The Potential of Social Media as a Vehicle for Social Action
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ABSTRACT
Social network services (SNS) are potentially full of social capital, yet it remains unclear how to use SNS to generate productive social behavior. This proposal seeks to study how SNS users establish and foster a sense of community online. Identifying those features can be useful in encouraging pro-social participation offline.

RELEVANT LITERATURE
Burke, M., Marlow, C., & Lento, T. (2009) conducted a similar study on new social media member’s contribution to the online community and its possible effects on offline participation.
Hazari, S. & Richards, A. (2011) provided the only known qualitative study on social communities along with a good summary on social media tools and how it changed the way individuals and organizations communicate with each other.
Lin, K.-Y., & Lu, H.-P. (2011) focused specifically in network externalities and how it relates to online member’s motivation to join social communities.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK
Social Ecological Model

PROBLEMS
Even though many agree that social networks have value (Putman, 2000), and despite the fact that several studies have begun to explore how SNS affect social behavior—including crowdsourcing, social anxiety, self-esteem, and virtual relationships—it is unclear what are the expected collective or economic benefits derived from SNS.

PURPOSE
The proposed study will use the Social Ecological Model (SEM) to examine if certain aspects of what makes SNS useful to their members can be adapted to encourage participation in pro-social activities, online and offline. Although the qualitative SEM model has never been used to study a virtual environment before, adopting SEM will allow this study to investigate the perception and influence online friends have on an individual’s participation in online as well as offline communities, particularly in terms of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS
RQ: What reasons do social media users use to explain their involvement in online communities (e.g., Facebook), and how does it compare to their participation in offline social communities? (Individual)
Sub-Question 1: How much weight do participants give to their online friends for their involvement in online and offline communities? (Relationship)
Sub-Question 2: What are some of the benefits and limitations participants experienced when actively participating in an online community? (Community)
Sub-Question 3: How much influence do social policies have on participants’ disposition to carry their online experience into offline activities, particularly those involving helping others? (Societal)

FINDINGS
A qualitative approach should allow the identification of bottom-up effects (how individuals affect social networks by forming alliances or coalitions to accomplish goals), and interactive effects (how interdependent variables, such as technology, at the same time liberate and constrain individual and communal behavior at various levels).

LIMITATIONS
The study does not include other age groups, such as the young and the elderly, or people outside the U.S., whose online experience might differ considerably from the target group.

CONCLUSIONS
This proposed study predicts that online SNS operate and fulfill many of the same needs as do their offline counterparts, but with some remarkable differences; indeed, this study contends that the key to unlock the social capital latent in SNS resides in the strength of relationship ties among users and their friends.