BUILDING SOCIAL CAPITAL THROUGH SOCIAL NETWORKING: STRATEGY OR COINCIDENCE?

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Abstract

The Internet is one of the main driving forces of globalisation. It enables simple and fast access to information and provides a broad insight into various business processes. It is dialectically intertwined with new patterns of behaviour and socialization. On such basis, it alters standard approaches to Bourdieu's social capital (Bourdieu, 1983) [1] by changing people's communication patterns, habits, and interaction with the community. Most people directly link social capital and financial capital – the more people you know, the more money you are worth. Based on individualist theories, this kind of mindset recognises that one's financial success is a direct measure of his or her personal efforts and ability. According to Coleman, such individualism is a "broadly accepted fiction in modern society" (Coleman, 1988) [2]. Based on quantitative research methods, this research examines the relationships between Coleman's individualism and social capital of students at the Polytechnic of Zagreb. Following ever-increasing usage of social networking in student population, it examines the relationships between social capital created in the virtual world of Facebook and social capital in their real lives. It looks directly into the new patterns of behaviour and socialization, and inquires whether student social networks are initiated by entrepreneurial attitudes or students simply use traditional social networks for entrepreneurial purposes. Finally, it compares the found results with similar research in Croatia at Michigan State University. Based on ubiquitous logic of social networking, high levels of integration of the Polytechnic of Zagreb into European educational context, and similarities with results obtained in the USA, authors of this research are convinced that the obtained results can confidently be generalized to other higher education institutions in Croatia and abroad.

1 INTRODUCTION

This paper researches student understanding of social capital created in the virtual world of Facebook versus student understanding of social capital in their real lives, and inquires whether their online social networks result from coherent strategies. Formal networks are created in "official ways" which include formal procedures at the Polytechnic of Zagreb. Informal and "unofficial" dimensions refer to informal communication between students and teachers via e-mail, telephone and face-to-face communications. Horizontal trust is built between people of similar status and power, while vertical trust is related to institutions and typically involves unequal status and power. In order to structure horizontal and vertical dimensions of social capital, this research looks both into formal and informal relationships. In this way, it analyzes overall student social capital at the Polytechnic of Zagreb.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Defining social capital

Robert Putnam i Kristin Goss (2002) [3] use the concept of social capital mostly as an "auxiliary" term. Their descriptions of social relationships are mostly used as resource to deepen description of human capital, emphasizing the importance of knowledge and abilities (Cohen, Doyle, Skoner, Rabin & Gwaltney Jr., 1997) [4]. In the field of economics, theory of social capital has been further developed by Gray Becker (1974) [5]. Croatian theorist Salaj asserts that economic capital is based on monetary terms; human capital accumulates in people; while social capital is contained in relationships between people. Contemporary western theorists talk about social capital in close relation to knowledge. In this view social networking is considered as investment, or equity capital for further development of the individual. All the more is evident that there are processes within processes that build bridges over certain gaps in conceptual understanding of macro and micro structure of the links between the individual and the society (Salaj, 2002) [6].

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Trust is the main backbone of social capital. It can be interpreted as an indicator of social capital among individuals, communities and societies. Fukuyama defines social capital as an ability that comes from understanding of the relationships of trust within the society or its specific parts (1997) [7]. Fukuyama's social capital is also defined as an informal standard that allows cooperation between two or more individuals (1999) [8]. Social capital is sometimes considered as a normative order within the community and spontaneous friendship between people. It can also be interpreted as a very high level of trust that includes unknown participants. Fukuyama writes about "high" confidence societies, with tendency towards spontaneous sociability such as American society and "low" trust society with family preferences e.g. Chinese society. According to Fukuyama, every society has its +type' of social capital. Borders of Fukuyama's main analytical unit – the cultural community – mainly coincide with national state boundaries (Ignjatović, 2007) [9].

Based on empirical data, Glaeser (2001) [10] surveyed effects of human migration, and concluded that the increased mobility (emigration and settlement) is not necessarily associated with the decline of social capital within the community. Contrary to earlier expectations, places with developed migration and rapid economic growth have higher levels of social capital than places with less developed migration and economic growth. Cities with large potentials for emigration are not jeopardized by "disappearance" of social capital, unless levels of human capital such as educational status are in decline. In such cases, the political decision to keep people settled in one place will not necessarily lead to increased investment in individual social capital.

