Map a virtual social network

Cambridge OCR A Level Sociology H583 | Globalisation and the digital social world

Key question:
How do online relationships provide social ties and social capital?

Learning objectives

- Define and distinguish between virtual communities, social ties and social capital.
- Differentiate between strong and weak social ties within digital networks.
- Explain how online relationships can provide access to different forms of social capital.
- Apply sociological theory to examples of digital social relationships.

Key concepts

- **Virtual communities:** Groups who interact online, often with shared interests, norms and a sense of belonging.
- **Social ties:** Connections and relationships between individuals.
- **Strong social ties:** Close relationships characterised by regular interaction, emotional attachment and trust.
- **Weak social ties:** Less intimate relationships that can still provide access to information, resources and opportunities.
- **Social capital:** The resources and benefits that individuals can access through their social relationships and networks.

Extension: More connections, more social capital?

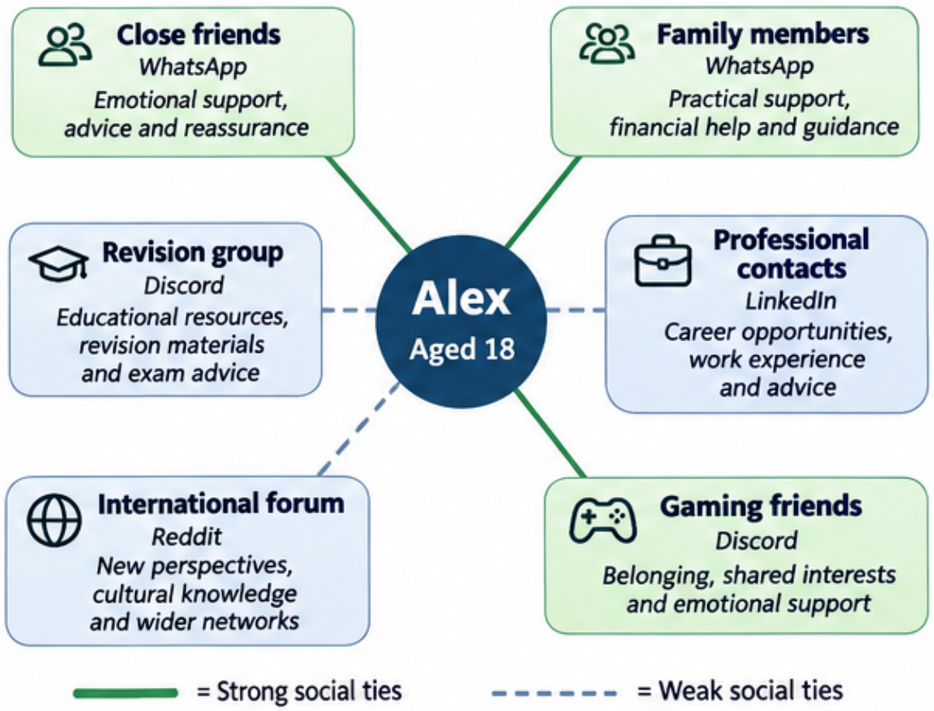
Imagine Alex gains 5,000 additional followers but rarely communicates with them.

Would this increase Alex's social capital? Justify your judgement.

The activity: Map a virtual social network

1. Write a fictional individual's name (e.g. Alex, aged 18) in the centre of a piece of paper.
2. Identify at least six individuals or groups they communicate with online.
3. Connect each one using a solid line for a strong social tie or a broken line for a weak social tie.
4. Alongside each connection, identify the resources, opportunities or support that could be accessed.
5. Decide which relationships provide the most valuable social capital and justify your response using sociological concepts or research.

Illustrative example: Alex's digital social network



The strength of each social tie depends on the nature of the relationship, rather than the digital platform used.

Example social ties and social capital

Online relationship	Possible tie	Potential social capital
Close friends (WhatsApp)	Strong	Emotional support, advice and reassurance
Family group chat	Strong	Financial assistance, practical help and guidance
Revision community (Discord)	Weak	Revision materials, subject knowledge and exam advice
Gaming friends (Discord)	Strong	Friendship, belonging and emotional support
LinkedIn contacts	Weak	Employment opportunities, work experience and career advice
International forum (Reddit)	Weak	Cultural knowledge and alternative perspectives

Sample responses to discussion questions

- **Which relationships are likely to involve the greatest trust?**
  Close friends and family are likely to involve greater trust due to sustained interaction, although strong ties can also form with online friends (e.g. gaming).
- **Which relationships might provide resources that close friends cannot?**
  LinkedIn contacts may provide employment opportunities, supporting Granovetter's (1973) theory of the strength of weak ties.
- **Which groups could be considered virtual communities?**
  The gaming group and revision group, as members regularly interact, share interests and may develop shared norms.

Key sociological links

- **Granovetter (1973):** weak ties can provide valuable information and apportunities.
- **Putnam (2000):** bonding (e.g. close friends, family) and bridging social capital (e.g. online forums, LinkedIn).
- **Bourdieu (1986):** social capital provides access to resources, but is unequally distributed.
- **Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe (2007):** found an association between Facebook use and social capital, particularly bridging social capital.

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