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A social net? Internet and social media use during unemployment

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A Social Net?

Internet and Social Media Use during Unemployment

***Abstract:** Many people who are unemployed tend to experience forms of psychological and social losses, including a weakened time structure, diminished social contacts, an absence of collective purpose, falling status, and inactivity. This article focuses on the experience of diminished social contacts and addresses whether social media helps the unemployed maintain their relationships. Based on qualitative interviews with unemployed individuals, the article identifies various types of social support networks and their impact on individual experiences of inclusion and exclusion. Although the unemployed use social media to cultivate their social support networks, the opportunity to establish new contacts, both private and professional, is underutilised. Thus, social network differentiation between the unemployed and employed persists online in social media.*

Keywords: social media, social networks, social support, unemployment

Introduction

In both strong and weak economies, people lose their jobs for a variety of reasons: they may resign, be terminated or made redundant; their employment contracts may expire; or they may retire. Unintended unemployment can have serious consequences for an individual's well-being, both economically and socio-emotionally (McKee-Ryan et al., 2005). Employment not only is a means to earn a living but also structures the day and facilitates the development of social relationships.

This article focuses on the nature of the development and maintenance of those social structures during unemployment. Based on qualitative data, it addresses whether social network technology is harmful or helpful for maintaining the social environment of the unemployed. Building on the unemployment literature, the aim is to contribute to unemployment research by critically analysing media use. The recent past has witnessed a shift in the media environment towards more participatory forms of communication that may (or may not) enrich the time spent in unemployment. These new social media tools may affect how the unemployed include themselves in society and how time spent online may be used for impression management and networking. Additionally, how the unemployed use social media may guide the way organisations, policymakers, and society should design new media to engage them. In this context, 'social media' is used as an umbrella term for all internet applications with a communicative and collaborative function. In their ordinary use, social media applications are interactive and participatory. Web services that can be categorised as social media include (listed in increasing degree of participation) wikis, forums, multimedia platforms (YouTube, Flickr), blogs (WordPress), microblogs (Twitter), social games, social networking sites (Facebook), and instant messaging.

This article discusses whether and to what extent the effects of unemployment—including diminishing social networks and social support—are influenced by social media.

For example, can social media alleviate the negative consequences of unemployment? Can social media create new ways of overcoming these negative consequences by facilitating (and maintaining) online relationships and revealing new employment opportunities? The previous literature advances two opposing perspectives: the networking capabilities of social media might enhance social relationships, on one hand, or they might be as socially isolating as they are socially enabling, on the other. Social media may provide novel opportunities for the unemployed. For example, online interactions may facilitate the exchange of information, provide emotional support, or foster conversations among unemployed individuals with similar interests (Douglas et al., 2008). Alternatively, such interactions might facilitate an escape from an unpleasant reality. Online media's sociability is often cited as the reason for the excessive amount of time that people invest in computer-mediated interactions (Davis et al., 2002). However, the excessive amount of time spent online and the compulsive use of new media may decrease social interaction with 'real' people and increase loneliness and depression (Whang et al., 2003; Yellowlees and Marks, 2007). Therefore, the interactive and participatory potential of social media may not be equally realised among users. At the individual level, the effect of social media may be determined by how social media is used.

Theoretical Background

Overview of the Unemployment Experience

Research on the experience of being unemployed has a rich history that begins with *Die Arbeitslosen von Marienthal* (The Unemployed of Marienthal) (Lazarsfeld, Jahoda, and Zeisel, 1933), which was first published in 1933 and remains one of the most frequently cited and influential pieces of social scientific fieldwork. The volume of research that followed the Marienthal study showed that unemployment affects individuals in terms of how they use their time, with whom they spend their time, and how they feel. Unemployment is typically considered a highly negative personal event. According to Jahoda (1981), unemployment en-

tails a sense of loss spread over five dimensions: time structure, social contacts, collective purpose, status, and activity. All types of loss directly affect individuals' psychological distress and well-being (Ware et al., 1984), which worsen as the period of unemployment lengthens (Bellaby and Bellaby, 1999; Nordenmark, 1999; Strandh, 2000).

Based on these findings, diverse approaches have classified the unemployed (Lazarsfeld, Jahoda, and Zeisel, 1933; Opaschowski, 1976; Engbersen, Schuyt, and Timmer, 1993; Kronauer and Vogel, 1993). Using reactions and coping strategies regarding unemployment, the Marienthal study determined four unemployed personality types: the unbroken, the resigned, the desperate, and the apathetic (Lazarsfeld, Jahoda, and Zeisel, 1933). Lazarsfeld et al. noted that unemployment is often accompanied by feelings of uselessness and the consciousness of not being integrated, which manifest as strong feelings of loneliness. Opaschowski (1976) built on this work by identifying four similar attitude types. In his study of the housing and living conditions of unemployed adolescents, he differentiated various states of isolation: active isolation as a conscious or an unconscious search for detachment, passive isolation as acceptance of the absence of contacts, situationally stable isolation as a result of a particular social situation, and situationally fragile isolation as individuals continuing to seek contacts despite their situation.

