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Developing a sense of self in the modern world: Gaining deeper insight into the role of social media in young peoples' lives.

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Abstract

In a world where the ability to connect globally and instantaneously has reached a profound level, the challenges and opportunities presented by digital environments are now greater than ever before. The current generation of adolescents represent the first generation to have grown up with 24-hour access to modern social media platforms, and are therefore at the forefront of social, cultural, political, and technological change. Thus, social media platforms now have far-reaching implications for identity development, social interaction, self-presentation, privacy, and connection. However, young peoples' social media use occurs within a wider public discourse of risk and concern. Therefore, the aims of the research were to explore young peoples' positive experiences of social media platforms, identify the narratives used by young people in discussing their online engagement, and to explore how social media informs young peoples' identity practices and sense of self. To explore what could be learnt from taking an affirmative approach to social media, this study utilised cooperative inquiry as an action research methodology. Between 4-5 workshops were held with young people over the course of several weeks. Sixteen participants aged 16 and 17 were recruited through local secondary schools by way of advertisements and recruitment of friendship groups. Data gathered from these workshops was analysed through phenomenologically informed thematic analysis. Overall, participant responses were highly nuanced and insightful. They negotiated their engagement with platforms carefully and challenged dominant risk discourses with dialectical understandings. They also recognised contextual factors associated with developmental age and stage that influenced their engagement over time. However, the implementation of individual solutions were limited by sociocultural and political systems underpinning platforms, resulting in a sense of helplessness among participants. Additionally, young people criticised adults for not recognising their expertise and requested collaborative support to generate effective

solutions. Social media platforms were also found to intimately shape the identity practices of young people through the utilisation of impression management strategies and development of safe spaces online. Importantly, cooperative inquiry was found to be a meaningful methodology for engaging with young people and highlights the importance of intentionally designing affirmative oriented research in this area.

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Chapter One: Introduction

This chapter will begin with an outline of the history of what is now known as "social media", as well as providing a definition of social media as it is referred to and understood within this thesis. To provide greater context to the findings of the present study, a description of the defining features and affordances of modern social media platforms will then be provided. This chapter will also critically evaluate the commercial interests and business models underlying social media, and the interactions between user and interface that have significant implications for the individual and their social world.

The previous century has experienced the most radical period of technological change that humanity has witnessed in the past fifty years. The past decade in particular has seen a rapid adoption of these technologies, with more than two-thirds of all Internet users now present on at least one social media platform (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). In New Zealand, 4.24 million people were social media users at January 2023, comprising 81.4% of the total population (Social & Kemp, 2023). Of the countries included in the data set, New Zealand ranked 17th in highest percentage of social media users of total population. Social and Kemp (2023) reported that there are 4.76 billion social media users globally, which has increased by 3% over the past year. The main reasons for using social media included keeping in touch with friends and family (47.1%), filling spare time (36.2%), reading news stories (34.2%), finding content e.g. articles and videos (30.3%) and seeing what is being talked about (28.8%). As a result of continual software developments, social media platforms require more, gather more, and take more from users than ever before. Consequently, there are fundamental implications for the psychology and well-being of social media users.

Social Media: A Brief History

The introduction of the World Wide Web into mainstream American culture (and then the rest of the world) began in the early 1990s, coinciding with the induction of personal computers into most households (Han et al., 2011). By the late 1990s, e-commerce sites and search engines had become commonplace in everyday life worldwide, but it wasn't until the turn of the millennium that the first social networking sites appeared online (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). Initially, blogs and social networks were anonymous and characterized by a 'nickname culture' (Brandtzaeg & Lüders, 2018), allowing users freedom to create and experiment with changing identities without complicating their offline lives. As social networking sites developed, communication became non-anonymous, and users were afforded the ability to connect with people they already knew using their real offline identities (McMahon, 2019). However, although one way communication platforms enabled users to actively form groups, the first iteration of the World Wide Web (known as Web 1.0) was not designed to automatically connect users with others online (Dijck, 2013).

Then came the development of Web 2.0, a term scholars have used to represent the "revolution in user-generated content" near the end of the millennium (McMahon, 2019, p. 3). Where Web 1.0 was characterized by information consumption (Han et al., 2011), Web 2.0 has been characterized by liberation (Marwick, 2013). Web 2.0 was hailed as the new digital democracy, providing increasingly user-friendly web-browsers that were more interactive and enabled two-way communication (Dijck, 2013). Thus, users were able to create virtual communities and bulletin boards encouraged more people to be online and actively participate. Further, communication has shifted from anonymous to non-anonymous, meaning users typically make profiles with identifying information such as their full name, birth date, birth place, relationship status, education and occupation (Utz, 2015). Modern social media platforms also differ from early social networking sites in that almost all

websites now allow users to publicly share personal photos and videos. Social media thus encourages (and often requires) users to reveal something of themselves that was not required in earlier social networking sites. Additionally, platforms such as Facebook and Instagram also make available a history of the self (Brandtzaeg & Lüders) by capturing and archiving posts via a visual timeline on users' profiles. The implications of such changes for self-performance and socializing will be discussed later in this chapter.

It has been established by many authors that Web 2.0 encapsulates more than just a set of websites and technology (Marwick, 2013; Pangrazio, 2019); rather, it represents an ideology based on enhanced transparency and openness, with the intention to bring about political change and disseminated control. Pangrazio (2019) argues that digital technologies should not be thought of as neutral tools, but rather platforms that have the power to transform lives and socialities on a global scale. Modern social media was built on the foundations of Web 2.0 and are dynamic and unfinished platforms that are constantly altered in response to changing technological climates and user's needs (Dijck, 2013). As such, Palfrey and Gasser (2008) describe the previous century as the most radical period of technological transformation, regarding information sharing, that humanity has ever seen.

Social Media Defined

Due to the dynamic nature of the Web, a singular, stable definition of social media does not exist. Numerous terms have been used in the literature to represent what is defined in this thesis as 'social media'. For example, an early term was 'social networking sites' ('SNSs'), which prior to 2010, encapsulated websites primarily used for connecting people rather than the explicit sharing of digital media such as music or photographs (McMahon, 2019). Although the terms 'social networking sites' and 'social media' have been used interchangeably in the literature, 'social media' will be used in this thesis to represent the

current technology of modern platforms. Social media is defined in this thesis according to the description given by Bell (2019):

> Social media refers to a group of web and mobile based applications used to communicate with others through user-generated content, including text, images and videos. There are multiple different social media, typically distinguished by their emphasis on specific media types (text, video or images), temporality of content (ephemeral or persistent), level of anonymity afforded (identifiable or anonymous), communication synchronicity (synchronous or asynchronous), and nuanced functionality (pp. 64).

