizing that members are similar to themselves in that they too, are seeking a human connection.

In order to provide a glimpse of the different types of individuals who are participating in MeetUp, and to convey their humanness, the following section provides brief descriptions about the interview participants for this study. Names have been changed to protect participants' confidentiality.

Jenny is a woman in her mid-thirties who is currently attending graduate school. She has lived in Colorado most of her life, so while she has a strong network within the state, she joined MeetUp in order to find other people to do activities with. She describes herself as an extrovert and as someone who really enjoys meeting new people.

Anna is a woman in her early thirties who has lived in Denver for a couple of years. In her free time, she volunteers at the Denver Botanic Gardens and helps out with fitness classes in the Denver area. She describes herself as a shy extrovert in that she enjoys meeting new people, but that she likes to do so in one-on-one situations.

Joe is a man in his late twenties who has lived in Denver for most of his life. He's interested in non-profit work and is passionate about social issues such as education, abandoned animals, affordable housing, and clean water. He describes himself as introverted and is conscientious about who he spends his time with.

Laura is a woman in her early twenties who has lived in Colorado her entire life. She graduated from college a year ago and has since been searching for a career that she's passionate about. She stays active by running, cycling, swimming, and rock

climbing. She describes herself as very introverted, but still recognizes the need to be around people and be social.

Erin is a woman in her mid-twenties who has moved to Colorado within the last year. She enjoys working with children and loves to read. She describes herself as introverted, but not shy.

Peter is a man in his early forties who has lived in the Denver area for most of his life. He enjoys spending time with his kids and is a natural leader. He describes himself as introverted and enjoys helping others.

Susan is a woman in her early forties who has lived in Colorado for approximately twenty-five years. She enjoys spending time with her kids and her dogs, and is also actively involved in the community as a youth mentor. She describes herself as an introvert and takes joy in helping others and in reading.

Carl is a man in his mid-thirties who has lived in Colorado for a couple of years. He enjoys writing, being in nature, and is a connoisseur of tea. He describes himself as very introverted, to the extent that making friends can be challenging.

Chris is a man in his early fifties who has lived in Colorado for approximately six years. He is active in various community and professional organizations and enjoys being around people. He describes himself as an undeniable extrovert, and is the person who always tries to include others.

Robert is a man in his early forties who has lived in the Denver area for approximately five years. He is an active volunteer in community organizations, such as Big Brothers, Big Sisters, and enjoys playing sports and working out. He describes himself as being more introverted, but takes pleasure in helping others.

Though the interview participants vary in sex, age, personality, and interests, they are all examples of individuals who are involved in MeetUp. While their reasons for joining MeetUp are as varied as their personalities, the underlying commonality is their desire to meet and connect with other people. When I asked Carl why people participate in MeetUp, he responded with the following:

We're all there for a reason and if you have a really well established social network, you're probably not going to MeetUp.com. Why would you need to? [...] I can recognize that everybody is there for some reason, and maybe that reason is that they're an amazing person and have an amazing life and just want to reach out and meet new people, and they don't feel any lack. But I'm sure some people...are in similar situations [as me]. I wonder if it sometimes makes it easier to talk because you realize, 'oh, they're there for a purpose too' and that's to meet people.

Many participants stated that they decided to join MeetUp because they wanted to meet like-minded individuals and connect with other people. Being a network based upon shared interests, many MeetUp participants found that it was an "organic" way to meet acquaintances and form relationships. For example, during an interview with Erin, I inquired about if there was a moment during the event where she felt reassured in her decision to attend. Erin responded with:

It was very organic how it happened. And I liked that. So when I was halfway through I was like 'yeah, I'm glad I came out today.' We ended up going out to eat afterward, which made it even better.

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Although MeetUp.com is not a dating website— though there are individual groups whose purposes are to help people find romantic partners— this desire for the friendships to develop naturally resonated strongly with the ways in which developers are now designing dating applications, such as the use of geospatial capabilities in order to help individuals feel like their romantic relationships have developed organically. In that regard, MeetUp has helped individuals connect with others in ways that participants feel are both natural and organic.

User Experiences with MeetUp.com

Dimensions of the website— It can be a bit overwhelming when one first visits MeetUp.com because there are what seems like an infinite number of MeetUp groups that individuals can join, ranging from popular interests (e.g., running) to the more obscure and niche interests (e.g., Quabalah and tarot). Clicking on a group's link takes the user to the introduction page, the page that provides a description of what the group is. This typically includes a brief description of the type of activities that the group participates in, which often involves something that speaks to the group's inclusivity. For example, this inclusivity is foregrounded in the "Colorado Runs" description, which states, "Colorado Runs is for runners of all abilities from the first time 5K runner to the dedicated marathoner in Denver and the greater Denver area." However, some introductions combine a mixture of both inclusivity and exclusivity, as seen in this description: "'Girly' girls are welcome of course! ...But keep in mind this group is for those not interested in only the typical "girl's day out" events."

Visitors can also peruse the group's site. There are a variety of templates that can be used and these vary in the degree that they encourage users to interact with the website.

For example, some groups have chosen to provide "tabs" for categories like members, sponsors, photos, discussions, polls and so forth, while other groups have chosen to not make categories such as photos and discussions available. Users can also look at the past and current events of the group, as well as the group's reviews. However, some groups only permit members access to this information, so in those situations, in order to view the content one has to officially "join" the group.