A related research stream prioritises social exclusion and networks (Russell, 1999). Being unemployed perpetuates 'negative stereotypes and social exclusion' (Evans and Repper, 2000), and exclusion from society can be linked to the objective dimensions of precariousness and the subjective feeling of exclusion or social segregation. Regarding social relationships, the unemployed tend to move away from close (family) networks towards an 'individualisation' of the self. This process can spur detachment from traditional patterns of living and lead to changes in the state of social isolation. The latter changes appear primarily as biographical discontinuity, in which individuals feel limited in their ability to control their life

circumstances. For example, the unemployed may withdraw from interdependent relationships, which might result in a sense of ineptness. Furthermore, unemployment may quickly lead to a loss of supportive social networks—such as a circle of colleagues—or ‘an attenuation of friendship with long-term unemployment’ (Morris and Irwin, 1992). The resulting social isolation may limit an individual’s social relationships to individuals occupying identical or similarly disadvantaged positions, a limitation that may intensify isolation (Kronauer, 2010). However, not every objectively precarious situation necessarily leads to a subjective feeling of exclusion (Bude and Lantermann, 2006). Instead, the subjective perception of an individual’s position depends on the belief regarding whether the situation may be successfully mastered with his/her own resources.

Social Media as a Participatory Device

Social media change patterns of communication and social structures. Applications such as social networking sites facilitate new types of social relationships and individualised forms of information reception and production. In these applications, researchers perceive not only new patterns of communication but also new forms of identity formation at the individual level that can have various social effects. In particular, social media may affect collective and individual well-being (Amichai-Hamburger and Furnham, 2007), increase the size of social networks and the number of social contacts with friends or family (Katz et al., 2001), increase feelings of contribution and closeness (Contarello and Sarrica, 2007), and provide social support (Haythornthwaite and Wellman, 2007).

Building relationships within social networks and online communities enables information exchanges among friends in the context of novel social interactions regardless of geographical proximity. However, the extent to which offline and online social relationships interrelate has not yet been determined. Socially inhibited individuals may benefit from social media because of the comparatively anonymous nature of participation, the amount of control

over social interactions, and the ease of finding likeminded others (Amichai-Hamburger and Furnham, 2007; Barak, 2007; McKenna and Bargh, 2000; Etzioni and Etzioni, 1997). Online media may enhance feelings of emotional closeness and openness (Ben-Ze'ev, 2003; Davis et al, 2002), as demonstrated by online emotional support groups that are popular among people suffering from illness or disability. Thus, social media may serve as a protected environment in which people identify new social contacts, find social support, and participate in (online) activities (Amichai-Hamburger and Furnham, 2007). Consequently, an individual who is disadvantaged in real life may assume an independent position in a web-based social network—at least in theory. The opportunities that the internet provides for overcoming exclusionary processes and structures may offer additional ways to cope with the (subjective) perception of a precarious life situation. A more critical view of this aspect of new media is that internet use may lead to decreased offline communication and thus amplify loneliness (Kraut et al., 1998) because less time is spent in offline social interactions (Nie and Erbing, 2002).

Method

This study aims to describe and understand the social environment of the unemployed and to explore the opportunities and challenges presented by social media applications in retaining or expanding social networks from the participant's perspective. Qualitative methods were selected because of this study's exploratory character.

To approach the topic from the participants' perspective, 28 semistructured face-to-face interviews with unemployed individuals were conducted in October 2011. The interviews were conducted following predesigned interview guidelines and included questions on practices related to general social media use, media competencies, and social media use targeted specifically at job searches. Participants were also asked questions regarding unemployment in general, their (social) environment and sense of inclusion therein, and their representation in social media. Additionally, participants were asked to diagram and comment on their social

networks. These diagrams not only helped to visualise the interviewees' social environments but also provided a new perspective for understanding their social relationships and describing their living situation more completely.

The interviews were conducted in German for 60 minutes on average at four regional employment agencies in Germany that are located in rural and urban areas with different unemployment rates. The interviewees were evenly distributed with respect to region, gender, and age. The interviewees consisted of 13 male and 15 female job seekers with the following age distribution: four persons under 25 years old, 14 between 25 and 50 years old, and 10 between 50 and 65 years old. When selecting the interviewees, the recruitment of a diverse group, in terms of not only demographics but also perspectives and social media utilisation (i.e., different levels of internet skills and different use patterns of the internet for private or business communication, interpersonal communication, information seeking, or entertainment), was prioritised. The interviewees were recruited through job advisers at employment agencies. A small monetary reward was offered as an incentive to participate in the study.

All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed for analysis, and coded using ATLAS.ti, the qualitative data analysis software. The codebook was developed based on a literature review and an analysis of the first four interviews. The subcategories were clustered thematically based on similarity. The superordinate categories were oriented towards the central topics of the questionnaire, i.e., personal factors, inclusion, media literacy, impression management, technology acceptance, and the digital divide. However, the coding process was kept open to allow for new codes to be developed and categories to be refined, which then permitted emergent themes to be considered and the text to be integrated into broader concepts during interpretation. The network sketches were scanned and contextualised with a detailed description using notes from both interviewees and the interviewer. Using the same codebook with a focus on the subcategories of 'inclusion' (social environment (offline/online)

and change caused by unemployment), all sketches were coded and classified by the analysis group in an open discussion. Names were changed to protect the interviewees' privacy.

