

**The role of Facebook for overcoming “the problem of the
Stranger”**
A case study with Bulgarian immigrants in the United Kingdom

By

Christian Danielov Vatchkov

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Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology

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Supervisors:

prof Jean-Louis Fabiani

prof Andreas Däfinger

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis I focus on the analysis of the possible coping strategies incited by the mediation of Facebook which can be adopted by immigrants to overcome the problem of status loss in the process of immigration. In the first chapter I analyze the existing in the physical world channels for information flow between the domestic and the foreign peer group and their limitations for establishing a vital connection between peer networks from different social settings. I also focus on the role of cohesive immigrant groups and pre-SNS forms of mediated communication. In the second chapter I deal with the mediation of Facebook and the opportunities for self-representation provided by it, which allow the immigrant to regain control over her history, to receive confirmation for that history from her peers due to the mediation of the SNS and possibly to capitalize social assets from. The third chapter focuses on my case study with Bulgarian immigrants in the United Kingdom, and the specific strategies adopted by them to cope with the insecurities in their everyday life in the light of the anti-Bulgarian media campaign spearheaded by the Daily mail. The theoretical approach and the findings of this research can be of interest for social scientists concerned with the problems of cybersociology and immigration studies.

Keywords: social networks; homophilous ties; Facebook; computer mediated communication; cohesive networks; status loss;

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Introduction

This research deals with two phenomena far too broad, sodden with a multiplicity of semantic meanings, the manifestations of which are not simply particular but often contradictory – immigration and computer mediated communication (CMC). It is a matter of honesty and respect for the reader of this text that the author should provide information in regard to what her expectations of the following pages might be. Since both immigration and CMC have been discussed in previous works over and over again, it will probably be easier to begin with addressing what this paper is not, rather than what it is. The reader will not find a critical assessment of the role of new media in the lives of immigrants here, and even less some inherent social laws and universal patterns that dominate the particular discourse of choice. This work belongs to a long tradition of non-positivist sociological thought, one that can be traced back at least to the works of Max Weber and Georg Simmel. In other words, this text offers primarily an approach, a toolbox and a methodological instrumentarium that can be used as a vantage point towards rationalizing and understanding the role of Facebook in the lives of “the strangers” (Schutz 1944).

The situation of the immigrant, an individual who is engaged in a process of transition between two different social settings, has been discussed in the social sciences many times over. What makes this topic so tempting for the researcher is the intrinsic tension in this act of transition, which sheds light on social mechanisms otherwise easily overlooked and/or naturalized if analyzed separately in the net of overlapping contexts with different agents and their dispositions. In this paper, I focus on one problematic aspect of the immigration process which is present to a varying degree in many of the individual cases - the loss of social status experienced by the immigrant, as a consequence of her role transitioning from the domestic setting to the foreign one. Following Weber’s affinity for producing one-sided analysis

(1949), I focus on one very particular aspect of the coping strategies that the immigrant might adopt in her attempts to regain and consolidate her social role, and the status that comes from it (Leifer 1988). The scope of this research is the immigrant's drive to establish contacts with past immigrant or existing compatriot immigrant networks, to build ties that can secure the flow of information from the domestic setting to the foreign one and thus to diminish the gravity of the loss of social status.

In this context I will trace the inherent operating mechanisms of Facebook, which might exercise influence on the way the immigrant copes with the problem without the mediation of past immigrants or bridges between the home group and the foreign one. My particular interest is how can Social Network Sites affect the reasoning's of the immigrants to maintain contact with peers from the domestic group, and to engage in continuous interaction with past immigrants, and how this can be connected in the long run to the dispersion of cohesive immigrant networks, the process of pioneering to a new destination where no compatriots are present at the moment and eventually to the process of reverse migration.

The key authors used in this text - Alfred Schutz, Erving Goffman and Pierre Bourdieu wrote their theoretical systems long before the rise of the "Digital Age". To some, the choice of such "outdated" theoretical framework might seem inappropriate. However, I find it to be if not mandatory, then at least very efficient for the task at hand. Since my priority is to juxtapose the ex-ante and ex-post situation of the immigrant in relation to the creation and popularization of the Social Network Sites (SNS), I think that the ideas of the aforementioned authors present an exceptionally relevant starting point for a research focusing on the process of collision or interference of the virtual and the physical worlds. Furthermore, the existing literature on transnationalism and cohesive immigrant groups on one hand (add cit. inter alia. Massey and Espinosa 1997; Sandell 2011; Sassen 2003;), and on digital diasporas on the other (Miller and Madianou 2011; Elias and Lemish 2011), is to a great extent dealing with

precisely localized phenomena and is thus shaped by and limited to the needs and peculiarities of the particular researches. It is my opinion that building an argumentation primary on their basis will inevitably lead to a distortion of the focus of the present sociological piece.

The implemented methodology makes use of the toolsets provided by the fields of Social Inquiry and Network Science, going from general (although supported by examples from the fieldwork) analysis of the structure of individual agents' social networks to a more personal and immediate form of inquiry – in-depth interviews with the respondents. The choice of field and respondents is to a great extent a consequence of my own position as a sociologist, and my own engagement with the problems of immigration and the role of cyber space in it. Not being too far from the situation in which Schutz was writing his famous essay “The Stranger” (1944), I engaged with the topic and made my research in a foreign setting, in an unfamiliar social environment, while constantly relying on the mediation of Facebook to keep and maintain my social contacts with my domestic and foreign peers. However, as a sociologist, and as such - a disinterested scientific onlooker (Weber 1932), I could not possibly rely solely on my own experiences, and on the discourse analysis of the phenomena in question through my own point of view, marked by my own value judgments (Blum 1944). Thus by choosing to make my research among other Bulgarians I made an attempt to offer the readers with examples from the everyday life of the respondents, while not completely disregarding the facility of being able to rationalize their actions and dispositions through the scope of my own experience. The choice of the Bulgarian group as a center of my fieldwork has a major objective significance – the fact that national Bulgarian identity is subjected to stigmatizations by an aggressive political campaign against immigration going on in the British mass media for the past few months. Thus by focusing on the emergence of this new “crisis situation” (Schutz 1944), which further embellishes the status loss of my research

group I can map the actions of long-term and recently arrived immigrants and how it affects their coping strategies related to the mediation of Facebook.

The problem of the stranger and coping strategies

In the following pages I will make an attempt to clarify the notion of “the problem of the stranger” as it will be used in my research. The goal of this chapter is to present a more or less ideal-typical conception of the immigrant as a rational agent - one who is driven by *Zweckrational*, by instrumental rationality (Weber 1978:24-25) in the process of prioritizing her social endeavors and planning her actions according to the means or ends for her “use and enjoyment” (Dewey 1938). This ideal-typical notion of the immigrant bears the characteristics of Schutz’s “stranger” (1944) - the individual who is engaged in the process of transition from one social setting to another. If we stay true to Schutz’s line of thought, the required change in the way of perception of social reality and in the basic dispositions towards it, that the individual must undertake in order to achieve acceptance in a foreign setting, inevitably leads to a shift in the focus of her actions that will allow her to successfully influence a new audience. In that sense, the individual must alter her “thinking as usual” (Schutz 1944) and rationalize her actions in order to be able to act relevantly to her new setting. However, this “acting as usual” and “thinking as usual” is not a skill that can be acquired overnight, if ever. And if Schutz, in his purely phenomenological approach, focuses on the shift of attention, the act of challenging the cultural dispositions acquired in the domestic setting and the immigrants’ largely instrumental use of the foreign culture, he overlooks the problem of status loss, posed by the inability of the agent to act as an equal participant in the interaction process with the new peers .

The change of social settings requires of the immigrant to enact a specific image of herself, which is to a certain extent different from her domestic roles. As a stranger in her new social environment, the immigrant experiences a crisis situation in a sense that she lacks the opportunities to exercise control over her social role and therefore the socially interact on an equal level with her new peers. She approaches the coveted new group as a person “with-out a

history” or at least as a person without “interested audience” (Leifer 1988:867) that can confirm that history.

The immigrant doesn’t have a masterful operation of the language (in a metaphorical sense, that she do not possess organic knowledge of the nuances of interpretation of the foreign culture shared by these born within it) of the in-group – he is always the lesser player, the novice who is playing with experts (Leifer 1988:876). And being the lesser player poses many limitations for the immigrant in her attempt to achieve a coveted role, one that can secure her future opportunities to gain prestige in the foreign network. If we observe the initial stage of the interaction between two agents, the local action which precedes the establishment of social roles (Leifer 1988), the inherent inequality between local and foreign becomes obvious – as a matter of degree of control over the situation that each of them can exercise in a given moment. In order to regain control over the situation, the immigrant has to acquire a coveted role, but can never infiltrate the social network of her new peers in a reciprocal social interaction as an equal (as a contradiction to the ideal situation of reciprocity, as Eric Leifer described it in his work on pre-role interaction (1988)).

The reason for this unavoidable inequality between the immigrant and the local rests on the fact that they are put in particular roles before the beginning of the interaction – roles as simple as that of a giver and receiver (Leifer 1988), or of one who has organic knowledge of the social environment and a cooperative audience to reaffirm that knowledge, and one who has not (Schutz 1944). Being a “stranger” in a network of peers who share common history, the individual lacks a peer group that can confirm her social role and the prestige and status related to it. Thus, from the beginning of the interaction, the immigrant is withheld in a loop between the need to affirm her social role in the new setting as an equal (and to capitalize on it to gain prestige) and the fact that she is being deprived from the credence that a stable peer network could provide her with. The lack of a social network that can give

credence to her coveted role requires of the immigrant to either accept subordinate role in her new setting, or to design strategies in order to overcome the crisis situation and regain the prestige she has lost in the process of immigration.

It is true that, speaking in Bourdieusian terminology, the lack of social connections can be partially compensated by a sufficient amount of economic or cultural capital (the former one can be recognized as valid as it is considered to be universal, and not as bound to the local reality of the domestic setting). Furthermore, prestigious status can be achieved, if the immigrant possesses a universally recognized role that is entitled with symbolic capital recognized by the new audience (such is the case with highly qualified professionals, university professors, famous actors, athletes etc.). However, the situation with the immigrant who lacks this opportunities to regain prestige without relying on her social capital, drives us back to the ideal type of Schutz's stranger. On the one hand, she lacks the intimacy of her domestic social group, the required "interested audience" that can confirm the validity of her coveted role. On the other hand, she is unable to get involved in local action (Leifer 1988), without adopting the subordinate role in the dyadic pair immigrant-local. In this situation, it is not surprising that the immigrant is tempted to maintain her connections with her peers in the homeland or with her compatriots in the foreign country, so she can affirm her identity through the brokerage of people who can confirm her past roles or/and make possible the transliteration of symbols of prestige recognized in the old network to the new one.

