

The Affordances of Social Networking Sites for Relational Maintenance in a Distrustful Society: The Case of Azerbaijan

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Abstract

The Internet and social media afford opportunities for relational maintenance, but most scholarship has focused on relational maintenance in high-trust environments. This study explores relational maintenance online and offline in a distrustful society. In distrustful societies, trust is situated within one's particularized kin network, and friendships have strategic significance and are characterized by norms of reciprocity. In distrustful societies, relational maintenance behaviors are different from trustful societies and take on greater significance. This preliminary study, based on informant interviews in Azerbaijan, examines both offline relational maintenance and the affordances of social networking sites (SNSs) for relational maintenance in such an environment. SNSs do provide for some relational maintenance behaviors through *supplementing* offline behaviors at a low cost and give some additional benefits like status display, yet SNSs do not *replace* traditional relational maintenance behaviors in Azerbaijan.

Keywords

social media, trust, distrust, relational maintenance, social networking sites, Azerbaijan

Introduction

Much recent scholarship has explored how the Internet and social media afford opportunities for individuals to engage in relational maintenance (McEwan, 2013; Tong & Walther, 2011; Vitak, 2014). However, nearly all of this scholarship on both online and offline relational maintenance draws from theories, frameworks, and empirical work based in North America (see Rains and Brunner (2014) for a broader discussion of North American dominance of this field and Canary and Yum's (2015) call for more work on relational maintenance both online and offline outside of North America). North American cultures are perhaps atypical because of their emphasis on equity as a standard of fairness (Canary & Yum, 2015) as well as high levels of institutional, generalized, and particularized trust (Freitag & Buhlmann, 2009), due in part to institutions and judicial systems that contribute to a safe trust environment. Also, North Americans are more willing to have trusting relationships with individuals beyond their immediate family (Fukuyama, 1995). And the dominant frameworks for understanding the ways that individuals maintain relationships in trustful environments are entirely driven by North American norms. Given that much of the

world does not live in such a trusting environment, and relationships and their maintenance differ because of different ways of trusting, we seek to explore what social networking sites (SNSs) afford for relational maintenance in *societies of distrust* (Giordano, 2006). In such environments, individuals turn toward their particularized kin network for trust and strategically engage close friends in reciprocal relational maintenance activities in order to access resources that neither the particularized kin network nor the state can provide. As such, relation maintenance behaviors are both different from trusting societies and take on greater significance. In this study, we look at how SNSs afford opportunities for relational maintenance behaviors in distrustful societies. Exploring online relational maintenance in distrustful environments contributes not only to our broad understanding of

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how social media use impacts lives but also can contribute more specifically to better theory development for our understanding of relational maintenance online and offline by considering the affordances of information and communication technology for relational maintenance in different cultural settings.

Context

Azerbaijan is the quintessential distrustful society: In the 2014 World Values Survey, it was ranked the second or third least trusting nation on every “trust in others” question. Moreover, according to the 2012 Social Capital, Media and Gender survey,¹ Azerbaijanis have strong trust in their families (3.95/4, 4 being total trust) but low trust in fellow citizens (1.90/4) and even lower trust in strangers (1.27/4). And ethnographic work notes the guarded and private tendencies of Azerbaijanis (Heyat, 2002; Wistrand, 2011) and “the secretive, complex nature of the Azeri society that evolved through seven decades of the Soviet system” (Heyat, 2002, p. 52). Moreover, many of the antecedents of distrust in others (poor institutions (Nannestad, 2008), economic inequality (Uslaner & Brown, 2005), repressive political environment (Uslaner, 2004), specifically post-Soviet distrustfulness (Rose, 1995), and honor culture (Giordano, 2006)) are present in Azerbaijan. Thus, although we wish to make broader arguments about cultures of distrust characterized by high trust in kin and low trust in others, we believe that Azerbaijan is an excellent case study to begin this research.