Findings

The findings are presented in two parts. First, to illustrate the inclusion of the unemployed individual, social support networks types (SSNTs) are summarised, including the actual network, the contacts made and maintained, and changes caused by joblessness. Second, an overview of the use of social media for cultivating and extending social support networks is developed by comparing interviewees' descriptions of their experiences.

Social Support Network Types

Social support networks indicate the individual's experience of inclusion. They describe the level and type of both social participation and the support of social contacts. SSNTs enable the possibility of identifying nuances within the heterogeneous group of the unemployed. SSNTs are specified according to the following selection criteria: the level of inclusion, size of the social network, ability to make or maintain social contacts, origin of social contacts (e.g., family, work, or spare time), structure of everyday life, and perception and management of unemployment, with a focus on unemployment's effects on social contacts. Our findings correspond to the following five SSNTs: two types with a low level of social support ('the excluded' and 'the contact searcher') and three types with a fulfilling level of social support ('the family included, 'the activity included, and 'the multilateral included'). The table below presents an overview of the five SSNTs.

TABLE 1 HERE

Social Media Use to Cultivate and Extend Social Networks

An examination of the social aspect of social media should reveal the negative and positive aspects of social media in cultivating and extending social contacts and networks.

However, not all interviewees made equal use of social media because of personal characteristics, different degrees of literacy, and/or motivational control. Thus, inequalities can emerge from different use patterns.

The Excluded

‘The excluded’ do not use social media. Similarly, in ‘real life,’ they do not exploit available mechanisms to socialise. The only interviewee of this type is Oliver (48, varied training, unemployed for ten years). His social network consists of his brother, his aunt, and a former coworker (figure 1). He states that he lost his circle of acquaintances because of working shift work. He avoids contact with other unemployed individuals because of previous bad experiences, such as his description of an encounter with one such individual:

He began to rail against the employment agency. The more he talked about it, the more I felt uncomfortable. I listened to it for a while, but then I said to myself: “Leave him alone, it doesn’t make any sense to stay in touch.” The problem was that he just complained about the agency, no matter what they did. He went on and on. This is why I keep my distance. Another time, during a job-creation session, it was exactly the same. Everybody complained about the official in charge. I don’t need that. (Oliver, 48, varied training, unemployed for 10 years)

Oliver appears to feel supported by the employment agency. He is thankful for their help, which may explain his attitude. Currently, he is attempting to build a new circle of friends among clients from his volunteer work. Thus, social media only indirectly affects his social network, i.e., through disuse. Oliver does not use Facebook because he worries about data security:

On Facebook, basically everybody—I do not know how many million people have access to it—can see everything and get your information. So, this is a domain I will never access, not through Facebook or any similar network. There is just too much risk that somebody will get my information. And there are people out there who might have criminal interests in that information. This is why I will avoid Facebook. (Oliver, 48, varied training, unemployed for ten years)

This negative approach to social media is mainly shaped by the mass media, which tend to be critical of Facebook and other social media websites and portray them negatively. Because ‘the excluded’ do not have a social network, this opinion remains unquestioned.

FIGURE 1 HERE

The Contact Searcher

By contrast, ‘the contact searcher’ is driven by a high degree of self-motivation to utilise social media to establish new contacts: ‘Because of my job search and the active approach from my side (since the unemployment), I have become closer with some contacts within my church congregation’ (Tobias, 47, computer scientist, unemployed for two years, regularly uses job-creating measures). Contact searchers have a relatively small social network because they do not have a circle of acquaintances and prefer to focus on close contacts, e.g., first-degree relatives and close friends. For example, figure 2 shows the social network of Mary (51, call centre agent, made redundant some months ago), which consists of her two sons, two close friends, two remote friends, and two former coworkers. In addition to Mary, Martin (51, food industry, unemployed for 6 months) and Tobias have similar SSNTs. With their unemployment, these three individuals lost the structuring mechanism for their everyday lives, their jobs, and opportunities for occasional contacts, which makes unemployment particularly difficult for them: ‘This really knocked me down. The whole process of my dismissal damaged me mentally. I was at a breaking point. However, this is how society is’ (Mary, 51, call centre agent, made redundant some months ago). These individuals are seeking ways to meet people. Mary uses instant messaging and online games to socialise and refuses to use social network sites, Martin uses social network sites, and Tobias participates in online forums to build relationships:

I made contact with one person online, but we have never talked on the phone. We have the same type of humour. (...) She is alone, like me. Sometimes, we encourage each other, and I really appreciate that. We have a kind of friendship, a sort of internet friendship. (Mary, 51, call centre agent, made redundant some months ago)

I joined some discussion boards, and this is also a search for contacts. I like chatting about experiences. Because of my age, I am in two forums for seniors. My positive experiences are searching for contacts and exchanges with others. (Martin, 51, food industry, unemployed for 6 months)

If you have a specific topic in a forum, it is very easy to find two or three people to chat with. You write them every now and then but only about this specific topic. (Tobias, 47, computer scientist, unemployed for two years, regularly uses job-creating measures).