The need to maintain stable role, and the pressure of the new social environment to compromise the validity of that role, are a main reason for the creation of immigrant colonies, where the individuals situated in a crisis situation can maintain the feeling of stability by isolating themselves from the unfamiliar setting. In the following pages, I will examine how the coping strategies for regaining the history of the immigrant, by acquiring an "interested" and knowledgeable (acquainted with her social role in the domestic country) audience work in

practice – what are their limitations and why the immigrant might want to refuse the mediation of compatriots between her and the foreign in-group in the process of migration.

1.1 Immigrant networks

It has been discussed many times in the existing literature on the topic, that the information exchange between past immigrants and incoming immigrants who share same country of origin is a major factor for the choice of destination of individual agents (inter alia Massey 1990; Massey and Espinosa 1997). In Rickard Sandell's work, *The immigration flux* (2011), the author makes his argument on the importance of social capital¹ density in a particular municipality, as a major factor for the future immigration of foreign-born citizens in that area. He distinguishes two major steps in the process of immigration. The first one is the pioneering step, when individual immigrants move to a destination where their compatriots have not moved yet (2011:26), thus establishing a channel for the flow of social capital for future immigrants. The second step is the creation of an immigrant network, which attracts same foreign-born groups to the municipality.

As Sandell argues, the exchange of social capital is the main benefit and priority for the immigrants to seek out new destinations within the foreign country where there are already other past immigrants. Following Burt's assumption that larger network size can be used as an effective proxy measure of quantity of social capital being exchanged (Burt 1992:12), I may assume that the rational choice of the future immigrant is to seek large clusters of past-immigrants. To maximize the flow of social capital within the immigrant

¹ The author uses the term "social capital" as follows: "the form of assistance and information passed on from past migrants to potential migrants" (Sandell 2011:2)

network, shorter network distance between the individual agents will be preferable (Kossinets and Watts 2009:437), one that can support the emergence of denser networks where the individual agents are strongly connected to one another. By any means this process of creation and maintenance of vital immigrant networks has been a major aspect in the choice of destination, and can be considered as a relevant factor for establishing social ties between the past immigrants and the new arrivals. The need for immigrant-specific information regarding, but not limited to, housing and labor-opportunities (Sandell 2011) that a preexisting immigrant network can secure for the future immigrants, represent one piece of the puzzle posed by the immigrants' patterns for selection of new destinations.

In the context of my study, I turn my focus to another major aspect of the formation of immigrant networks, their durability in the long run and the level of cohesiveness they achieve. If we go further from Sandell's scope of analysis, we can distinguish additional factors for the formation of cohesive immigrant networks, or at least for vital connections with past immigrants – the inevitable insecurity resulting from the loss of social status experienced by the immigrant in the process of transition from the domestic social setting to the foreign one. Since the immigrant does not share the social and cultural past of the in-group that she desires to join, she is unfamiliar with the peculiar cultural and social dispositions shared among her new peers (1944). Not being able to “act as usual,” she is subsequently positioned into an unfavorable social role, which rarely entitles her with symbols of prestige and social status. In this situation, it is not strange why the immigrant seeks the company of compatriots in the foreign setting, who can provide her with the sense of role stability that can be observed among people who share similar cultural and social background (Goffman 1967).

To understand the patterns of selectivity for forming new ties within the foreign setting, which eventually result into the formation of immigrant networks, I employ the concept of the “homophily principle” (inter alia, Lazarsfeld and Merton 1954; Burt 1991;

Smith Lovin and Cook 2001). According to it, the agent strives to associate herself with other agents that share a certain degree of similarity with her. In the case with immigrant networks, this similarity is manifested in the shared interest for information, mutual aid (Sandell 2011:2) and role stability. However, the individual social foci of the agents in the network may or may not be similar. In this sense, the cohesiveness of the group in the long run is based predominantly on the established spatial proximity of the agents and their shared habitus as compatriots in a foreign municipality. This *sui generis* form of induced homophily (Leifer 2009) that binds together immigrant networks, can be easily negated in the long term, if the individual agents social prerogatives are altered – for example, as a consequence of establishing vital ties with the foreign network, or by losing interest into sharing information due to achieving a prestigious status in the foreign country.

The role of past immigrants and existing immigrant networks is therefore twofold. On the one hand, there is the initial and continual mutual aid provided by a compatriot community regarding information for labor, education, medical etc. prospects. On the other hand, there is the opportunity to rely on an audience familiar with personal past experiences, or at least the disposition to acknowledge their validity. Past immigrants serve first as bridges between the in-group in the foreign country and the future immigrant, and second - as bridges between the history of the domestic group and the in-group. That makes the attractive power of dense immigrant networks easily understandable.

However, there are a few major potential drawbacks that are worth mentioning. First of all, the future immigrant takes the risk to be perceived by the in-group as a part of the established priory before her arrival image and social status of the past-immigrants, which, as a consequence of the pre-role action limitation, is likely to be subordinate. Second, if indeed the immigrant network is entitled with favorable social status by the in-group, the Machiavellian dilemma of the “conquest by fortune” supposes that the immigrants role will be

unstable and distorts the power relation between an individual and his peers, endorsing with great influence a third agent who mediates the communication and verifies the prestigious role of the immigrant². Third, if the individual agent chooses to associate herself with compatriots she risks to be perceived by the members of the foreign group as a “cultural hybrid... a marginal [wo]man” (Schutz 1944:507) – one who does not show signs that he wishes to become an equal member of the coveted new group. In the long run, the social ties based on the principle of induced homophily and the immediate need for support experienced by the immigrant, can significantly limit her future prospects to engage in ties with peers of the in-group with whom she shares homophily by choice, thus jeopardizing her supposed goal – maximizing her “use and enjoyment” (Dewey 1938).

1.2 Mediation through bridges

However, for people who do not live in such colonies, the options to transfer status from the domestic setting are very limited. The “traditional” channels (face-to-face communication, phone calls, chat rooms etc. and all kinds of communication that are limited to interaction between two agents) for confirming someone’s identity require a system of bridges between the two groups to be present. What is more, in order to efficiently allow the flow of information between the domestic and the foreign networks, the system of brokers has to be large enough to effectively influence the new peers (so it can be credible beyond the level of singular opinion from one peer) and it must include people who are simultaneously well connected with the domestic and the foreign network.

² By using the term “the conquest by fortune” Machiavelli is referring to Cesare Borgia’s rise to power, which was achieved predominantly on behalf of the authority of his father pope Alejandro VI. (See Machiavelli 1988:22)

In the next pages, I will analyze two individual networks and their inherent potential for bridging the domestic and the foreign group. If such connections are indeed present, that would allow a channel for the flow confirming and validating information for the prior social role and social status, that the immigrant used to have in his home country, to be established. After that I will briefly make some assumptions, which will be further developed in the next chapters, on the possible implications of adopting Facebook as a communication medium by immigrants and particularly the way in which it transcends the limitations of the “traditional” model based on brokerage.

In the past few years, Facebook has become extremely popular, and in the majority of cases the social network one possesses in the SNS almost completely overlaps with one’s offline social network. In the next pages, I use as examples the networks of two of my respondents, who confirmed that the Facebook networks share a high degree of similarity with their actual networks outside virtual space. The first example is the relatively small network of Manol, who immigrated recently to London to seek job opportunities. The second one is Mila’s network, which displays a rather more complex case, since she immigrated to Scotland 6 years ago, and subsequently moved to London. The fact that she has been studying and working in two different locations provide a more scattered network, with several distinctive peer groups.

The very limited data that is being used has purely exemplary character, since at this stage I can rely only on networks about which I can be sure to be representative of the actual offline networks with a satisfying degree of similarity. In both networks there are only a few people that might be considered as strong ties³³ who are missing. The missing links are however very closely tied to the cores of the individual’s Facebook networks (either the

³³ The definition for strong and weak ties I imply is the classical one formulated by Granovetter in regard to the frequency and intimacy of the relation between two agents (Granovetter 1983)

domestic or the foreign) and therefore can receive information about our present social behavior through a variety of other peers. What is of the utmost importance is that there are no unrepresented people who could be familiar with both the domestic and the foreign group. This gives me the assurance that the displayed networks can provide a correct representation of the possible bridges existing between the different groups. For privacy reason, the names of the individual agents in the networks have been encrypted and therefore appear as number sequences on the graphs. The data for the graphs was collected by the author with the Facebook application namegenweb (<https://apps.facebook.com/namegenweb/>) visualisation of the graphs was done with NetDraw. The squares represent individual peers within the network, while the nodes between them indicate the existing connection between two squares. Higher density of nodes within the network indicates high level of connection between the peers in a particular group, where the peers near the core of the network group are better connected, than these in the periphery.

Manol's network displays two rather small groups. The Bulgarian network is very dense and the nodes in the core display the short network distance between the individual

peers.