The online profile: creating one's self and stalking others— Once a participant becomes a member of a group, they are prompted to create a profile by answering questions chosen by the site administrators. These questions depend upon the purpose of the group, but typically are used in order to introduce one's self to other members. Some general questions include, "What kind of meetups are you interested in?" "Why did you join this group?" and "What are your hobbies/interests?" More group-specific questions include, "What is your favorite park or place to run at?" and "What's your experience with yoga?"

While these questions were generally helpful as a mechanism for other people to learn about new members, oftentimes participants had varying responses to this requirement, from perceiving it as a waste of time to perceiving it as useful information. One participant, Joe, discussed the process of creating a profile and provided a plausible explanation for why participants are prompted to answer a different set of questions for each group that they join:

> People that get on there, they're there for multiple reasons, so they can't fill out a
> profile that answers the questions of any one group of people that they're in a
> MeetUp with. Like the hikers, for example, want to hear about my snow shoeing

and hiking and camping stuff. The yoga people want to hear about my yoga and my meditation and things like that...It would be a very extensive profile to put in all of that stuff and I'm too lazy to fill it out that much...I shouldn't say that I know nobody's going to read it, cause some people might, but it doesn't benefit me to put that much effort into it.

This statement illustrates the perspective that some participants have toward the online profiles, namely that it's not useful because other members may not read it. However, other participants found these questions to be useful, even if they found the process tedious. Laura described this by saying, "I was kind of annoyed that they asked for so much information. I was like, 'I don't have time for this.' [...] But at the same time, I was happy to read everyone else's."

Perhaps more important than participants' responses to the group's questions were the profile pictures that members used to represent themselves. The overwhelming majority of individuals spent time before events "stalking" the profiles of other attendees. Some individuals, like Anna, explained this by saying, "I often will stalk the website and see who's coming and try to remember a few faces and a few names, so that I can get a head start on that," so they use it as a resource to familiarize themselves with other attendees. Other participants, like Erin and Carl, described this process in more detail:

I kind of stalked the little images and would read and be like, 'okay, if I see you there...I'll try and go and talk to you' or something like that. [...] If I can recognize faces that look nice, I'm more likely to approach them versus if it was all just little fake avatars...then it'd be a little more daunting (Erin).

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I...go down and try to look at the photographs of the people there. On the one

hand, there is the 'are there any cute girls? [...] [And] there's always the step

where I look...and see if there's any guys that look like [they] could be a potential

guy friend (Carl).

As such, many people used the profiles of members in order to help determine

who to seek out at events. However, even though many people admitted to stalking one

another's profiles on MeetUp, using that information to start conversations was met with

varying reactions. Participants like Laura found comfort in the fact that other's had

stalked her profile. She described this in the following way:

Because I RSVP'd 'yes' via MeetUp, people were able to look at my profile

before I went. That actually did a lot for me because I had a couple of groups of

people say, 'oh, are you the new grad I saw on MeetUp? [...] so I felt like I had

things to say.

As an introvert, Laura had been anxious about going to the event, but because

others had looked at her profile, she ended up feeling more welcomed, and in turn, had a

really positive experience. However, participants also spoke about how this could lead to

awkward situations, as evidenced by the following story from Anna:

There was one guy...I guess he wanted to observe and see where he fit best, so he

was just kind of walking back and forth behind the two groups. It was just one of

those weird things. So...when he was walking by, I turned and smiled...he stopped

and was just kind of like, 'oh, you're wearing that shirt in your MeetUp photo.'

And I was like, 'was I?' I don't really remember my MeetUp photo. [...] I can see

that he just wasn't comfortable...didn't know how to start a conversation, but because of that, it just ended up being awkward.

There's a clear tension between using the website to become familiar with other members and actually using that information to start conversations. It reveals another social norm, and in doing so, says something about the ways in which individuals are supplementing their face-to-face interactions with the MeetUp website. Rather than using the information provided by member profiles in ways that could encourage connections to develop more quickly, individuals are instead conscientious about allowing others to introduce themselves. This isn't something specific to MeetUp, as it's something that is practiced in most social situations. If individuals instantly told others everything they knew about one another, then the conversation would quickly fall flat. In that regard, the website seems like a place to become *familiar* with others, but the *process of knowing* others occurs in more intimate settings.

Facilitating connections: website and digital technology usage— Requiring members to respond to profile questions seems to force members to engage and interact with the platform. Combined with other technological aspects of the website, one would think that it would be incredibly conducive at providing a way for individuals to connect and interact with one another. However, this wasn't necessarily the case.

Many individuals stated that they used the website primarily during the early stages of deciding what groups to join. When discussing how she chose which groups to participate in, Anna said, "I'm a little bit more likely to go to a MeetUp, [and] to participate in a MeetUp group sooner, if it's a brand new group. Then you know that everyone's new to it." Other participants described similar processes of looking at the

newness of the group when deciding whether or not to attend an event. Individuals also made decisions based upon the introduction page's description and the group's current members. In describing this, Susan stated,

> If I'm interested in...the group, I will read the whole introduction page and see if it sounds like [what I want]. Now what I do, which is probably a little prejudice, is I go on and see if it's a whole group of twenty young thirty somethings. Cause that's a generational gap [and] it's hard to connect. It's very, very hard to connect.

After this initial vetting process, the majority of participants stated that they rarely used the website. While the usage of the website was somewhat dependent upon the group (e.g., photography groups often post their pictures), more often than not, after joining a MeetUp, interviewees only used the website to RSVP to events. Other than that, the majority of people relied on the emails that are regularly sent out by the groups (and MeetUp) to notify them of events and/or other groups that they may be interested in. Jenny described this in the following way, "I've checked the ones I'm interested in and just get those updates, but I haven't been back to the MeetUp site since I started out." This experience was common among members, with many stating something similar to Laura: "I get the emails, so I read the headlines and never open them."

