Departing and Returning: Sense of Agency as an Organizing Concept for Understanding Social Media Non/use Transitions

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Recent work has identified a variety of motivations for various forms of technology use and non-use. However, less work has closely examined relationships between those motivations and the experiences of transiting among these different forms of use and non-use. This paper fills that gap by conducting a qualitative interview- and diary-based study where participants were asked to deactivate their Facebook account. An abductive analysis suggests participants' experiences can be organized under the conceptual umbrella of sense of agency, which refers to an individual's perception that their actions are under their own control. The analysis shows how, across disparate motivations, all participants took actions that increased their own subjective sense of agency, regardless of whether they returned to Facebook or not. The discussion applies this conceptual lens to prior studies of technology use and non-use. Doing so shows how sense of agency may provide an organizing orientation for understanding subjective experiences of use and non-use.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing** → **Empirical studies in collaborative and social computing**;

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1 INTRODUCTION

What is it like to leave a social media site? What is it like to then return? How can the motivations for and experiences of departing and returning be interpreted in a consistent, coherent manner?

Prior work, particularly in recent years, has explored the phenomena surrounding technology non-use [7, 65, 81]. Non-users include those who do not use a given technology or who would not fit within a tradition focus on “the user” [6, 15], where “A user is ‘an individual or group’ who ‘uses [a] software product to perform a specific function’ and ‘benefits from a system during its utilization’ ” [4] (citing [40, 41]). Some such work has indicated that people will at times take intentionally short-term breaks from social media [8, 14, 66]. While such work has identified a

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number of motivations and factors that influence both who takes breaks and who returns or “reverts” [8], we currently lack a means of viewing these various motivations under a coherent conceptual umbrella. Furthermore, most such analyses are conducted post-hoc; they report on experiences of transitioning among forms of use and non-use after the fact rather than as these processes are actually occurring.

To address this gap, the current paper analyzes data from a qualitative interview- and diary-based study. Participants kept a social media non/use¹ diary throughout two study phases. After an initial two-week phase of regular social media use, participants were asked to deactivate their Facebook account for four weeks. At the end of the four weeks, participants were then given the option to reactivate their account if they chose to do so. This combination of interviews and diaries provides a means of capturing participants’ experiences of transitioning among forms of non/use as those transitions happen. This point differentiates the current study from prior work, which examined states of non/use after they had already occurred [1, 14, 36, 43, 61, 66, 71, 73] rather than transitions among those states as they happened. Focusing on Facebook, the most commonly used social media site (as identified in surveys of US Internet users [19, 31]), increases the likelihood of a significant impact on participants, both individually and socially [cf. 5].

This paper focuses less on the question of *whether* each individual participant returned to Facebook and more on the question of *how*. That is, it investigates the interplay between participants’ experiences of deactivation and the motivations they cited for that decision to return or not. Participants’ experiences were analyzed using bottom-up, abductive methods [28, 50].

Rather than enumerate motivations for returning to or staying off of Facebook, the analysis instead sought to unite participants’ disparate experiences and motivations under some unifying conceptual umbrella. In considering various possibilities, sense of agency [26, 27, 53, 56] emerged as the most suitable organizing concept. Sense of agency is generally defined as feeling in control of one’s own actions [53]. Both those participants who chose to stay off of Facebook and those who chose to return described doing so because of the ways that it made them feel more in control of their own decisions and their own lives. The utility of the conceptual lens of a sense of agency is demonstrated by its application in interpreting data from this study.

The discussion then considers how this same conceptual lens could be used to interpret findings from prior work. This analysis thus provides an important conceptual contribution. Prior work has detailed a wide variety of motivations for using or not using social media in various ways, including privacy concerns [5, 63, 71], negotiating social relationships [14, 38, 73], making a political statement [8, 61], efforts at time management [5, 38], and others [43, 66]. The analysis presented here suggests that it may be possible to organize these disparate motivations by seeing that as each individual’s effort to behave in what they perceive as the most agentive, intentional manner. While not conclusive, this work takes an important step to organizing our current understanding in this area.

2 RELATED WORK

Prior work has examined technology non-use from a variety of perspectives. Several studies have compared differences between users and non-users of a given technology. Differences have been noted in terms of personality [64, 71], privacy attitudes [1, 63], demographics such as age or race [1, 19, 31, 36, 73], and other attributes.

Some such work has also emphasized that a strict, binary distinction between use and non-use can obscure more than it reveals [7]. Examples include differentiating among heavy, light, and non-users [43], exploring the subjective experiences in different cycles of technological engagement

¹Following Baumer et al. [7], the term “non/use” provides a shorthand for the phrase “use and non-use.”

and disengagement [14, 38], examining intentionally short-term breaks [8, 66], and considering interpersonal impacts of technology use non-use [51, 61].

Across such work, various motivations have been documented, particularly with respect to transitions among differing forms of non/use. Brubaker et al. [14] describe how users of the mobile dating app Grindr periodically oscillate between using and not using the service. These changes vary based on relationship status, geographical location, and other factors, to the point that users sometimes forget they even have the app installed on their phone.

Schoenebeck [66] studied experiences of Twitter users who gave up the site during the Christian period of Lent (the 40 days, excluding Sundays, preceding Easter). Most of the participants quoted in the study cite the use of their time as a major motivation for taking a break from social media. However, “users who failed [to stay off Twitter] did not reveal systematic patterns in how they returned” [66:776] or their motivations for doing so.