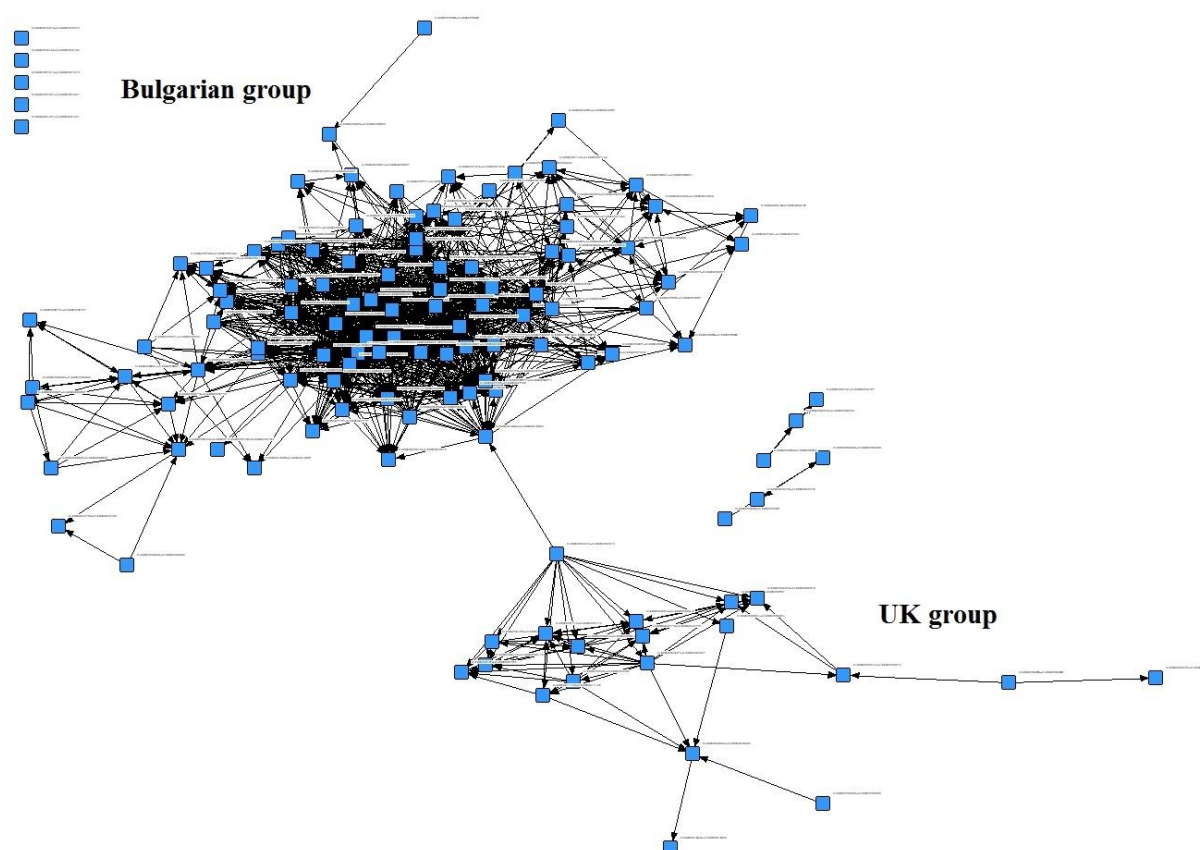
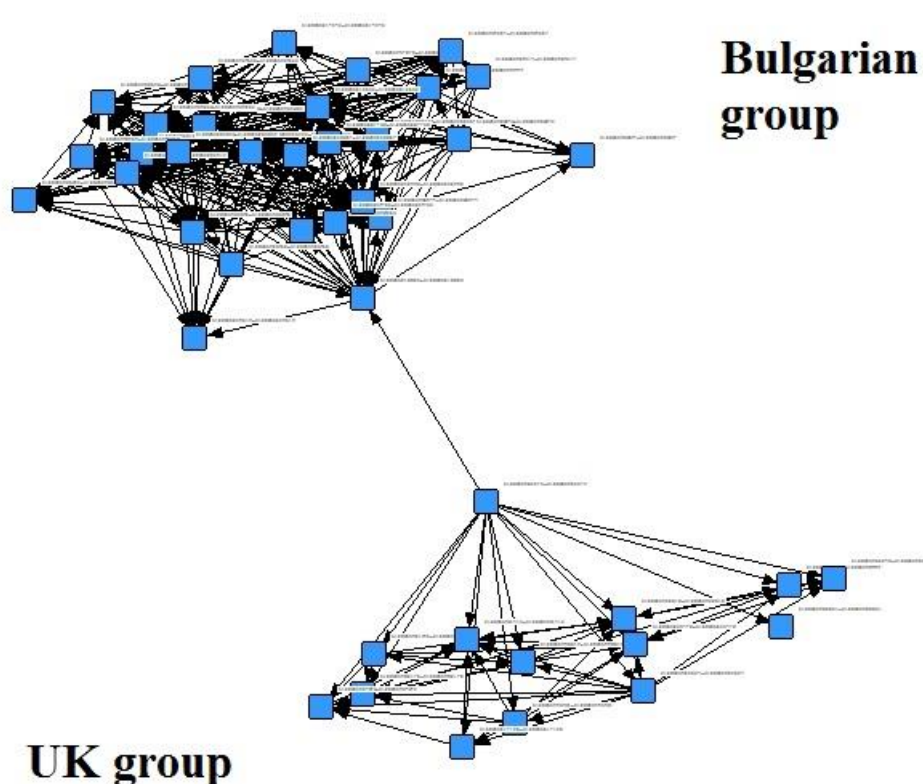


figure 1

I assume, and Manol confirmed it to me during the interview, that the Bulgarian group is highly clustered around a core of really close friends, displaying a network well saturated with social capital. Here I employ the term social capital in the loose sense offered by Rickard Sandell (2011:2) as a measurement of the potential of a network system to maintain the flow of relevant information between the peers in the group. The people in the core of this group are mostly close friends who know Manol from his childhood years, who lived in his hometown of Yambol and subsequently moved with him to Sofia. In other words, this group represents the peer network in which the members share common history and are acquainted with her biography in the domestic country (Goffman1971:198-199), and can therefore be used as relevant source for confirmation of her domestic social role.

On the other hand, the UK group is presented by three separate networks, which are divided by structural wholes (Burt 1995) from one another. The existence of a structural whole in the case of the immigrant's network indicates complete absence of connection between two peer groups, and thus no foreseeable opportunity for an information flow between them to be present. If we assume that Manol can rely on the brokerage of one or more people who act as bridges between the core of his domestic group and the foreign



network,

figure 2

there must be an established channel between the two networks as displayed in the figure bellow. However, as we can see there is no direct bridge between the two networks, and only two relatively well connected peers have a mutual connection with each other. This connection requires the information for Manol's domestic biography and social role to travel two steps to reach his new peers in the foreign group, which is highly improbable, even if the

two connectors indeed keep a vital relationship with one another. Furthermore the two British groups (co-workers from different jobs) are left as isolated networks, which cannot possibly communicate either with peers from the domestic group, or with the main foreign one.

The visualization of Mila's network displays a very different picture of network dispersion.

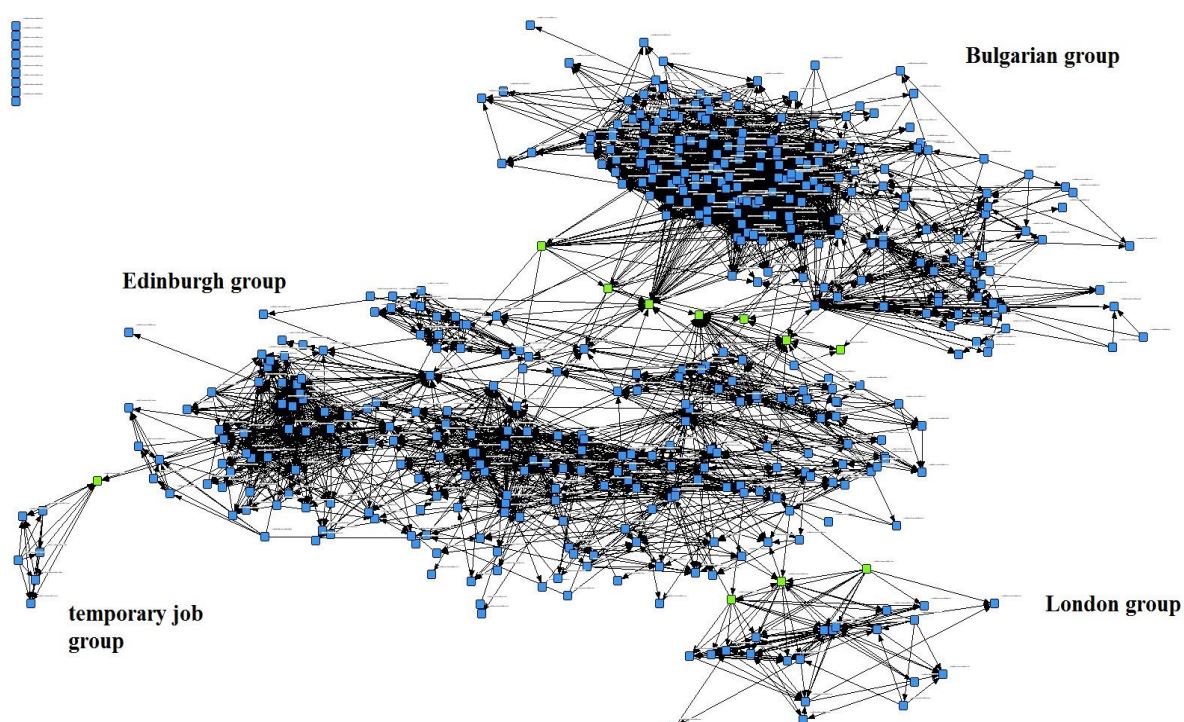


figure 3

As the graph shows, Mila's network includes several distinct groups, which are separated from one another, but the level of brokerage between them is significantly higher in comparison to Manol's case. Mila has spent significantly longer time in the United Kingdom, and has accumulated a vast network in Edinburgh. However, her London network is relatively small including mostly her new peers from UCL.

The ego networks⁴ of the agents who can possibly act as bridges between the Edinburgh group and the Bulgarian network, highlighted in green, red and yellow on the graph bellow demonstrate significantly higher level of brokerage.

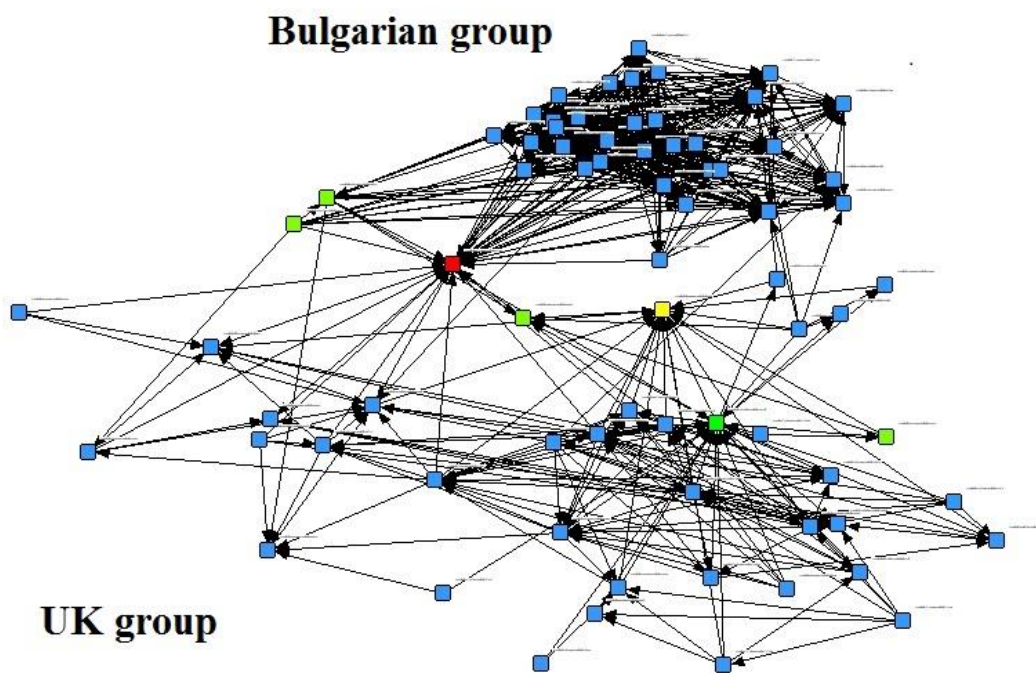


figure 4

The long time spent in Edinburgh, and the frequent visits of Bulgarians to the foreign destination, have penetrated the UK network relatively effectively. However, the bridges highlighted in green (fig. 4) do not possess vital connections with both networks. The yellow node (UK citizen), which is the strongest connector in the Edinburgh network has a connection to the core of Mila's Bulgarian network only through another peer (much like the

⁴ An ego network displays one node (ego) representing one particular peer of interest. All other nodes (alters) are displayed according to their connection to ego.

case with Manol's network). The only vital bridge between the two communities, highlighted in red, has a very strong connection with the Bulgarian group, but information flowing from the Bulgarian network to the core of the Edinburgh group has to pass through two or more steps. As we can see, the situation with the London group (fig. 5) is even more unfavorable for a vital flow of information.