As such, people's primary form of interaction with the website largely occurred by proxy through the regular emails that they received from MeetUp.com, however even then, people still had low online engagement levels. When I inquired about why participants were not utilizing the web platform, many provided reasons such as, "it's not

super convenient to use" (Joe), primarily referring to the site's inability to accurately synch with their mobile devices. Joe elaborated on this inability in the following way:

> I've had a really hard time getting my phone to properly synch up the usage of the website versus the app, cause I have the app. But when I click on the links in the emails, like to RSVP or just comment...it sometimes takes me to the website and [it] sometimes takes me to the app, and so that inconsistency makes it harder to use properly.

Peter also spoke extensively about the frustrations involved in using a mobile device to interact with the website:

> The main part of the website, it does have a mobile site. But once you get to the message boards, even to have access to it you have to switch your browser to desktop version, which is a pain in the ass. And then to use it and everything...their desktop site is double click. [On] phones when you double click something, it doesn't click anything. It scrolls up or zooms. So I think that may be part of it. It's just that it's a pain in the ass.

These comments point to the seamless ways that many individuals are (attempting) to use their mobile devices to access the website. While this raises questions regarding how user engagement and interaction could change if the phone app had better functionality, it may also be an advantage in that it forces people to interact in other ways. As Erin observed, "it doesn't seem as conducive as other social media outlets...it seems more like a conduit to get you off of social media communication online, and in person."

In this regard, MeetUp participants are connecting in other ways. Professional connections are usually facilitated by LinkedIn, while potential friendships are being

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facilitated by Facebook. As Carl stated, "the MeetUp platform is used primarily just to set up the events and Facebook is still very much used in the facilitation of the acquaintanceship and friendship." When I asked participants if they exchanged phone numbers with people that they met at events, I found that in most groups, there were social norms that governed asking for personal contact information (i.e., phone numbers). Jenny explained this process in the following way:

> I think unless you really have this connection that feels very much mutual, I think it's just more appropriate to reach out through MeetUp...because that's giving both people enough control because you're not like 'give me your personal info.' [...] It's more appropriate to reach out through [MeetUp channels] and say, 'here's my info, give me a call...' or something like that versus asking people for their personal info.

This unspoken rule about when it's appropriate to ask for a person's contact information revealed one of the primary ways that individuals did engage with the MeetUp platform: its messaging function. However, I still found that in most situations, groups did not utilize this tool. For example, Erin stated, "I didn't know it had a message function until you messaged me. And so I was like, 'message from this group? What?'"

While the majority of interview participants cited Facebook as the most common way that they connected with potential friends, there was a group that was an exception to both the use of messages and the social norms surrounding exchanging personal contact info.

Understanding social norms through the exception— That group was a mental health support group. Both of the organizers that I interviewed stated that they were very intentional and "aggressive" with welcoming new people to their group:

I get an email every time somebody new joins the group. So [the co-organizer] and I both will send a personalized [message] to these people and say, 'welcome to the group. I saw that you're having some issues with this or that or whatever.' Just some kind of opening. Less than half the time I get a response back from that person saying, 'thank you.' That's when I make sure...that they caught my phone number off of the first [message]; make sure that if they have any questions or they have any problems, they need whatever, let me now (Peter).

While it could be argued that this environment of inclusivity is due to the nature of the group, namely that because there may be more barriers to going to a group about mental health and consequently, providing a welcoming atmosphere is more necessary, the reality is that all groups face situations where there are barriers to participation. While this will be discussed in more detail in the next section, it's worth noting here that this MeetUp group is doing an exceptional job at being proactive in connecting online with members and at attempting to qualm people's anxieties. In that regard, these online connections are permeating into participants' offline experiences because they help prepare members for face-to-face interactions.

This group has also addressed the social norms surrounding exchanging contact information. It was not uncommon to hear that by the end of people's first MeetUp with this group, they had already exchanged phone numbers with multiple people. Not only did they exchange contact info, but they also began nurturing those relationships by

staying in frequent contact with others through text messages. Chris described these interactions in this way: "...the [MeetUp event] last night was my third time and I've got probably four to five phone numbers from people...we chat everyday and say, 'hey, good morning. have a great day,' things like that." This accurately represents many individuals' experience with this group, with some people saying that they had as many as thirteen to fifteen phone numbers from other members.

Even though these group participants are establishing connections relatively quickly by augmenting their face-to-face experiences with mobile technologies, other MeetUp groups are also combining the virtual and physical aspects of their experiences in ways that augment one another. From connecting over other social media to the scenarios where the online profiles influence the face-to-face encounters, these experiences of augmented sociality all raise questions regarding the formation of social capital.

More often than not, participants described using digital and media technologies in the development of bridging capital, rather than bonding capital. Given participants' desire to use MeetUp in order to connect with other people, and the inherent benefits therein, understanding the types of capital that participants described is important with regards to relating them to the psychosocial well-being of participants.