Baumer et al. [8] analyzed survey data from an online campaign encouraging users to give up Facebook for 99 days. The results identified several factors that either increased or decreased the likelihood that an individual would return to Facebook before 99 days had passed. For example, individuals whose open-ended responses mentioned missing out on, e.g., birthdays, photos, and events in their friends’ lives were less likely to return. However, those who described their experiences in terms consistent with addiction, such as withdrawal or reduced impulse control, were more likely to return.

Harmon and Mazmanian [38], in studying smartphone use, describe a cycle of constant flux and tension. Smartphone users often feel like “distracted addicts,” constantly checking their phones even though they do not want to. So, they take a break from their technology in order to become more “authentic humans.” After a time, though, they end up feeling like “disconnected luddites” and return to using their phones. Initially, their return grants the feeling of a “multitasking master,” using technology to enhance their lives. However, over time, they grow more to feel like the distracted addict. Thus, individuals find themselves in recurring states of tension about their relationships with their smartphone, both wanting the benefits they perceive it to bestow but also dreading its perceived ill effects on their lives.

While motivations identified in prior work are potentially illuminating, it can be hard to understand why the same motivation plays out differently across different studies. For example, privacy concerns influence some people to quit Facebook (or social media) entirely [5, 61, 63], others to adopt clever boundary management strategies [12, 34], and still others to grow apathetic [37]. For some people, professional, organizational, or institutional obligations drive them off of Facebook [5], while for others those same obligations require them to be on the site [8]. The quality of interpersonal relationships is cited both as a reason that people leave Facebook and a reason that they stay or return [5, 8, 11, 61]. Habitual or addictive social media use sometimes prevents, and at other times motivates, people to quit [5, 8, 60, 63, 66, 71].

In short, how can we reconcile and organize the disparate motivations for non/use identified in prior work?

3 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: SENSE OF AGENCY

This paper suggests sense of agency (SoA) [26, 27, 53, 56] as an organizing concept for understanding non-use. To be clear, SoA was not applied to these data as an *a priori* framework. Instead, inductive, bottom-up analysis of the data suggested themes dealing with participants’ sense of control over their own social media non/use, and SoA was identified as a useful theoretical lens for organizing those themes. Thus, our analysis incorporated this framework later on in the process. For clarity, though, this paper discusses SoA first, then presents results from our study.

Agency is defined, broadly speaking, as the ability to act [22]. The amount and types of agency available to various human and non-human actors has been the subject of much debate in HCI and related areas [e.g., 35, 42, 46]. A full review of such work is neither feasible within nor directly applicable to the current paper.

Instead, this paper focuses on the *sense of agency* [26, 27, 53, 56], which can be defined as an individual's perception that their actions are under their own control. The individual must perceive not only that the actions taken are taken by them, but also that those actions stem from their own intentions and desires. Furthermore, the individual should perceive that they are not subject to the influence of outside forces. Put differently, "sense of agency refers to this feeling of being in the driving seat when it comes to our actions" [53:28].

Two overarching accounts have been suggested for understanding sense of agency. First, "apparent mental causation" [77, 78] suggests that actions bestow a sense of agency when an individual can interpret them as arising from their own conscious intentions. While appealing in its simplicity, this formulation places too much emphasis on interpretation, i.e., it suggests that the sense of agency is more illusory than a fundamental component of experience [10, 26].

Others have suggested a model based on motor control in the human nervous system [24, 25]. When taking an action, the individual knows what they want to happen, but they also predict what will happen. Once an action is taken, the individual compares what actually happened against what was predicted to happen. The degree to which the predicted result aligns with what they perceive to be happening influences the individual's sense of agency. However, this approach's basis in the sensorimotor system leaves this approach relatively little room to account for subjective experiences of agency.

As a response, a third approach has been offered that combines elements of each [53]. First, a sense of agency can occur *in situ*, when a person who is performing some action currently perceives themselves to be in control of those actions. Second, a sense of agency can also occur *post hoc*, when an individual retrospectively perceives that their actions aligned with their intentions. This kind of retrospection can introduce all the usual kinds of biases one would expect with recall. Such biases can help explain observed misperceptions in the judgment of one's own agency [53].

Across these various approaches, three key attributes emerge that characterize sense of agency. First, an individual must have an *awareness* of their own actions. Sense of agency is reduced when individuals feel unaware of themselves, such as when casino patrons lose themselves "in the zone" of machine gambling [67]. Second, an individual must act in an *intentional* manner, i.e., see their actions as arising from their own beliefs and desires. For example, if I intend to buy a new car, I may identify models of interest, visit a dealership, go for a test drive, or consider potential options. Third, an individual must feel that they have the *capacity* to initiate causal action. Continuing the example, lacking the funds to purchase a new car would diminish my sense of agency. Contrariwise, simply having the capacity to buy a new car would increase my sense of agency, regardless of whether I actually make the purchase.

The aim here is not to determine, for each individual, whether they have a high or low sense of agency about their own Facebook use. Rather, this paper leverages sense of agency as an analytic lens. That is, it interprets participants' actions, both during departure from and during return to Facebook, in terms of their impact on each participant's sense of agency. The analysis shows how this lens helps organize participants' differing experiences under a consistent conceptual umbrella.

3.1 Distinguishing Sense of Agency from Habit and Addiction

Prior work has highlighted the relationship between technology non/use and the constructs of habit and of addiction. Having described sense of agency above, this subsection articulates how these two concepts are both related to, but distinct from, sense of agency.

