A Dialogue for Social Change on Facebook: A South African Case Study

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Abstract

The increasing popularity of social media platforms and the Internet's increasing accessibility in developing countries establish a case for using social media in international development. This essay outlines the potential of social media to drive a dialogue for social change. I argue that social media posses an important potential that is grounded in the congruent philosophies of the two concepts 'social media' and 'social change.' Social media express a new mindset that distinguishes this evolved media species from the so-called traditional media. This social media mindset is expressed in six core ideas which I call the six Cs of social media: connectedness, community, content, conversation, collaborating crowd and collective action.

Before elaborating on the theoretical underpinnings, I will first present the most important empirical findings of a case study: loveLife, South Africa's largest HIV-prevention initiative, which engages youth in vivid dialogues on Facebook about societal grievances. I applied a model of communication for social change (Figueroa et al., 2002) in a deductive content analysis to a sample of the dialogues. The results confirm that there are elements of a dialogue for change inherent in the analysed dialogue sample and emphasize the potential of social media dialogues to drive social change. In making societal grievances a topic of discussion and participating in the dialogues on loveLife's Facebook page, the young people become aware of the status quo in their society. Furthermore, they actively negotiate understandings of the presented situations, identify causes, and to a smaller extent outline visions for the future and more or less concrete solutions and actions to take. Therefore, the dialogues trigger thought processes and create mutual understanding about the societal situation. The study could confirm previous research (Junge, 2012; Sheedy, 2011) which pointed out the power of online dialogues in change processes by making topics being present in the minds of people and making them discussed. However, the research also reveals some challenges that the approach has to face.

Keywords: development communication, communication for social change, social media, Facebook, South Africa, loveLife

I. Introduction

Lately, since the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the transforming power of new technologies in the hands of people has been discussed. The uprisings, which took their beginning in 2010, were quickly titled the 'Facebook-revolution.' While the power

of social media to drive social change has become a well-established research topic in revolutionary contexts, the same phenomenon has received less attention in the context of international development cooperation, more concretely, in development communication (DC) (Hemer & Tufte, 2012; McAnany, 2012). The here presented research is set in exactly this context, acknowledging the need for academic research on social media, in general, as well as in change processes in international development.

In the next section, I will highlight the most important empirical findings of a case study set in South Africa, namely *loveLife* (LL), the country's largest HIV-prevention initiative. It targets primarily teenagers and follows a holistic approach, taking further societal and individual factors into account (LoveLife corporate, 2012a). One of LL's main approaches is an educational multi-media campaign. The initiative can be considered a pioneer in using new media in order to drive the country's development and making young people become active in social change. Indeed, the results of the here presented case study underline the potential of social media to drive processes of social change.

II. The Case Study of *loveLife*: The Most Significant Findings

LL engages with youth where they are home on different new media platforms, for example on the social network Facebook. Their page (*loveLifeNGO*) has nearly 30.000 likes and engages their youth community in dialogues on societally relevant topics. In the case study here presented, a sample of 42 dialogues was analysed. This content analysis was supported by face-to-face interviews with employees of the LL editorial team that initiates the Facebook dialogues. Most of the time, LL describes a status quo in its posts in order to trigger a dialogue amongst its community. The content analysis identified the elements of 'A Dialogue for Change' that were found in the Facebook dialogues (see Figure 1).
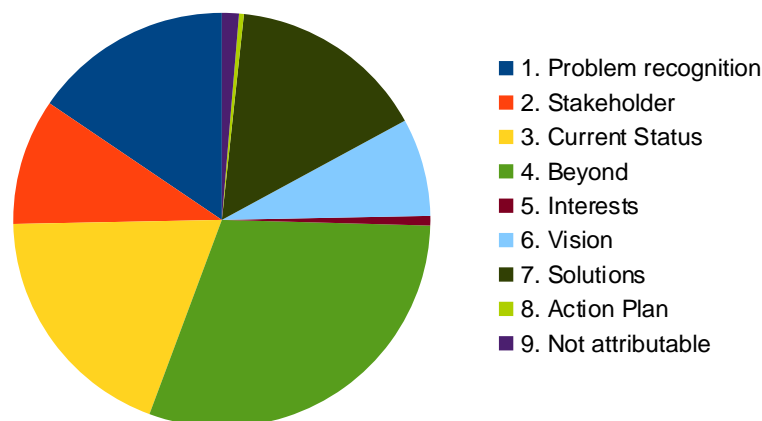
Figure 1: *Distribution of the elements of a 'Dialogue for Change' on loveLife's Facebook page (in %).*

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First and foremost, the online dialogues enable the young people to identify a societal status quo and mark it as a societal problem. With other community members, the young people reflect and negotiate understandings of the reality they experience, its meanings, underlying causes and following consequences. The youths comment on each other's comments, ask clarifying questions and develop the topics in a common dialogue forward. To a smaller extent, the dialogue participants direct their perspective towards the future and outline visions and solutions.