Literature Review

Trust

“[T]rust is the expectation that arises within a community of regular, honest, and cooperative behavior, based on commonly shared norms, on the part of other members of the community” (Fukuyama, 1995, p. 26).² Trust in individuals is often understood in two ways: particularized and generalized (Uslaner, 2000). Particularized trust is “thick” trust given to individuals with whom one is intimately familiar where indicators of trust are easily anticipated and interpreted (Branzei, Vertinsky, & Camp, 2007) because of repeated face-to-face interactions (Delhey, Newton, & Welzel, 2011). The circle of intimate familiars who are trusted usually includes kin, and in traditional societies, it is often limited to kin (Fukuyama, 1995). This is the case in Azerbaijan, where family and kin are the primary network of relationships (Aliyev, 2013a, 2013b, 2014a, 2014b, 2015), for example, the particularized network. Generalized trust is “thin” trust in a wider circle of unfamiliar individuals with whom an individual has not had previous experiences (Uslaner & Brown, 2005), and interactions between these individuals have no expectation of reciprocity (Uslaner,

2007). Greater generalized trust widens the radius of trust beyond family (Realo, Allik, & Greenfield, 2008).

While most societies have fairly high particularized trust, individuals and societies vary in the level of generalized trust extended to strangers. Many argue that there is an inverse relationship between generalized and particularized trust. If one lacks faith in strangers and public institutions, they turn toward their own particularized kin networks as the only reliable channel to access resources (Giordano, 2006; Ledeneva, 1998; Mishler & Rose, 2005; Rose, 1995; Sayfutdinova, 2015). Giordano (2006) calls societies which experience this phenomenon “societies of distrust,” where distrust is functionally equivalent to lack of trust and is understood to be the opposite end of a continuum from trust (Saunders, Dietz, & Thornhill, 2014).

But it is impossible for one’s particularized kin network to have access to all possible resources, so one must reach beyond those individuals. Thus, one maintains an additional layer of close friends—these are non-blood relationships often arising from being in the same school or university cohort and someone from the workplace with a strong expectation of mutual obligation (Aliyev, 2013b; Gullette, 2010; Tohidi, 1997; Werner, 1998a, 1998b). The close friendships link an individual’s particularized kin network together with his or her close friends’ particularized kin networks, creating a chain of networks. In Azerbaijan, Aliyev (2013a, 2013b, 2014a, 2014b, 2015) argues, this next level of one’s network is friendship, which is “fairly strong,” while family and kin are the primary network and relationships are “strong.” Azerbaijani “[k]in-based networks . . . maintain a system of weak extra-network ties which enable them to provide their members with public goods beyond the network’s boundaries” (Aliyev, 2014a, p. 271). When a network member needs a resource, he or she will mobilize a close friend to get in touch with someone occupying an essential position to get the task done (Giordano, 2006).

Relational Maintenance

Maintaining these extra-network close friendships is an important activity for individuals in a society of distrust (Schweers Cook, 2005). Relational maintenance is how individuals sustain ties with other individuals. In particular, the term refers to efforts at cultivating a relationship for the purpose of future access to resources and support, which may involve sustaining a variety of relational conditions: keeping a relationship in existence, keeping a relationship in a specified state or condition, keeping a relationship in a satisfactory condition, and/or repairing a relationship (Dindia & Canary, 1993). Individuals engage in behaviors, actions, and activities to enact maintenance and ensure that relationships are sustained through one of these pathways (Canary & Stafford, 1994; Canary & Yum, 2015; Stafford, 1994). Positive emotions associated with relational maintenance behaviors strengthen the bond between individuals

(Lawler, Thye, & Yoon, 2000). Relational maintenance behaviors can be either routine or strategic (Duck, 1986), although the categories are not strict and can in fact be quite fluid (Canary, Stafford, Hause, & Wallace, 1993), and the categories often used are entirely derived from North American empirical studies. Routine maintenance behaviors are those at a lower level of consciousness and are not performed “with the express goal of maintaining the relationship” (Dainton & Stafford, 1993, p. 256). Strategic maintenance behaviors, in contrast, are *intentional* and *planned* for relational maintenance (Canary & Stafford, 1994; Dainton & Stafford, 1993). Additionally, strategic or routine relational maintenance behaviors are not always conducted because an individual purely desires to maintain the relationship; rather, the activities can sometimes be conducted out of a sense of obligation or indebtedness (Werner, 1998a).

Relational maintenance in a distrustful society. The ways in which an individual both understands and maintains these relationships differ across cultural environments (Canary & Yum, 2015; Stafford, 1994), and relational maintenance cannot be understood without contextualizing “various invisible cultural foundations and values” (Canary & Yum, 2015, p 5). The two ways that close friend relational maintenance differs in a society of distrust are, first, that individuals in a society of distrust perceive close friendship as being more instrumental than those in a trustful society (Werner, 1998a) and thus are more likely to engage in *strategic* relational maintenance behaviors, and, second, to maintain close friendships in distrustful societies, there is a strict norm of reciprocity, which is likely to also involve strategic relational maintenance behaviors.