Furthermore, they find social support online:

It [the game] is easy, but you also need team spirit because (in the game) we are a village on a mission together. (...) Sometimes, you need encouragement, “You can do it; you can work through this.” And then it is really good because you have those kinds of people around you who cheer you up. There is no pity—because this will not help you. I do this because it is without any pressure. I had pity at my job; I don’t need it in my private time. I can have my own thoughts that are just for me. As I said, it is not real life. It is just a game. (Mary, 51, call centre agent, made redundant some months ago)

Through these positive (social) effects, the social network indirectly affects their social media use and engagement.

FIGURE 2 HERE

The Family Included

In addition to family members and a ‘relatively small circle of friends, I think, at least,’ work colleagues complete the social network of the ‘family included’ for Volker (50, trainer for aircraft mechanics, unemployed for several months). The female ‘family included’ remain in touch with acquaintances, club members, or other leisure-time relationships, in addition to family members and a relatively small circle of friends, as shown in the social network of Hannah (53, office administrator, unemployed since July 2011) (figure 3). However, the focus on family contacts is particularly clear; in contrast to other SSNTs, (close) family members are listed individually and are not grouped under the category ‘family.’ Their families provide social support:

The closest relationships I have are with my wife and daughter. I can talk about any problem with them, including private and sensitive things—same with my parents. I can also talk about my mental state with them, but more cautiously. I can't go into details here; otherwise, they will just start worrying about me. (Volker, 50, trainer for aircraft mechanics, unemployed for several months)

Their family duties provide stability:

I have both feet on the ground. I have many obligations, so I am actually surrounded with real people every day. (Monica, 43, personnel officer, unemployed for six months)

They define themselves through their work and experience unemployment as onerous:

I could go through the world proudly while I was working. This changed. (Volker, 50, trainer for aircraft mechanics, unemployed for several months)

I have to try to change jobs to be able to work more years. If you do not have a job, your head just explodes. This is really terrible. (Olivia, 54, team leader hospitality, seasonal unemployment)

Furthermore, 'the family included' struggle to cope with loss of status, loss of contact with their coworkers, the anxiety of experiencing degrading treatment by others, and/or experiences of degrading treatment:

Those who have a job do not have the time to meet or make calls the whole time. Contact drops quite fast, especially with former colleagues. (Olaf, 45-50, chemistry, unemployed intermittently since 1990)

I see that now. You start holding back. You avoid being asked about certain things. And you also avoid contact with certain people. (Volker, 50, trainer for aircraft mechanics, unemployed for several months)

My very first experience with the job adviser was that I walked out of the office and started crying. He made me feel like I was nothing. (Simone, 58, childcare worker, unemployed since November 2010)

I had a job adviser who made me feel like a beggar. (Hannah, 53, office administrator, unemployed since July 2011)

Most 'family-included' interviewees avoid social network sites. Only three of 12 interviewees, i.e., Hannah, Peter (47, leading position in insurance company, unemployed for one year), and Sabine (38, editor, unemployed for two years after parental leave)—all with higher-level job positions—are the exceptions; they use private social network sites or social network sites not for professional reasons but to socialise, i.e., not to expand their networks. The essentially negative approach to social media is influenced by the mass media—'as I learned from the newspaper or TV' (Daniela, 40-45, office manager in a nursing home, unemployed for one-and-a-half years, regularly uses job-creating measures)—but is determined mainly by the individual's social networks. Families and friends of the 'family included' prefer to communicate face-to-face or via telephone or email:

We do not participate in social networks. I think that most of my generation does not. (...) Not being part of Facebook does not bother us. (Volker, 50, trainer for aircraft mechanics, unemployed for several months)

My acquaintances are not there—especially not my closer acquaintances. (Arnold, 64, social worker, unemployed for one-and-a-half years)

Furthermore, these people often lack the skills to technically and mentally cope with social media:

‘Well, at first, you had to look for those sites. (...) Today, I know where I can click, but then what?’ (Christina, 53, saleswoman, unemployed for one-and-a-half years).

Other reasons for disuse involve privacy, security, or feelings of impersonality or purposelessness:

Well, it involves personal distrust. You should not have to expose yourself on the internet. You do not know what will happen to your information. I do not trust the system, and I worry about it. (...) I do not know what could be in it for me. What does someone in New Zealand have to do with my well-being? He cannot help me. He cannot give me any advice. He can't even try. (Volker, 50, trainer for aircraft mechanics, unemployed for several months)

I am an anti-Facebook activist. (...) I prefer the old ways. I call people personally or simply meet them. I am not interested in people who do not exist in the real world, who are just friends on Facebook and not in reality. They are redundant. I am not engaging with such people. (Monica, 43, personnel officer, unemployed for six months))

I have to admit that I am not the type of person who necessarily has to be in touch with people from all over the world via Facebook. People who count for me are my friends, my acquaintances, and my family. I do not want other people to read my stuff. (Olivia, 54, team leader hospitality, seasonal unemployment)

Therefore, in these cases, social media use or disuse does not change individuals' social networks. However, the social network influences social media use by affecting the individual's engagement with social media.