Some work has investigated the habitual nature of technology use [44, 49, 55, 66, 74]. Broadly speaking, habits are actions that are triggered automatically in response to triggers or cues [54, 75, 76, 80]. Such automaticity could conceivably be associated with decreased SoA. However, only a subset of Facebook use occurs in response to cues or triggers. Furthermore, in a study of smartphone habits [55], participants described habitual use as “concentrated to the ‘empty’ moments when [they] had very little else to do” [55:111] rather than something that took away their control of their own actions.

In psychometric measures of habit, especially of habitual technology use [49, 74], some items bear resemblance to a recently developed measure for SoA [72]. For example, both mention using technology “automatically.” However, measures for habit emphasize regular or routine usage, e.g., “smartphone usage is part of my daily routines,” “my smartphone is a part of my life,” [74:418]. In contrast, Tapal et al.’s measure for SoA emphasizes control and intentionality, e.g., “I am in full control of what I do,” “my actions just happen without my intention,” [72:3]. Put differently, a habitual action can still register a high sense of agency if the individual perceives themselves as the originator of that action. These points make habit a poor choice for an organizing concept to understand more broadly how individuals navigate among forms of technology non/use.

Other work has suggested addiction as a driver of technology non/use [3, 5, 39, 63, 71]. Addiction to an activity is defined in terms meeting a critical threshold of key criteria, including mood modification (engaging in the activity to feel better), tolerance (needing to engage in the activity progressively more in order to feel the same benefit from it), conflict (personal, professional, or other negative consequences), and others [3, 30, 39]. Some definitions of addiction include loss of control as an important component. Examples include engaging in the activity for longer than intended, or attempting to reduce the time spent on the activity but failing to do so [3, 44]. In this way, diminished sense of agency can certainly be seen as a component of addiction.

Ultimately, though, addiction is a fairly prescribed construct. Due to its specific definition, addiction only applies to a limited subset of situations that fulfill enough of the criteria mentioned above. Furthermore, there is active debate about the applicability of the term “addiction” to describe technology usage [3, 18, 32, 33, 39, 44, 60, 82]. For these reasons, sense of agency provides a much more effective organizing concept to understand technology non/use than does addiction.

4 METHODS

This study was designed to investigate how people negotiate transitions among various forms of social technology non/use. The focus on social technologies highlights the interpersonal negotiations and impacts of non/use [29, 61]. Since Facebook is currently the most common social media platform [19, 31], deactivating their account is more likely to impact both participants and their social interactions. Participants were not given explicit directions about using or not using any other social media. This aspect of the study allowed for investigating how various forms of non/use unfold in a broader media ecology [23], that is, how deactivating a Facebook account can precipitate changes in the use of other social media.

4.1 Recruitment

This study required seeking a population of Facebook users who currently had an account, had considered deactivating, but had never actually done so. In prior work, anywhere from 27% to 62% of respondents had considered taking a break from Facebook or deactivating their account [5, 9, 63]. Recruitment efforts targeted college students, for several reasons. First, younger demographics tend to be heavier users of social media [19, 31]. Thus, deactivation would likely impact these users more significantly. Second, younger college students, particularly sophomores and freshmen, still may have relationships with friends and family from their hometown, which may be far away

from their college. Social media offers an important means of maintaining these connections [70], meaning that an absence would likely have a greater impact.

College students were recruited via postings to several university-specific email lists and online groups, including on Facebook. Recruitment efforts focused on universities in the [anonymized] region of the US, due to proximity to the authors' location. Recruitment materials specifically targeted individuals who currently had and use a Facebook account, who had thought about deactivating their account, but who had never actually done so. Asking study participants to actually deactivate their account differentiates this study from prior work where most participants simply avoided use of social media [8, 14, 61, 66].

4.2 Participants

Initially, 25 participants joined the study, but five dropped out part way through, leaving 20 participants (7 female, 13 male, 0 non-binary) from seven different colleges and universities (Table 1). One participant (P#17) was in a professional degree program, all others were rising sophomores, juniors, or seniors. Most (14) participants reported that before joining the study they used Facebook every day for a little less than thirty minutes, which is slightly less than the average user [21, 31]. Some participants took summer classes and some worked throughout the Facebook Quitting Study. About one third of our participants are international students or traveled abroad during the study, which impacted their social communication and interaction.

4.3 Diary Study

Participants were involved with the study for a total of six weeks during the summer of 2017. During this entire time, participants submitted diary entries via either text messages or emails. For the first two weeks, the participants were asked to use Facebook normally and to "Send a descriptive text message when you use Facebook in a significant way [and] when you have a conversation related to Facebook." Participants were then asked to deactivate their Facebook account. During the following four weeks, participants were asked to submit a diary entry "when you encounter or try to use Facebook in a significant way [and] when you have a conversation related to Facebook." Similar to experience sampling [16, 45], these prompts allow us to capture participants' subjective reactions to specific experiences as they happen.

After the initial two weeks, each participant completed a semi-structured qualitative interview. Participants were asked a variety of questions about Facebook: when they first signed up, what they find useful about it, how their usage has changed over time, if they have ever tried limiting their usage in the past, etc. Participants were also asked a handful of follow-up questions based on their diary entries. The combination of diary entries and initial interview established a "baseline" of Facebook practices through which to interpret participants' experiences of deactivation.