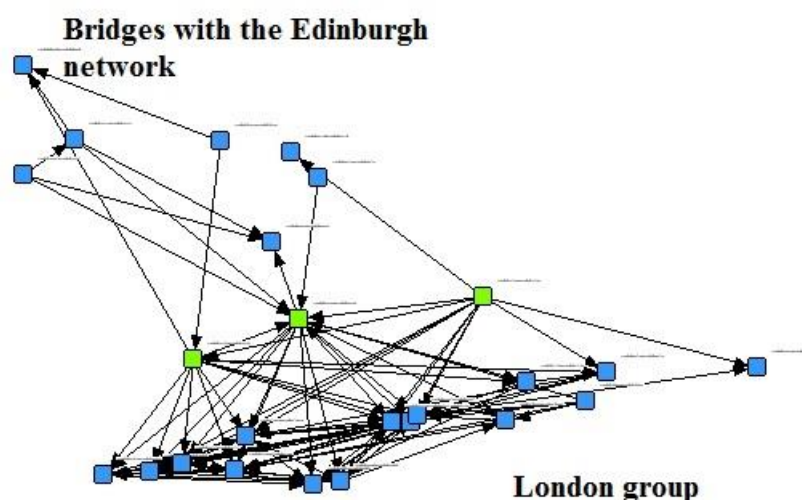


figure 5

Here we can see that all three brokers are well connected with (the predominantly student) London network. However, their connection with the Edinburgh group is severely limited, chiefly to connections with peripheral members who are poorly connected with the core of the Scottish group. This makes me consider the fact that, in the process of internal migration within the UK, the immigrant cannot maintain a vital group of brokers between the groups in different municipalities, and subsequently the connection established between the domestic group and the group in one municipality remains a local phenomenon, that cannot influence effectively the channels for information flow between the Bulgarian and the London group.

From the displayed networks we can see that the level of brokerage is limited to very few and to large extent ineffective bridges. The possible removal of one strong tie (the only one is figure 2 or the red one in figure 4) will lead to the formation of a structural hole between the domestic and the foreign group, practically leaving them as two completely separate networks, without any possible channels for information to flow between them. While structural wholes can be seen as beneficial in certain scenarios (such as the case with competitive players described by Ronald Burt (1995)) in the case of the immigrant they force her into a powerless position, where she cannot control directly the flow of information about her domestic role, and the eventual prestige social status associated with it, and therefore is completely unable to capitalize on her position in the domestic network to accumulate and validate prestige in the foreign one.

If we come back to Leifer's Machiavellian approach (1988), but in another context, we must acknowledge that the prestige acquired by the power of a singular relation (through a bridge confirming the validity of a social role) can be lost easily, or to even turn against the one who possesses it. Furthermore, the information passed by connectors is by definition incoherent and biased (depends on the individual reporting it, the social status she holds in the domestic/foreign group and the particular attitude of different circles towards her) and gets progressively less credible and more distorted with every single step it takes to reach the core of one of the main networks (as displayed by the two step connection in figure 2 and the 2 or more steps required for information from the Bulgarian group to reach the London network in figure 3). In the process of immigration, the channels for validating the social capital accumulated in relation to a past social role are therefore being extremely limited, and subsequently the opportunities to accumulate prestige through past roles become unavailable. The described so far scenario, reveals the major issues that prevent the immigrant from successfully managing vital channels between the domestic and the foreign networks that can

secure him with the required interested audience, which can verify and accredit the social status occupied by the individual in her former social setting.

1.3 The role of mass media and pre-SNS computer mediated communication

The importance of face-to-face communication with benevolent and responsive peers is the backbone of successful social integration. This frequently repeated refrain has influenced immensely the studies on the topic of immigration in the social sciences, and especially the fields of sociology, anthropology and social psychology. “The quantity and the quality” of face-to-face interaction (Argyle 1989;1996;2001) and the effective social environment that can secure it are the main reason for the individual to seek the establishment of homophiles ties “by choice” (McPherson and Smith-Lovin 1987), with peers who share similar social foci and cultural disposition with her. However, the difficulties of maintaining and establishing such ties in a new setting require gradual effort and time. By any means, the picture of the social world and the “problem of the immigrant” has changed dramatically since Schutz rationalized his own experience in “The Stranger” (1944), and one of the main reasons for that change is the revolutionized channels for communication that transcend the spatial and temporal limitations of the pre-digital era. This is why in the past decade more and more social scientists focus their research on the role of mediated communication and mass media as a tool that can facilitate and accelerate the process of acquiring new homophilous ties, while preserving the existing ones.

The role of traditional mass media (radio, TV, newspapers) in building hyphenated identities, and a sui generis transnational habitus of the immigrant (Anteby-Yemini 2003; Niznik 2003), have and still exercises an immense influence. The broadcaster-recipient form

of connection allow the immigrant to transcend her local status as an immigrant and receive the feeling of belonging to a network of compatriots (Castells 2001), but however it does not imply a reflexive connection with the information source and can only play a subsidiary role in her face-to-face interactions with the new peers. The role of traditional media for coping with role insecurity and alienation in the process of immigration (inter alia. Bailey 2007; Elias 2008; Gergiou 2006), has been however to a large extent overshadowed by the new forms of communication existing in virtual space. The popularity of computer mediated communication has seen a steady rise in the past years, and introduced to the immigrants an unmatched opportunity to interact with compatriots and new peers in a reciprocal action, that can substitute or complement their face-to-face social encounters.

The existing literature on the importance of computer mediated communication in the lives of immigrants can be separated in two main groups – Internet optimists (inter alia. Amichai-Hamburger and Furhnam 2005a; 2005b; 2007; Elias and Lemish 2009, Miller 2010; 2011) and authors who are more critical and focus on the possible negative implications of CMC (the criticism has followed the development of CMC as early as the works of Siegel, Dubrovsky, Kiesler & McGuire (1986) to recent articles focusing on SNS - Boyd and Heer 2006; Boyd 2004;). The latter ones largely promote the idea that the lack of restraint in virtual communication and the unregulated hostility of some virtual peers can lead to establishing a compromised identity of the agent in her offline group or to insecurity, and social inhibition in the long run, due to the lack of offline contact (Hiltz and Turoff, 1993).

As far as pre-SNS forms of CMC are concerned, the positive influence of the Internet has been largely debated as a form of escapism for socially inhibited people or people who experience stigmatization (Amichai-Hamburger and Furhnam 2007). Since increasing the effectiveness of face-to-face communication remains the major goal of the immigrant, the mediation of chat rooms and forums has been seen largely as a training ground (Elias and

Lemish 2009), where new strategies and social roles can be tested in a controlled and safe environment (McKenna 2002), as a process of preparation for active engagement with the peers in the host country. In this sense, the mediation of pre-SNS sites was limited to overcoming insecurity issues and establishing new homophilous ties based on common interests within a more relaxed environment (where the pressure of the language barrier and the disruptive influence of hostile locals can be minimized), rather than as a tool to directly influence the new peers.

Therefore, the major problem of the stranger, her unequal position in the face-to-face interaction with the peers in her immediate social environment in the foreign setting (co-workers, colleagues, neighbors etc.), is still at hand. Pre SNS sites, are largely limited to direct conversation (chat) or to the employment of an anonymous role in forums and cannot possibly serve as a major factor for regaining prestige, in the degree offered by the mediation of compatriots (either past-immigrants or effective bridges between the domestic and the host networks). The problem with the lack of interested and knowledgeable audience that can confirm one's role, cannot possibly be overcome through the mediation of chat programs, since the domestic and the foreign groups remain two separate worlds without any connection between them, save for the immigrant herself.

2. The role of Facebook as a medium

The multitude of websites, offering different prospects for the immigrant to overcome the crisis situation of her compromised social status and to establish a network of peers, have been to a significant extent either made obsolete or incorporated in the structure of the major SNSs. This ongoing process partially answers the sociological dilemma, posed by Palfrey and Gasser, of the nature of virtual identity (2008:22). The authors discuss the confronting theories in the debate on the production of the “virtual self” as a multiplicity of “selves” as juxtaposed to the concept of “a more or less unitary self-construct” (2008:23). Facebook is a perfect example for a site that constantly amplifies its virtual territory, embedding in its own structure almost every other significant web 2.0 based site, like YouTube.com or completely devouring them, like the case with Instagram.com. This is the reason for many researchers, to focus on SNSs (Inter alia. Boyd 2004, Boyd and Heer 2006, Miller 2007; 2010; Miller and Madianou 2011; Pappacharisi and Easton 2013), when analyzing online activity of different social groups, thus emphasizing on a larger common discourse, with immense impact on everyday life. Among others Zizi Pappacharissi and Emily Easton formulated the trend towards unifying virtual discourses in a common place, with the paradigmatic statement: „The habitus of the new is convergence” (Pappacharissi and Easton 2013:9). The existing literature on Facebook, although very insightful, do not offer a coherent theoretical framework that can be used to analyze in depth the role of Facebook in the process of coping with “the problem of the stranger”. This makes it mandatory for me to engage with the preliminary task to define how the interaction occurs in Facebook, before I can argue on its potential influence on the life of the immigrant.