FIGURE 3 HERE

The Activity Included

Figure 4 shows that the focus of ‘activity-included’ social networkers is the interest-oriented friend circle. Social relationships are defined by common interests rather than familial relationships:

I do not have many friends, except for the jugglers. It is more a kind of attitude towards life, and we have a lot of contact. And I dance, too. (...) I am a member of Couchsurfing, which is a community for people who are travelling a lot. You get cheap accommodations, and you get to know many friendly and terrific people. (Rebecca, 34, office administrator, unemployed for nine months)

Because their hobbies give structure to the lives of these individuals, unemployment seems less important. The primary impact of unemployment is that the lack of financial resources associated with unemployment reduces the scale of activities:

I cannot do so much when I am out of work. (...) I play Smail—an online 3d chat. Every now and then you can play a game. There are always small games for in between. Sometimes, they want money, but I only play the games that are free. (...) If there is a party or similar event, most of the time, the information is distributed through Facebook. If you do not have Facebook, you are out. Nobody wants to call or send a text message because it costs money. And Facebook is free. I think it is all about the fact that Facebook does not charge you any money. (Stella, 19, confectioner, redundant since the end of an apprenticeship)

Furthermore, these individuals are linked together with other users online. The social networks of the ‘activity included‘ centre on social media, which influence group members' approach to social media and, consequently, their social media use:

Actually, my friends from Israel said, “Do you have Facebook?” I asked what that was, and they said I really should set up a profile there to exchange photos. And I liked that, so I did it. So the first friends I had were Israelis. (Rebecca, 34, office administrator, unemployed for nine months)

Therefore, a large part of their social lives occurs on social network sites. They use social media to make new contacts (Facebook or chat) but use these media mainly to socialise:

I have too many friends on Facebook—about 500? I would say that I know many only through friends. But I know them from somewhere. I do not accept anybody that I do not know. (Stella, 19, confectioner, redundant since the end of an apprenticeship)

It is always on in the background. And when somebody says “Hello”, I say “Hello” back. (Rebecca, 34, office administrator, unemployed for nine months)

They receive social support—both emotional and material—from their friends online and offline:

Facebook is very important for me to stay in touch with people—Inbatz, too, which is only for jugglers. This is my address book when I am searching for a telephone number; it's really cool. If you are lost somewhere in Germany, without any money, you could search for the nearest juggler and just call him. This is a cool network. (...) I get tips from working colleagues or ex-colleagues. I also get many tips from my friends who are jugglers or dancers. They all know about my job search. Yesterday, I got an email from the wife of my dancing partner. She asked me if I was skilled in controlling, but I am not. However, they are all searching with me. I really appreciate that. (Rebecca, 34, office administrator, unemployed for nine months)

Thus, the influence of social media and social networks is mutually reinforcing. Social media engagement is strengthened with positive experiences. Nonetheless, the social net-

works of these individuals, their social media use, and their social media engagement are influenced by their interests.

FIGURE 4 HERE

The Multilateral Included

Members of ‘the multilateral included’ meet with close friends and families regularly. They cultivate their contacts and expand their social networks using various applications, e.g., Skype, WhatsApp, Email, and Facebook, as indicated in comments from Nick (figure 5):

Well, my connections to the outside world, to friends and colleagues, take place on the internet. (...) We use Skype. I communicate with my grandchildren. We do not do it too much, so we don't annoy each other, but they say “Hello”, when they have something new and want to show it to their granddad. (Nick, 62, editor and research assistant, unemployed for two years)

They distinguish themselves as highly competent in managing new (technological) objects and have high social-media competencies—‘If the question is whether I can deal with it, I would say well. If the question is whether I understand it technically, I would say satisfactorily’ (Nick, 62, editor and research assistant, unemployed for two years)—based on extensive experience with the internet in general and social media in particular. ‘I can remember 15 years ago when we broadcasted the first images from living room to living room, with colleagues or friends who shared the same interests in this technology’ (Nick, 62, editor and research assistant, unemployed for two years).