During that interview, participants were asked to deactivate their Facebook account. This approach allowed for observing participants going through the deactivation process, rather than recalling it post hoc as in most prior work [5, 14, 62, 64, 66, 71].

After the four weeks, participants were interviewed again, this time about their deactivation experiences: how their friends and family reacted, how deactivation impacted their usage of other social media platforms, which personal relationships were most and least impacted, etc. Near the end of this second interview, participants were offered the chance to reactivate their Facebook account. If they initially did not want to do so, participants were asked if they would mind reactivating briefly, simply to describe how they felt upon doing so, and then they could deactivate again. If participants were unable to go the entire four weeks without Facebook, they were allowed to reactivate earlier, and the second interview was scheduled as soon as possible after they reactivated.

Table 1. Study Participants

P#	Age/Year in College	Gender	Domestic/International	Reactivated Interview	Reactivated Survey
01	Junior	M	Domestic	Yes	Yes
02	Sophomore	M	Domestic	Yes	
04	Sophomore	F	Domestic	Yes	Yes
06	Sophomore	M	Domestic	Yes	Yes
08	Sophomore	M	Domestic	Yes	Yes
10	Junior	M	Domestic	Yes	Yes
11	Senior	M	International	Yes	Yes
12	Senior	M	Domestic	Yes	Yes
14	Sophomore	F	Domestic	Yes	Yes
15	Sophomore	F	Domestic	Yes	Yes
18	Sophomore	F	International	Yes	Yes
19	Junior	M	International	Yes	
21	Senior	F	International	Yes	
07	Sophomore	F	International	No → Yes	No
20	Junior	M	Domestic	No → Yes	
24	Sophomore	M	Domestic	No → Yes	
09	Junior	M	Domestic	No	Yes
13	Sophomore	F	Domestic	No	Yes
16	Sophomore	M	International	No	
17	25	M	Domestic	No	
03	Senior	F	Domestic		
05		M	International		
22	Freshman	M			
23		F	International		
25		F			

List of participants, ordered by whether each reactivated their account during the second interview. Far right column shows whether the participant reported their account was active in the follow-up survey. Blank cells are not available (participant did not respond). Participants below the line did not complete the interviews.

Finally, a follow-up was sent to the 20 participants who completed the second interview approximately six months later to determine their current status of Facebook non/use. Figure 1 shows a timeline of the study’s various phases.

As compensation for their time and effort, participants received a \$10 Amazon.com gift card for each interview they completed.

Fig. 1. Timeline depicting each phase of the study. Between recruitment and the first interview, participants kept diaries about their baseline Facebook usage. At the end of the first interview, participants deactivate their Facebook account. Between the first and second interviews, participants kept diaries about trying to use Facebook or relevant conversations with others. At the end of the second interview, participants were asked if they would like to reactivate their account. A final follow-up determined whether each participant ultimately returned to Facebook or not.

All interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed. Transcripts of the interviews and diary entries were then read and reread iteratively to identify and refine common themes [28, 50]. Analysis began shortly before completion of the first interviews so that the analysis and data collection could mutually inform each other [28].

5 FINDINGS

This section presents themes that emerged from the analysis of the interviews. It first discusses themes associated with departing from Facebook, followed by themes associated with returning. These themes are discussed in their respective sections regardless of whether the participants involved ultimately stayed off or went back to Facebook. Throughout, the analysis shows how participants' accounts can be interpreted consistently in terms of their efforts to maintain a sense of agency [26, 27, 53, 56].

5.1 Departing

Participants' experiences around departing Facebook involved three main themes: participants felt more aligned with themselves, reported having more control over their own time, and described changing their habits. We also note participants' descriptions of how keeping diaries impacted their perceptions.

5.1.1 Peaceful, "in Tune with Myself". Participants described a feeling of tranquility that accompanied their departure from Facebook. For P#09, the "personal gain of being off Facebook is just peaceful mind." This sense of peacefulness manifested both in their mindset and in their activities. In comparing their mindset without Facebook with that before deactivating, participants felt they had become more of their true selves [cf. 38].

"I felt very good. I felt more like myself, I guess, or more in tune with myself. Yeah. And I felt... I guess that was the biggest thing, just feeling more in tune [...] with the environment and stuff like that. More in the moment." (P#13)

Upon reflection, participants who chose to stay off of Facebook concluded that this peaceful mindset was more desirable, even precious. Some became afraid to lose it.

"Now that I've broken the habit of looking for Facebook, I don't really have a desire to get back into it because *I don't really trust myself to get back into Facebook and not*

regain that habit. So, now that I'm off Facebook, I've found that I don't real [sic] have a need for it. So, there's no real point in me going back. So, just staying off it seems like the wisest idea." (P#09, emphasis added)

On the one hand, this participant feels empowered by having "broken the habit" of Facebook. On the other hand, he fears that returning would be accompanied by restarting his previously habitual use, acting in a manner that differs from his intentions. While there are important conceptual distinctions between habit and sense of agency (see above), the combination of awareness and intentionality grant this participant a greater sense of agency by being off of Facebook. Harmon and Mazmanian [38] describe a similar observation about the trope of the "distracted addict" reducing the integration of technology into their life in order to become a more "authentic human."

This feeling of peace and of being in tune with one's self brings a heightened awareness. Such awareness resembles the "reflective self-consciousness" [27:16] and "agentive self-awareness" [10] requisite for sense of agency. Thus, these participants perceive being off of Facebook is thus perceived as more agentic because of the awareness and intentionality it brings.