In doing so I combine Schutz's phenomenological approach and Goffman's theory of everyday social life to outline the peculiar implications of communication through Facebook, as juxtaposed to face-to-face communication in the physical world. The two classical theorists provide a stable framework which can be utilized to grasp the complex nature of the social action as it occurs in the virtual space of Facebook from two different perspectives. On one hand, I utilize Schutz's extensive work on how the social world is experienced by the individual, as a phenomenon that she realizes only partially according to her personal needs and goals. On the other hand, Goffman provides valuable insights for the nature of the social interaction, as it is carried on by the individuals in practice. I further incorporate a Bourdieusian framework to explain the processes occurring on the macro-level, which determine to a great extent the personal experiences and the possible actions and strategies that the user can adopt. By doing so I strive to avoid the dangers of taking an overly deterministic or purely ethnomethodological approach but to rather search for a "middle ground" combining the best of the two worlds to achieve deep understanding of the operating mechanisms of Facebook. Bourdieu's theory of fields and habitus, that provides a conception of unity between structure and agency, connects the macro and micro levels in a logical relation to each other and provides a comparison between the social processes occurring on the macro level in the physical world (inciting certain dispositions of the agents towards Facebook for instance) and their individual practice in the framework of the SNS.

2.1 The Facebook profile as a tool for regaining control over history

The first step towards rationalizing the role of Facebook in the process of immigration is to understand how the operating mechanisms of the SNS compare to face-to-face and pre web

2.0 forms of analog and digital communication. Schutz's concept of the lifeworld (1967; 1973) divides the social space as it is experienced by the individual in three separate worlds – the realm of directly experienced social reality, the realm of contemporaries and the realm of predecessors (1967:139). The first of these “worlds” refers to the immediate communication which requires the agents to share common space and time and to be in the face-to-face presence of each other. Only when engaged in such an interaction, the agents receive direct information for the changing persona of the other. As long as they are “thou orientated”, as long as they share an interest in each other during that interaction, they can receive information about the other without the mediation of a bridge. However leaving the immediate presence of the peers in the interaction, breaks the channel for unmediated flow of information and the two agents become “contemporaries” to one another. Thinking of one as a contemporary requires the employment of a projection constructed on the basis of past interactions and information passed by third parties, that becomes less relevant and eventually idealized as the time passes (Schutz 1967:167). Once the immigrant leaves her domestic peer group she becomes a contemporary to the agents within this network, as they become to her. In this sense the process of immigration inevitably is related to a sense of loss or sacrifice. The immigrant must abandon the opportunity to enact direct control over the way she is perceived among her domestic peers, and in this sense to lose control over the process of updating her history among them.

With the mediation of Facebook, the immigrant acquires the tools to interact with the social world on a completely new level that transcends the limitations of time and space characteristic for the physical world. Every action she engages in becomes a part of her virtual persona – the user profile with “an unprecedented simultaneity, but also (leaves) a digital inscription that lasts” (Miller 2010:17). Once uploaded, the history of the individual, displayed in the form of biographical info., pictures, comments, interests etc. becomes visible

in a space that can be accessed at will by all her Facebook friends. Furthermore her history is under her complete control, unbound to a particular face-to face interaction, and she is able to modify it in any given time without leaving a trace for that alteration being made. This major shift in the way the social action occurs in practice, essentially abolishes the “world of contemporaries” (Schutz 1967:176-202), by providing a constant update for the changing persona of the other, thus diminishing the process of idealization and distortion of the previously acquired information for a particular individual. It makes it possible so the agent can enter the immediate virtual presence of her peers, while sharing time and space within the SNS with them, in a manner which surpasses the traditional channels for information (phone calls, chat messages, emails) in a significant way. The mediation of Facebook do not only offer a channel for communication, that can be achieved through phone calls, chat messages, emails etc., but an opportunity for the immigrant to “grow old” (Schutz 1967:167) together with her peers, to share each other’s virtual presence instead of just exchanging information relevant to the objectives of the particular interaction at hand.

The sense of immediacy that FB profiles manages to enact in the user, allows the immigrant to engage in a communication with both the domestic and the foreign peers, as if she never leaves her home environment and never completely immerses in the foreign one, but however inhabits a setting that belongs to both spheres. This can surely be a factor in easing the “problem of the stranger” as it is experienced by the immigrant, and reduce the need of face-to-face interaction with compatriots in the foreign setting. Furthermore, the ability to make visible her own history, and by doing so to make public a social role that can be associated with this history is on its own a big step towards regaining control over the process of interaction in the foster country and to overcoming the subordinate position in the pre-role action, by making public an already present role.

However, even if we agree with Daniel Miller when he argues that many people share the opinion that the history of one individual as it is displayed on Facebook can provide more information and better understanding of the other, than face-to-face interactions (Miller 2011), the act of self-representation alone is not enough to secure prestige in a foreign setting. Telling her own history and supplementing it with relevant information cannot provide credibility of the role that the immigrant wants to adopt in the foreign network on its own. At this point, the user profile can be seen as a self-made projection of one's social role, and as such as a virtual CV of the user. To emulate the credibility provided by the mediation of past immigrants or effective bridges that can secure a social role, the immigrant needs the active participation of an interested audience that can relate to and confirm the validity of that history.

2.2 The Facebook profile as a network of ties

The basic inequality occurring on the level of the local action between an immigrant and a local, as I mentioned before, is closely related to the issue that the “stranger” cannot rely on signifiers that can indicate her connection with a certain peer group, while the local has the advantage of the “interested audience” to which she is visibly connected. As Goffman puts it down, the local has an “anchored identity”, while the immigrant has an “anonymous identity”, which can be thought in the light of the “standard dichotomies distance-intimacy and impersonal-personal” (1971:190). In other words, the local can easily demonstrate intimacy and engage in a personal relation, or to retreat from an interaction to an already present group. On the other hand, the immigrant appears as an anonymous stranger, whose tie-signs (the indicators for a preexisting relationship with a peer network) (Goffman 1971:195) are

unintelligible for the local. Therefore the physical absence of an interested group leaves the individual in the unfavorable position to seek out peers just so she can appear as a part of a network of friends, or to put it in Goffman's words: "So too often the concern one has on a Saturday night is not so much who one is seen with but that one is not seen alone." (1971:198). Therefore the second major aspect of the Facebook profile that I find relevant for the situation of the immigrant is the way it provides a projection of the individual as situated in a peer network, as a core of a network that displays her existing social ties and relations, despite their spatial and temporal distribution in the physical world (from another country or from a prior moment of her life.).

Danah Boyd, who is a notable and prolific researcher of identity production in virtual space, accurately points out the major shift in computer mediated communication incited by the popularization of SNSs (while focusing on Friendster, the acclaimed predecessor of Facebook). She argues that the major role of SNSs is not the accumulation of new social connections, but rather the public display of existing social networks, in which the individual is involved (Boyd and Ellison 2008:211). If approached from purely qualitative perspective the number of friends provides an expression of one's social capital and a visual display of her social ties. In this sense, the Facebook network in relation to the user profile, is always manifested to the observer as an ego network (fig. 8), where all social connections lead to the center, and every possible action of one of the peers related to affirmation of the virtual role (like, comment, shared activity etc.) is displayed simultaneously to all others.

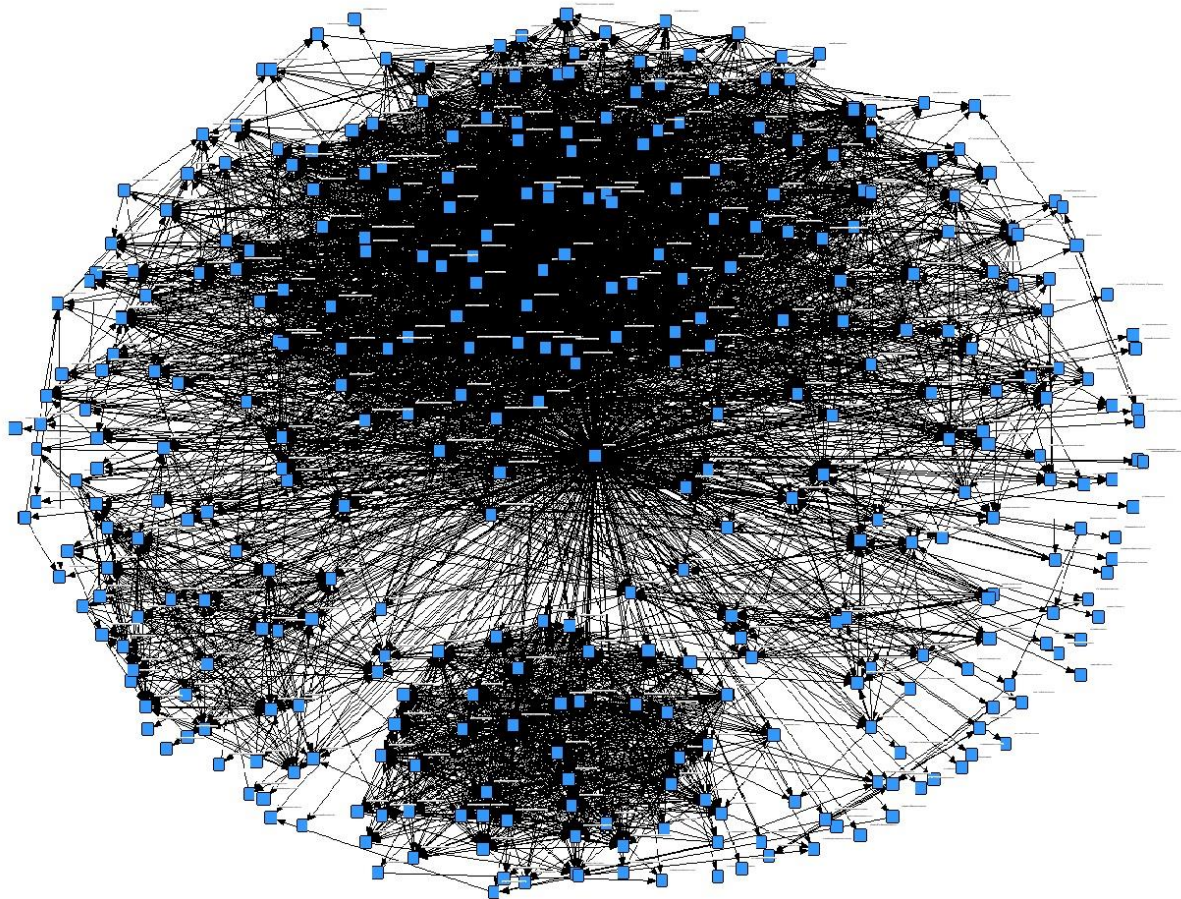


figure 8 example for a FB ego network

As a mere number on the screen, the domestic and the foreign peers alike are displayed as equally important and equally valid social connections (Boyd and Heer 2006:8), and thus represent a gross quantified expression of one's social capital (and securing the problem of "being seen alone". However, the "public display of connections" (Donath and Boyd 2004) in Facebook is not limited to quantitative expression of one's social ties. Through the categories of specified relations displayed in the profile (family members, spouses, close friends etc.) and the particular demonstration of intimacy and affection seen on photos and comments/shared data, the user's controlled history becomes intelligible as shared history – one that belongs to the individual past of the immigrant, but to the shared past of her domestic

peer group as well. In this sense “a public display of connections can be viewed as a signal of the reliability of one’s identity claims” (Donath and Boyd 2004). Naturally, the greater is the interest of the immigrant’s virtual audience, as expressed by the quantity and quality of the social ties and their active participation with her user profile (common photos, comments, likes etc.), the more credible the displayed history and social role becomes, like a scientific book that becomes more credible with the growth of its list of references.