This research did not attempt to evaluate a social change process and the findings do not provide information about its impact. However, the study could confirm previous research (Junge, 2012; Sheedy, 2011) which pointed out the power of dialogues on new media to contribute to change processes by making topics present in the minds of people and initiating their discussion. The identified elements of a change process will be discussed further in the following section of the paper.

A. Problem Recognition

According to the *Iceberg Model of Change* (Käufer and Scharmer as cited in Pruitt, 2007),

change starts in the minds of individuals where they identify a status quo and define it as problem. Overall, of all counted elements, more than 15% can be allotted to this category. The contributors judge negatively a current status quo and show incomprehension, often brought forward in an emotional manner. For example, the mention of a rape case triggered comments such as "crazy & sick people" (LL FB 4.5_1)[1] or "dis world is cumin 2 an end* disgrace*" (*sic*) [This world is coming to an end. Disgrace] (LL FB 4.1_2).

Through their engagement level, the youths clearly value the agenda brought forward by LL. Furthermore, the young people use the dialogue platform to raise their own topics and set their own agenda of issues. For example, one participant made the following comment in a dialogue about rape statistics "[…] and there is another type of rape called corrective rape […]" (LL FB 4.7_17). The community members especially express their agenda of pressing topics when asked for it. One LL post, for example, reminds the youngsters on the laws known as 'Pass laws,' which restricted freedom of non-white South Africans during Apartheid times: "Tomorrow, we set aside a day to celebrate the 20 000 or so women who marched against pass laws in 1956. If we were to march again, what would we be fighting for?" (LL FB 8.4_0). This questions receives outspoken answers, such as "Corruption" (LL FB 8.4_2) or "Better education" (LL FB 8.4_4). However, most of the newly named issues are not taken up by the community and developed further.

B. Identification of Stakeholders

LL's Facebook community engages in a deeper analysis of the identified issues, such as the identification of stakeholders who can contribute to an actual change. Most of the comments identify stakeholders implicitly. For example, comments that refer to the law identify the state or the government as a stakeholder. However, in the here presented analysis only explicit identifications of stakeholders were included. Young people locate stakeholders

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1The coding scheme 'LL FB 4.5_1' reads: LoveLife Facebook dialogues, month 4 (April), loveLife's discussion-sparking post number 5 in that month (date ascending), comment number 1 on this post.

on different levels, such as the United Nations, the state, and the community.

Half of the overall number of dialogue elements identified help to clarify different perceptions. Participants negotiate frames, conclusions drawn from experiences and different perceptions of reality in order to come closer to a common understanding. This negotiation process can be divided into two different categories: descriptions that focus on the current situation (category C) and those descriptions which go beyond and ask for underlying causes or consequences, if the current status remains (category D).

C. Clarifications of Perceptions – Current Status

The contributions in this category are of different quality. Most of the time, young people describe one aspect of a tackled problem. Together with the contributions of the other members, the whole picture becomes apparent. Fewer contributions even go one step further and contributors point out the complexity of real world, mentioning tensions. For example, some comments point out the high requirements job advertisements expect from applicants, while young graduates without work experience have trouble finding jobs (LL FB 7.1_4; LL FB 7.1_10). Sometimes the descriptions are supported by contributors' own experiences and examples, such as "[…] being a young mom myself […]" (LL FB 5.2_24).

In this negotiation process of perceptions, participants feel the necessity to clearly label situations. Introductory phrases, such as "That is..." or "I call this...," are followed by outspoken expressions that help put realities in a nutshell – for example, when labelling the pregnancy of nine year old girls as "rape" (LL FB 5.2_2; LL FB 5.2_8; LL FB 5.2_10). The following example illustrates such a negotiation process: The community members tackle the LL following question: "What is standing between you and economic freedom?" (LL FB 6.5_0 – LL FB 6.5_3).