5.1.2 Productive Time and Free Time. Participants emphasized how leaving Facebook meant gaining more free time. P#09 "looked for other things to fill my time besides Facebook." Put differently, P#09 now had a *choice* as to how to spend his time.

Relatedly, participants described themselves as feeling more productive while off of Facebook. When prompted for additional explanation, participants defined "productive" in highly varied ways. For example, P#13, who worked as a computer science researcher, said:

"I did a lot of reading books and went on walks and hikes and stuff like that and also I found it easier to do work because [I'm] already at a computer less too so I have more of this energy to spend on the research. [...] I think it [this experience] has enhanced the idea in my head that it's nice to be off Facebook." (P#13)

Here, spending time reading books for her work and spending time hiking both count as "productive" uses of time. In another example, P#17 described how deactivating his account freed time to devote to his job application process. "I got like six interviews, and one hiring, so it was a very busy month" (P#17).

When prompted to explain his definition of "productive," P#24 responded that "productive things would be things that *help you toward a goal* of yours. It's productive when I work [...]. It's productive when I work out. It's productive when I sing. It's productive when I study" (P#24, emphasis added).

The term "productivity" here pertains less specifically to professional or academic use of time and more to an *intentional* use of time. As described above, seeing one's actions as directed by one's own conscious intentions constitutes an important component to feeling a sense of agency [10, 26, 27, 53, 56].

This sense of productivity was contrasted with "wasting time."

"I basically use Facebook to kind of scroll through [...]. I'll finally just do the videos that had nothing related to what I'm doing through the day and then you kind of *get lost at a tangent*, right. You watch one stupid video, it falls into another stupid dog video and another video some lady like hitting a traffic hub. You get a bunch of dumb videos that just waste your time." (P#06)

Such experiences as getting "lost at a tangent" suggest very little intentionality.

Such responses show how feelings of using time productively are caught up both with working "toward a goal" (P#24) and with utilizing time in a more intentional and fulfilling way. Productivity could pertain to fulfilling professional or academic obligations, or it could deal with leisure activities. For these participants to be productive, it mattered less *what* they were doing and more *how* and

why they were doing it. Specifically, participants felt more productive when, rather than “getting lost at a tangent” (P#06), they perceived that they were intentionally directing the use of their own time [10, 27, 53].

5.1.3 Changing the Habit of Facebook. Prior work has described habit as an influential driver of social media use [3, 7, 39, 66]. Participants in this study similarly described themselves as looking for Facebook out of habit. Similar to other mechanisms to prevent one’s self from accessing technology [59], about half the participants deleted the Facebook application from their phones as a means of self-control. The impulse to sign in generally lasted for about one to two weeks after deactivating. After around two weeks, roughly two thirds of participants found that their habitual urge had faded or even described feeling oblivious to Facebook.

“It took just probably about as long as... Don’t studies show that after 21 days, you can make or break a new habit or an old habit? So, that sounds about right for what I was doing, like I kept looking for Facebook and didn’t have it. So, I slowly broke the habit of looking for Facebook.” (P#09)

Numerous diary entries echo this experience. For example, P#12 “Forgot about Facebook all weekend. Spent time with friends and enjoyed direct social contact” (P#12, Diary Entry on the 19th day without Facebook). Similarly, P#20 asked, “What’s Facebook?” (P#20, Diary Entry on the 16th day without Facebook).

Participants’ descriptions of Facebook as a habit warrant revisiting the distinction drawn above between habit and sense of agency. To reiterate, if an individual perceives their habitual actions as arising from their own intentions (e.g., intending to exercise on selected days of the week), such actions would yield a heightened sense of agency. In contrast, participants describe using Facebook not out of an intentional routine but out of an unintentional urge or compulsion. The experience of “breaking” this unintentional compulsion resulted in participants realizing their own capacity to take action through departure from Facebook.

5.1.4 Diaries and Awareness. Many respondents specifically mentioned how the act of keeping diaries increased their awareness about their own Facebook use. Both participants who stayed off Facebook after the second interview and those who returned took more notice of their social media usage when they kept diaries about Facebook-related moments. This increased awareness in turn led to increased consideration of Facebook’s influence in participants’ lives.

“I guess it [keeping diaries] just made me a little more aware, especially during the two weeks prior to deactivating it, making me a little aware of how often I go on and what I do when I’m on there. And then after deactivating, it made... I’d say it was less influential, but it did make me think about how particularly my friends would say something about Facebook. Okay, there we go. I really had to take notice of that *because I had to report it to the study, so I think it made me take notice a little bit more* of how people, not just myself, but how other people [see] Facebook in relation to me. [...] So when my friend would say ‘where have you been, can I use Facebook to contact you?’ *it made me really think about how almost omnipresent Facebook is in our world.*” (P#13, emphasis added)

Initially, the diaries were meant to facilitate examining the processes and experiences of departing from Facebook as they occurred. As intended, these diaries provided additional insights and understanding to the researchers, as well as opportunities for discussion during the interviews. In addition, this subsection shows the diaries’ unintended consequence of providing similar insights and understanding to study participants. In some ways, this resembles how the act of keeping a diary about behaviors such as eating, exercise, or mood can affect the behavior being documented

[20, 68]. In this case, explicating their social media use, and their reaction to its absence, gave participants a greater awareness of their own experiences.