Therefore, their engagement level and their engagement with their networks in social media are positive. However, although the interviewees discuss the advantages regarding establishing contacts and communication, some do not use social network sites and prefer personal contacts:

Facebook cannot replace social contacts, definitively not. [...] For job reasons, I can very well imagine that you acquire new clientele or even stay in touch with them, but not for private matters. Those who want to reach me privately can call me, and I will keep it like that. (Victoria, 37, lawyer, redundant since the end of law school)

Being unemployed does not seem difficult for them. Multilateral-included interviewees do not discuss unemployment or unemployment as a problem but adopt a rather rational position:

I am relatively free of illusion. I do not think that I, at 62 years of age, will find work again, especially not on the level that I worked on before. (Nick, 62, editor and research assistant, unemployed for two years)

If the economic crisis is going on, what can you do? Because I am a single parent, I always have to look for companies that are single-parent friendly. There are companies that say from the start: "I do not want a single parent." This must be respected; it exists. (Susan, 30, retail and hospitality worker, seasonal unemployment)

FIGURE 5 HERE

Discussion

In the literature, ‘recent debates about the underclass and social exclusion have focused attention on the social networks of the unemployed’ (Russell, 1999: 205). The present study extends these debates by identifying five SSNTs and their social media habits. Therefore, it not only expands the literature in terms of identifying the possibility that social media might overcome some of the negative consequences of unemployment with respect to emotional and informational support but also extends approaches for classifying the unemployed. There are similarities with other typologies. For example, ‘the excluded’ SSNT is found in Lazarsfeld, Jahoda, and Zeisel (1933) and Opaschowski (1976). However, the differentiation of the unemployed by social environment introduces a new perspective to the analysis of the unemployed that reveals the influence of social networks.

The results indicate that the use of social media affects social networks and that there are differences in social media use. The analysis of the social media habits differentiated by SSNTs illustrates that differences in social media use are based primarily on the degree of social media engagement. Therefore, the degree of engagement in social media determines social media use. The influence of the social network is similarly important—directly and indirectly—through members’ engagement in social media. However, although social net-

works are typically positive stimuli, social media are not generally utilised when the individual's perception of social media is negative. This negative perception of social media is influenced by several factors, including mass media, a sense of scepticism regarding data security, personal motivations, personal competencies and experiences in media use, and most notably, the individual's social network.

Nevertheless, because of individuals' engagement in social media, the opportunity to establish new contacts—both private and professional—has been underutilised. Opportunities to build new business relationships underlie the aforementioned factors. Notably, none of the interviewees sought support from other unemployed persons. The question of whether the 'unemployed receive aid predominantly from other unemployed people' (Morris and Irwin, 1992: 192) did not arise. Interviewees receive informational support from unemployed persons in their network by exchanging experiences but generally show no particular interest in making contact with other unemployed individuals. Furthermore, interviewees who came into contact with other unemployed people—whether through an employment agency or through online forums—reported having bad experiences, which they attributed to the negative outlook of other unemployed people.

A closer examination of social media use stratified by SSNTs reveals that it positively affects the experience of unemployment, although it is nonessential because offline networks can serve as the main form of social support. Furthermore, to participate in and to benefit from interactions on social media, new skill sets are required. For individuals who find social support mainly offline, the question remains as to how long those networks can avoid the negative consequences of unemployment. Previous studies (Scutella and Wooden, 2008; Hanisch, 1999; Paul and Moser, 2009) show that social support might decrease with longer unemployment. Further research is required to elucidate the long-term effects of social media on social networks.

The positive effects of social media use are conveyed by contrasting the limited social media use of ‘the family-included’ SSNT with the extensive social media use of the ‘multilateral-included’ SSNT. The risk of being marginalised from the labour market and the ‘danger of exclusion from wider social relationships’ (Russell, 1999: 206; Evans and Repper, 2000) were only mentioned by ‘the family-included’ interviewees. The influence of unemployment in reducing social contacts and the weakening of friendship ties was also observed in ‘the family included’. Based on interviewee descriptions of their perceptions of unemployment, the family seems to provide emotional support, but this support might be insufficient in the long term. A reluctance to accept help from others, also noted by Morris and Irwin (1992), was observed. ‘The family-included’ interviewees did not enhance their social network by connecting with likeminded others online. The skills to technically and mentally cope with social media are absent; therefore, the possible positive effects of social media on unemployment are not experienced. For ‘the multilateral-included’ and ‘activity-included’ groups, unemployment seems to have no influence on feelings of inclusion, as interviewees of these SSNTs did not mention it, unlike interviewees in other SSNTs. These positive feelings of inclusion likely result from their ability to secure social support, in addition to their engagement in activities in their online and offline interest-balanced networks. Thus, social media play a positive role in shaping the unemployment experience by providing a place in which individuals feel comfortable. However, both of these SSNTs consist mainly of younger persons, and negative perceptions of unemployment may increase with age. For the ‘excluded’ and ‘contact searcher’ SSNTs, no direct connection between unemployment and social inclusion is evident. These groups may have had a low level of social support before their unemployment. However, a small social network and fewer social contacts may heighten the negative emotions regarding unemployment. Both SSNTs are strongly affected by being unemployed and by becoming unemployed, which is likely related to the missing safety net of their social support network. However, social media use and disuse seem to modify the perception of unemploy-

ment. Whereas ‘the excluded’ retire from the social world online and offline, ‘the contact searcher’ uses social media to extend his/her social networks. Social media form a protected environment, which gives these individuals the opportunity to establish new social contacts, find social support, and participate in (online) activities. Comparing the SSNTs shows that social media use helps individuals cope with being unemployed. Individuals who use social media seem to feel less insecure and excluded than individuals who refuse to use social media.