Comment 1: 'we have improved but the countys wealth is still dominated by whites... I dont
know where we lacking maybe you can answer that for me' (*sic*) [We have

improved, but the country's wealth is still dominated by whites. I

don't know where we are lacking. Maybe you can answer that for me.]

Comment 2: 'I bealive dat thers no problem b2wn me/youth nd economy bt we dnt wana as

youth of 21st century we come deficult 2 da economy of our country... Meaning

we got wat it takes 2 reach success bt we dnt wana make use of it.....!! Tnx 4 a

gud topic....!' (*sic*) [I believe that there is no problem between me/youth and

economy. But as youth of the 21st century we come difficult to the economy of

your country. Meaning we got what it takes to reach success but we don't want

to make use of it. Thanks for a good topic!]

Comment 3: '@Comment2 datz nt true we are tryin 2 reach out bt da economy is failin us'

(*sic*) [at Comment2: That is not true. We are trying to reach out, but the

economy is failing us.]

The contributors project different perceptions against each other and set up the field in

which the problem is situated. Contributor 2 takes a self-determined and pro-active mindset,

locating the problem within the people. Contributor 3 clearly rejects this presented frame and

locates the reason in exterior circumstances. Contributor 1 already takes a solution-oriented

mindset, asking for necessary changes.

D. Clarifications of Perceptions – Beyond

The contributions in this category clarify perceptions that go beyond the current status.

Nearly 1/3 of the contributions in this functional category identify underlying causes for a

current societal situation. Contributors are especially likely to identify causes when LL asks

for it. An example of this was regarding a statement on high school dropout rates in South

Africa: "Sad fact: Over 66% of young South Africans us drop out of school without a matric

certificate. Why do you think so many teens drop out of school?" (*sic*) (LL FB 6.4_0). The

community identifies causes, such as "drugs, peerstigma, child headed families, pregnancy

and porvety" (*sic*) [drugs, peer stigma, child headed families, pregnancy and poverty] (LL FB 6.4_21). Similar as before, these issues are not taken up by the community in a dialogue. Other contributions were found in the following functionalities:

- They point out consequences ("[…] & ths also brings SA in a disgrace & discusting to other countries" (*sic*) [and this also brings South Africa in disgrace and disgust from other countries] (LL FB 4.4_1)).

- They ask follow-up questions and dig deeper. However, this stylistic device is rather used by LL in order to keep the dialogue going. Especially outraging topics, such as the pregnancy of nine-year-olds, get the community to engage with the LL's follow-up question: "What do you guys feel should be done about this?" (LL FB 5.2_18). The following comments demand for "more sex education at skuls" (*sic*) [more sexual education at schools] (cf. LL FB 5.2_20), penalties for the perpetrators (cf. LL FB 5.2_22; LL FB 5.2_23), and reminding parents as stakeholders of their duty of providing sexual education (cf. LL FB 5.2_26).

- They tackle the identified issue on a meta-level, such as societal inclusion or societal classes. One contributor, for example, challenges with his/her comment regarding the rape of a mentally ill boy by two women: "[…] are we saying humans who are physically challenged dont belong in our society […]" (*sic*) (LL FB 4.5_12).

- They take sides, as for example when LL asked if condoms should be distributed at schools (cf. LL FB 10.8_0).

- They fulfil dialogical functions, such as addressing specific community members and directing questions and answers. The use of this stylistic device suggests that community members indeed read previous comments before commenting themselves. Most of the time, community members address others directly when following up on timely close comments. This referring function is also expressed in neighbouring

comments, which tackle a common idea not mentioned before by LL. In a dialogue on the high rate of rapes, three out of the total number of six comments took up the idea that a "real man" does not rape (cf. LL FB 4.1). However, the analysis clearly shows the limitations of a multi-participant dialogue on the current Facebook environment. If a dialogue triggers too many comments, the single posts tend to become standing-alone contributions without the dialogue participants referring to earlier comments.

E. Expression of Interest

Participation in online dialogues requires young people to be literate and to have the possibility to access the Internet. Therefore, the most disadvantaged community members probably do not participate. The community makes the voices of disadvantaged members heard, and in so doing aims to be inclusive in its dialogue. For example, the community brings the cases or perspectives of victims forward (cf. LL FB 4.4_5; LL FB 4.6_13). Although this element was present in the dialogues, it goes beyond the scope of this research to make an adequate judgement about it.