Key aspects of modern social media platforms

The evolution of technology and ability to access social media platforms at any time from multiple, portable electronic devices, has resulted in an intensification in the level of participation with social media in modern life (Baxter & Connolly, 2014). Key aspects of modern social media that will be discussed in this chapter include the increased accessibility and connectivity, an exploration of the multiple platforms available, the technological affordances they offer users, and discussion of specific platform features and the commercial business models that platforms are built on.

Accessibility and connectivity

One of the defining features of modern social media is mobile device convenience, compatibility and thus ubiquity. Unlike personal computers that were restricted to use within the home, pocket-sized mobile phone devices allow social media to be accessed from anywhere, at any time. Users can now interact with people all over the world, making regular photo uploading and status updating a normalized, highly-encouraged activity (Goodwin et al., 2016). Further, the development of push notification features which alert users whenever new information is available, result in continuous interaction and connectedness with social

media (Salo et al., 2019). However, Turkle (1996) has argued that the phenomenon of being "always on" has the potential for negative consequences for relationships due to notifications luring our attention and less interactions occurring face-to-face. Other researchers suggest that constant connectivity promotes cognitive overload for users, in that the demands of being available 24/7 generate feelings of overwhelm and anxiety (Salo et al., 2019).

Multiplicity of mediums

New social media platforms are constantly being created and existing platforms are continually evolving to stay updated with current trends to appease their audiences. The social media market is a highly competitive one. For example, in 2008, Friendster and MySpace closely competed with Facebook for dominance in the market; however, four years later both platforms had virtually disappeared (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). The defining characteristic in the longevity of social media appears to be the ability to continually evolve and redesign what they offer users. Twitter was introduced to the Internet in 2006 but did not allow users to upload images or video until 2011. Currently, half of the content viewed by users on Twitter is made up of videos and images (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). Modern social media now represent a convergence in once-separated activities of email, diaries, messaging, music and video, photo albums and communication (Livingstone, 2008). This leaves users with overwhelming choice about how and where they interact, and with whom. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that social media only offers singular, isolated challenges and benefits, as these will be unique to each platform. Understanding the features of each platform is thus crucial to understanding where young people are going online and why.

Ellison et al. (2007) note that social media sites are oriented towards specific contexts that can be divided into work, romance, shared interests, and specific demographic populations. For example, Facebook was initially designed for college students to build social connections. Previous research has identified that young people have multiple social media

platforms in their communication toolbox, as each platform fulfils different needs and purposes (Gan & Wang, 2015). Other streams of research have followed users' trends away from particular social media toward other platforms that suit their needs. For example, Dunbar (2016) noted a tendency for teenagers to reserve Facebook mainly for handling social events and arrangements, while user activity on media such as Instagram, Snapchat and Vine was found to increase. Manikonda et al. (2014) highlight that the instantaneous uploading of photo and video content that Instagram offers attracts users by allowing the sharing of life moments with others, with the additional benefit of filters to enhance the quality and attractiveness of content. Further, young people tend to have smaller offline networks compared to adults, thus the large number of loosely associated friends on platforms such as Facebook, may strain their ability to manage their social networks (Dunbar, 2016). These tensions might explain the appeal of platforms like Snapchat which better maps onto offline communication in its immediacy and inability to archive content (Brandtzaeg & Lüders, 2018).

Technological affordances

The term "technological affordance" has been defined and conceptualized differently throughout existing literature and is a sociotechnical concept that describes the relationship between technology and people (Kitzie, 2019). *Technological affordance* has been used widely to refer to the qualities a tool offers or provides a user (Gibson, 1979), and has been extended by some to include "the properties or functions of technology that extend our learning and perceptual capabilities" (Gagne et al., 2004, p. 120), or more simply put "possibilities for action" (Evans et al., 2017, p. 36). According to Mao (2014), these capabilities can be cognitive, economic, social, and affective. Other academics have categorized affordances into high-level and low-level (Bucher & Helmond, 2017). High-level affordances are more abstract and include concepts such as persistence, replicability,

scalability and searchability which structure user engagement (Boyd & Marwick, 2011). Other researchers have explored visibility, editability, association, as well as persistence (Treem & Leonardi, 2013). In contrast, low-level affordances are considered feature-oriented, concrete aspects, such as buttons, screens and operating systems that allow a user to click, share or like. For example, Twitter's original 140-character limit (now 280-character limit) when posting a tweet is considered a low-level affordance.

Other researchers have investigated affordances according to their capability to meet individuals' psychological needs, categorising affordances as either egocentric or allocentric. Egocentric affordances being those that are solitary and can be experienced without others, whereas allocentric affordances are social in nature (Karahanna et al., 2018). For example, the authors list self-presentation, content sharing and interactivity as egocentric affordances, whereas relationship formation, communication, collaboration, and competition among others, are considered allocentric affordances.

In this thesis, *social media affordances* are defined according to Ronzhyn et al.'s (2022) conceptualisation: *"*The perceived actual or imagined properties of social media, emerging through the relation of technological, social, and contextual, that enable and constrain specific uses of the platforms" (p. 14). Livingstone (2008) adds that affordances frame, rather than determine, the possibilities for change. For example, social media platforms enable wider social networks but do not guarantee users will exercise this affordance. Thus, Livingstone (2008) argues that technology should be understood as an artefact that is shaped by users, at the same time also shaping user behaviour. Charteris et al. (2018) also notes that technologies and their corresponding affordances are shaped by the social institutions that develop them, as well as the social actors that use them. Rather than "low-level affordances", "platform features" (discussed further below) will refer to the level of buttons and operating systems that provide the conditions for higher level technological

affordances. By analysing distinct affordances, research findings will remain relevant when new platforms inevitably supersede current popular platforms.

Platform features

Technological affordances are intimately linked to platform features. For example, features such as uploading photos, instant messaging and the search for *Friends* function can either promote or undermine friendship practices through enabling increased surveillance and connectivity (Niland et al., 2015). Thus, all platform features can be analysed for their ability to enable or constrain opportunities for the user. All social media platforms have similar affordances and infrastructures; however, it is the features that vary across platforms which define them. Social media platforms enable users to complete a host of functions including creating profiles, connecting with other users through messaging, linking content from other sources, leaving public comments on others' posts, video calling, sharing photo and video content, and live broadcasting. Such features enable users to traverse geographical barriers, build social networks, increasingly connect with others with shared interests, access information, and fulfil needs for community and identity online (Ho et al., 2017). These differences in sharing mechanisms (such as public commenting features) can frame self-presentation and profile work, a concept which will be discussed further in the following chapter. The following platform features are not intended as an exhaustive list, rather an illustration of the types of functions available to users and the ways in which they shape engagement. Further, due to the focus of the research being to explore the experiences of young people, existing studies with this demographic are drawn on more than studies with older populations.