MeetUp and the Formation of Social Capital

Everyone is a lurker— In order to use MeetUp to form social capital, one needs to transcend the unease that accompanies meeting with a group of strangers for the first time. Even with the comfort that individuals can find with being able to connect with others around shared interests, it still takes a significant amount of time before

individuals attend their first MeetUp event. When I first set out on this project, I was determined to hear the stories and experiences of the "lurkers," the individuals who are members of sites, but have never attended events. What I quickly realized however, was that *everyone is a lurker*. Out of the people interviewed, everyone was a member of a site that they had not yet attended, including myself. While some individuals credited this to factors such as location and scheduling, the overwhelming majority of people talked about the nervousness and anxiety that meeting with strangers for the first time presents. Joe described this experience in the following way:

> It took me a really long time before I went to my first MeetUp. I was a member of groups for like 4-6 months before I actually went to a MeetUp. And that was for a number of reasons. First of all because I didn't have the time for it [...] and the other half of it was just sort of being nervous and not really understanding what the culture was like and not being sure about how I should approach it. And so just sort of, you know, being in the right headspace to jump those hurdles for the first time.

Other participants described the build up to the first MeetUp as "nerve-wracking," "uncomfortable," and anxiety provoking, which helps explain why many participants spent several weeks to several months lurking the group(s) before attending an event.

Eventually, people used a variety of strategies in order to help them overcome their barriers to participation. The most common of these strategies was self-talk, such as "you can't sit around all the time or else you'll get lonely and will be sad. You can't be a hermit" (Erin). Peter, one of the members of the mental health MeetUp, used a combination of self-talk and action-oriented behaviors:

I RSVP'd...didn't leave the house the first week. I RSVP'd, then I drove to the

church, parked in the parking lot, sat in my car, watched everyone go in, and once

I thought there was nobody to see me leave, I left. I did that two more times. So

finally after the fourth week, I showed up and I was just like, 'get out of the

fucking car and just go in the door.

Many of the participants, regardless of the group, had similar experiences where

they would psych themselves up to going and then would change their minds at the last

minute because, "there's always reasons to talk yourself out of going to these types of

things" (Carl). However, once people were able to transcend those initial feelings of

nervousness and attend an event, they found that "it felt good once [they] got there"

(Erin) and that "you relax rather quickly" (Robert). So, like many things in life, the build-

up to big moments is often the hardest part.

Performing extroversion: how introverts experience MeetUp— Perhaps the

people who have the most difficult time transcending the initial barriers are introverts.

While there are many definitions that personality psychologists have ascribed to

introversion, in general, "introverts are drawn to the inner world of thought and feeling"

(Cain, 2012, p. 10). Cain has elaborated on this definition by providing examples of the

most common introvert characteristics:

They prefer to devote their social energies to close friends, colleagues, and family.

They listen more than they talk, think before they speak, and often feel as if they

express themselves better in writing than in conversation. They tend to dislike

conflict. Many have a horror of small talk, but enjoy deep conversations (p. 11).

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Given the strong preference for spending time in deep conversations with close friends, it was surprising to find that seven out of the ten interview participants identified as introverts. Thinking back to Kraut et al.'s (2002) rich get richer model—the model that posited that extroverts benefit more from Internet use—and Williams' (2007) assertion that at the same time, introverts become more lonely, the findings from this research illustrate the uniqueness of MeetUp.com. Being a platform that is centered around connecting people in face-to-face situations, rather than merely over a SNS, it appears that introverts are just as likely as extroverts to participate in MeetUp.

While introverts found it more challenging to take the initial step and attend an event, there were many factors of MeetUp groups that helped people overcome their barriers. One of the factors that introverts commonly discussed was the importance of the event being activity-based (e.g., game nights, physical activity groups, etc) versus more socially based (e.g., meeting in a bar for mixers). Many people, like Laura and Susan, noted that the activity-based groups "gives you something to talk about" and are "easier and more gentle to get in socially [because] you start with your [common interest] being the attention, which is a good opener." Joe described this process in the following way:

> Introverts need a catalyst. They can't just sit there and stare at each other across the table with a brand new person and have things to talk about. Introverts need a subject. They need that structure. So I think MeetUps are the bars for introverts because they can have that activity set out for them already.

In addition to emphasizing the importance that the MeetUp be activity-based, another common theme among introverts was the social energy that it took to "put on [their] inner extrovert" (Laura) and "perform extrovertedness" (Carl). This contrasted

with Chris's experience, as an extrovert, because he stated that, "I'm a social person, so being around people is nice. I don't care what the group is." Chris also noted that he's often the one who seeks out the people who don't seem included and encourages them to engage with others. There is a certain balance that occurs between introverts and extroverts, as introverts still want the social connection, but have a more difficult time creating the space to join into conversations, space that extroverted people are more likely to help create.

While there were differences between how introverts and extroverts approached MeetUp groups, there was no relationship between the types of social capital that people formed and their personality type. Instead, the forms of social capital that developed were largely dependent upon the group and the ways in which individuals augmented their relationships with other media and technologies.

Types of social capital— The most common form of social capital that MeetUp participants described was bridging capital, the heterogeneous weak ties between individuals. Aligned with Putnam and Granovetter's conceptualization of this form of capital, MeetUp participants described the usefulness of these relationships with regards to professional networking and the networking of resources. For example, Laura found her current job through a connection she made at a MeetUp event. She then helped other MeetUp participants, who were networking through her, to locate potential job opportunities. Other participants, like Peter, noted that they used these connections to "network resources and then networking to friendships to meet people."