Although friendships are not exclusively maintained with a strategic goal in mind (Wolf, 1966), the instrumental role of friendship becomes more salient when access to resources is scarce (Duck, 1986), and thus, individuals are more likely to engage in strategic relational maintenance behaviors. Given the resource scarcity often associated with distrustful societies, strategic relational maintenance behaviors are not uncommon (Werner, 1998a). To illustrate, acquiring new friends in Azerbaijan, Aliyev (2013b) argues, is about potentially expanding an individual’s opportunities to access more resources. Even relationships with existing friends involve thoughts about instrumentality and engaging in strategic relational maintenance behaviors. Aliyev (2013b) gives the example:

an individual would be unwilling to offer a lucrative employment offer to a friend or introduce that person to influential contacts unless the favor-provider is confident that the favor-recipient deserves his or her place in the favor-provider’s *blat*³ [reciprocity]-circle. Most importantly, the favor-recipient has to be deemed capable of repaying the favor with a gesture of equal magnitude. (p. 95)

Nonetheless, individuals are not always conscious of their engagement in strategic relational maintenance behaviors and prefer not to emphasize the strategic dimension, rather focusing on “being a good friend” (Werner, 1998a).

Reciprocity norms dominate close friendships in distrustful societies, including Azerbaijan (Aliyev, 2013b; Tohidi, 1997), creating mutual obligatory indebtedness between close friends (Gullette, 2010; Werner, 1998a, 1998b). Reciprocal actions, a particular type of strategic relational maintenance behavior, reinforce this mutual indebtedness, yet also consume substantial time and energy (Ledeneva, 1998; Werner, 1998a, 1998b).

Relational maintenance online. Relational maintenance, either routine or strategic, in any type of society, no longer only occurs “in real life.” Today, one’s “real life” includes online activities. Thus, SNSs have become another space for relational maintenance to occur in ways that are both similar to and different from traditional relational maintenance behaviors.

While SNSs afford opportunities for meeting new people and maintaining all types of relationships, both routinely and strategically, they are particularly effective tools for maintaining relationships beyond one’s particularized kin network. SNSs are designed for communication with non-co-located others. While one’s particularized kin network sees each other face to face frequently, in a country such as Azerbaijan where multigenerational households are the norm and families frequently gather, close friends meet less frequently. SNSs thus have the potential to increase frequency of communication (Stafford & Hillyer, 2012). SNSs also allow individuals to communicate with close friends, asynchronously (Tong & Walther, 2011). Moreover, the efficiency and low transaction cost associated with SNSs (Ellison, Gray, Lampe, & Fiore, 2014; Ellison, Vitak, Gray, & Lampe, 2014; Tong & Walther, 2011) ease routine and strategic relational maintenance behaviors. And the design of SNSs encourages resource exchanges such as assistance and information (Vitak, 2014).

This study focuses on strategic relational maintenance behaviors specifically. Exploring how SNSs afford opportunities for strategic relational maintenance behaviors in an environment where close friendships are more instrumental, reciprocal, and utilize more strategic relational maintenance behaviors provides a new perspective on the affordances of SNSs and our understanding of relational maintenance in different environments than those typically studied. Offline and online strategic maintenance of these friendships are the focus of this study, although we occasionally note individuals beyond close friendships. We argue that SNSs afford opportunities to maintain relationships with close friends, but that in a society of distrust, these close friend relationships are particularly marked by instrumentality and reciprocity and greater use of strategic relational maintenance behaviors and that SNSs afford new and easier means to strategically maintain such relationships.

Table 1. Participants.

Pseudonym	Approximate age	Gender	Occupation
Aida	Late 20s	Female	Unemployed
Anar	Early 20s	Male	Unemployed
Aynur	Early 20s	Female	University student
Dilara	Mid 20s	Female	Professional
Eldar	Early 30s	Male	Professional
Farida	Mid 20s	Female	Student
Gulnara	Late teens	Female	Student
Ibrahim	Mid 20s	Male	Unemployed
Karim	Early 20s	Male	Student
Leyla	Late 30s	Female	Academic
Murad	Late 20s	Male	Unemployed
Nargiz	Late 30s	Female	Professional
Parviz	Mid 20s	Male	Graduate student
Rovshan	Mid 20s	Male	Unemployed
Samir	Late 30s	Male	Academic
Vusal	Mid 20s	Male	Professional