For instance, Bell (2019) found that receiving quantifiable feedback on posts in the form of '*Likes'* was used by adolescents to determine whether their displays of identity had been successful in gaining approval from peers. Thus, the number of likes motivated

adolescents’ sharing practices, resulting in the employment of strategies such as uploading posts at favourable times of the day or using hashtags to increase visibility (Bell, 2019). Sherman et al. (2016) found that adolescents were also more likely to like posts that had already received many likes. Bell (2019) also found that younger teenagers went to greater lengths to accumulate likes than older teenagers did, including messaging their friends to like their posts publicly. Similarly, Blakemore (2018) suggested that adolescence is a particularly sensitive time-period for sociocultural processing. Other research has demonstrated that some young females may engage in posting revealing images of themselves in order to garner more likes (Mascheroni et al., 2014).

The relationship between platform features and affordances are further illustrated by the ‘Snapstreak’ feature introduced by Snapchat in 2016, in which users are rewarded with a fire symbol next to their friend’s name for sending snapchats to each other on consecutive days, with the platform recording the number of days this occurred for and thus rewarding the development of social capital and increased friendship practices (McMahon, 2019). Snapchat also provides disappearing or ephemeral media (content that is visible for a pre-determined number of seconds before being deleted automatically). Charteris et al. (2018) argue that through disappearing media, Snapchat has shifted the social landscape of teen culture, overhauling traditional methods of conversation. Limited time to view images on Snapchat thus heightens the focus on the content and enables users to evade detection and avoid the gaze of others. Existing literature has centered on adolescents’ use of ephemeral technologies, due to the opportunities platforms provide for young people to operate online away from the ‘gaze’ of adults, and the spaces afforded to negotiate formation of the self and relationships (Charteris et al., 2018).

Instant messaging is another feature that has also been researched by several scholars (Blais et al., 2008; Joinson, 2001). McKenna and Bargh (1999) note that instant messaging creates more opportunity for greater self-disclosure with existing social networks due to the ability to sustain multiple, private, simultaneous conversations that are not constrained by the physical barriers of traditional face-to-face communication. Dolev-Cohen and Barak (2013) reported that young people found instant messaging created greater comfort and safety in discussing personal issues that would have been more difficult to address face-to-face. Finally, in Blais et al.'s (2008) research it was found that young people that used instant messaging reported increases in trust, intimacy, communication and companionship across friendships and romantic relationships, whereas experiences of chat rooms was related to conflict and alienation.

Commercial Models

From a computational standpoint, social media platforms are infrastructures that can be programmed and built on (Bogost & Montfort, 2009). The technology that enables programmability is known as Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) which allow computer systems and software to exchange and make use of information (also known as interoperability). APIs thus enable third parties to utilise platform data (Bodle, 2011). In Facebook's case, third parties in the form of developers and advertisers have access to users' profiles, photos, events, and friends (Helmond, 2015). Thus, platforms are not only programmable technologies, but also services that facilitate relationships between stakeholders, which in turn have their own agendas (Gillespie, 2010). According to the Social Media Industry Report in 2014, 97% of companies used social media platforms to market their product or brand (Stelzner, 2014). As such, platforms are developed based on both infrastructural and economic business models (Bucher & Helmond, 2017). Thus, research

must consider platforms and user engagement within the wider social, political, and economic contexts in which platforms are situated.

Platforms are owned by profit-making companies (McMahon, 2019) and are capitalist commercial platforms that sell users' attention in return for businesses to market their products and brands (Niland et al., 2015). Thus, the primary aim of modern social media platforms is to encourage participation and increase user engagement. The underlying economic principle of social media platforms is that the longer users' attention is held, the more they can be exposed to paid advertising, and thus the more profitable social media companies become (Lanier, 2018; McNamee, 2018; Price, 2018). Social media companies therefore invest significant funds into studying users' online patterns and behaviours which inform new platform updates and features. Dobson et al. (2018) note that social media companies also generate value through facilitating social relationships and thus, intimate communication and connection is viewed as a form of free labor from social media users.

Algorithms, updates, and platform architecture

Methods to keep users engaged for longer periods of time primarily occur through the use of algorithms that continuously refine the content users are exposed to (Lanier, 2018). User preferences are analysed through the collection of user data and machine learning algorithms, as greater customisation of content is thought to increase consumer engagement (Martin & Murphy, 2016). For example, machine learning is used by Facebook to rank search results, tailor advertisements, and identify faces (Bucher & Helmond, 2017). Further, Facebook's '*On This Day'* feature is built on a model which learns in real time the memories that users would like to view on their NewsFeeds (Aziz & Paluri, 2016). Therefore, machine learning algorithms are designed to learn from user engagement and make predictions to guide user experience (Bucher & Helmond, 2017). Social media platforms have consequently become key channels for businesses to promote and market their products. Further, with the

data collected by social media companies, targeted marketing messages can be aimed at specific groups, making these more salient and relevant to users (Ho et al., 2017). What has been termed ‘platform capitalism’ will be discussed further below.

Algorithms are also used by platforms for other purposes, such as structuring and prioritising news and popularity by ordering the NewsFeed to make certain content more visible. Bucher (2012) found that Facebook’s EdgeRank algorithm determines what is shown on users’ *Top News* by drawing on three different components: affinity (nature of the relationship between viewer and content creator), weight (how popular or important Facebook considers the content to be) and time decay (recency of the post). Thus, the algorithm assumes that not all friend connections are equal, giving more weight to the visibility of some compared to others. Thus, who and what is seen and heard becomes a question of software (Bucher, 2012).

Software studies (Berry, 2011; Chun, 2011; Fuller, 2008; Kitchin & Dodge, 2011) have begun to explore the ways in which software has the ability to influence social media practices and experiences. As Bucher (2012) notes, Google’s PageRank algorithm was one of the pioneers in devising an instrument to sort and filter what users encounter on the Web. This algorithm is based on cultural assumptions about the relevancy and importance of news, and informed by other websites, with the weight they hold determining what is made visible.

Further, to remain relevant and compete with other platforms, social media companies must continually respond to the market and to their users’ needs, which means rather than finished products, platforms are dynamic mediums with increasing technological infrastructures (Dijck, 2013). As such, social media companies regularly update platforms by providing better navigation, faster loading times, improving functionality and offering more intuitive interfaces. They are constantly working to add new features, fix bugs and increase security protection. With the risk of becoming redundant, platforms are required to attract and

retain users and differentiate themselves by introducing unique features or improving existing ones.

Limbic platform capitalism

"Platform capitalism" refers to the ways in which platforms conduct data collection and process it with the purpose of organizing markets, and thus influencing users' consumption patterns" (Srnicek, 2017). Lyons et al. (2023) created the term "limbic capitalism" to describe the purposeful design and marketisation of health-demoting products with the intention of increasing habitual consumption for profit. The authors argue that social media platforms intensify this form of capitalism due to their inherent design which was created to influence users' moods, desires, and emotions, thus shaping consumption behaviour through limbic processes. For example, platforms facilitate the sharing of both positive engagement with peers and advertising content of businesses, which ultimately blurs the lines between commercial and non-commercial content (Bucher, 2018; Srnicek, 2017). Other researchers have argued that marketing on social media is more effective than other forms due to the ability to target users' feelings and affinities and exploit their behaviours and affect, thereby increasing consumption (José, 2021).