Nearly one quarter of the overall number of elements refers to the future. They describe a vision (category F), try to identify solutions (category G) and very few indicate a plan for action (category H).

F. Vision of the Future

In their wish for change, the community aims for an ideal, such as: "A violence free nation, especially against women and children in rural areas..." (LL FB 6.2_2) or "D end of teenage prgnanc" (*sic*) [The end of teenage pregnancy] (LL FB 6.2_13). Furthermore, community members bring forward the general mindset of change, for example, when facing the high rate of rapes: "sumthng must b done 2 prevent dat 4rm hapening […]" (*sic*) [Something must be done to prevent that from happening] (LL FB 4.7_8).

G. Finding Solutions

The previously identified vision for the future remains a pure vision unless approaches for solutions are envisaged. Indeed, community members indicate solutions which have different degrees of concreteness and take different approaches. Passive approaches (appeals to divine power), general solutions (penalties for the perpetrators, demands for education) and concrete solutions (concrete behavioural advices, for example regarding HIV/AIDS, proposals of concrete actions) were identified.

The proposed actions are situated on different levels. One participant demands for grassroots' action regarding the high rates of rape: 'Cmo..n! Guys ur all take abt change what abt action? We need 2 form group nd go 2 places, gather people around especialy woman nd children make them be ware nd how 2 get away 4rm dat situation!' (*sic*) [Come on, guys! You all talk about change, what about action? We need to form groups and go to places, gather people around, especially women and children and make them be aware and how to get away from that situation!] (LL FB 4.7_18). Another one demands the government to take action with regards to homosexuality: "The government have to make a public speech about this to make it legal" (*sic*) (LL FB 10.1_4). Community members feel the need to make other members understand their ideas. More than 1/3 of the proposals are accompanied by further elaborations, such as reasons for the proposals and consequences of their suggested solution. Furthermore, some comments also acknowledge restrictions of their own suggestions.

H. Action Plan

A few comments bring forward action plans. For example, one community member addresses LL's peer educators called groundbreakers: "[…] groundbkreakers in jhb if akhona plz ... each and every month u guys nid a BFD […]" [groundbreakers in Johannesburg [if akhona?] please each and every month you guys need a born-free dialogue[2]] (LL FB 4.5_3).

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[2] The generation born after the end of Apartheid in 1994 is referred to as the 'born free'-generation. In the so called "born-free dialogues," LL provides a platform for an open dialogue between the born frees and their

Before discussing the implications of these results, I will elaborate on the methodology and the theoretical frameworks in order to clearly situate the research.

III. The Research Interest and Methodology

The research was guided by a set of research questions which together shed light on social media's potential to drive change. Leading the way to the overall question, the first question grounded the research in theory. It focused on the underlying and very similar philosophies of the two theoretical frameworks in which this research is set: social media and development communication. The question asked: how do the congruent philosophies of the two concepts make social media be a valuable approach for bringing about change in development?

The second research question complemented this perspective on the benefits, asking about the challenges. Besides this potential, which limitations does a social media approach have to face? It was answered through theory and results of the actual case study.

The third question applied the theoretical insights to the case study of loveLife's Facebook community and asked for the extent to which social change is enacted on social media platforms. Do social media open up new spaces for dialogical approaches to change? Elements of social change were identified and portrayed in the on-going dialogues on LL's Facebook page for a specific period of time. The research applied a dialogue-centred and process-oriented model of Communication for Social Change (CFSC), which was developed by the Johns Hopkins University Center for Communication Programs (cf. Figueroa *et al.*, 2002). The model describes the processes of "community dialogue" and "collective action," which are connected to each other, triggered by a catalyst and lead to changes at the individual and social level. In turn, these aggregate to changes with a societal impact. While the idea of a dialogue refers to a thought process that is developed further in the exchange with others, collective action refers to a very concrete action to be realized. The model

parents about challenges that sustain the high rates of HIV/AIDS in the country (cf. LoveLife corporate 2012b).

proposes a number of different steps which the process of dialogue-focused social change follows. It is, therefore, designed in a problem-solving mode, which takes a campaign-character with a clear end and within a very traditional development context. As indicated before, I prefer to follow the Iceberg Model of Change (Käufer and Scharmer as cited in Pruitt, 2007) in its interpretation of change processes. According to the model, visible changes have deeper-lying roots in mental models. They start in the mind of each individual through a thought process and dialogue. Therefore, the proposed steps of a CFSC process were interpreted as elements inherent in a process of dialogue-focused social change (cf. Benzinger, 2013).