Method

This study is primarily based on 16 semistructured interviews inquiring about offline and online relationships for young Azerbaijanis. The interviews were conducted in person or via Skype in spring and summer 2014. These can be considered informant interviews, as the goal was to better understand the scene (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010). Participants were recruited via social media via snowball and criterion sampling (Table 1). The authors attempted to obtain diversity in gender, age, education, region, and social media use. However, all participants were currently residing in the capital city, either since birth or attending university or working and willing to be interviewed by a researcher, and are thus not representative of all Azerbaijanis.⁴

Additionally, the analysis is contextually influenced by general ethnographic observations by one of the authors who lived in the capital city of Azerbaijan, Baku, for 7 months over 2 years in 2013–2014, observing both those interviewed and Azerbaijani society more broadly. That author also engaged in Internet-based ethnographic observation of the Azerbaijani social media sphere over 4 years (2012–2015), both of the interview participants and the broader Internet-using society.

Analysis

Constructivist grounded theory was used for the analysis of the interview data. Beginning with inductive logic, the research team engaged in systematic comparison, close reading, or an interrogation of data and generated successively more abstract concepts through an inductive process of comparing data, categories, and concepts (Charmaz, 2008). We have reviewed the literature on relational maintenance in the broader Turkic Muslim post-Soviet environment as there are

too few social scientific studies of Azerbaijani society to be limited to only that literature. While certainly there are cultural variations, given shared language, ethnic roots, and pre-Soviet and post-Soviet histories between these states, we believe that embedding our research within scholarly works in the region is appropriate.

From the relevant literature and the interviews, the research team identified four ways that Azerbaijanis maintain close friend relationships: social gathering and hospitality; events, celebrations, and ceremonies; gift giving; and helping and voluntary labor. Each relational maintenance method is described, first in how it is enacted offline, followed by the affordances provided by SNSs.

Friendship Overall

Speaking to the instrumental and reciprocal nature of Azerbaijani close friendships and the emphasis on strategic relational maintenance behaviors, interviews provided many insights into the nature of distrust and focus on the kin network in Azerbaijan. For example, Farida was escorted to school by her parents and not allowed to spend time with her girlfriends outside of school when she was a teenager. Aynur recalled her mother telling her explicitly not to spend time with girls from school and only to hang out with her cousins, and Eldar said that few non-family members are allowed inside the home. Thus, the rare opportunities to have relationships with non-kin are more precious and require greater strategy.

With regard to the instrumental and reciprocal nature of Azerbaijani close friendships and the strategic relational maintenance behaviors involved, participants confirmed that interpersonal interactions are *mandatory* and tied to reciprocity both online and offline. “Friends do expect a lot from each other,” Samir said,

[there is] some sort of compulsory character in friendship . . . it has some sort of reciprocal meaning for people. If you do something for a friend, you always expect that they will pay it back in a way.

Nargiz said that friendships are “built on the basis of helping out each other.” This sense of obligation also extends to the online sphere. As Aynur described,

sometimes if someone posts a picture I feel compelled to like it even if I don’t like it. I feel like if I don’t they’re going to think that I’m envious or a bad person because I don’t like it, so I kind of have this pressure.

Social Gathering and Hospitality

Getting together socially is a non-routine and strategic strong aspect of maintaining (Koroteyeva & Makarova, 1998; Lepisto, 2010) and deepening close friend relationships (Ledeneva, 1998). Within the home, hosting others and

showing hospitality allow for the strategic demonstration of the importance of the relationship (Simpson-Hebert, 1987; Werner, 1998a), creating a demarcation between distant and close friends. Several interview participants mentioned social gatherings in the home as a sacred place for only closer friends. But it is quite strategic. One anthropologist in Azerbaijan discussed how her host mother's hospitality "towards a visitor would be very much dependent on how high she ranked them in the scale of social hierarchy, and their utility to her" (Heyat, 2002, p. 50). But hospitality also evokes reciprocity as a "prelude to expectations of favors" (Heyat, 2002, p. 50).

Close friend relationships can also be strategically maintained outside the home, often in teahouses or restaurants (Rowe, 2012). However, such venues, especially teahouses, are generally reserved for men and are considered "improper" for women (Heyat, 2002). Close friend relational maintenance can also occur outdoors. Kirmse (2013) describes "strolling" as a common relational maintenance activity among young Kyrgyz friends because it is free or inexpensive and gets them out of the house without supervision. In the author's field observations, strolling is *the* year-round social activity for Azerbaijanis of all ages, regardless of gender.