Critical health psychology researchers (Buchanan et al., 2018; Jackler & Li, 2019; Laestadius & Wahl, 2017; Lyons et al., 2016; Niland et al., 2017) investigating alcohol and tobacco advertising on social media platforms have expressed concern that digital marketing falls outside of regulatory frameworks and can thus reach underage consumers, connecting young people to products in increasingly innovative ways. Additionally, Lyons et al. (2023) argue that social media platforms have increased the opportunity for transnational corporations to maximise revenue and profit. Consequently, health politics are now situated within social media platforms, as their algorithms are designed to achieve profit-making over positive health outcomes (Amoore, 2020). Platforms such as Facebook have previously faced

criticism due to the development of social advertisements and their controversial role in advertising for political campaigns (Beer, 2009). These issues demonstrate the power social media companies hold with the information they have about their collective users and their ability to influence decision-making processes, and arguably impact individuals' health and wellbeing – including mental health.

Attention economy

The term "attention economy" has been used to describe the ways in which technologies are increasingly designed to capture attention and maintain the interest of users (Andrejevic, 2002; Boyd, 2014; Davenport & Beck, 2001; Smythe, 1977; Zulli, 2018). Furthermore, in the same way that advertisers and businesses attempt to hold consumer attention, Charteris et al. (2018) argues that technologies encourage young people to market themselves to peers in ways that are socially desirable. For example, in the case of Snapchat, attention is highly focused due to the limited time images appear for, resulting in users presenting themselves in often humorous ways to garner attention (Boyd, 2014). Instagram's "live" streaming feature further adds to the expectation of fleeting visuals, which has been demonstrated to increase interactivity between users (Zulli, 2018). Platforms thus encourage self-disclosure and value observing others' online just as much as receiving attention and being observed by others. Consequently, some authors have highlighted that social media platforms can mass-customise attention and that attention competes with commodification for the most valuable resource in modern capitalism (Dobson et al., 2018). Successful social media use is therefore based on those who capture the most attention from followers and social networks (Zulli, 2018).

Summary

Modern social media platforms, developed with Web 2.0 technologies and ideologies, have altered the possibilities for communication and connection in unprecedented ways. These platforms, which are easily accessible and ubiquitous when combined with smart phone technology, also encourage users to reveal something of themselves in non-anonymous formats. The ability of platforms to archive and time-capsule information and offer features such as ‘disappearing’ media, provide young people with new opportunities and challenges to negotiate self-presentation. Both technological affordances and platform features provide a framework for analysing user engagement and experience across platforms and help to uncover the wider social, political, and economic contexts in which platforms are situated. As capitalist commercial platforms, social media companies are motivated to encourage participation and keep their users engaged for long periods of time. The greater exposure that users have to paid advertising, the more profitable social media companies become. Thus, platform updates and machine learning algorithms designed are utilised to increase user engagement. Additionally, platforms are designed to influence users’ moods and emotions to shape consumption behaviours, a process termed ‘limbic capitalism’. While this chapter has explored the development and design of platforms, the following chapter will examine the ways in which technology has influenced identity formation, a key developmental task for adolescents.

Chapter Two: Social Media And Identity

As discussed in the previous chapter, social media platforms provide new opportunities for self-presentation, as well as technologies and ideologies that encourage user participation, connection and sharing practices. This chapter aims to provide an overview of identity as it pertains to adolescents and is shaped or influenced by social media platforms. The concept of identity has evolved over time and its definition remains highly debated. Therefore, this chapter will identify different theories of identity and outlined a multifaceted approach that recognizes the multiplicity of identity, the influence of psychosocial developmental stages, neoliberal principles, technological affordances, and ways in which identity is co-constructed with peers.

A changing concept over time

Due to the influence of developmental age and stage identified in the research on social media use, it is pertinent to consider the concept of identity formation and the way in which this is explored through social media. It is important to note that there is debate in the literature concerning the way identity is conceptualized and has evolved over time. Early in the 20th century, identity was considered 'forged'. Turkle (1996) suggests there was room for negotiation between roles, but for the most part an individual's position within their family and wider society meant there was limited opportunity to cycle through different selves. Identity fluidity was constrained by face-to-face interactions in which individuals were required to present a self that was seemingly consistent with their physical features and known social background (Zhao et al., 2008). Identity alteration was possible only by manipulation of appearance, manner, and language i.e., an individual's personal front.

However, postmodern life and the digital age has arguably led to the breakdown of stable social worlds, and fluidity has become socially valued (Turkle, 1996). Authors such as

Zhao et al. (2008) claim that the traditional conditions of identity formation have been changed by the introduction of the Internet where detachment of the corporeal body from online encounters allows users to interact in ways that are not bound to their physical characteristics. For example, the ability to create anonymous accounts allows users to experiment with identity production in a myriad of ways. In a world where lines between public and private spaces are increasingly being blurred (and online and offline worlds are being integrated), the complex practices and challenges for young people to negotiate identity are unparalleled. There now exists a paradox of the digital age in that while online tools enable individuals to experiment more freely with aspirational aspects of the self, the presence of a critical online audience means the individual's ability to control how they are perceived is significantly decreased (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). Further, theories of identity are particularly useful for understanding social media practices. For example, Liesbet (2013) considers identity as a performance or display in that identity is something we *do*, rather than something we *are.*

The definition of identity itself remains highly debated across disciplines, bordering between fields of psychology and sociology, and dependent on several theoretical perspectives (Larsen, 2016). Research exploring implications for identity formation in a non-anonymous online world is limited, and more sophisticated accounts of lived experience for young people are required to improve understanding. This thesis aims to take a multifaceted approach to identity that considers social, cultural, and historical processes influencing identity practices, such as technological developments, neoliberalism, peer group belonging and developmental stage.

Multiplicity

Historically, controversy has existed concerning whether identity is unitary or multiple. It is now accepted amongst most scholars that individuals experience multiple self-representations (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). Postmodern views support the conception that identity is dynamic, multiple, and can be flexible to the social and cultural contexts that individuals are situated within (Liesbet, 2013). LGBTQ literature has actively argued against understanding identity as a linear process by which young people come to accept a singular, innate identity (Kitzie, 2019). Further, the social identity approach outlined by Moncur et al. (2016) posits that multiple social identities function to allow individuals to perform an identity that conforms to the norms salient in particular social contexts. Individuals can develop a plurality of identities as they move through historical situations and interactions. Identity is thus fluid and dynamic, rather than singular and unchanging (Kimmons, 2014). Turkle (1996) contributes some of this shift in thinking about identity to processes such as globalization and the increasing awareness of other cultures that continue to relativize any existing norms.