Furthermore, social media aid in cultivating and maintaining social networks and increase users' participation in them. As Chung found, ‘social networking features can have distinct values for people who need emotional support and comfort’ (2011: 25). For example, social media facilitate contact by helping users create lists of friends or contacts with whom they share a connection (Boyd and Ellison, 2008). The results indicate that such connections often consist of contacts from offline networks and confirm current social network research regarding the use of social media to maintain contacts rather than to expand social networks. This finding demonstrates the positive impact of social media on (social) inclusion, as predicted by Amichai-Hamburger and Furnham (2007). However, there continue to be differences in the levels of social support in different social networks, and these are not resolved by social media. The individual remains in a loop: social media use and engagement depend on the individual’s social network, thus indicating that even in this era of social media—when everything has become social, connected, and participative—differences in the offline world persist online. The consequences of unemployment remain intact.

Conclusions

This study shows that the use of social media is beneficial for maintaining the social networks of unemployed persons. The positive aspects of social media notwithstanding, there are also risks, such as attenuating offline contacts and deflecting attention away from job

searches. Therefore, the dichotomy in previous research on the use of social media—that such media either increase loneliness and depression (Kraut et al., 1998; Whang et al., 2003; Yellowlees and Marks, 2007) or enhance social inclusion and participation (Amichai-Hamburger and Furnham, 2007; Contarello and Sarrica, 2007)—must be evaluated separately for each individual.

Distinguishing the various SSNTs and analysing their specific social media use helps identify individuals who might benefit from the supporting functions of social media. Not all SSNTs must be stimulated, and each type must be stimulated differently. Whereas the ‘activity-included’ and the ‘multilateral-included’ types do not require distinct treatment, training for ‘family-included’ individuals might be developed to alter their engagement with social media. Members of this group could use their time to expand their offline contacts online and thus to (re)build social support networks online—which they can rely on during unemployment. Simply providing more support to attain higher social media skill levels would be insufficient for individuals of this SSNT. Such an approach, however, would be effective for ‘the contact searcher.’ As previously discussed, motivational traits and social media literacy help determine people’s online behaviour. Because ‘contact searchers’ are highly motivated to expand their social networks but have not cultivated the benefits of social media, training for the necessary skills might enhance their online experiences. ‘The excluded’ should be assisted in becoming acquainted with social media by emphasising the anonymous nature of and the control that they have over social interactions online (e.g., Amichai-Hamburger and Furnham, 2007).

While by no means replacing the importance of offline social networks, which remain the main form of social support during unemployment, social media may thus partly provide new opportunities for those who are ready to take them. In this sense, the internet is a social net, helping those individuals to feel less insecure and excluded during their unemployment

than their peers. Nevertheless, coping with unemployment is only one side of the equation; the other is the question of reemployment. Here, there is real potential for employers and employment agencies alike to leverage social media, to offer opportunities to build new relationships, and to use computer-mediated social networks as a means to find job opportunities in the semi-immediate social surroundings of the unemployed (cf. Granovetter, 1973). With this still very much in its infancy, the internet remains a social net in the becoming, not detached from the real world, but already a worthwhile addition to alleviate the exclusion of being unemployed.

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Tables and Figures

Type	Number of Individuals	Description
Type 1: ‘the excluded’	(1)	These individuals lead a solitary life. They do not build relationships actively and have difficulties structuring their everyday life with activities other than work. Therefore, they have minimal social support outside the working world. Because this SSNT characterises only one interviewee, inferring corresponding demographics is difficult. However, persons characterised by this type may be older, live in poorer regions, have low education, and suffer from long-term unemployment.
Type 2: ‘the contact searcher’	(3)	These individuals focus on close contacts, e.g., first-degree relatives and close friends. They are characterised by a strong desire for inclusion and, therefore, actively search for new contacts. With the loss of their job, they lost not only important occasional contacts but also the structuring element of their everyday life, which they attempt to replace with leisure activities and new contacts. With respect to demographic characteristics, neither region nor education characterises this type. However, all three interviewees of this type were approximately 50 years old.
Type 3: ‘the family included’	(12)	These people have close relationships with their families, who provide them with security and social support. They define themselves through their work. Therefore, unemployment is a burden because it destroys their life plan and is associated with social stigma. As included and involved family members, they structure their everyday lives around their home or parental duties. They are over 40 years of age and typically do not have a university degree.
Type 4: ‘the activity included’	(2)	These people define themselves through their hobbies and receive social support from a large circle of friends that they know through their hobbies. Because of their interest-oriented lifestyle, they do not find unemployment difficult, and joblessness does not affect their social networks. No demographic characteristics are generalisable for this group.
Type 5: ‘the multilateral included’	(10)	These individuals have widespread, stable networks. They find social support in different social circles. They habitually remain in touch with their contacts and use diverse communication methods to socialise and expand their networks. Unemployment is not particularly difficult for them because they find equilibrium within their social networks. Furthermore, they use their newfound leisure time for other activities, such as volunteer work, further training, hobbies, or side jobs. They are generally younger with higher education.