In-home hospitality and social gathering outside the home are the primary venues for Azerbaijanis to meet with and presumably strategically maintain relationships with close friends, but SNSs also allow for social gathering. SNSs "serve much the same functions as publics like the mall or the park did for previous generations" (boyd, 2014, p. 9).

Social gathering via SNSs is especially common for Azerbaijanis with limited mobility. There is evidence for this in other contexts (Nef, Ganea, Müri, & Mosimann, 2013), and Azerbaijani low-mobility groups such as young women (van Klaveren, Tijdens, Williams, & Martin, 2010) and political dissidents (Pearce & Kendzior, 2012) see SNSs as a primary social gathering space. Farida was not allowed to socialize outside of school, and as a teenager, she found the Internet to be a useful way to have a bit of a social life with her classmates. Gulnara too found her "surroundings too small. It wasn't enough for me" and "they didn't share my mindset," so she turned to SNSs to gradually meet new people through mutual friends. When asked what her parents thought of her meeting new people online as a young teenager, Gulnara replied, "My family is more modern. They understood that my circles were not enough for me and didn't interfere." Field observations of young women also confirmed that young women gather "together" on SNSs, especially at night when confined to their homes. Although SNSs do afford risk for young women, concerned about their reputations, it also gives them a space to socialize (Pearce & Vitak, 2015). More politically oppositional Azerbaijanis also use SNSs to find like-minded people. Rovshan said, "I needed open minded friends desperately. I would have never found such a circle at university." Eldar similarly said, for

politically oppositional youth whose movements are often monitored by the regime, Facebook is "the last place to laugh, be crazy, yell, to have fun." Anar, a semi-out young gay man, explained that young lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) Azerbaijanis have to be very cautious when going out. Small groups rather than large groups are the norm as to not attract attention. Clubs are private or invite-only with heavy security. He said that SNSs allows for LGBT Azerbaijanis to "network" with each other and other "free-minded people," but he also receives numerous threats and insults on SNSs, which makes it less useful. Interview participants with greater mobility—due to financial independence or living apart from family—seemed to rely less on Facebook for social gathering and spoke of active "offline" social lives and more traditional relational maintenance.

But while SNSs can complement or supplement outside the home social gathering, they do not afford the same strategic opportunities for hospitality as face-to-face in-home gathering does, and the symbolic act of inviting one into the family home would not be possible to replicate on an SNS.

Events, Celebrations, and Ceremonies

Ceremonies, celebrations, and events, much more formal and time-consuming than social gatherings described earlier, play a key strategic role in cultivating, reaffirming, maintaining, and expanding relationships with close friends (Heyat, 2002; Kuehnast & Dudwick, 2004; Urinboyev & Svensson, 2013a; Werner, 1998b). Events provide opportunities to strategically display a family's status in the community via wealth, whether in what sort of celebration they can host or in the value of the gift that the guest brings (Agadjanian & Makarova, 2003; Argyrou, 1996; Bloch, Rao, & Desai, 2004; Heyat, 2002). For Soviet and post-Soviet people, "the wedding became the central occasion for vast, demonstrative, and competitive exchanges of wealth between families" (Agadjanian & Makarova, 2003, p. 459). Showing status is an important strategic move to demonstrate to a close friend that an individual and his kin are a good network to link to (Agadjanian & Makarova, 2003; Argyrou, 1996; Bloch et al., 2004). According to Eldar,

the wedding is one of the rare times when they open up their world and they show themselves to the world. And that's why you need to show your best face, because that's a very rare chance when you show your inner world shown outwards.

Weddings or other life-stage ceremonies provide a rare opportunity for Azerbaijanis to show their status in a socially acceptable way.