Another point of contention in the literature is whether any level of integration can be achieved between the different aspects of an individual's identity. Kimmons (2014) argues there can be no real or essential self, due to the multiplicity of identity. Diverse aspects of the self can be adapted, copied, and synthesized according to the social and cultural context. Gergen (2007) used the term 'saturated self' to illustrate the numerous languages of the self that can appear incoherent and unrelated. However, whilst Gergen (2007) contends that multiplicity and integration are incompatible, other scholars (Giddens, 1991; Turkle, 1996) argue that an individual can still experience a coherent sense of self without being limited to one self. Thus, identity is arguably multiple, yet integrated. It is acknowledged among scholars (Kimmons, 2014) that identity is a sense-making process through which people

come to form some form of coherency about who they are, selecting experiences and organizing them in meaningful ways.

Identity also needs to be considered in relation to the online context in which multiple forms of self-display are possible. The Internet is thought to be an important contributing factor to the thinking of identity as multiple, as it allows people the freedom to experiment with the construction of self (Turkle, 1996). Presentations of identity online are described by Moncur et al. (2016) as increasingly kaleidoscopic. However, tensions exist concerning the argument that platforms such as Google and Facebook discourage flexibility in identity by requiring verifiable information to be linked to a single, authentic self (Marwick, 2013). In their focus groups, Palfrey and Gasser (2008) found that young people claimed to have multiple self-representations online. However, they could not agree about whether this meant they had multiple identities that converged online and offline, or whether they had a singular identity that was displayed coherently in both contexts. Given this ambiguity, the negotiation between an essentialist view of online identity and the understanding that identity is not singular needs to be explored and considered. As Kimmons (2014) writes, online identity is one part of an overall identity, not the whole part. The flexible nature of reality in modern societies has contributed to the understanding that the self can be equally flexible, supporting the notion of identity as fluid abstraction (Kimmons, 2014).

Psychosocial developmental stages

Understanding identity development also needs to be considered within the lifespan. Developing a socially validated identity that is also meaningful to the individual, is a primary development task for adolescents (Beyers & Goossens, 2008; Davis, 2013). Adolescence is a key period in which social relationships are being navigated and restructured, long-term decisions are being contemplated and identity is repeatedly challenged (Beyers & Goossens, 2008). Peer group membership is particularly relevant to the way young people define

themselves; using intimate encounters and disclosure with each other to express and construct who they are (Davis, 2013).

Erikson's psychosocial approach was influential in recognizing the importance of the people in young people's lives in supporting and helping to shape their identity (Beyers & Goossens, 2008). He proposed an 'ego identity', suggesting that adolescents must simultaneously gain autonomy and confidence within, while at the same time balancing the expectations and judgments made by society (Livingstone, 2008). In doing so, young people must learn whom they can trust, make decisions about what they reveal of themselves, and decipher when emotions should be expressed. The formation of ego identity between adolescence and adulthood is a crucial period to strengthen the sense of self (Mazalin & Moore, 2004). For young people who are unable to balance self-knowledge and arrive at a successfully integrated identity, the result is a state of identity confusion (Beyers & Goossens, 2008). Achieving coherency and sameness within the self functions to protect an individual from sudden life changes (Mazalin & Moore, 2004). Thus, not only has coherency among an individual's multiple aspects of identity been found to improve psychological well-being (Davis, 2013), wholeness and continuity of the self is required for identity synthesis. A further issue for young people of the current generation is contending with the wider socio-economic-political context of neoliberalism that underpins the relationship between identity and social media.

Informed by neoliberal principles

The inception of Web 2.0 introduced not only new technology and advanced connection, but also the creation of a Web 2.0 culture in which a range of innovative self-presentation strategies provided users novel ways of constructing the self (Marwick, 2013). Social media offers marketing opportunities to sell the self and construct identity according to neoliberal principles that previously were not possible. Nilan and Feixa (2006) suggest the

creation of an entrepreneurial self, resulting from the modern process of individualization and the increased number of possibilities available to create the self. This entrepreneurial self is possible due to individuals' capacity to choose their future from an abundance of socially desirable lifestyles. In addition, Kelly (2006) refers to the entrepreneurial self as a form of personhood in Western democracies, in which the lines between the self and work can become blurred. The dominance of this way of thinking about the self results in environments in which self-promoting, self-directing and me-incorporated behaviour is celebrated in every facet of life. Citizens in modernity thus becomes successful in business principles at work and a business-principled life. These neoliberal principles thus underpin some of the logic behind young people seeking to brand themselves to gain 'likes' or social status.

Hearn (2008) argues that 'self-branding' is a result of the unity between the self and consumption practices of post-Fordist capitalism, in which the 'project of the self' is the new labour. Thus, the self is a product and commodity that can be manipulated and sold for material profit, based on its cultural value. According to commercial models of social media, social interactions and self-presentations can generate value through the generation of increased relationship-building and/or deeper engagement with others (Dobson et al., 2018). The model relies upon users spending time online and generating data based on online expression and flows of affect. Thus, the authors argue that certain forms of self-display and embodied interaction become normative on social media, channeling identity, belonging and intimacy into capital. For example, practices such as generating numerous personal pictures to post and acquiring lots of friendships on social media platforms are considered by Hearn (2008) as forms of 'egocasting'.

Charteris et al. (2018) blame features of neoliberalism for producing an attention economy in which young people market themselves to others. They are not only surveilled but involved in a process of surveilling their peers. Due to the quantifiable nature of status,

Marwick (2013) argues that users engage in unpaid labour on social media to uphold their brand. From a social constructionist approach, it is claimed that researchers need to take into consideration the cultural hybridity of young people in what has become a highly globalized world amidst social movements and transformations (Nilan & Feixa, 2006). Plural worlds now exist that offer young people identity discourses locally, regionally, and globally, requiring greater reflexivity between self and group identity. Therefore, literature on neoliberalism and social media connects technological affordances to wider social change and helps to explain young peoples' online practices, how they think about themselves and enact this with others.

Negotiated through technological affordances

Kimmons (2014) argues that social media platforms should not be considered as value-free zones of expression in which users have the freedom to interact with complete autonomy. The implicit structures of platforms evoke particular types of information, while disregarding other forms, ultimately structuring the communication of users. Kitzie (2019) takes a sociotechnical lens to the interaction between identity and technology, acknowledging that complex relationships exist between artifacts, people, and their sociocultural context, and thereby arguing that online forums act as critical resources for young people to articulate their identity. Platforms promote self-performance by providing spaces that extend boundaries for identity management. For example, users can create multiple, "throwaway accounts" to share information about themselves that they do not want linked to their primary account (Leavitt, 2015, p. 317). How the self is displayed online is significant, due to the nature of social media profiles being comparable with products, business cards and curriculum vitae (CVs) which represents the user (Uski & Lampinen, 2016).