Migration and mobility are generally viewed as negative parameters of the individual willingness to invest in own social capital. Coleman (1993) [11] and Glaeser (2001) [10] assert that relocation or just the ability to relocate is expected to affect functioning of individual social networks. For Coleman, family mobility enables much easier normative closure, and thus adversely affects levels of social capital in a particular environment (1993) [11]. However, there are differences among individuals. At one end of the spectrum is the social capital that is independent of spatial dimensions, mobility and separation from family, while at the other end is exactly the opposite. Coleman notes that mobility can affect increased normative closure, which in turn adversely affects children school success and their relationships with parents. Within large corporations, however, normative closure has no direct connection with relocation (Coleman, 1988) [12]. This difference is caused by diverse spatial sensitivity of the network. In the first case normative closure facilitates relocation of families, while in the second example, movement and spatial distance strongly influence "links" within social-capital networks.

Generally, social capital refers to resources accumulated in interpersonal relationships (Coleman, 1988) [12]. Social capital is a flexible concept with different definitions in multiple dimensions (Adler & Kwon, 2002) [13], which are both related to causes and consequences (Resnick, 2002) [14] (Williams, 2006) [15]. Social capital consists of social networks, which are used as a theoretical framework for researching relationships between individuals and groups, as well as organizations and entire societies. Social networking is defined as a group of nodes and links that represent relationships or lack thereof (Brass, Galaskiewicz, Greve & Tsui, 2004) [16]. Probably the most complete definition of social capital, provided by Bourdieu and Wacquant, calls it "the sum of resources" that an individual possesses (1992) [17]. Those resources can be located within the real worlds or the virtual worlds. In turn, characteristics of these worlds shape form and function of interpersonal relationships.

Social capital improves public health, lowers crime rates, and improves efficiency of financial markets (Adler & Kwon, 2002) [18]. Lack of social capital increases social disturbances, reduces participation in civic activities (e.g. volunteering), and increases distrust among community members. Social capital can also be used for negative purposes. In general, however, social capital effects participants in social networks in positive ways (Helliwell & Putnam, 2004) [19]. According to recent research, social capital in the developed world over the last few years has been steadily decreasing (Putnam, 2000) [20].

For individuals, social capital provides opportunities to exploit different forms of capital (economic, social, educational, etc.) from other members of the network. Thus, it is directly related to organization and homogeneity of community (Paxton, 1999) [21]. Outsiders usually cannot reach information which circulates within the network. In this way, they are deprived of various benefits such as job recommendations and informatin about available vacancies (Granovetter, 1973) [22]. Finally, different forms of social capital include links with friends and neighbors, which are associated with various indexes of psychological well-being such as self-esteem and overall life satisfaction (Bargh & McKenna, 2004) [23].

2.2 Internet and social capital

According to Nie (2001) [24], Internet reduces interpersonal communication which could lead to reduction of individual social capital. Other theorists, however, argue that online interaction can substitute or replace personal communication, and even mitigate the loss of time which is spent online (Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001) [25] (Bargh & McKenna, 2004). Studies of relationships between physical communities and online communities such as Netville community in Toronto or the Blacksburg Electronic Village, show that computer-mediated interactions have positive effects on communication within the community, inclusion and social capital (Hampton & Wellman, 2003) [26]; (Kavanaugh, Carroll, Rosson, Zin, i Reese, 2005) [27]. In short, the Internet simultaneously increases and decreases social capital.

Donath and Boyd (2004) [28] have asserted that virtual social networks cannot increase the number of strong links between individuals. However, existing technologies can strengthen weak links, because they keep them favourable and easy to maintain. This hypothesis was confirmed by Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe's (2007) [29] empirical research, which showed that Facebook usage has a major role in maintaining existing offline relationships, but does not have a major role in meeting new people. Therefore, Faceebook is mostly used to strengthen the existing social capital. Furthermore, they believe that Facebook provides larger benefits for users who have low self esteem and low life satisfaction.