Furthermore, following Kononova and Mitchell (2012), I argue to interpret collective action in a broader sense. In this sense, social media engagement was not seen as leading to collective action, but already the engagement in itself was interpreted as a kind of collective action. Already the gathering as a group on social media platforms, the exchange with each other, and the development of a common understanding of the situation is a common first, collective step towards change.

The core idea of the case study was to identify if and where the CFSC elements, as proposed by Figueroa *et al.* (2002), were present in the sample dialogues. These elements were traced with a deductive content analysis and adjusted as necessary. The sample was derived from a body of dialogues which developed on the page over the period of seven months, concretely from April to October 2012[3]. Semi-structured interviews with the LL staff as well as a research diary completed the data gathered.

The agenda for LL's Facebook page consists of monthly topics, which are broken down into weekly themes. LL follows two great lines of posts. On the one hand, LL writes about subject-oriented topics such as schooling, sexuality and HIV/AIDS. On the other hand, LL

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[3] LoveLife's Facebook page can be found here: https://www.facebook.com/loveLifeNGO?fref=ts.

also takes the role of a reliable coach for youths in the challenging South African environment. Hence, the team uses inspiring and motivating posts to strengthen the bonds within the LL's community. It was assumed that the foremost mentioned type of posts – factual posts – were of more value for the conducted research.

In addition, the value of these factual posts for the dialogue-focused analysis varied depending on the response they triggered. The spectrum of visible responses is wide: sparking discussions, short replies, and liking or sharing a post. Depending on its character, a post takes a different overall function for community engagement and is more likely to trigger one response over another. Posts using open questions, asking for the community's opinion, presenting current statistics and cases about disturbing societal situations were assumed to be especially likely to trigger dialogues among the community. Examples would be: "We're sad to hear about another rape. A 17-year-old mentally ill boy has been allegedly raped by two women in Soweto [Link to an online news article]" (LL FB, 23.04.2012), or "Music videos and other media pressure 'makes schoolgirls behave as sex objects to lure boys' – what's your opinion?" (LL FB, 16.05.2012). After classifying the posts according to the overall functions, 42 posts were found to be relevant for the analysed time period. The number of responses triggered by these posts varies greatly from zero to more than 80 with a median of 9,5.

IV. The Choice of the Case Study

The case study is situated in South Africa. An exhaustive discussion of the country's context regarding Internet connectivity and new media is out of the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, some aspects shall be touched upon. South Africa is a pioneer in subsaharan Africa regarding Internet connectivity and usage. Internet penetration is constantly increasing (Internet World Stats, 2012) and its use not limited to urban areas. Especially with younger generations, it is also very popular in the usually less developed periphery regions of South

African metropolises, known as townships. In a 2011 study, only 14% of a total of 715 interviewed township inhabitants, aged 16 to 35 years, claimed not to have Internet access at all. While that research does not claim representativeness, the results represent "arguably the closest approximation to social media usage patterns of township residents currently available" (ikapadata Mobile data solutions, 2011).

Comparably to the international situation, social media activities rank also very high amongst South African internet users (Gottfried, 2012; Phantaky, 2012) with Facebook being a major player (Vermeulen, 2012; ikapadata Mobile data solutions, 2011). Studies report social media's growing popularity amongst other South African age segments than youth (World Wide Worx, 2012; Accuracast, 2012). Mobile phones are the major way for the African population to connect to the Internet (Deloitte, 2012; Strauss, 2012). Even within the South African low-income urban youth segment, the great majority have a mobile that enables them to access the web (Kreutzer, 2009). Indeed, new media do not always require a permanent Internet access. There are projects, such as the social network platform, *awarenet*, which runs on a basis of mesh networks (Village Scribe Association, 2011).

For social media to be taken up by a society, its philosophy has to fit into the cultural context. The idea of the social web traces back to the cultural context of the U.S. Asking if this idea fits into the cultural context of the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China), a research group at Georgetown University (U.S.) conducted a cultural comparison of those countries with the U.S. based on a widely acknowledged tool proposed by the cultural researcher Geert Hofstede (Mishra, 2008). Applying the same comparison to South Africa reveals a coherent picture and similarities regarding cultural values. For instance, both contexts are cultures of competition and performance and both have a slight tendency towards openness for innovation (Benzinger, 2013). Social media fit well with South African oral traditions of making oneself heard. As one interviewee put it, "It is almost as if social

media were invented for us" (Interview, LL_7).