This is where theories of identity are particularly useful for understanding social media practices. For example, Turkle (1996) asserts that users self-create, constructing and

reconstructing identities that are available to mix and match. The idea of identity as being performed (Liesbet, 2013) is particularly pertinent to online environments, which enable young people to experiment, role-play and ask peers, "What do you think of me?" (Larsen, 2016, p. 24). Modern social media platforms afford users the ability to craft who they are through selecting information to be made visible or hidden, as well as utilizing public or private functions (Livingstone, 2008). Further, Zhao et al. (2008) suggest that identity displays online take the form of 'show not tell' whereby users express their identities implicitly more than explicitly. Practices such as uploading a picture, updating a status, sharing information, creating polls, all constitute identity performance that will simultaneously be judged, interpreted, misinterpreted, and fed back to the performer, who adjusts their performance accordingly. Pangrazio's (2019) study also demonstrated that identity is performed online in an aspirational way. That is, online profiles represent not only who an individual is, but also who the individual wants to become.

Co-constructed with peers

As well as identity being informed by the technologies it is displayed on, the presentation of identity is also shaped by peer influence. Adolescence in particular is a key period whereby the influence shifts from family of origin to peers, as youth strive to achieve autonomy and independence. Young people are particularly adept at displaying the sides of themselves online that they perceive will be well-received by their peers (Boyd, 2014). Thus, identity construction online is considered a highly social practice (Bell, 2019). Further, Niland et al. (2015) found that young people come to understand who they are by representing themselves in relation to their peers; coming to see themselves as they are seen by their friends. Livingstone (2008) also found that position within broader social networks was deemed more important than the information presented on profiles, demonstrating that profiles are considered by young people to be 'place-markers' more than self-portraits.

However, the physical presentation of the profile has been found by researchers to be a complex process, requiring continuous revisions of the self. Profiles are often presented as glossified, polished versions of reality due to users being selective about what portions of their lives they portray online (Salo et al., 2019). Young people in Livingstone's (2008) research acknowledged that profiles could be just a 'front', due to the highly stylized nature of profiles and ability to omit or include information about the self. Thus, the adolescents in this study were aware that information on profiles could not be taken at face value. Research has also demonstrated that aesthetic aspects of the profile evolve as young people age. For example, Livingstone (2008) found that the profiles of younger adolescents were often highly decorated and elaborately styled. In contrast, older adolescents tended to have plain aesthetics, favoring relationships with others on their profiles, thus demonstrating identity in arguably more authentic ways.

In a study conducted by Bell (2019), young people reported significant tensions between attempts to convey an authentic sense of self, while experiencing pressures to appease their audience, which often consisted of more idealized versions of the self. As described by Brandtzaeg and Lüders (2018), impression management is much more complicated in the online world compared to offline due to the context of multiple, flattened audiences. Essentially, social media users must meet the expectations of diverse audiences simultaneously. These audiences are often imagined by the user in order to display themselves appropriately depending on the social context (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). For example, markers of what is cool will vary between audiences and different demographics.

The strategic self-presentation and efforts made by social media users to create and maintain their personal profiles is described by Uski and Lampinen (2016) as "profile work". Profile work also represents attempts to negotiate the tension between meeting personal needs and conflicting social norms. For example, in Niland et al.'s (2015) study, they found

that young people consciously made efforts to demonstrate popularity and having fun, while also attempting to avoid the perception that they were falsely trying to create these impressions. Thus, the problem of authenticity lends itself to significant profile work which can be exhausting (McMahon, 2019). Examples of profile work can include modifying privacy settings, editing or deleting content or manipulating online behaviours in some other way. However, Uski and Lampinen (2016) note that the aim of profile work is to minimize the work required as much as possible to reduce the psychological burden. The authors found that Facebook users ultimately reduced the amount of content they shared to reduce their profile work, though doing so meant that they missed out on participating and thus risked being invisible to peers. In the absence of suitable, effective solutions, the challenge remains for young people to perform identity online in ways that enable them to be both authentic and psychologically well.

Summary

The concept of identity has evolved over time and new understandings of identity have been influenced by the development of the Internet and the new opportunities afforded by social media platforms. This thesis takes the position that identity is dynamic and multiple; individuals are continuously searching for coherency and integration between a plurality of selves. Further, identity formation is a key psychosocial task for adolescents in which they strive for identity synthesis. Identity is socially constructed through relationships with others, informed by peer audiences and the feedback an individual receives. Thus, identity can be considered as a balancing act, managing the pressures and expectations of peers, while simultaneously configuring to the desires of the individual and their 'ideal self'. Additionally, technologies directly inform and constrain identity practices, requiring platform users to form innovative strategies to control and manage self-presentation. Finally, identity

is also shaped by broader global, cultural contexts that exist due to Web 2.0, including neoliberalism, consumerism, capitalism, marketisation, individualization and globalization.

Chapter Three: Young People And Social Media

This chapter builds on the literature review so far to focus specifically on the nature of the relevant population – adolescents and young adults - and what characteristics define them from previous generations. The dominant risk narrative around adolescents and young adults (with regards to social media) will be outlined, as well as a counter narrative that the thesis aims to explore and challenge. The chapter will close with a brief outline of the current online behaviours and motivations at the intersect of young people and social media.

Unlike their predecessors, the current generation of young people have grown up with social networking technologies and represent a generational shift, in which Niland et al. (2015) argue has seen young people engage in online practices at a much more profound level. Several authors report that globally, young people spend a significant amount of time on social media and have the highest rates of social media use compared to any other age group (Goodyear et al., 2017; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). Factors that make social media platforms particularly enticing for young people have been explored by several researchers, and the affordances and features of these platforms have been discussed in previous chapters. Davis (2013) suggests that digital media technologies have presented new possibilities for the exploration and construction of identity, which is a key development task of adolescents. Niland et al. (2015) identify that many friendship practices are now tied to online platforms and provide important opportunities for socialization and connection. Finally, as Gibson and Trnka (2020) write, online communities provide a safe place for young people to engage and confide in peers away from adult surveillance. These findings go some way in explaining the high use of social media use among adolescents, online motivations and behaviours will be discussed further below.

Further, while some research has considered young people highly skilled and knowledgeable in online and image-based communication (Gibson & Trnka, 2020), other research articulates a dominant narrative regarding young people as naïve, problematic and passive in their use of online networks (Retallack et al., 2016). The risk discourses (often driven by mainstream media and parent-reporting) fail to acknowledge the perspective of young people (Pangrazio, 2019), resulting in this demographic being 'researched on' rather than 'researched with'. The current 'danger' narrative regarding social media also has implications for the education that young people receive (Gibson, 2021). Finally, despite the pervasive use of social media in society, and the finding that young people are among its most prolific users, relationships between social media use and identity practices, self-concept clarity, well-being and emotion-regulation remain unclear.