In addition, many individuals felt like they had, at the very least, developed acquaintances and people whom they could receive social interaction from. One of the

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common trends with regards to developing weak ties was that people would see some of the same people at other events and/or other MeetUp groups. Carl described how this familiarity helped alleviate some of the pressure to perform because, "I have those couple of familiar faces that [I] can connect with. It's not like I'm a stranger in a sea of faces that I don't know or don't connect with." Erin also described the comfort that comes from this familiarity by stating that, "even if you only see them at MeetUps...you can technically call them your friends [because] you're doing activities with this core group of people even if you never see them outside of doing these things."

These statements revealed the ways that people thought about these social connections, and the values of those connections, even while acknowledging that they hadn't necessarily made strong ties (i.e., close friends). This isn't to say that strong ties didn't occur, because many individuals did develop close friendships. However, like Erin, MeetUp participants generally agreed that "you're gonna have hits or misses," so it's likely that you're not going to deeply connect with someone at every event.

However, the interesting part about the formation of bonding capital among MeetUp participants was that, while many individuals would frequently cite that they had made one or two close friends through MeetUp, the individuals in the mental health group "developed a lot closer friendships a lot faster" (Robert). This was reflected in the relatively large numbers of strong ties that participants in this group reported, ranging anywhere from 2-3 to 6-7. Since this group was largely staying in frequent contact with one another through text messages and emails, it raises questions regarding the role that media played with regards to aiding in the formation of bonding capital.

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Regardless of if participant experiences indicated the formation of bridging capital or bonding capital, all of the participants found benefits to these connections, many of which overlapped between the two categories.

The Benefits of Social Capital and MeetUp

The value of a human connection— For many people, experience with MeetUp was beneficial with regards to feeling connected—both to others and to their community—even if they didn't feel as if they had made any deep connections. The important benefits of these weak ties were reflected in the ways that people spoke about their experiences. Many individuals, like Anna, described this in the following way: "MeetUp group was definitely a really good way to feel connected...even if I didn't become friends with anyone, I was still feeling part of something." Anna later explained the value of this by stating, "sometimes just having a good, but brief conversation with someone can make the difference in your day [and] in your week."

While most can relate to the experience of days becoming a bit brighter after even the briefest of encounters with others—maybe a quick 'hello' from a friend or a friendly smile— these types of moments and experiences were not only acknowledged by participants, but they were also incredibly valued. Members repeatedly stated that these brief encounters with strangers were worthwhile to seek out because, "you're getting out there and you're doing things and you're experiencing life with other people" (Erin).

Another participant, Joe, also spoke about the importance of these weak connections:

> I do treat the MeetUp groups a little bit like somewhere I can go and hang out with acquaintances. It fulfills a social need for me. One feels like they need to

socialize a certain amount a day or a week to be fulfilled as a person. And since I

don't like bars and there are only so many parties that my few friends throw a

year, it's hard to fulfill that social need...so it's nice to have another outlet other

than just the close friends that I have, [because] if they're all busy, then I need

something to do.

Statements such as these illustrate that the value of the social capital created

through MeetUp was not dependent upon the type of social connection that participants

created, rather it was dependent upon just making a *human connection*. Although Putnam

asserted that social capital was declining largely due to the Internet and other media, the

findings of this research support the notion that, "humans have a need not just to belong

in an abstract sense, but to actually get together" (Capioppo 2008, p. 260) in physical

spaces. In that regard, this research challenges Putnam's assertion that media have a

corrosive effect on society, because it provides a powerful example of how an online

platform and other digital technologies are being utilized in ways where social capital is

not only being formed, but is flourishing. Furthermore, this research illustrates the

limitations of SNSs, namely that interacting with others solely through SNSs is not

enough to fulfill individuals' need for connection, though participants are receiving this

fulfillment through MeetUp and the formation of bridging capital.

The extent to which individuals felt a sense of belonging within their network of

weak ties may also be influenced by being able to tell others that they were a "part of

something." Jenny described this feeling by stating, "That feels good. Feeling like, 'what

did you do this week?' 'Oh, I went to a rugby tournament." Similarly, Erin discussed how

participation in MeetUp allowed her to talk to her co-workers about her weekend: "I

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could actually go to work and if someone asked me, 'hey, what'd you do this weekend?' I could say I actually did something versus, 'I watched movies and made candy and ate my weight in cake.'"

Statements such as these revealed another way that MeetUp participants experienced the benefits of participation, namely, the benefit that comes with being able to represent one's self as having a network of friends and a "full social calendar." Individuals who have been "uprooted," for whatever reason, have likely experienced the loneliness that accompanies telling co-workers that their weekend was 'good' or 'relaxing' (aka: they spent it alone doing nothing). In those situations, having to report to others about their weekend is a reminder of their loneliness. However, as Jenny and Erin demonstrated, participation in MeetUp enabled them to speak about their weekends in ways that reminded them that they have people to do things with. This helps explain why individuals return to MeetUp events and continue to seek out new MeetUp groups, even if they had a negative or unfulfilling 'first time' experience.

Connecting with the local community— In addition to feeling more connected to people, participants also discussed how they felt more connected to their communities because of participation in MeetUp. Jenny described this in the following way:

It was almost like alerting me to things that were going on in town....that sounded neat. You could go and know people are there, so I felt like it actually engaged me in exciting things that were going on already that I didn't know about.

Anna also expressed similar sentiments by saying, "it helps kind of keep you connected because you know what's going on." Anna gave the example of how she had learned about new places to hike through one of the MeetUp events. Though she wasn't

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able to attend the event and hike with the group, she did end up going there by herself the following week.