It is difficult to imagine how SNSs could afford opportunities for strategic relational maintenance behaviors that weddings provide. However, SNSs *are* an excellent place to strategically demonstrate wealth and status (Kamal, Chu, & Pedram, 2013), and many interview participants noted the

ability to let a wider audience—beyond those invited to the event, in particular the friends of those tagged in photographs—know how posh a wedding was through photographs on SNSs. In this way, SNSs potentially supplement or enhance the status display potential that weddings provide. Undoubtedly, images are one, if not the most, important aspect of presentation on Facebook, and thus, we expect that the ability to share the wedding with a wide audience is important. Eldar said,

Let's say you have a big wedding . . . an Azeri big wedding can have 700 people invited . . . [others think] "Oh, this was a great wedding. Such a good family. The groom must love the bride so much, because he spent so much" . . . But with Facebook, if you have 3,000-4,000 friends, the group of people who will be seeing what you've done for your wedding is much more. And there will be more people seeing how happy and how in love you are, and . . . how well off you are. So Facebook is . . . giving those people an extra tool to portray this false image of wealth and happiness.

Similarly, while one may not be close enough to be invited to a wedding or circumcision, one can like or comment upon photographs of the event, again increasing positive emotional reaction from the receiver and the broader network that see the comment. Thus, although it is difficult to perform the same strategic relational maintenance behaviors online as one can offline, had one attended the event, amplification of status through SNSs provides an online alternative with similar results.

Weddings exemplify the norms of reciprocity in events. As Yalçın-Heckmann (2001) explains about an Azerbaijani wedding in particular,

they involve numerous economic transactions which serve to bring forth and contest various oppositions in social relations between people, e.g. between those who are socially "close"—kin, neighbors, workmates and friends. The expected participation in work, preparations, gift giving and entertainment is indicative of these processes of defining and redefining social relationships. (p. 5)

Reciprocity norms extend to birthdays as well. In Azerbaijan, birthdays are "mandatory" according to participants and require phone calls and in-person visits. And this extends to SNSs. Aynur said,

On Facebook when someone has a birthday and I don't really hang out with them that much or we're not that close I still feel compelled to write "happy birthday" even though I've only seen them once in my life.

The principal investigator's observations confirm that happy birthday wishing in Azerbaijani SNS circles is strongly emphasized. Certainly, although close friends would not merely wish happy birthday via SNSs, they use SNSs to complement a more personal acknowledgement offline.

SNSs do afford an easier way to remember and wish happy birthday or an opportunity to supplement an offline greeting. However, in SNSs, one can engage in a happy birthday greeting at low cost and still reap some, although not all, of the in-person strategic benefit. First, the receiver sees the happy birthday wish and gains positive emotions, and second, the broader network sees the happy birthday wish and thinks more positively of the sender for being reciprocal and "a good friend," adding to the value of the strategic relational maintenance behavior.

Gift Giving

Gift giving is a popular relational maintenance strategy because it affirms reputation and social identity (Kuehnast & Dudwick, 2004; Louw, 2007; Werner, 1998b) and reinforces reciprocity (Louw, 2007; Patico, 2001; Werner, 1998a, 1998b). As Kuehnast and Dudwick (2004) put it, people maintain the tradition of giving gifts because they know they must give in order to receive. (See Komter (2007) for a broader review of the function of gift giving.) Gift giving is common not only at ceremonies like birthdays and weddings, but there is also a long Soviet tradition and set of social norms of gift giving to friends on public holidays (Patico, 2001). One holiday popular throughout the post-socialist world is Women's Day, observed annually on 8 March. Traditionally, women in homes and offices are given flowers or sweets on this day.

It is important to note that gift giving in the post-Soviet world is not always a US\$5 greeting card and US\$20 bouquet of flowers; some rural Kazakh households spend over half their household income on gifts (Werner, 2002), and Nargiz indicated that she too spends a great deal of her income on gifts and could not bear calculating the proportion of her income she spends. Field observations echo this. The author received gifts frequently and without occasion. Gift giving is also part of reciprocity as gift-giving transactions "enact the ties of obligations and expectations within networks of kinship and friendship" (Urinboyev & Svensson, 2013b, pp. 273-274). Yalçın-Heckmann (2001) found that Azerbaijani weddings typically have a guest-book which lists the names and amount of money the household gave to the bride and groom. Yalçın-Heckmann (2001) says that

such lists are kept at all weddings and also at other ceremonies (such as mourning or circumcision), and the particular amount registered serves as a guideline for the **exact amount** (emphasis ours) to be given and received in return at the donor's wedding ceremony or on similar ceremonial occasions. (p. 25)

Interviewees confirmed that this is true; although today the amount of money given is no longer written in the guest-book, it is more common that gift (cash) givers write their names on the envelope, and the list is created by the hosting

family after the ceremony. Yalçın-Heckmann's (2001) late 1990s study found that the couple received US\$2000 and earned US\$360 after the cost of the event, but that the long-term cycles of exchange were more important. Multiple participants confirmed that few "make money" at a wedding.