The Digital Divide

Some academics have used the term 'digital natives' to describe the current generation of young people that have grown up with 24-hour access to online communication and are therefore considered more at home with social media than previous generations (Brandtzaeg & Lüders, 2018; Gibson & Trnka, 2020; Pangrazio, 2019). However, other researchers have refuted terminology such as 'digital natives', asserting that there is a lack of evidence supporting the claim that there are identifiable differences between generations (Bennett & Maton, 2010; Thomas, 2011). While the use of labels to characterize different generations is a point of contention for academics, the origins of the terminology and the influence that such terms have for research (and the way young peoples' social media engagement is approached by older generations) is important to investigate.

Prensky (2001) first used the term *digital natives* to describe students and *digital immigrants* to describe teachers or educators, with differences between generations hypothesized as being the root of educational problems in the early 2000s. Prensky

highlighted concerns that educators were not able to teach digital natives effectively due to an inability to speak their native language and traditional methods were considered to be outdated. Alongside the significant uptake of these terms within the education literature, the concept of the digital native has been widely used by other academics and in popular discourse (Pangrazio, 2019). Beyond differences in technological language used by digital natives compared to digital immigrants, other defining features of digital natives include that they have a natural affinity and greater comfortability with technologies, and that constant connection is the norm (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). Consequences for identity have also been considered in the literature, with researchers suggesting that life stages and identity evolution are marked by practices of self-performance (Brandtzaeg & Lüders, 2018).

Some researchers have critiqued the sweeping generalisations made about digital natives, including that they are tremendously creative, learn differently and relate to information differently than previous generations (Thomas, 2011). Subsequently, Bennett and Maton (2010) argue that the insurmountable gap created by this discourse in overstating the extent of the technological divide contributes to moral panics. Other researchers have highlighted that assumptions made about digital natives are based on overly simplistic logic that fails to reflect the complex social and cultural issues associated with online engagement (Pangrazio, 2019). Rather than approaching digital natives as a homogenous group, Bennett and Maton (2010) suggest exploring different user types, such as *digital pioneers* or *information gatherers*, as well as the nature of technologically-based activities which may be more important than the access young people have to platforms. Lastly, Prensky (2011) acknowledged that the term digital native was intended as a metaphor illustrating the distinction between the digital culture young people have grown up with, as opposed to universal understandings of reality for young people.

Risk Discourse

Previous research concerning youth and social media evidences a dominant narrative that assumes young people are naïve, problematic and passive in their use of online networks (Retallack et al., 2016). Some academics have drawn on Foucauldian theory and identified a discourse of innocence, in which young people are constructed as a powerless other that is dependent on the knowing adult to think critically and make decisions (Charteris et al., 2018). What ensues has been labelled as a moral panic, in which parents and other adults become overly concerned by the risks posed by the Internet (Charteris et al., 2018; Goodwin et al., 2016; Pangrazio, 2019). Considering the reporting of media and the popular press, parents have been exposed to heavy claims regarding the unhealthy relationship teenagers have with social media and the multitude of dangers that being online poses (Pangrazio, 2019). Feminist scholars have argued that school policies also create an environment in which student activism on social media is framed as problematic, rather than a source of pedagogical potential (Retallack et al., 2016).

The abundance of literature reporting on the negative impacts of social media has led to a public discourse of social media primarily concerned with risk. Fears are typically related to issues such as teenagers' reduced capacity to form intimate relationships in face to face environments and the possibility of cyberbullying (Gibson, 2021). However, much of the evidence within psychological literature concerning social media and its impact on well-being is contradictory. Some studies report detrimental effects such as social isolation, internet addiction and poorer mental health outcomes, while other studies emphasize the ability of the Internet to improve social relationships by removing time and space constraints (Gibson & Cartwright, 2014; Mazalin & Moore, 2004).

Social media has thus become a topic of polar positions and discourses, and this ambiguity has created uncertainty for many parents who are unsure how to navigate online

terrain. Goodyear et al. (2017) suggests that this narrative of risk has implications for the way adults view social media and may cause them to deny online platforms as positive tools for engagement. Pangrazio (2019) argues that adults and caregivers can be particularly sensitive to the press and media and tend to adopt protection-orientated approaches that are influenced by a desire to control, rather than understand young people's online activity. However, Livingstone and Blum-Ross (2020) suggest that parents recognize on the whole that technology can enable pleasurable experiences, facilitate learning and make life easier, while also acknowledging the potential for controversial and divisive effects. These authors have also challenged understandings of parents as being hyper anxious or pressurizing, suggesting that many parents are committed to learning about evolving technologies and are confident in their ability to do so. Other researchers have suggested that there is a relationship between parental mediation strategies and parents social media literacy. For example, parents with mostly critical understandings of social media were more likely to choose active mediation (evaluative or explanatory discussion) over restrictive mediation (enforcing rules to control social media use) or technical strategies (Daneels & Vanwynsberghe, 2017).

Problematic social media use

Addiction

Social media addiction has garnered significant media attention around the world and has been the focus of an ever-growing research field. It has been deemed a "public health issue" by some (Stanley, 2018, para. 1), and a "prominent cultural narrative" by others (Tiidenberg et al., 2017, p. 3). Further, various terminology has been used to characterize problematic use of the Internet, including internet addiction, internet dependence, problematic internet use, pathological internet use and compulsive internet use (Court, 2021). Despite these terms reflecting general use of the Internet, social media addiction is considered one form of Internet addiction (Hou et al., 2019). However, controversy remains

among academics regarding the use of the term 'addiction' in its application to social media use. Carbonell and Panova (2017) suggest the use of this label can undermine the severity of psychiatric disorders and result in pathologizing social media use.

Other problems within the literature include inconsistent measurements of problematic platform use. For example, some researchers have measured social media addiction according to behavioural addiction definitions (Chen & Kim, 2013; Lee-Won et al., 2015), while others have focused on the purpose or context of use such as for social comparison or social media use while driving (Flynn et al., 2018; Turel & Qahri-Saremi, 2016). Consequently, there is also inconsistency in theorising social media addiction, with several cognitive and neurobiological perspectives and models emerging within the literature (Sun & Zhang, 2021). Finally, while previous research has primarily investigated addiction at the level of the individual, more recently focus has turned to exploring the role of social media companies and their design of platforms which renders them addictive (Lundahl, 2020). This distinction in the literature will be covered further below.

Individual level.