V. Theoretical Framework: Development Communication and Social Media

The research is set at the intersection of two theoretical frameworks: the participatory lines of development communication (DC) and social media. DC has shifted its focus from a top-down communication driven by international aid organizations to a bottom-up perspective, which favours participation and emphasises the community as owner of their own change (Dagron & Tufte, 2006; FAO, 2005). A current approach to DC is known as Communication for Social Change (CFSC). It defines development in terms of social change as it is described by the Millennium Development Goals (Wilkins, 2009; Waisbord, 2005; Rogers & Hart, 2002). Having an interdisciplinary character and being rooted in non-Western value systems, CFSC satisfies the calls of academia to internationalize a research field that traditionally has been dominated by European and US approaches (Dagron & Tufte, 2006). The widely agreed upon and referred to definition of CFSC reads as follows. CFSC is:

> a process of public and private **dialogue** through which people define who they are, what they want and how they can get it. Social change is defined as change in people's lives as they themselves define such change. This work seeks particularly to improve the lives of the politically and economically marginalized, and is informed by principles of tolerance, self-determination, equity, social justice and active participation for all. (Gray-Felder & Deane, 1999, p. 8; emphasis mine)

Clearly, CFSC puts the affected in the driver's seat for change, demands engagement and activity from them and makes the community owner of their own change that is enacted in a horizontal, dialogical process. The understanding of change, as argued for by CFSC, goes beyond change at the individual level and recognizes the influence of social norms.

Situating the research at the triangle of social change, youth and media makes it recognize youth's role in driving change (United Nations, 2010) as well as the influence of new media

on the appearance of CFSC (Centre for Communication and Social Change, University of Queensland, 2011). The research follows Marc Deuze's idea of a "media life" (2011, p.139) which postulates that young people's lives are mediated lives where online and offline have become one (Larsen, undated; Interview, LL_7). In turn, young people are the ones to make very innovative and creative uses of digital media (Carlsson, 2009).

While there seems to be unspoken consensus on the core idea in the variety of terms used to describe the phenomenon, different definitions emphasize different aspects. Oftentimes, the emphasis is placed on new technology, which is accompanied by social aspects (cf. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2012; Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011; Carton, 2009). At the other end of the continuum, definitions become more abstract (Doyle, 2010; Kagan, 2008, Solis & JESS3, n.d.). The understanding of social media as applied here rejects a technologic-centric perspective and argues for a new philosophy that is inherent in the phenomenon.

Therefore, I use the term "new media" in order to refer to interactive technologies. They distinguish themselves in crucial terms from the so-called traditional media. While traditional media exist independent of their use, the new generation of media "comes into being through their use only" (Münker, 2009, p. 38). The user becomes immersed in the media while creating them.

I argue for the use of the term "social media" to refer to new "principles" and "practices" (O'Reilly, 2005), which have continued to arise surrounding the new technological features. Social media refer to developments grounded much deeper and describe an underlying philosophy that brings a "fundamental" (Scearce, Kasper & Grant, 2009, p. 1; Li & Bernoff, 2008, p. 9) change in the way a society lives and works with each other. Scearce, Kasper and Grant (2009) find a new term to describe what is not simply "the wiki; it's how wikis and other social media tools are engendering a new, networked mindset − a way of working wikily" (p.1) that in its core is deeply anchored in humanity:

> [It] is actually just about being human beings. Sharing ideas, cooperating and collaborating to create art, thinking and commerce, vigorous debate and discourse, finding people who might be good friends, allies and lovers – it's what our species has built several civilisations on. That's why it is spreading so quickly, not because it's great shiny, whizzy new technology, but because it lets us be ourselves – only more so. (Mayfield, 2008, p. 7)

In order to capture the essence of this new mindset, I compiled the works of different scholars (Benzinger, 2013). Although the compilation is not an extensive literature review, the congruence of different descriptions becomes obvious. From this compilation, I derived the six core ideas of social media mindset: connectedness, community, content, conversation, collaborating crowd and collective action. Following other proposals (Royse, 2012; Mishra, 2009), I describe them as the *six Cs of social media*. In these, the striking parallels to the philosophy of CFSC become obvious.