Putnam (2000) [20] asserts that interpersonal ties are strongest amongst family, close friends, and between people who are able to provide emotional support. Williams (2006) [30] points out that very few empirical research explicitly deals with influence of the Internet on social capital. It is clear that the Internet facilitates creation of new relationships, in the sense that it provides an alternative way for individuals to connect with others who also share their interests or relational goals (Ellison, Heino & Gibbs, 2006) [31]; (Parks & Floyd, 1996) [32]. Recent studies demonstrate that it affects increase in social capital. For example, the 2006 Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project is coming to the conclusion that it is more likely that users will have a larger network of close friends who use the Internet than those who do not use the Internet, and that Internet users ar emore likely to receive assistance (Horrigan, Wellman & Rainie, 2006) [33]. However, it remains unclear how social capital is created when the real social capital and the virtual social capital are inseparable. Williams (2006) [26] argues that, although more than few researchers have examined the potential loss of social capital in the real community because of the increased use of virtual social capital, virtual gains that could possibly make that capital up have not been adequately explored.

Recent research places more emphasis on the importance of Internet communication because it allows formation of more networks with weak ties, which serve as the main links between social capital. Internet allows social capital to be displayed in different ways than in real life: one can look up friends, view photos and do additional searches of past events (Resnick 2001) [34]. Such approach provides the opportunity to the rise of new forms of social capital and interpersonal relationships created by virtual online environments. This phenomenon can be interpreted in different ways, allowing people to expand their networks for more gain (Donath & Boyd, 2004) [30]; (Resnick, 2001) [34]; (Boase, Horrigan, Wellman, B., & Rainie, 2006) [33]. In general, the existing body of research on the relationships between the Internet and social capital still provides different and often contradictory conclusions, thus suggesting the need for further theoretical and practical research.

3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is based on quantitative research methodology. The researched population consists of students of Profesional Undergraduate Studies and Specialist Graduate Studies at the Polytechnic of Zagreb. Students of Informatics are covered on undergraduate level, while the survey on graduate study is conducted among students of Informatics and Electrical Engineering.

Research results are compared with similar surveys conducted in two American universities: Michigan State University (Ellison, Steinfield, Cliff, 2007) [29] and the University of Texas at Austin (Valenzuela, Namsu, Kee, 2009) [35].

4 CHOICE AND COINCIDENCE

The first part of the study looks into the relationships between chance and choice in the student networking. In general, most individuals meet new people by chance (Burt, Jannott & Mahoney, 1998)

[36]. Networks normally arise from unconscious reactions to possibilities and limitations, rather than conscious strategies. Some people let their personal network decrease because of time demanding jobs. Some give up natural opportunities for expanding their networks, such as the ability to perform temporary assignments abroad. Others give up the opportunity to make their networks more diverse through participation in formal job rotation program or voluntary joining a multifunctional workgroup. In the university environment, associations like students clubs, sports clubs, etc. encourages and supports building student networks.

Wayne Baker quotes three important concepts that affect personal networks: limitations, opportunities and choices (2004) [37]. Choice is a set of decisions that individuals make in relation to their current existing networks. It allows each individual to best accommodate the newly created limitations and opportunities. Implicit assumptions often drive individual choices. For instance, some individuals assume that personal life should be separate from business, while others apply the principle of selection by similarities or the tendency to associate with like minded people. In this research, all students of the Polytechnic of Zagreb display similar networking choices.

Restrictions are various barriers to networking. The most usual restrictions are: work requirements, size and type of company / organization, time, money etc. The main limitation for students studying at the Polytechnic of Zagreb is manifested through an environment where more than 90% of students are men. Consequently, the created network is "naturally" masculine. Also, due to the technical character of all majors at the Polytechnic of Zagreb, student networks are generally limited to students in related fields.

Opportunity is every possibility that exists in one's environment. For example, if you are studying with an equal number of men and women, each individual has the opportunity to develop a network of diverse gender. If an individual or organization offers plenty of possibility for traveling, individuals will have the opportunity to meet people from different places. In higher education, institutions such as Student Association provide opportunities to meet colleagues with similar interests and develop new relationships. According to answers to questions such as the frequency of meeting new people or the possibility of obtaining referrals for work, studying at the Polytechnic of Zagreb offers average opportunities for networking.