5.2 Returning

After the study, 13 of the 20 participants chose to return to Facebook. The reasons for reactivating varied, including needing it for professional reasons, wanting it for specific features, or wanting it to keep in touch with specific people. Even for those who stayed off the site, not having an account for four weeks caused participants to realize specific aspects of Facebook that they used in a deliberate fashion for specific purposes or benefits. In noticing this, many participants asserted that they would use Facebook more intentionally going forward, focusing on the parts of the platform that involved such agentive action.

5.2.1 Professional Connections and Groups. In some cases, participants felt that deactivating their accounts had a negative professional impact, preventing them from connecting with employers or colleagues. For example, P#20 noted in a diary entry that his work duties included “Facebook stalking companies and people within,” an activity he could not do with a deactivated account. In other cases, participants found themselves unable to access important documents or events posted by coworkers. For example, “I was told today to use fb to find a business’s info at work today. When I told [my boss], I dont have fb she was extremely surprised [sic]” (P#06, diary entry while deactivated). During their deactivation, participants in such situations had to ask coworkers for the information separately.

After the four weeks had elapsed, these participants felt it necessary to return to Facebook. For example, P#14 was the secretary for a professional organization at her university. In a diary entry, she describes how part of this job’s responsibilities include using social media.

“Today not being able to access my facebook account hindered my ability to do my job as a secretary for [organization]. During our national conference call we were asked to log into Facebook in order to readily access our monthly report.” (P#14, diary entry while deactivated)

In fact, P#14 stated that the only reason she was able to participate in the study was that it was conducted during the summer, when her official obligations are less demanding because that professional organization is less active. Thus, returning at the end of the study was, for her, necessary.

However, this necessitated return was not associated with a diminished sense of agency. Unlike the habitual uses described above by those who stayed off, P#14 uses Facebook in a very intentional, deliberate manner. Furthermore, Facebook uniquely provides capacities for initiating actions that could not otherwise be taken. Thus, not only does returning to Facebook offer her the ability to perform her full secretarial duties, it also remains free of the agency-depleting effects that others experience.

5.2.2 The “Killer” Feature. Other participants found it easy to disconnect from Facebook overall but missed a specific aspect or feature that required reactivation. The most commonly mentioned aspect was communication, specifically, Facebook Messenger. Facebook does provide the option to deactivate an account without deactivating Messenger. For the purpose of this study, though, participants were also asked to deactivate Messenger. No participants mentioned reactivating only Messenger and keeping the rest of Facebook deactivated.

For many participants, Facebook Messenger is one of the most common communication platforms among their friends. Not having access to it either made communicating more difficult or led to missed communication.

“A couple of people [...] would just message me on Snapchat, ‘Are you coming to the thing?’ and nobody told me about the thing and they’ll be like, ‘Can you just make your Facebook?’ For some people it was really hard to make that change. *The second I made my Facebook back, immediately we started talking*, they started bringing me into the loop with everything but the second I asked them to text me on WhatsApp, it just never went through.” (P#08, emphasis added)

The above quote emphasizes not a feeling of peacefulness but feeling of incapacitation while away from Facebook. Rather than emphasizing a feeling of pressure to reactivate, P#08 instead notes that, upon return, he was “immediately” in close contact with his friends. That is, he was once again able to take action on the relevant social flows of information.

Being cut off from communication also occurred in other, more general ways not directly linked with Messenger. When asked who was most impacted by their deactivation, P#15 responded “Probably my family in Venezuela because then I’d have to be like, ‘Mom, remember, tell them I don’t have a Facebook right now,’ so they’d have to go through WhatsApp or go to my mom.” (P#15). Several participants similarly mentioned having specific friends or family with whom they interacted only over Facebook. Although these friends were often in other countries, both international and domestic students recounted such experiences. In such instances, the ability to communicate with this subgroup acted as a killer feature, the key functionality afforded by Facebook and no other medium.

In a few cases, the single crucial feature Facebook provided was not directly part of the site itself. Rather, these participants used Facebook as a login option for other services, such as Spotify or SoundCloud. Deactivating their accounts prevented them from logging in to those services. These participants emphasized that reactivating their Facebook account restored their ability to use these services.

Even when they could not suggest a specific reason for needing to have or use a Facebook account, lacking one was perceived as limiting participants’ capacity for social action. Thus, regardless of actual Facebook utilization, lacking an account often led to a diminished sense of agency.

6 DISCUSSION

6.1 Departing and Returning through the Lens of Sense of Agency

This paper makes its key contribution by documenting the processes and experiences of departing from and returning to Facebook as they happen. In analyzing the themes that emerged from such experiences, the authors sought to identify a common, overarching concept. How could we coherently interpret participants’ experiences during both their departures from Facebook and their returns to it?

One of the most striking aspects across these distinctly different activities is the common subjective impressions and experiences. For example, departing Facebook helped participants feel more in control of themselves and their lives, but so did returning to Facebook. How could this be?

These experiences can be seen as coherent through the lens of sense of agency. The background section above describes three key attributes that characterize sense of agency: awareness (of one’s self), intentionality (of one’s actions), and capacity (to initiate action). Throughout the results, the themes identified in the analysis are connected to one or more of these key attributes. Keeping diaries facilitated participants’ awareness of their social media use (or non-use). The peaceful feelings associated with leaving granted both a greater self-awareness and an ability to act in a more intentional manner. Feeling more productive in their use of time enabled participants to act more intentionally and to see themselves as having greater capacity for action. Similarly, changing their habitual Facebook use led participants to feel an enhanced capacity for initiating causal action.