Table 1: Overview of Social Support Network Types

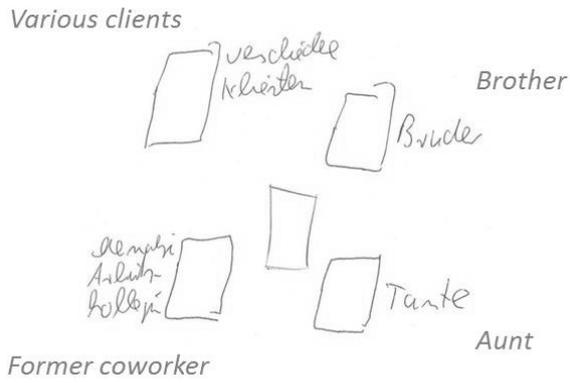


Figure 1: Oliver's Social Network.

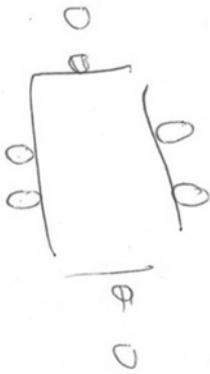


Figure 2: Mary's Social Network.

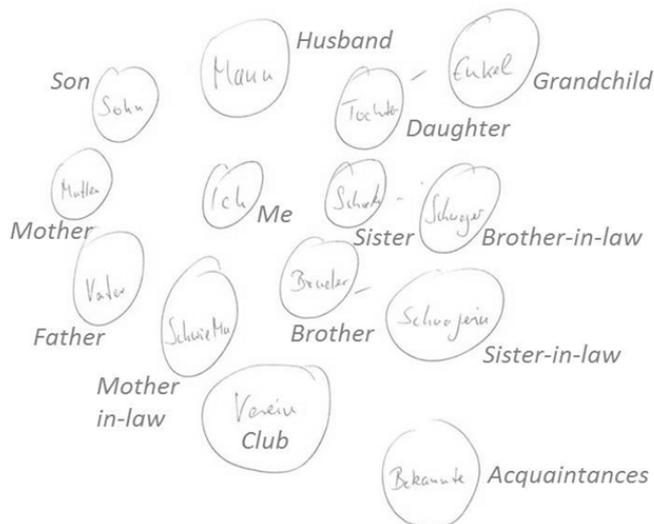


Figure 3: Hannah's Social Network.

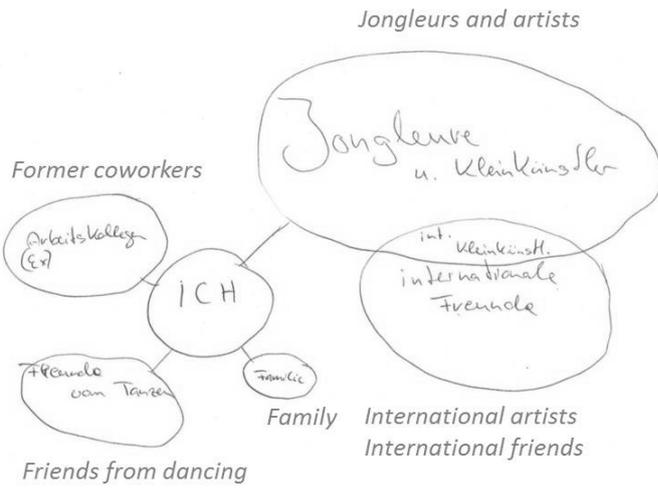


Figure 4: Rebecca's Social Network.

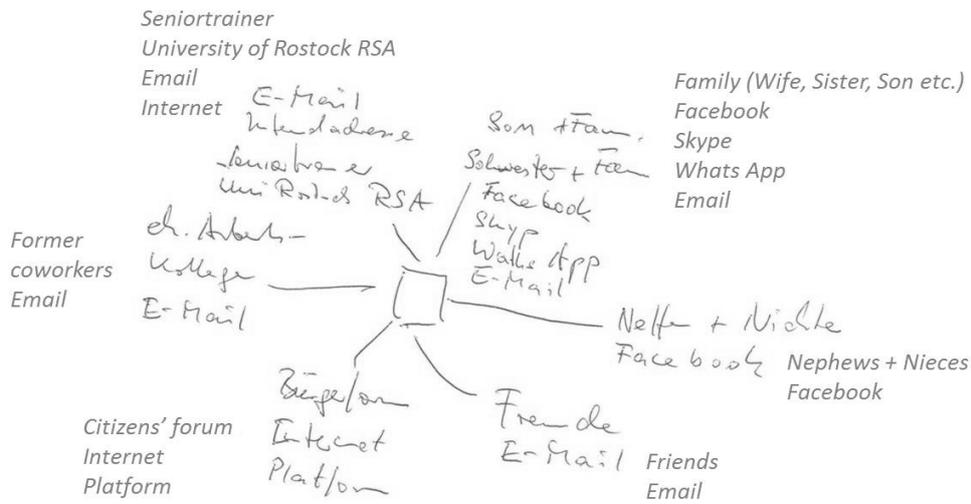


Figure 5: Nick's Social Network.