5 BUILDING SOCIAL CAPITAL THROUGH SOCIAL NETWORKING

Average age of students at the Polytechnic of Zagreb is 24.2 years (Appendix 1). Almost half (45%) live with their parents. Surveyed students are divided into regular and part-time students, so employment is considered separately. 29,99%, of regular students are employed, in contrast to 52,58% of part-time students. They use the Internet in avegare 4 hours per day, and 75% have Facebook profiles, which are used 10 to 20 minutes per day (Appendix 2). It is interesting that such Facebook usage seems to provide students with a sense of belonging to the community. On the other hand, in case they do not visit Facebook, they do not report feeling excluded.

Virtual student community is primarily created from trust relationships made in the real world. At the Polytechnic of Zagreb, therefore, physical involvment in the community is essential for communication with colleagues, while student online acitivities do not significantly affect their status in the community. Through a survey question: *I would take time to support students activity at the Polytechnic of Zagreb* and its score of 3.18, it can be concluded that students feel fairly included in the community.

Each student communicates daily via Facebook with an average of 100-149 friends (Appendix 3). Student community at the Polytechnic of Zagreb is not primarily formed by Facebook, and they would not be sad if it suddenly shuts down. Half of their time on Facebook is spent in reading posts and news groups; however, only a small percent of time is dedicated to creating new posts or news (active participation) (Appendix 4). Users gladly participate in the existing discussions, but rarely open new ones. On such basis, it is evident that students are satisfied with their existing networks.

In conclusion, students at the Polytechnic of Zagreb use Facebook primarily as the source of additional information rather than means of creating new connections. For this reason, it can be concluded that they do not fully exploit virtual potentials for creating social capital.