Other individuals reiterated that MeetUp enabled them to get out of their homes and explore their town. Erin described this as, "I can kind of learn about the town I'm in while doing this activity and not having to explore on [my] own." In that regard, MeetUp functioned in a way that provided people with a reason to go and be social or, as one Robert succinctly stated, "they go to different places and I'm like this is awesome cause for whatever reason I can't make myself go do that by myself."

While a few individuals stated that they had made 1-2 strong ties through MeetUp, more often than not, people participated in order to reap the benefits of the weak ties established through the MeetUp network. So even though MeetUp groups experienced fluctuations that occurred through the formation of bonding capital, many participants noted that they continued to participate in MeetUp groups due to the benefits of their weak ties. However, the one group that served as an exception to these experiences was the mental health support group.

Lessons from the outlier: bonding capital and supportive networks— This MeetUp group was the group referred to in the introductory story—the story of a network being activated in order to organize a surprise birthday party— and was commonly spoken of by participants as a "special network." In order to better understand this group, it's helpful to provide a little context.

This group has three regular MeetUps throughout the week that target different areas. On Monday afternoons, they meet at a park to "draw people out of the house" and use "physical activity to fight the isolation" that is common to people who experience

mental health concerns. The support aspect occurs on Monday evenings in the form of a support group meeting. The group begins with the administrators reading the guidelines for the meeting, such as not providing medication advice, and then the remaining time is dedicated to allowing members to share as much or as little as they feel comfortable with regarding what they have struggled with in the past week. On Wednesdays, the group gathers in a local restaurant for what they have termed "pie-polar Wednesdays," with the purpose being to socialize with one another.

In addition, members are in frequent contact with one another through text messages and emails. As such, many participants like Robert, stated that they "developed a lot closer friendships faster." Even though individuals in this group typically reported a higher frequency of strong ties, the weak ties that were created were equally important, similar to that of other MeetUp participants' experiences. In many ways, both individuals in this particular group and individuals in other groups, have experienced positive psychosocial benefits. The difference is in how the benefits were described.

Individuals in the mental health support MeetUp repeatedly stated that they felt that, "validation is one of the biggest things that comes out of [it]" because you're "speaking the same language" (Peter). Robert described his experience in the following way:

> One of the benefits was I was able to be open with what's going on in my life [because] a lot of that shit you don't want anybody to know. I grew up trying to hide it—constantly trying to hide it—and then all of a sudden I'm in this group where I can say whatever I want without somebody looking at me like I've got four heads.

Being able to talk openly with others who were going through similar experiences provided people with "very comforting knowledge that [they] have mental health support [because their] very close and best friends who are not diagnosed have no clue what [they're] dealing with" (Susan). This relatability factor seemed to be a common trend among participants in this group. However, another large factor that individuals spoke about was the way in which their support networks became activated. This largely pertained to the value that people found in their weak ties, as individuals felt comfortable reaching out and asking other members for help unrelated to mental health concerns. Susan recounted her experiences with this by providing the following examples:

Two days after I had my knee surgery, my waterbed started leaking...so I called up two male friends [from meet-up]...and they came and then they helped me. I got a free couch [and] they came and helped me. You know, so it's really neat. It's whatever you need. [...] I have friends there, not just a once a week peer.

This support network was also activated during situations when individuals were in the midst of experiencing a crisis, most commonly related to their mental health concerns. In these situations, they would send out a message to all the members of the group who allowed emails. Peter described the response as follows:

Usually what happens...cause I'll talk to people afterwards, is

it sounds like you get a minimum of 10 responses from people. People you've never met. People that are out of town...People I don't even know [and] I've never seen...or heard of anywhere in the group other than I know their names on the list, but people reaching back out.

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Even people who had never participated in the actual MeetUp— the lurkers on the site— still came together to help support a complete stranger. In that regard, the distinction between the benefits of strong ties and weak ties were increasingly blurred. As such, MeetUp is effectively succeeding in creating both bridging and bonding capital, and the values of those connections with regards to an individual's psychosocial well-being are often indistinguishable.

Given the benefits that participants have described, and the positive experiences that have been presented here, it's also important to consider the potential drawbacks. The opening quote, where Carl stated that, "I recognize that there is a level of desperation there," reflects the degree to which individuals have set their expectations for MeetUp groups. Namely, that the majority of people who participate in MeetUp are likely not having their social needs met. What happens when those expectations are not fulfilled and participants leave MeetUps with the same void that they had when they entered?

Managing Expectations and the Potential Drawbacks

Although participants provided numerous accounts of having left MeetUp events feeling fulfilled, many also described experiences similar to Jenny's, where she left "[feeling] more defeated than invigorated." One of the ways that this commonly occurred was through a discrepancy between the group's description and the reality of what the group was actually like. Susan described this with the following story:

> I was disappointed in the description and what it ended up being. [...] I just did one with a dog MeetUp and I was on crutches at the time, and they were not receptive to having somebody at the tail end...at all. [...] They'd be like 'okay, come on' and I'd be like, 'I can't rest? I cannot keep up.' So all the other

subsequent invites to the [MeetUps] have been 'this is going to be heavily

[walking].' [...] It was evident that I wasn't welcome.

Susan later compared the MeetUp groups' introduction pages with resumes: "anybody

can beef it up, make em' look good, but when the time comes it's not that way." This is

resonate with the literature on self representation on dating sites and other SNSs, as a

common issue that people mention is the ability for individuals to misrepresent who they

are (boyd & Ellison 2008, Ellison et al. 2007)

While the above example reflects a situation whereby the group wasn't as

inclusive as it appeared to be, other MeetUp participants have also found discrepancies

between the skill levels described (e.g., cycling or hiking) and the actual level at the event.