The impact of the displayed peer network on the immigrant’s disposition towards joining a cohesive immigrant networks can be very significant. Through the mediation of Facebook the immigrant receives the opportunity to consolidate a social role, based on previous symbols of status confirmed by an interested audience. If we return to Machiavelli’s notion of conquest, applied to the social reality of everyday life, the opportunity to gain social assets in the new setting through one’s own deeds and individual characteristics (as visualized and written into being in the profile) is a variation of the method of securing status by the power of “conquest by virtue” (Machiavelli 1977 [1469] 16). And if I argued in the first chapter that status achieved through mediation might be unstable, I might assume that one gained without that mediation can be more durable, and thus more desirable, since: “the less one trusts to chance, the better [is] one’s hope of holding on” (Machiavelli 1469:16). In other words, the status provided by the power of third parties – bridges between the communities or induced homophilous ties with past immigrants can become less tempting, if the immigrant has the option to validate a coveted role without their mediation.

2.3 Facebook as a normative framework and regulator of the social interaction

So far, I have explained some of the mechanisms offered by Facebook, by the power of which the immigrant can regain control over her own history and acquire the visible presence of the needed audience that can confirm it. On this micro level of the sociological analysis, where only the agency of the individuals was taken under concern, I have disregarded to a large extent the normative power exercised by the SNS itself, as a social construct that mediates the communication, but also sets the framework of the social interaction occurring in virtual space. In this section I focus on the legitimacy provided by Facebook as a unifying social setting to secure the credibility to one's social role and eventually to incite new coping strategies with the problem of the stranger. When we take under account the larger scale, Facebook operates as a "system of relations" (Bourdieu 1989), a constituted semi-autonomous field of the social life which regulates the social relations between the actors and constitutes distinctive forms of capital and value to be recognized as valid according to the rules of the field. The first form of capital I have already mentioned - the number of friends and the degree of their intimacy displayed in the user profile constitute a certain amount of *social capital* attributed to the user. Furthermore, the Facebook profile is represented in the field of the SNS in its connection to other structures – Facebook pages. By identifying oneself with a number of sites of public figures, political causes, musical preferences, the individual adopts the symbolic significance of existing social phenomena in the field to represent herself, and to broadcast a virtual identity, which is a conglomerate of past experiences and external cultural references. This public association with cultural phenomena represents the public display of the second type of capital – *cultural capital*. Naturally the third type of capital - the *economic capital* can also be demonstrated within the SNS, for instance - through uploading photos of luxury goods and leisure lifestyle, a

digitalized manifestation of Veblen's conspicuous conception (Veblen 1899)⁵. The so described division of the three forms of capital recognized within the field completes Bourdieu's theoretical concept of the three dimensional space (1979:114).

The peculiar thing with Facebook, a common feature for web 2.0 based websites, is that from the very beginning of its existence, a major attribute of the SNS has been the possibility for all users to evaluate every social action of their peers in a precise quantified form, namely – with a fluctuating number of likes. Participation in the social network allows the individual not only to make her social experiences, cultural dispositions and economic prowess public, but to receive immediate evaluation of her actions from her peers. All the uploaded past experiences, as well as indefinite number of symbolic references to cultural signs recognized in the field (pages of popular artists for instance) are subjected to this evaluation system and accumulate a certain amount of symbolic capital attributed to the user (Bourdieu 1992:12).

It is important to keep in mind that the more social capital one possesses, the more her opportunity to receive symbolic evaluation for her social role increases. Therefore Facebook allows and encourages the immigrant to rely on the potential power of her whole network to influence a particular social circle she is currently interested in and to enforce and validate a prestigious role through the amount of symbolic evaluation offered by her strong ties, as well as through her weak ties (from the core and the periphery of the network). If we accept that the rational individual as an ideal type strives to maximize her gains, in the form of quantitative and qualitative evaluation of her social role, she is therefore encouraged by the rules of the SNS to expand her network (both in the domestic and the foreign setting), and to maintain a vital connection with the existing ties, since bigger interested audience directly

⁵ For the Bourdieusian additions to Veblen's theory see Thrigg (2001)

correlates with better opportunities for receiving affirmation of her coveted social role. Therefore, at least in theory, Facebook has the potential to bring a change in the way immigration occurs. Remaining in contact with the domestic group, and building up new contacts in the new setting are not contrary processes, as they appear to be when seen in the perspective of the traditional dichotomy integration-isolation and the leap-based process of social transition depicted by Schutz (1944). At least in an ideal situation where the individual strives to optimize her opportunities for gaining social recognition, they appear to be mutually connected and beneficial to one another.

The value of the “like” as a universal measurement for the symbolic evaluation of the peers is however very dubious. It can indeed be assumed that the SNS as a normative framework exercises certain influence on the users to perceive as legitimate its system for evaluation and that it induces a certain shared by the participants *doxa* – a certain system of “schemes of thought and perception” (Bourdieu 1977:164) common for the users of Facebook. However notions such as “Facebook habitus” or “Twitter habitus” (Pappacharissi and Easton 2013), cannot be regarded as omnipresent in all individual cases of the Facebook users. In reality it is much more probable, that the offline habitus of the particular user formed before their engagement with Facebook, which can be related to their cultural, social and class dispositions will play a more significant role in their judgment of what can be considered as prestigious and what as discrediting for the immigrants social role. This statement is especially relevant in the case of the “digital immigrants”, the generation who extensively uses the Internet (Palfrey and Gasser 2010; Prensky 2001), but has cultural dispositions that are not formed in the process of interaction with it, but prior to their immigration to the Internet. The level of trust in the system for evaluation of the network is thus more likely to be related to the offline habitus of the immigrant’s peers, rather than to their supposed online habitus.

Following Bourdieu's assumption that symbolic capital "is credit ... a credence, that only the group's belief can grant those who give it the best symbolic and material guarantees" (1990:120), I may assume that a "like" is worth only as much, as the beholder of the user profile thinks it is worth. If we perceive the SNS through the Bourdieusian theoretical framework which unifies structure and agency, we have on one hand the quantified measurement for value formulated and legitimated by the structure of Facebook, but it is the habitus of the perceiver, who dictates the exact social worth of this value. For example a particular type of language, or a manner of body expression displayed in public (which can be related to a peculiar form of body hexis (Bourdieu 1977:91) incited by the SNS) like posting and commenting with "yolo" and "swag", and uploading pictures with "duckface" facial expressions, while giving "duces" to the camera might be perceived as valuable by a certain youth sub-culture and thus the amount of symbolic evaluation attached to it becomes credible⁶. On the other hand if it is perceived by an audience disposed negatively to that type of expression, no amount of likes and peer evaluation will be able to negate the contempt of the beholder. Therefore the validity of the role and the amount of peer evaluation becomes relevant only when perceived by the a-likes of the peer, the individuals and groups who share their cultural dispositions and/or social foci.

In this context it is very likely, that the credibility for once social role provided by the mediation of Facebook affects mostly the peers of the user, with whom she can engage in homophily by choice, while they will have little effect or even bring negative connotations among a peer group that doesn't share similar social habitus. The operating mechanisms of the SNS encourage the user to broadcast a variety of symbols associated with a coveted role,

⁶ "yolo" (you only live once) and "swag" are usually used by adolescents in Europe and the States and bring connotations to pop culture and po-stars like Justin Bieber. The "duckfaces" (mouth expression involving pressing the lips together and pushing them forward) and "duces" (the "V" hand sign) can also be largely regarded to the body hexis largely shared by the members of the "swag" community.

relevant to the peer group she strives to infiltrate. For the immigrant that means that if her goal is to engage in an interaction with a foreign peer group sharing her social foci, she might likely limit her influence within the immigrant networks of compatriots' with whom she has established induced homophilous ties. If indeed in practice the role of Facebook favors the establishment of ties on the power of homophily by choice (both with new peers in the foreign setting, past immigrants who share the individual's social foci and peers for the domestic group), while diminishing the need for induced homophilous ties with past immigrants, one of the basic *raison d'être* for the existence of cohesive networks can be put to the question.

2.4 Aspects of the social transparency

The opportunity to visualize and display evidence for the validity of one's history allows the immigrant to regain control over the interaction and to partially overcome the insecurities related to engaging in a local action with foreign peers before their roles have been established. However so far I have considered the immigrant as an ideal type, who is supposed to have deep knowledge of her new peer group and interest to display information on which she can capitalize effectively in the future. Avoiding the local action in favor of pursuing the re-institution of a prior social role, however poses if we abandon that ideal type. If we go back to Schutz's conception of the individual, it is clear that the knowledge and interest that she has for her peers are incoherent, based on mediated and occasionally stereotypical knowledge of the foreign group (1944:502). The effectiveness of the user profile as a controlled projection of the social role is therefore limited to the individual's expectations of what is perceived as valuable and prestigious in the foreign group.

It will be a display of great naivety to think that the cultural differences and social inequalities operating in the physical world will disappear with one gesture of the magical wand manifested in the form of this specific form of computer mediated communication. To reveal oneself in the entirety of her “public image” as it can be achieved through Facebook is not necessarily a wise and desired option. By making visible her previous social roles and cultural and financial status, with all their national peculiarities, the immigrant takes the risk to make public information that is potentially harmful to her image in the foreign setting. As Goffman emphasizes, visibility is a major factor that can define if an individual will be stigmatized in a given society or not: “That which can be told about an individual's social identity at all times during his daily round and by all persons he encounters therein will be of great importance to him.” (Goffman 1963:110). And if Schutz’s stranger is “seen from the point of view of the approached group, he is a man with-out a history” (1944:502), the FB stranger has his previous experiences, his cultural background and the network of his domestic social acquaintances on display for everybody to see. The symbols of the past can reveal both similarities (practices that are considered as normal, familiar and possibly prestigious by his new peers) and controversies (local cultural and social peculiarities which bring infamous connotations for the peers in the new country) with the cultural dispositions of her peers in the new group. And while in everyday life the individual associates herself only with a certain amount of socially recognizable signs, relevant to the present interaction, in Facebook consumption of signs (including the most obvious like national identification) is always visible and therefore is par excellence conspicuous (see Veblen 1899; Trigg 2001). Therefore the profile is demonstrated to the audience as a whole, bearing symbolic capital that is on one hand validated by the field, and on the other tied to offline marks of once social role that can display both symbols of prestige and appreciation, as well as of infamy or stigmata (1984:482).