It would be difficult to replicate the ceremonial gift-giving traditions, especially because of the reciprocal financial aspect of them. However, SNSs do provide opportunities to strategically give gifts and reap the status demonstration affordance. First, it is important to consider that gifts need not be material goods but are vehicles for the exchange of an array of social functions, primarily to create and maintain social ties (Komter, 2007). It is the signaling of the act of giving, not the object itself that matters. In Azerbaijan, *virtual* exchange of gifts and such holiday gift exchange, in the form of graphics, is common. Because SNSs are digital, gift giving is also digital. But while these gifts are digital, the strategic relational maintenance function of gift giving can certainly also occur online (Skågeby, 2010). These virtual gifts are low cost and can be easily given to anyone multiple times (Skågeby, 2010). On the contrary, non-virtual gifts are for closer relations and, as material objects, come at a cost and require transport. A virtual gift could supplement a non-virtual gift though. Additionally, there is a performative benefit of giving a digital gift. An affordance of SNSs is the broad audience that witnesses a digital gift being given, thus increasing the strategic relational maintenance behavior value through status gaining, similar to what Lampel and Bhalla (2007) found.

SNS users tagged 100 and 60 people in an image, a virtual gift, to celebrate the Eid holiday. Most users replied with "thank you," but some users responded with a virtual gift (Figure 1).

Helping and Voluntary Labor

Assisting each other in work tasks is an important part of close friend relational maintenance with both strategic and reciprocal functions. In addition to gift giving at ceremonies, helping is a common way of evoking reciprocity during large ceremonies. Yalçın-Heckmann (2001) also describes Azerbaijani male kin and close friends working throughout the night to set up tents for weddings as well as transporting and unloading the dowry (including heavy furniture). She writes,

The terms for providing labor and help were once again not based on payments of money but on delayed exchange between relatives and friends. Those friends, neighbors and relatives who were involved in various aspects of the preparations were all carefully chosen, **on the basis of mutual and symbolic labor "debts"** (emphasis ours). One colleague of Könül's (bride), for instance, who had come to offer her help, although Könül had not sent for her, was, in Könül's eyes, trying to make up for a former offence. Other participants were also fulfilling their roles

as helpers, as they were the "close people" (*yaxın*) of [the bride and groom]. **In return they would expect the same amount of help in gifts, labor and eventually cash for their own wedding celebrations.** (Emphasis ours; p. 24)

Interview participants noted similar reciprocity expectation examples: after a death, neighbors bring chairs to the home without being asked or help to dig a grave. And Werner (1998b) describes close friends (women) working hard to prepare lavish feasts for an upcoming ceremony. Close friends may also be called in to help with larger tasks. For example, Gullette (2010) notes friends help to build a house, but reciprocity is assumed. Helping is also a strategic relational maintenance behavior, so much so that it is difficult to draw the line between the social kindness of assisting others and the strategic networking and solidarity aspects of such activities (Kandiyoti, 1998).

While SNSs do not provide many opportunities for in-person labor, they do allow for opportunities for individuals to ask for help and advice, what Ellison et al. (2014) call "Facebook-enabled resource mobilization attempts." These requests for help are a signal to start reciprocal exchange (Lampe, Gray, Fiore, & Ellison, 2014), and answering requests for help demonstrates that one is paying attention to those in the network (Lampe et al., 2014) and strategically maintaining the relationship. The principal investigator has observed the participants ask for help via SNSs on numerous occasions, for example, Azerbaijanis asking for travel or dining recommendations or recommendations for a service. Ibrahim and Parviz said that information resources were an early drive of Facebook use among their classmates. In the late 2000s, they both had Facebook group for their "cohort" where they shared notes and asked each other questions about course material. Farida has also used Facebook to seek out trainings and lectures of interest to her and said that there would be no other way for her to learn about these opportunities. They are not alone. Most participants noted the ability to get information and advice as an important aspect of SNS use in Azerbaijan, especially because the "real-life" process of acquiring information resources is often fraught with the need to reach out to others. In some ways then, SNSs allow for supplementing of offline activities but afford much in terms of broader audience and speed of transaction. Social media simplify this process, *if* the information required is appropriate to share with a wide audience, for instance, "Does anyone know what time this café opens?" rather than "How can I get my son a spot in this elite school?"