Still, others described situations where MeetUp participants were "standoffish" and

didn't seem open to conversations, making the interaction seem both forced and awkward.

This is reflected in the way that Jenny described her first MeetUp event: "everybody was

friendly...but I kind of questioned what everybody was doing there...it didn't seem

conversation heavy, but like, really...not at all."

These scenarios often led people to not give up on MeetUp entirely, but rather, to

adjust their expectations for the connections that they were seeking. For example, after

attending MeetUps and not feeling connected with others, Joe reflected on his

expectations in the following way:

It no longer became my purpose to meet friends and dating partners through

MeetUp. After that, it became more about the activities, and if I met those people,

then great. That's why I started looking for more hiking and yoga

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MeetUps...because then it seemed a little less about the personal aspect and a little more about the activity and having people to do the activity with.

Joe's strategy, namely that of adjusting his expectations in a way where his personal needs were excluded, resonates with how Jenny described the implications for when those personal, social needs are not met:

I went in with an expectation and had been wanting to do this—it's finally happening—I was so excited. And...everybody was fine...it just wasn't as great as I thought it was gonna be and so I left feeling a little down about that. So I can only imagine somebody who's not feeling as fulfilled in their...social self...and maybe you've got some expectations, so it's more important that this work out— there's more riding on it. If I was feeling kind of low after that, I can only imagine if you go into it with certain expectations, and you're already feeling a little insecure...and it doesn't work out.

That said, while people did acknowledge the sense of disappointment that accompanied being 'let down' by a MeetUp group, Carl framed the experience of not having his expectations met in the following way:

It's normalized. But, then when it does happen and you kind of sit down and have a connection with somebody, and I don't even mean romantically or anything, just have a human connection with somebody, I feel then it becomes this very, maybe not novel, but very inceptual experience.

In that regard, the majority of participants had lowered their initial expectations, so that even if a deep connection didn't happen, they were still able to view it as a positive experience because, at the very least, they were out being social with like-minded people.

This was strongly resonate with the ways that people described the various benefits afforded by participation in MeetUp, as many members readily pointed out that even their weak ties led them to feel more connected to others. Perhaps this is why MeetUp is continuing to grow in popularity, and why millions of people worldwide are relying on a web-based platform to facilitate their social connections.

Chapter Four: Conclusion

Limitations and Future Research

This research on MeetUp.com explores what it means to be social and what it means to connect with someone through the use of face-to-face meetings and near constant connectivity. While the research has numerous limitations, such as its small sample size and its strong leaning toward introverted individuals, it still provides an interesting exploration into the ways that people are building community in an increasingly digital world. More specifically, this research analyzed the ability for MeetUp.com to facilitate different forms of social capital while also examining the values of those relationships through the experiences of MeetUp participants.

In that regard, the psychosocial benefits of bridging capital and bonding capital often overlapped in ways that were indistinguishable from one another. The results of this study have strongly supported the notion that individuals still need to connect with others in physical spaces, to the extent that connecting with strangers can somewhat satisfy this need. Because of this, future researchers need to take an inductive approach when studying the inherent value and worth of social capital. Rather than quantifying the psychosocial benefits of social capital through pre-determined indicators, researchers need to begin talking to participants in face-to-face settings while paying specific attention to how participants convey their experiences. In doing so, scholars will be able

to better discern the ways in which MeetUp participants are creating meaning from their experiences, and moreover, what it means to be social.

Final Thoughts

Returning to the opening metaphor of a plant's roots being disrupted and replanted, this research has demonstrated that in many ways, MeetUp is providing the soil for individuals' roots to entangle around; it is providing a way for people to feel grounded and connected. Similar to how a plant's growth depends upon adequate amounts of sunlight, water, and other nutrients, an individual's growth is largely dependent upon his/her social connections with other people. Because relationships do not occur in a vacuum, an individual's network of relationships become central to meeting the individual's basic social needs. Throughout this research, the benefits that occurred from the formation of these relationships, were largely related to individuals' psychosocial well-being.

Participation in MeetUp, and the relationships that were formed, often led individuals to feel a sense of belonging and connectedness to others and to their communities, and ultimately fulfilled their social needs to some extent. These benefits resulted from both bridging capital and bonding capital, thereby furthering Putnam and Granovetter's conceptualization of the value of these forms of relationships. Rather than bonding capital being responsible for individuals' emotional well-being, this research found that the formation of bridging capital also had psychosocial benefits for participants. As such, the value of these relationships was not contingent upon the particular type of social capital that was formed.

In addition, the findings of this research challenge Putnam's primary assertion that media contributed to the decline of social capital. While Putnam's emphasis was on the television, the findings from this study were focused on new media and digital technologies. In particular, its focus was on an online platform specifically created in order to build social capital and community. Rather than privatizing individuals' free time in ways that isolated them, MeetUp and other digital technologies have done just the opposite: they have encouraged individuals to connect with others in physical places. In that regard, this research challenges Putnam by illustrating that individuals *are* still gathering with one another, but for different purposes. While Putnam measured the decline in social capital by factors such as voter turnout, participation in politics, and community/organizational involvement, this research has measured social capital through the lived experiences of MeetUp participants. In doing so, the findings support the notion that social capital and community are being built across the nation, as evidenced by the rapidly growing number of MeetUp participants, and are being built largely through the use of new media and digital technologies.