The second big issue that arises is the problem with the public display of the shift in the attention of the user from one social group to another. I previously considered the fact that through the mediation of Facebook the immigrant has the motivation to maintain vital ties with the domestic community and with the new one alike, displaying a transnational social role. However the shift in attention that occurs in the process of immigration is also made visible through the user profile – the adaptation of the individual to the new culture, or her persistence to preserve her domestic cultural identity is presented to both networks. In this context, if the immigrant orientates her social advances towards acceptance in the new group and disregards the domestic peers in the process and “(s)he will find that (her) offence has been committed in the very presence of those who were offended by it” (int. rit.115). The opposite social transgression is also present – by maintaining connections with the domestic peers and orientating her profile towards them, the individual risks to leave the foreign peers with the feeling that she does not want to achieve acceptance among them, and in a sense is constantly a part of virtual network of compatriots. That can bring more negative connotations than the active association with a certain immigrant network in the physical world, and eventually Facebook rather than becoming a substitute for the positive influence of the mediation of past immigrant, will become a very undesirable and harmful to the social role of the immigrant factor.

The described theoretical suppositions leads me to assume that Facebook can incite three different ideal-typical strategies (who does not necessary exist in reality in pure form, but should be thought, in a Weberian tradition, as heuristic devices (Weber 2005)) for overcoming the “situation of the stranger” without the mediation of past immigrants or bridges. The first option that eventually leads to isolationism is to maintain a Facebook account exclusively dominated by domestic peers, with frequent status updates in Bulgarian. The second option, aimed towards integration, can include removing discrediting sections of

the profile and even removing friends that can be regarded as stigmatized and thus harmful to the controlled social role of the immigrant (as long as the profile is perceived by the observers as a part of a network, where the symbolic capital of the peers partially transfers over the individual user (see Boyd and Heer 2006)). The third option, which is of the greatest interest for me, and which could hardly come into being without the mediation of Facebook, is the possibility for managing an identity that is manifested as an effective bricolage of past and present experiences, that coexist and amplify the potential accumulation of symbolic capital and can be subsequently utilized to secure the immigrants social status both in the foreign setting and in the domestic one, a vivid example of the process of “globalization of the self” (Bualong 2007) and a step towards establishing a transnational identity of the immigrant (Schiller and Glick 1995).

3. Case study – The role of Facebook in the concrete scenario of Bulgarian immigrants in the UK

The theoretical assumptions I have made so far imply that the impact of Facebook on the immigration process can vary greatly in the different scenarios. There are many different social factors operating in the physical world, like the individual psychological, cultural, and social dispositions of the particular immigrant, the concrete situation and reasons for immigration, the dispositions of the host community towards individuals from a particular ethnic, religious or social group etc. Subsequently the impact of Facebook on the immigrant can incite multiple different strategies that can lead to a variety of outcomes like breaking of the existing or reluctance for forming new social ties with past immigrants, increased motivation for pioneering to new previously unexplored by compatriots municipalities and increased motivation for reverse migration to the home country.

In order to give a field test of my theoretical assumptions I have chosen to do a research with Bulgarian immigrants in the United Kingdom. The main motivation for my choice which poses the certain specificity of their case is the ongoing political and media campaigns on the Island against Bulgarian and Romanians that can further embellish the gravity of the social status loss experienced by the immigrant and make her need for establishing channels for contact with compatriots and for status confirmation connected to her domestic social role more distinguishable.

3.1 Bulgarian strangers in the UK

After the demise of the Soviet Union in 1989, immigration from Eastern Europe to Western countries in Central Europe, and particularly to the United Kingdom, has been an ongoing process with wide specter of social and economic implications. For the period of more than two decades the number of immigrants from Eastern European in the UK has grown immensely to form the five largest foreign communities in the country (Standart News 2012). The process seems to escalate in time, with 1,9 million new immigrants having crossed the border since 2004, making United Kingdom the state that accepted the largest number of citizens from post-socialist countries (Kelly 2012).

And while British laws largely prevent immigrants from sharing equal rights, in terms of working opportunities for instance, the latest expansion of the EU in 2007 has been causing a lot of controversy in the public space in the UK. The acceptance of the two new members – Bulgaria and Romania, combined with the ongoing World Recession is a cause for alarm for many citizens of the UK. In the unstable economic climate, with the dangers of unemployment threatening more and more households, the public image of Easter European immigrants is likely to degrade. British experts, cited by the Daily Mail, expressed their concerns for expected “significant spike” in immigration rates from Romania and Bulgaria that will pose a significant thread for the British job market, once the EU regulations for the two countries are to be lifted in 2014. They advise for an extension of additional 5 year period of the transnational arrangements regulating the labor restrictions Romanian and Bulgarian immigrants. Furthermore the article portrays the persistent stereotype of the Eastern European immigrant, situated into the lowest economic stratus – “restaurant workers, sales staff, taxi-drivers and lap-dancers” (Gore 2012).

However, a large part of the immigration from Bulgaria, constituting of young graduate students, searching for better studying and carrier prospects in the UK is subjected to unprecedented discrimination in terms of job opportunities. Since 2007 their access to the labor market in the UK has been restricted by the “yellow card” system. This system confines the rights of A2 EU students in the UK, obliging them to wait for a certificate that allows them to get a part-time job, needed for covering their living costs during the studies. Bulgarians are not only placed in a worse position compared to the time prior to 2007, but are treated with more mistrust from the British Government than students from all other countries over the world, excluding the Romanians (euractiv.com 4.01.2013).

The unfavorable position on the labor market is however only one aspect of the complicated situation of Bulgarian migrants. As Charles Kelly argues, the acts of restricting their rights, the tendency not to acknowledge them as “full Europeans” symbolically “stripped (them) of their whiteness” (Kelly 2012). The pejorative denotation of the Bulgarian community is furthermore developed in association with the preexisting negative image of the Eastern European Roma. The Bulgarian – Roma relationship, manifested in the image circulating in the British media, has been established on two levels, both of which assume their “savagery”. On one hand, there is the popular association between Roma and Bulgarians, thus Bulgarian immigrants are attributed with traditional stereotypes for the Roma, and subsequently perceived as the “new savage” of Europe (on the “savagery” of immigrants see Silverstein 2005). On the other hand there is the connotation of the racist Eastern European, who barbarically discriminates Roma people and is henceforth to be blamed for the waves of immigration to the Western countries (Reid 2012).

These are only a few examples that I call upon to show the particular exceptional character of the Bulgarian immigrants, that makes them of interest for my research. In Bourdieusian terms, the British government policies, enhanced with the power of media

propaganda, serve the purpose to propagandize that a certain habitus can be shared if not by all, than with the majority Bulgarian immigrants. This par excellence act of symbolic violence is depraving these individuals from the opportunity to benefit from their cultural capital, as well as restricting their access to economic capital. In other words they are “strangers”, situated in a setting where their prior experience and social status in the domestic setting is not only questioned but in many cases looked down on.

3.2 Choice of respondents and methodology

The unfavorable social role that can be attributed to the Bulgarian immigrant due to the stigmatized national identity broadcasted by the British media, made me consider that the most relevant approach towards making a fieldwork will be to interview immigrants who have arrived before and after the start of the anti-Bulgarian disputes.

In doing so I will be able to map the difference between the usage of Facebook and its importance, as it occurs in two different situations. In the first one we have the Bulgarian immigrants who have lived for five or more years in the United Kingdom and have probably already established a network of peers and a more or less stable social role in the new setting. The new-comers however have to deal with the already emerged situation without a peer group to support them; this is to say that they must involve in the pre-role interaction without the support of British peers who are already familiar with them and have built a certain image for them. In this sense the year 2012 is the landmark by which I distinguish the two categories of respondents.

Furthermore, even given the rather small number of respondents, I tried to pick individuals who can be regarded as representative for the general population of Bulgarians

living in the United Kingdom. The age of the respondents varies between 19 and 30 years, which loosely categorizes them as “digital immigrants” (Palfrey and Gasser 2011). Three of the respondents are male and three are female, thus representing an equal gender representativeness. Two of them are workers, two are full-time university students, one has just graduated and is currently working and one is a housewife. The equal distribution of students and workers will allow me to juxtapose the two most common scenarios among immigrants that pose a significant difference to one another on the aspect of entering compatriot or foreign cohesive groups (which are more or less pre-established with the case of the students who enter in cohesive groups with the university students (Kossinets and Watts 2009)). In terms of municipalities I chose four of my respondents from the capital city of London, one from the provincial town of Southampton and one from Edinburgh, the capital city of Scotland. Rickard Sandell’s argumentation that a crucial factor for the internal immigration of foreign-born individuals is dictated by the presence of past immigrants and dense networks in a municipality makes three of my respondents Mila, Emilia and Iva, a very good choice for examining the connection between usage of Facebook and internal migration and pioneering. I have conducted in-depth interviews with the respondents, five of them were recorded and one was made via Skype. The method of in-depth interviews was chosen because it can provide my research with vivid and personal experiences from the lives of people actively using Facebook in a “crisis situation”. The qualitative method complements the discourse analysis of Facebook with experiences from the practice of the respondents and provides credibility for the network analysis.

Below for clarity purposes I show the qualitative characteristics of my respondents as follows:

name, gender, age, municipality in the UK, years in immigration (rounded up), occupation

- Boyan; 20; male; Edinburgh; 1year; student
- Emilia; 24; female; Nottingham (5) Southampton (8 months) 6 years; student
(5years) worker (1year)
Manol; 26; male; London; 10 years; worker
- Mila; female; 22; (Edinburgh 4) London (9 months) 5 years; student
- Liubomir; male; 30; London; 1 year; worker
- Iva; female; 28 Dublin (3 months) London (1) 1 year; housewife

3.3 Findings:

The in-depth interviews were to a large extent very successful. The respondents were cooperative, and the majority of the information they provided about their Facebook activities do indeed occur in the practice displayed on their Facebook profiles. The first part of the questionnaire engages with the process of choice of destination, the notable insecurities experienced by the immigrant and the role of past immigrants in this picture.

Rickard Sandell's assumption that future immigrants consider the initial support of compatriots as a major factor in the choice of municipality held true in my case. Five of my respondents (excluding Boyan) received support either from a very close friend or a family

member (Manol's mother who is living in London since 1990) in the beginning and the urge and motivation for immigration came chiefly through a single strong tie. However the density of the social capital, in the form of information, aid and support, did not play a major factor in their choice, and none of them mentioned the existence of a vital Bulgarian community in the region as a reason to go to a particular city (or a country as a matter of fact).