Some individuals, like Farida and Dilara, actively share information without being asked, with the possible strategic benefit of being known as a good resource. Farida often posts Wikipedia articles, especially about science, on Facebook, in hopes that her friends "will read it and want to seek out new information as well." She also uses these posts to learn who in her network is also interested in science because she says her university classmates do not seem to be interested in such



Figure 1. Virtual gifts.

topics. Dilara also posts information to Facebook with the hope that it will be “helpful” to someone in her network. Nonetheless, these are concrete informational resources and opportunities to provide resources that are important for Azerbaijanis.

Conclusion

Based on these preliminary results, in distrustful Azerbaijan, the affordances of SNSs provide opportunities for strategic relational maintenance for Azerbaijanis. Azerbaijanis have a different set of relational maintenance behaviors from that

found in North American contexts because of the need for close friendships to create a network of resources. Friendships are thus more instrumental and reciprocal, and Azerbaijanis utilize more strategic behaviors to maintain these relationships.

In this study, we found that none of the traditional close friend relational maintenance behaviors can be *replaced* by SNSs, but they can be supplemented. Because social media reduce costs and increase efficiency, relational maintenance behaviors are extending *outside the bounds* of traditional ways to engage in relational maintenance (McEwan, 2013; Rabby & Walther, 2003), for example, by allowing a wider

audience to witness the relational maintenance behaviors, which makes them more valuable. These findings expand research on the affordances of SNSs for relational maintenance, an area still in its infancy. These findings also extend work on understanding the affordances of information and communication technology in different cultural settings. The affordance perspective has not considered cultural, economic, and political contexts as well as it could, and future research that contextualizes findings in such a way is much needed.

Additionally, despite the new opportunities that SNSs provide Azerbaijanis demonstrated in this article, the distrusting, insular nature of Azerbaijani society may limit the potential benefits of SNSs for relational maintenance. For example, interviewees said that it is common for new brides to turn over their passwords to their husbands and some mentioned fear of being blackmailed through screen captures of private messages. So, despite the affordances of SNSs for relational maintenance, it is unlikely that SNSs will do much to impact the overall trust environment in Azerbaijan. Finally, this study was limited in its empirical scope, and questions remain as to what other influences, perhaps gender, socioeconomic status, and cosmopolitanism may have in our results. Future research should look at a more diverse sample of Azerbaijanis' online and offline relational maintenance behaviors.

In conclusion, SNSs are influencing how Azerbaijanis strategically maintain close friendships, yet it remains to be seen what the outcomes of this new platform for relational maintenance will be and whether SNSs can provide opportunities for easier resource acquisition or even upward mobility for Azerbaijanis, especially those with less access to the close friends that open doors. There is some evidence that some young Azerbaijanis do use SNSs to bypass the traditional networks and means of accessing resources. Aynur noted a young photographer who spent years commenting and liking on SNS posts of some young Azerbaijani socialites, eventually making it into their outer circle. It would be difficult for the photographer to befriend the socialites face to face, but SNSs made it possible for him to prove his worthiness. Similarly, Azerbaijan has numerous Internet celebrities who have used SNSs to build large followings (20,000-70,000 followers, out of a Facebook population of about 1 million) and platforms for their opinions and content that would be impossible to create without technology. These Internet celebrities have a surprising amount of influence in Azerbaijan, especially given that most of them did not come from particular families or organizations that would traditionally be a source of power in Azerbaijan. Building power almost exclusively from SNSs is undeniably an important development in such a closed society (Pearce, 2014). Such examples demonstrate that SNSs may provide an alternative means of resource acquisition outside of this kin and close friend system for those willing to dedicate the time and energy to do so, and such possibilities have more of a transformative potential in Azerbaijan than supplementing traditional relational maintenance behaviors does.

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Notes

1. <http://www.crrccenters.org/20560/Social-Capital-Media-and-Gender-Survey-in-Azerbaijan>
2. We acknowledge that there is a great deal of debate about the conceptual definition of trust (Nannestad, 2008; Schweers Cook, 2005).
3. "the use of personal networks and informal contacts to obtain goods and services in short supply and to find a way around formal procedures" (Ledeneva, 1998, p. 1).
4. The first author (K.E.P.) conducted the first round of interviews, sometimes with assistance from three North American female graduate students. In the second round of interviews, K.E.P. was accompanied at interviews by a male Azerbaijani research assistant in his late 20s; he provided language interpretation when needed.

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