In that regard, this research also adds to the current literature on new media, technology and society. The literature reviewed in this paper largely stated that new media and technology can contribute to individuals' psychosocial well-being when used for social purposes, however in ways where the 'rich get richer' and the 'poor get poorer.' The results of this research have found that, while introverts and extroverts approach MeetUp differently, the benefits they receive are not dependent upon their personality type. Instead, they're dependent upon having a human connection with another person in a physical space, regardless of if it's a superficial or deep connection.

While many individuals began with the expectation of forming deep relationships, these expectations shifted in accordance with their experiences at MeetUp events, and shifted in ways where the stakes were lowered. Rather than expecting to meet their new best friend and confidant, they instead just wanted to have fun doing an activity that they enjoyed in the company of other people. Contrary to dating sites and apps that are also centered around connecting people with shared interests, MeetUp is unique because for many participants, they are not looking for a romantic partner, and for some, they are not even looking for a friend. They're just looking for a human connection in a physical space.

Furthermore, for many participants, the technological aspects of MeetUp were frustrating, so they only used the platform to decide what groups to join and what events to attend. While many participants spoke at length about how they would stalk other people's profile pictures, it's worthwhile to note that the profile picture was largely the only thing that was looked at. This contrasts with the detailed, lengthy profiles available to individuals on dating sites/apps, because MeetUp profiles do not give a large opportunity for individuals to misrepresent themselves. Given the literature that demonstrated that people were less likely to misrepresent themselves when they were planning on meeting face-to-face, it is interesting to consider how MeetUp is perhaps more conducive at facilitating the formation of social capital due to the seemingly irritating and tedious aspects of the website.

While it is easy to look at the media environment and conclude that the fabric of sociality has shifted, the reality is that the formation of social relationships are occurring through the same mechanisms that they always have, namely through the relatively

organic ways that people connect with others through other people. The difference

however, lies in people's ability to leverage media to facilitate the growth of relationships

through new opportunities of connecting. Due to the convergence of technological

functionalities and the ubiquitous nature of mobile devices, individuals are now able to be

"with" someone and foster their relationships through interactions on SNSs and mobile

devices. As a networked society, the ways that our sociality is augmented through other

media occurs so seamlessly that it is often outside of our awareness. Yet even despite this

near constant connectivity, individuals are still desiring to be with others in physical

spaces.

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Appendix A: Sample Interview Questions

These are sample questions. The actual interviews were more fluid and were topically driven (as opposed to the structured questions listed below).

1. How did you hear about MeetUp?

2. Can you describe the reason that you decided to get involved? Did you immediately start attending MeetUp or did you "lurk" around the different sites for a little bit? If you did, can you tell me a little bit about your reluctance? What made you decide to finally attend a MeetUp?

3. How long have you been involved in this particular MeetUp group? Would you consider yourself a regular participant—why or why not? Do you have a specific role within the group?

4. Are you involved in other MeetUp groups? Which ones? In your experience, what are the characteristics of a "good" MeetUp group? For example, why do you attend the ones you attend? Similarly, if you have attended an event and then left the group (or stopped attending events), what was it about the MeetUp that didn't connect with you?

5. Are there things that you like/dislike about this particular MeetUp group?

6. How often do you visit the group's page (via the website or the app)? What do you primarily use these platforms for? Have you noticed any differences between how this group uses the website versus how other groups use the website?

7. Can you tell me about your first time attending a MeetUp? Describe what the experience is like currently when you attend a MeetUp. What are the interactions like?

8. Have you become friends with anyone through MeetUp? Tell me more about these relationships.

9. Has your involvement in the group led you to feel more or less connected to others? To your community? How so?

10. Can you describe any benefits and drawbacks that you can think of with regards to your involvement with this group and with MeetUp as a whole?

11. What were your expectations for MeetUp? Were they met? If so, how? If not, why not?

12. What was it like when your expectations weren't met?

13. What kind of person benefits from MeetUp?

14. Would you consider yourself an introvert or an extrovert? How has this influenced your experience of MeetUp?

15. Have you ever invited a friend to come with you? Did that change your experience? Similarly, have you noticed if people who bring friends act differently?

16. If you were to describe MeetUp to a friend—what it is and what you've experienced—in one sentence, what would you say?

Appendix B: Interviewees' MeetUp Groups

These lists are arranged alphabetically and reflects the groups that individuals were, or are, actively involved in. It is not an exhaustive list that contains all of the group that they are "members" of on the site, rather it only contains those that they have participated in.

Colorado Craft Beer lovers
Denver Dog walks
Denver Metro Witches Meetup Group
Denver Vegans
Denver West Recreation and Gaming
Esri Developers MeetUp
Fort Collins Cycling
Girl Meets World
Great Dane Meetup
Ladies Who Love Ladies Who Love Beer
Lesbian Connection
Something Besides Bars: Social Club Focused on Fun!!!
Strange Yoga
The Boulder Polyamory Meetup Group
The Denver 20s and 30s Something "Not-SO-Girly" Girl's Group
The Denver Metro Area Bipolar Disorder Meetup
The Denver Trail Heads
The Imperial Order of Geeks
The Rocky Mountain Singles Meetup Group
Vegan life Colorado
YOCO: The Yoga Collective of Denver
20 and 30 Something Hikers and Outdoor Enthusiasts

Other groups that members are involved in, but that I didn't know the group names for, were around the following interests:

Introverts
Mental Health
Photography