Fig. 2. Summary of how each of the three main attributes of Sense of Agency (center) relate to each theme in the results about experiences of departing from (left) and returning to (right) Facebook.

At the same time, returning to Facebook in order to fulfill professional obligations or connect with social groups was also perceived as highly intentional, as well as granting an important capacity for action. Similarly, the “killer” feature of enabling easy communication enhanced participants’ perceptions of their own ability to initiate causal action. Figure 2 summarizes these relationships.

The astute reader will note the lack of a connection between the themes under Returning and the awareness component of SoA. Upon returning to Facebook, participants often described regaining a sense of what was happening in their social spheres. This kind of social awareness, though, differs from the awareness of one’s own actions described in SoA. That is, these participants did not describe becoming (more) aware of their own actions, as was this case with participants who felt more peaceful and in tune with themselves after leaving Facebook. Instead, the awareness gained upon returning was an awareness of activities among one’s social connections, which was more related to the “killer” feature of communication. While it may grant other kinds of benefits, such as feeling more connected, such social awareness is not a key component for SoA.

As shown above, both those who returned to Facebook and those who stayed off felt an enhanced sense of agency. This does not mean that all participants *actually* had more agency. Rather, all participants acted in a manner that allowed them to *feel* a greater sense of control over their own actions.

6.2 Sense of Agency as Organizing Concept

This paper suggests that sense of agency provides a valuable conceptual lens for understanding individuals’ actions around social media non/use, especially with respect to transitions among different forms thereof. This section shows how SoA can be used to help organize and synthesize results from prior work on non/use. The themes identified here emerged in the context of a researcher-initiated break from Facebook. Different instances of non/use may differ in important ways from this constructed context. Thus, while it may not account for every form of non/use, this section shows how SoA can informatively make sense of results from prior work.

In studying smartphone use and non-use, Harmon and Mazmanian [38] describe how individuals tend toward a continuous experience of tension among four idealized subject positions: multitasking

master, distracted addict, authentic human, and out-of-touch luddite. Experiences of participants in our study who returned to Facebook most closely resemble the transition from out-of-touch luddite to multitasking master. Similarly, experiences of participants who stayed off Facebook resemble the transition from distracted addict to authentic human. Harmon and Mazmanian describe both these transitions as prominently figuring “agency to orchestrate one’s interactions with others and to determine where, when, and how to allocate attention” [38:1057]. Even though “both stories promote unrealistic expectations of individual and technological agency” [38:1052], SoA can help to reconcile tensions among disparate motivations.

Similar tensions around intentionality were reported by Schoenebeck [66]. The Twitter users she studied, who “struggle with the behavioral challenges of disconnecting from social media” [66:780], took a break from the site to engage more intentionally with the “real world.” Schoenebeck specifically notes a tension with technologies such as Fred Stutzman’s Freedom application, which allows a user to disable her/his internet connection for specified periods of time. On one hand, such tools may reduce an individual’s agency in their own technology use. On the other, the individual must make the intentional decision to download (and often pay for) such software before using it. This apparent tension can be addressed through the lens of a sense of agency. That is, rather than asking whether tools such as Freedom *actually* grant a user more or less agency, it may be more informative to consider whether the individual *perceives* herself/himself to have greater agency.

As noted above, increased SoA often dealt with how participants spent their time. Drawing on a survey of 316 US residents, Rainie et al. [63] identified a collection of reasons that respondents cited for “voluntarily tak[ing] a break from using Facebook for a period of several weeks or more.” Of these, three reasons were mentioned by at least 10% of respondents: being too busy or not having time (21%), not being interested or not liking the site (10%), and finding the site a waste of time or not relevant (10%). A lack of interest resembles more closely what Satchell and Dourish [65] call “disinterest” and does not appear closely connected to a sense of agency. However, the third and, to some extent, the first of these motivations echo justifications that our respondents gave for staying off the site. This point was especially true when participants felt a limited ability to control their own use of the site and thus were wasting time despite not wanting to. That is, being off of Facebook allowed them to feel more capable of doing the various things they wanted or needed to do. Our participants’ emphasis on being “productive,” along with the expansive definition thereof, foregrounds the link between a sense of agency and how they spend their time.

One prior study, while not directly focused on non-use, describes reactions to the deployment of Facebook’s Timeline feature in terms of loss of control. Wisniewski et al. [79] analyze users’ responses in terms of coping strategies [47]. In this theory, a change in the environment is first appraised as stressful (threatening, harmful, challenging, etc.), positive, or irrelevant. Stressful changes are then assessed in terms of the individual’s ability to control the situation. High control leads to strategies that focus on the problem and on solving it. Low control leads to strategies that focus on emotional and adapting to the situation. Wisniewski et al. [79] use coping theory to discuss why some users responded to the Timeline deployment by changing their privacy settings while others responded by focusing on their own emotions. Indeed, they note that “exiting Facebook to avoid transitioning to Timeline was [an] emotion-focused coping strategy” [79:2426]. The implication here is that those who leave Facebook do so because of a perceived loss of control. In contrast, the findings presented here suggest that both the act of leaving Facebook and the act of returning can be interpreted consistently as participants working toward an increased sense of agency.