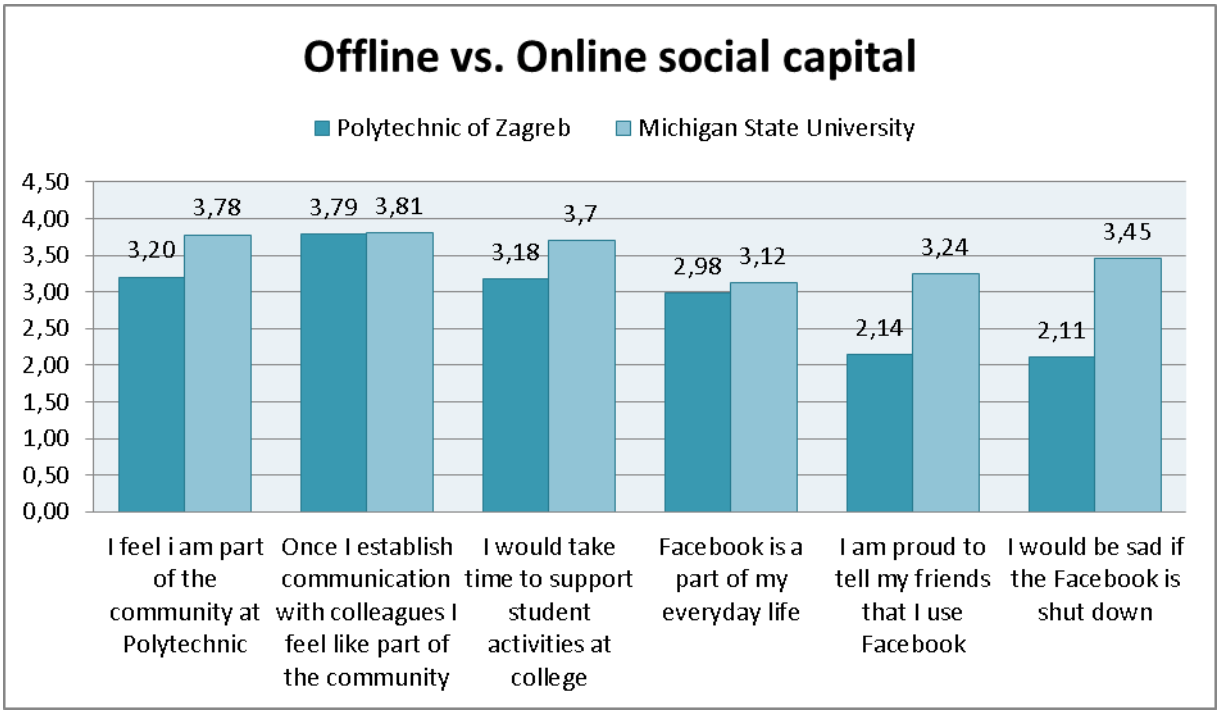
6 DISCUSSION

Figure 1 demonstrates differences between perception of virtual social capital and real social capital at the Polytechnic of Zagreb and Michigan State University. Differences between those results show that

students in Croatia think in similar ways as their peers in the USA. Minor differences can be partially attributed to statistical deviations and differences in local contexts.

In general, levels of social capital in established democracies such as Sweden, Switzerland, USA and transition countries such as Croatia can not be compared directly, because people in transition countries usually have less developed sense of belonging to the community (Salaj, 2002) [6]. It should also be taken into account that this research has been conducted less than a year before Croatian integration into the European Union, and social capital is very sensitve to major political events. However, this fact can also be used an advantage, because the presented results might be used in the context of other transition countries.

Figure 1: Comparison between the Polytechnic of Zagreb and Michigan State University (Michigan State University (Ellison, Steinfield, Cliff, 2007) [29].



7 CONCLUSION

This research shows that students create networks using face to face communication while virtual networking is used predominantly for and maintaining the existing connections. The presented measures of social capital and trust are far from high. However, when compared to results obtained in the USA, we have not managed to identify significant differences.

Randomly created virtual networks blend private and professional connections, and do not bring additional professional quality. For this reason, students at the Polytechnic of Zagreb will not significantly benefit from current online networking in later and current professional lives. For this reason, it is necessary to foster critical thinking about social capital in student population. For now, face to face relationships still dominate in creating new contacts. Students should therefore be directed towards joining professional and student organisations, and to transfer those relationships to the virtual worlds.

Based on ubiquitous logic of social networking, high levels of integration of the Polytechnic of Zagreb into European educational context, and similarities with results obtained in the USA, authors of this research are convinced that the obtained results can confidently be generalized to other higher education institutions in Croatia and abroad.

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APPENDIX 1: RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHOICE AND COINCIDENCE

	IT specialist	IT professional	Electrical Engineering Specialist	Average
I feel I am part of the community at Polytechnic	3,28	2,93	3,39	3,2
I am interested what is going on at Polytechnic	3,25	3,07	3,67	3,33
Communication with colleagues encouraged me to new thinking	3,92	3,25	4,07	4,06
Once I establish communication with colleagues I feel like part of the community	4,1	3,25	4,01	3,79
I would take time to support student activities at college	3,12	2,41	4,01	3,18
At Polytechnic I continuously meet new people	3,1	2,77	2,51	2,79
Communication with colleagues reminiscent me of business communication	2,77	2,52	2,51	2,6
At the Polytechnic there are few colleagues I believe they could solve my personal problems	3,05	2,75	3,22	3,01
If I need to urgently borrow 100 kuna I know whom of the colleague I could ask	4,02	3,32	3,22	3,52
Among colleagues I know someone whom I can turn for advice before important decisions	3,82	3,5	2,92	3,41
Colleagues I know will recommend me for the job	3,52	3,02	2,92	3,15

The responses were scaled points 1 to 5, where 1 means "I do not agree," and 5 means "I strongly agree." The results are shown by arithmetic mean of all responses.