The mediation of previous migrants as a channel for status confirmation was largely disregarded: "I won't be a friend with someone just because we are Bulgarians, and because we both live here. It's not a reason good enough: If I wanted to be a friend with you I would have become one long time ago.". Induced homophilous ties with compatriots were mentioned only briefly by Mila and Emilia as a "yes and no" (both respondents) factor for easing the initial insecurities experienced in the very beginning of their stay in the new country. The idea of keeping in contact with cohesive immigrant groups received the complete denial of the respondents: "[I will be] like the Russians and the Polish. Closed. The British hate us when we close [within a community]". However the mediation of particular individual compatriots is seen as a positive influence if they are mixed among other nationalities: "It is easier to, you know, explain [your] culture and history" (Mila) and that "'it's nice to have someone who is going through the same things as you do.". These relations were however brief and didn't last too long in the cases of the long-term migrants. As I already displayed in chapter 1, with the examples of Mila and Manol, the connection between Bulgarian and British communities through mutual friends is highly unlikely to occur in the physical world. Only one of my respondents had a peer that can serve as an effective bridge in his current municipality – Iva who came to London with her husband because of her best Bulgarian friend who was already there.

My basic presumption that the Bulgarians in the United Kingdom experience significant stigmatizations from the British population naturally led me to focus on this topic

in the next part of the interview. The three long-term immigrants Emilia, Mila and Manol were adamant in their statements that no change whatsoever occurred in the opinion of their friends in the UK in regard to the offensive campaign in the media. However the newcomers Iva and Boyan experienced some serious (as they perceive it) tension between them and the British locals: "I went to my doctor, and she asked me if it is true that all Bulgarians will come to England in 2013. She was very worried... all this things people are speaking in the news, I just feel unwanted" (Iva). Boyan was the only one who confirmed my hypothesis that the Bulgarian identity will be an object of ethnic stigma: "You can't be Bulgarian. You are too white. You are all gypsies!". The interviews showed a direct correlation between having an established peer group that can validate your identity and having to enter pre-role interaction in this particular moment – Mila was even cheered up by her British friends with jokes and ironic comments against the Daily mail. This might sound very obvious in correspondence to the idea that "status comes from [established] role" (Leifer), if it was not for the fact that Mila and Emilia might be long term migrants in the UK, but their just newcomers in their current municipalities – London and Southampton respectively. The factor of the built-up confidence from the longer stay in the foreign setting is by no means to be disregarded, but there is another major factor that may have influenced the stability of their social roles – the communication between foreign compatriots.

Although Mila and Emilia have only recently arrived to their new residence cities, they have very developed peer network in Edinburgh and in Birmingham respectively. Both of them confirmed that frequently their new peers engage in conversations within their posts (mostly shared articles or images), and that there are some mutual friends between the different British municipalities in both of their cases. Iva, who has lived in Ireland was even more precise on the role of interrelations of foreign compatriots for the validifying positive

information concerning Bulgaria: "our mutual friends [between London peers and Dublin peers] are interested in Bulgaria, and some of them have even been there. But they are not that interested in me being Bulgarian, but however that the British had some experience there... they want to hear from the British friends, but never ask me." This statements lead me to assume that the mediation of Facebook plays a certain role in mediating internal peer groups, that can be in fact more credible and play a more significant role for affirming one's status than the display of a vital domestic group within the SNS. In this sense Sandell's idea that internal migration is driven by dense immigrant networks and the role of pioneers and followers might be accurate for the economic reasons and the need for initial aid, but with the mediation of Facebook, the social aspect of "the problem of the stranger" can be eased in another way – through interaction of otherwise weakly connected peer groups born within the UK who validate the role of the immigrant as someone who already possess a significant British peer group.

Another major theme in the interviews was the relation with the domestic group in regard to the hypothetical process of reverse migration to Bulgaria. It is notable that only one of the respondents – Boyan has the idea to eventually return to Bulgaria at some point. However my respondents gave me some insights on the possible role of Facebook that motivates their choice to stay in the UK. Usually (five of six respondents start with it) the first and most important aspect of the role of Facebook that the respondents mentioned was the way they can maintain intimacy with their domestic group. Thus Mila, who has been abroad for five years, but has all her domestic peers (with only one strong tie missing) as Facebook friends, told me that "when I come for vacations it is like nothing changed, like I have never left." On the other hand, Liubomir, whose most close friends are absent from FB "already feel[s] the coldness" of his peers during his single visit in Bulgaria in the summer since his recent immigration: "I tried to make them [open a profile]... I try to find them on Skype but

it's too difficult. Telephone conversations, messages – but it is not the same. You are losing the connections.” The intimacy of Facebook communication is thus perceived as incomparably stronger than the one offered by pre-SNS forms of mediated communication: ”I learn [through] what they post when they [Liubo's Bulgarian friends] are happy and when they are sad... when I see their picture, I can live with them, I can relive their experience”. The role of Facebook as a mediator between the domestic and the social role is especially strong in Iva's case, who mostly posts pictures of her son, so her mother and grandmother can “watch my baby grow”. In this case the connotation with Miller and Madianou's idea (2011) of projected through SNS mothers⁷ can be perceived in its opposite form – projected children. The opportunity to ease the potential guilt of depriving your parents from being able to see their grandchildren, even by providing virtual updates of the kid can be considered as an option to cope with the insecurity to leave your family in the domestic country.

My assumption of the relation between social stigma and profile management was to a large extent proven irrelevant in the particular case, at least as far as the respondents rationalize the impact of their own profiles on the beholders. All of them confirmed that they do not make any alterations of their profiles according to the supposed dispositions of the new peers. However they do claim that they rationalize every action taken in the network. The two most prolific users (the others post rarely on Facebook) - Manol and Mila mostly direct their postings towards homophilous ties in the both networks. Mila who is mostly interested into politics and the development of the European Union shares predominantly articles, that according to her frequently incite debated between foreign and domestic peers: ”Yes most of the time I direct my posts very intentionally... you reach two groups, because of my

⁷ In “Migration and New Media: Transnational Families and Polymedia” the authors defend the argument that children whose mothers live in immigration live with a projection of the mother, mediated by new media, that they can compare subsequently to the real person. However the case with projected children do not have any of the major disadvantages of the “projected motherhood”, especially if we are considering small children (see Miller and Madianou 2011)

Bulgarian friends know English, and my British friends use Google translate... sometimes they post the translation in Bulgarian and it is hilarious.”. Manol on the other hand bets on what is “cool, what everybody likes... you, know – naked women. All colors, all races, everybody likes naked women.” Emilia, as well as Manol and Mila holds the opinion that there is no need to hide pictures from the profile: ”my friends are my age, I don’t see why their parties should be different”. The respondents shared the belief that the highly regarded and the photos that accumulate most “likes” fall in the category of what can be thought of as a universal “youth” habitus – Drinking in the park and camping (Mila); pictures from the Prom (Boyan) and partying (Emilia). The shared habitus of the young people that makes them recognizable as desirable peers, can incite interest between British and Bulgarian peers within the network: “my friends here and Edinburgh know my Bulgarian friends by name, like their pictures when we are together only from Facebook, they never met him IRL” (Mila).

The last topic that I want to address in the analysis of the fieldwork is the opportunity for mediated communication with future peers before the actual immigration. The case of Boyan is exemplary for the growing tendency of future university students to engage with their new peers’ months before the start of the academic year: ”I envy him (her brother) he has it so easy. Before the summer was over he had over a hundred new friends that he hasn’t met yet.” This complete negation for the need local action and pre-role interaction negates a great deal of the difficulty of pioneering. However this is directly related to the fact he is entering a pre-existing to his arrival cohesive network (Kossinets and Watts 2009), and must not be blown over proportion and taken as a truly relevant example for pioneering in general.

Conclusion

Above all else, this study is a work in progress. As such it is probable that it raises much more question that can possibly be answered at this point of the development of the SNS and their steadily growing popularity. My goal was to provide the reader with a more or less consistent approach that can be used if not as anything else as a heuristic devise and a vantage point for future researches of the role of new media in the lives of immigrants. Mapping the territories of the digital world and its effects on the formation and reproduction of the social life, as it is manifested in the everyday life of the individual and the group is a long process and the object of its analyses is a constantly fluctuating and mutating discourse.

By going from the general to the local, from the ideal type of the immigrant to the particular case of the Bulgarian in the United Kingdom, I strived to avoid the unwanted mixture of what has been a long lasting effort for rationalizing the operating mechanism of a virtual phenomenon and a brief and limited empirical study. However it is not relevant to say that the discourse analysis of Facebook and the concrete fieldwork are two unrelated studies, because they complement each other and serve as a corrective of each other, and the present theoretical study could not have been possible without the grounded examples provided by the empirical work.

In this research I argued of the importance of Facebook participation as an alternative mechanism for the “stranger” to overcome her subordinate role in the foreign setting, and what is more important - to do it on her own, without the mediation of compatriots, or at least without the need to share spatial and temporal proximity with them. Although the role of new media is a segment of the bigger picture, of innumerable multitude of factors that can affect the emergence of a true transnational identity (Schillerr and Glick 1995), it is relevant to say that Facebook offers a major change in the way the immigrant can represent herself in the

interaction with her new peers in the foster social setting. The option to regain control over her own history, to validate the objective character of this history through the display of interested audiences and eventually to capitalize social assets on that basis, are truly significant opportunities that can alter the behavior of the immigrant on the micro level as well as on the macro level of the social life. The possible changes that might occur in the interactions on the local level, the ability to present oneself with an already constructed and stable social role and thus to avoid the insecurities of the pre-role interaction, can bring a change on the macro level in a variety of directions. On one hand if indeed the role of Facebook is to empower the individual to enact control over the problematic situation of her status loss, the formation of cohesive immigrant groups may become less probable in the future, and eventually their very *raison d'être* might be compromised. On the other hand the opportunity to keep an intimate connection with the domestic group, without losing social assets within the peer network back home can incite both urges for reverse migration, as well as a new confidence and security that might consolidate the decision for a permanent stay in the new country. One or all of these processes may or may not occur in practice, but their potential is significant and the possibilities for a qualitative and quantitative change in the way immigration occurs are objectively present. Therefore, the importance of continuous and evermore detailed studies of Facebook as a phenomenon could not be put in better words than with the enigmatic statement of Pierre Bourdieu:

“To change the world, one has to change the ways of world-making, that is, the vision of the world and the practical operations by which groups are produced and reproduced.” (Bourdieu 1989)

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