Lastly, Birnholtz [11] provides an analysis of students’ use of instant messaging (IM). In terms of functionality, IM resembles just one subset of the features provided by social media, such as Facebook’s Messenger. However, the experiences Birnholtz describes – of adopting IM, of adapting

it specific situations or contexts of use, and of ultimately abandoning IM – resemble in many ways the experiences of social media non/users. Many reasons his participants mention for abandoning IM deal with boundary negotiation [57] and other aspects of privacy. For example, participants would share IM contact info with people but then over time become less close with some of them. However, IM clients would still share status and profile information with these people. In some ways, these concerns resemble the privacy issues that social media non/users often cite [5, 63, 71]. However, Birnholtz [11] interprets these in terms of “perceived control” [2]. He emphasizes that IM “provides little control over who can interrupt and when,” and that it has “minimal features for managing the contact list” [11:1432]. Although Birnholtz relates these experiences to theories of technology adoption [17], issues of control over interruptions or management of contacts also pertain directly to SoA. Over time, the IM users he studied came to perceive themselves as less in control of their own social interactions. When that happened, they reduced or ceased their use of IM, similar to the participants in the present study who felt a greater sense of agency when they stayed off of Facebook.

6.3 Limitations

Several aspects of the findings here may arise from the particular study design used. Participants deactivated their account because a researcher asked them to. Doing so enabled observing the processes of departing from and returning to Facebook as they happened. However, leaving Facebook at a researcher’s behest, rather than of their own volition, may have started the study by diminishing participants’ sense of agency. Similarly, participants who initially did not want to return but were willing to do so when the researcher asked them to (labeled No → Yes in Table 1) may have felt less agentic about their return. That said, many participants stated that, even if it were not for the study, they would likely have taken a break from Facebook. Our intervention provided a convenient means to observe this process of leaving (and returning) as it happened. Future work should consider other creative study designs, such as analyzing content from posts to social media made just before leaving or just after returning. While such data would not represent the time period the user was off the site, they may offer a glimpse into how SoA plays out when the participant, rather than a researcher, decides when to leave and when to return.

Similarly, keeping a diary is noted above as a key factor in contributing to participants’ awareness of their own actions. While it is possible that the act of keeping a diary may have led to greater awareness than would have resulted only from deactivating one’s account, two points should be made such an interpretation. First, the theme of feeling more peaceful and more in tune with one’s self did not, in the analysis, appear dependent on participants’ diary-keeping. Second, study designs in future work that do not make use of diaries may help clarify these relationships.

Participants were also asked to deactivate Facebook entirely and not given the option to leave only Facebook Messenger active. This aspect ensured that all participants underwent similar experiences. However, losing communication with friends is arguably different from missing out on, say, cute cat pictures [8, 13]. That said, non/use or negation of particular features has been mentioned in prior work [5, 58]. Future studies should examine more closely how selective non/use may further enhance SoA.

Furthermore, this study examines only one social media site (Facebook). Since it is the most prevalent social media site among many populations [19, 31], departure from Facebook may have different impacts on SoA than departure from other social media. For example, the capacity for initiating causal action may not be as significant of a factor in driving users to return to social media sites with smaller user bases or different affordances. On the other hand, questions of intentionality likely pervade use of numerous social media. Again, future work can and should examine such questions.

These interviews and diaries were also conducted only during the six-week study period. This approach limits our ability to understand how a brief period of deactivation might impact participants' sense of agency or their Facebook usage in the longer term. Our follow-up, while informative, does not provide the opportunity to observe participants' experiences during the intervening six months. However, it does tell us that all but one participant who responded to the follow-up ultimately returned to Facebook.

Finally, some aspects of the results may have occurred because of the study population. First, the study specifically targeted college students. This population was selected for reasons enumerated above, such as the fact that most college-age individuals are active Facebook users [19, 31] and would thus likely be more impacted by taking a break. The fact that the study took place over the summer, though, afforded different opportunities for deactivation than would have been possible during the regular academic year. Such constraints of the annual academic cycle are unique to students, as well as perhaps faculty, staff, their families, etc. However, other populations are also impacted by similar seasonal or annual cycles, such as migrant laborers or farming families [48, 69]. While the particular manifestations observed here likely pertain specifically to this population, the discussion below demonstrates that other prior work with more diverse participants can also be interpreted through the lens of SoA. Future work should attend more specifically to how useful this conceptual lens proves in other contexts.

Second, all participants had previously considered deactivating their account. This choice was made to reduce the chance of researchers coercing participants to do something they would rather not [cf. 52]. It is also possible that, since these participants already had considered deactivating their account, they perceived their departure as more intentional than if it occurred solely as part of a research study.

Third, on a related note, all participants' reported levels of Facebook use were slightly below average. Prior work has found that "light" and "heavy" Facebook users differ in terms of social capital, perceived usefulness of Facebook, self esteem, and Internet efficacy [43]. Future work should determine how light and heavy Facebook users differ in terms of the relationship between their sense of agency and non/use, particularly in terms of transitions among different forms of non/use.

7 CONCLUSION

This paper presents analysis of qualitative data from an interview- and diary-based study of participants who took a break from Facebook by deactivating their accounts. In contrast to prior work, which provides primarily post-hoc accounts, this study allows for observation of the transitions among different types of non/use as those transition processes unfold. The findings show how, regardless of whether participants returned to Facebook or stayed off the site, they took actions that provided them with a greater sense of agency [26, 27, 53, 56]. Applying this conceptual lens to other prior work shows how a sense of agency provides a useful means of understanding and organizing disparate motivations that individuals cite for using or not using social technologies in various ways.

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