APPENDIX 2: INTERNET USAGE

	IT specialist	IT professional	Electrical Engineering Specialist	Average
How much time You use Inernet daily				
No information	0	2,27	1,14	1,14
Less then 30 minutes	0	6,81	3,41	3,41
Between 30 minutes and 1 hour	0	11,35	20,45	10,6
1 to 2 hours	10,34	31,78	29,55	23,89
2 to 3 hours	14,94	20,43	23,86	19,75
3 to 4 hours	14,94	27,24	7,95	16,71
More than 4 hours	59,77	0	13,64	24,47
Do you use Faceebok				
No information	0	0	0	0
Yes	79,31	80,01	73,86	77,73
No	20,69	19,99	26,14	22,27
Are you employed				
No information	1,15	0	2,27	1,14
Yes	54,02	15,91	51,14	40,35
No	44,83	84,09	46,59	58,49
Where do you live				
No information	0	2,38	0	0,79
Alone in owned house/apartment	11,49	11,9	7,95	10,45
Alone in rented house/apartment	12,64	83,33	11,36	35,78
With parents	62,07	2,38	69,32	44,59
In a marriage	13,79	0	11,36	12,58

APPENDIX 3: FACEBOOK USAGE

	IT specialist	IT professional	Electrical Engineering Specialist	Average
How many Facebook friends you have				
Less then 10	3,45	2,5	0	1,98
10-49	1,15	5	7,95	4,7
50-99	10,34	2,5	9,09	7,31
100-149	21,84	25	19,32	22,05
150-199	11,49	10	12,5	11,33
200-299	10,35	22,5	11,36	14,73
300-399	10,34	17,5	3,41	10,42
400-499	4,6	7,5	2,27	4,79
500-999	5,75	7,5	4,55	5,93
More than 1000	1,15	0	2,27	1,14
No data	19,54	0	27,27	15,6
How often do you visit Facebook?				
Daily	55,17	87,5	45,45	62,71
Every other day	5,75	10	7,95	7,9
Few times a week	9,2	2,5	14,77	8,82
Once a week	5,75	0	2,27	2,67
Other	3,45	0	3,41	2,29
No information	20,69	0	26,14	15,61
How much time you spend on Facebook				
I don't spend time on Facebook	1,15	0	2,27	1,14
Less than 10 minutes	21,84	7,5	14,77	14,7
10 to 20 minutes	18,39	27,5	30,68	25,52
30 minutes to 1 hour	11,49	27,5	15,91	18,3
Between 1 and 2 hours	9,2	22,5	7,95	13,22
2 – 3 hours	6,9	12,5	0	6,47
More than 3 hours	9,2	2,5	2,27	4,66
No information	21,84	0	26,14	15,99
Facebook is a part of my everyday life	2,94	3,43	2,57	2,98
I am proud to tell my friends that I use Facebook	2,33	2,1	1,98	2,14
Facebook is part of my daily routine	3,13	3,4	2,58	3,04
Do you feel that you are not in touch with the current events if you do not visit Facebook	2,14	2,4	1,98	2,17
I feel like part of the community when I visit Faceebok	2,31	2,45	1,98	2,25
I would be sad if the Facebook is shut down	1,86	1,88	2,58	2,11

How much time you spend on reading and posting messages (combined) in the Facebook groups in which you are associated				
I do not spend time reading and publishing news in Facebook groups	20,69	0	18,18	12,96
Less than 10 minutes	36,78	42,5	35,23	38,17
10 to 30 minutes	10,34	25	18,18	17,84
30 minutes to 1 hour	5,75	27,5	2,27	11,84
Between 1 and 2 hours	2,3	2,5	0	1,6
2 to 3 hours	2,3	2,5	0	1,6
More than 3 hours	1,15	0	0	0,38
No information	20,69	0	26,14	15,61
Read news on the walls of online groups to which you are member on Facebook	2,57	3,53	2,71	2,94
Post news on the walls of online groups to which you are member on Facebook	1,81	2,05	1,65	1,84
Start new subject on the walls of online groups to which you are member on Facebook	1,41	1,7	1,42	1,51
Which of the following best describes your participation in online groups that you have joined on Facebook				
Rarely visit online group	32,18	12,5	32,95	25,88
Just read the posts and discussions that are on the wall of the group	22,99	30	17,05	23,34
Basically I read, but sometimes participate commenting posts and discussions on the groups wall	20,69	52,5	22,73	31,97
I read and write comments in the discussions that are not on the wall	1,15	2,5	1,14	1,6
Read, write and start a new discussion	3,45	2,5	0	1,98
No information	19,54	0	26,14	15,23