The first two Cs of *connectedness* and *community* are closely linked to each other. Connectedness describes networks as the "nervous system of our society" (Van Dijk, 2006, p. 2), which enables accessibility to other network nodes. Being the major societal structure, networks have been influenced by societal realms, and they also shape societal realms such as technology, economy and others (Van Dijk, 2006). Technology indeed has driven interconnectedness, and new media make it easy to establish connections. While in the 1960s, Stanley Milgram could prove the six degrees of separation which connect everybody in the world with everyone else (small world theorem), more recent studies indicate a clear reduction in intermediaries (Petersen, 2012).

Research from South Africa confirms that online social networks tend to reproduce existing societal structures, such as race, gender, or culture in a cluster of strong ties (Walton, 2010). However, the digital sphere enables people to easily develop the so-called weak and

latent ties, which can function as bridges between these core circles (Ferrara *et al.*, 2012; Haythornthwaite, 2011) and thus enact what Granovetter (1973) called "the strength of weak ties."

Out of this network structure and possible relations, a virtual community and the feeling of belonging together develop. In the 1980s, Benedict Anderson proposed the concept of an imagined community based upon the shared experience of newspaper consumption. Since then, technology has enabled these communities to become even more tangible and to interact virtually. The principle of a "generalized reciprocity" (Mathwick, 2008 as cited in Send, 2010) makes members contribute to their community without expecting a direct service in return.

Virtual communities connect people around *content*: one common issue of interest (Mishra, 2009; Van Dijk, 2006). As Rheingold (1993) puts it, "you can't simply pick up a phone and ask to be connected with someone who wants to talk about Islamic art or California wine." Participatory media have redefined traditional distribution of power and have merged the user with the producer role to what is expressed in the blend word "produser" (Bruns, 2009): producing media content themselves, deciding for what is important (agenda setting) and negotiating perspectives (framing). Participation inequality is a topic that has been discussed in this regard (Goodier, 2012; Nielsen, 2006).

The community interacts and engages in a *conversation*, which enables participants to bring perspectives forward, exchange and understand and in the end arrive at a "shared meaning-making & co-construction of knowledge" (Pruitt & Thomas, 2007, p. 23). Within the framework of participatory media, these dialogues are set in an advanced version of what Habermas termed the public sphere (Mazali, 2011; Edgerly *et al.*, 2009; Van Dijk, 2006).

The community as a *collaborative crowd* engages in common *collective action*: the "joint pursuit of goal(s)" (Rashid, 2011, p. 136). Participatory media follow a 'pull'-logic and invite

for participation. Hence, the dialogue and common action are solely up to its members who chose to become agents for their own societal change. As argued before, following Kononova and Mitchell (2012), already the dialogue with others on social media was interpreted as a kind of collective action. This approach was seen to be more fruitful in the dialogue-centric perspective taken in this research. Overall, a social media community can be understood as a collaborating crowd in which everybody's small contributions aggregate to a synergetic whole.

VI. The Case Study in the Light of Theory: Discussion of the Results

The main idea of the case study was to trace elements of CFSC in *loveLife*'s dialogues on Facebook. The research could confirm the strong existence of these elements in the dialogues. The research emphasizes the potential of social media for a community dialogue, in which frames are negotiated, experiences exchanged, agendas set and thought processes triggered. The analysis revealed a number of limitations in these dialogues on social media encounter, such as the number of contributors that can limit the effectiveness of a real dialogue. Oftentimes issues raised by community members are not taken up by the community in a further dialogue. This clearly indicates the need for someone to listen to the community, take up the issues and animate the dialogues.

In this interaction, the community creates shared knowledge and understanding. It was argued that social change starts in the minds of individuals. Therefore, engagement in the dialogues was described as part of collective action. Hence, the community dialogues are of great value. While attempts of solutions could be identified, they did not result in concrete offline actions. Indeed, these findings confirm other research (Byrne, 2007). As a result, one could ask, on the one hand, if collective action in a traditional sense is necessary, considering the strong potential of a dialogue for change. On the other hand, one could connect the findings back to Figueroa and Kincaid's model of CFSC (2002), interpreting the situation

portrayed in the sample as a snapshot of an ongoing change process that has not yet reached the stage of traditional collective action.

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