Research exploring social media use and addictive behaviours have found positive associations between overreliance on platforms and withdrawal and dependence (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017), interference with social and occupational functioning, (Billieux et al., 2015), decreased well-being (Marino et al., 2018), and reduced quality of sleep (Tandon et al., 2020). Other research has identified changes to mood, tolerance, and compulsive use (Lin et al., 2016). Increased concern for young people has also been outlined in the literature due to their increased vulnerability (Andreasson et al., 2016). Specific vulnerabilities have focused on social and neurobiological factors such as brain development, ease of access to the Internet, and difficulty regulating emotions (Panayides & Walker, 2012). Further contributing to the risk discourse surrounding young people and social media use, are narratives of

concern that platforms are detrimental to interpersonal relationships (Cyr et al., 2015), are replacing in-person interaction (Larson, 2021), and lead to relationship apprehension, poor social and communication deficits (Punyanunt-Carter et al., 2018). However, Larson's (2021) study did not support these claims, as correlations between social skills deficits, communication apprehension, and reduced in-person communication and social media were not found to be significant.

Some academics have argued that specific online behaviours should be explored further, rather than assuming causation between addiction and the platform itself (Sultan, 2021). For example, the authors argue for evaluating the role of instant messaging and excessive checking of notifications. Other researchers have investigated the concept of technostress, which suggests that particular aspects of social media use leads to negative consequences and dissatisfaction with social media use (Salo et al., 2019). These aspects include invasion (platforms occupying an overly central role in one's life), overload (the burden of providing social support to others online), disclosure (the abundance of content shared by others) and uncertainty (feeling unsettled due to constant change online). Academics have also begun investigating mediating variables and individual differences in addictive behaviours, such as ability to regulate emotion (Hormes et al., 2014) and fear of missing out (Przybylski et al., 2013; Talwar et al., 2019).

Platform level.

More recent research has argued that social media platforms are designed in ways which make them purposely addictive (Bhargava & Velasquez, 2021; Lundahl, 2020). As discussed in the previous chapter, the attention-economy business model of social media companies incentivizes platform design that encourages dependence. Several academics now suggest that design elements which utilize game-like features (Deterding et al., 2011; Eisingerich et al., 2019) such as introducing goals, progress tracking, as well as prompts and

rewards, are designed to increase engagement and thus the addictive potential of platforms. For example, the "like" button has been criticized for rewarding the user for creating a popular post (Lundahl, 2020), harnessing desires for social validation and reciprocity (Alter, 2017), which is particularly relevant for adolescents and young adults.

Other researchers have highlighted how platform features were initially designed by engineers of electronic gaming machines (EGMs) to keep gamblers engaged for longer periods of time (Abbott, 2017; Breen & Zimmerman, 2002; Schüll, 2012). Based on behavioural psychology principles such as classical and operant conditioning, EGMs were designed with the intention of modifying human behaviour and decision-making (Yücel et al., 2018). Cash et al. (2012) report that engineers trained by the Persuasive Technology Lab at Stanford University have been hired by Silicon Valley social media companies to design platforms based on their understandings, research, and development of behavioural modification techniques.

One of the most cited techniques utilized by platform engineers is the slot machine effect which employs the principle of variable reinforcement i.e., varying rewards in their frequency or magnitude so that the user remains motivated to stay engaged in the hopes of obtaining reward (Bhargava & Velasquez, 2021). For example, the 'pull-to-refresh' feature is argued by academics to mimic the motion of a slot machine (Harris, 2019). Further, the introduction of unlimited content and automatically populated NewsFeeds creates the anticipation of new content and reward being ever-present.

Thus, Williams (2018) argue that engineers have sought to remove natural stopping cues, whereby reaching the end of a page would prompt the user to consider whether they would like to continue the behaviour. However, infinite scrolling removes this awareness and opportunity to exit platforms. Bhargava and Velasquez (2021) have critiqued the ethics of platform design, arguing that addiction has several harmful effects for users' psychological

and physical well-being, and is thus exploitative. Finally, Alter (2017) also argues that by mining users' data and analysing preferences such as fonts, audio tones and colours, social media engagement is weaponized and used to create even more irresistible platforms, affecting behaviour and potentially mental health and wellbeing.

Body image

Body image and eating disturbances are said to be influenced by the consumption of media (Stein et al., 2019). Thus, for much of the twentieth century, media studies explored the relationship between body image and television, film, and print advertisements (Grabe et al., 2008). However, since the turn of the millennium and the evolution of digital media, research has shifted to assessing the role of social media platforms in the evaluation of physical appearance and body image disturbance (Stein et al., 2019). Researchers have argued that social media have replaced traditional media as the primary forum by which beauty ideals are established, contributing to increased body dissatisfaction and lower self-esteem among users (Stein et al., 2019). Krämer and Winter (2008) found that users have elaborate methods of self-presentation, such as applying editing software and filters, as well as posting practices such as deleting unfavourable content. Some have argued that social media has surpassed traditional media regarding influential power and contribution to body dissatisfaction (Cohen & Blaszczynski, 2015). Where traditional media tends to present fixed content, social media content is user-generated, and therefore contains diverse visual and text-based content that can be edited and presented by a wide array of individuals (Vandenbosch et al., 2022). Thus, while traditional media position celebrities at the centre of body image ideals, the ubiquitous nature of modern social media suggests that everyone, everywhere is placed under the same gaze (Stein et al., 2019).

Although initial research focused on overall time spent on social media, greater appreciation of the complexities in the relationship between social media and body image has

led to exploration of other variables. For example, Baker et al. (2019) found that young women in particular spend large quantities of time viewing profiles of peers, models and celebrities on Instagram, resulting in significant exposure to edited and often unrealistic images. This has led researchers to assert that it may be more important to evaluate what young people are using platforms for, rather than how often they are spending time on platforms (Stein et al., 2019). Learnings from body image literature assert that due to the marked differences between platforms, features such as posts, reels, commenting functions, stories, and reactions should be investigated further (Sharp & Gerrard, 2022). For example, Tiggemann et al. (2018) found that social media users often pay attention to posts that receive a high number of "Likes", frequently judging themselves as less attractive as a result. Further, research has consistently demonstrated that viewing digitally modified images and thin ideals can negatively impact users' body image (Vandenbosch, 2022). Thus, merely quantifying social media use is insufficient, and further research is needed that explores young peoples' social and emotional investment in social media in the context of their dynamic lives.

Initially, much of the research evaluating social media and body image focused on Facebook, which was the first platform to garner global success. Media studies found that methods of self-presentation afforded by Facebook contributed to problematic consequences for users' bodily perceptions (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015; Stronge et al., 2015; Tiggeman & Slater, 2013), even more so for those engaging in photo-related features (Kim & Chock, 2015; Meier & Gray, 2014). However more recently, body image researchers have shifted focus to other platforms such as Instagram and Pinterest, two platforms which are highly visual in nature (Marengo et al., 2018). Instagram has been referred to by some as highly influential in young peoples' conceptualisation of physical beauty, due to its prominent display of fashion, fitness, makeup, and diet culture (Stein et al., 2019).

Thus, research has demonstrated that photo-based platforms like Instagram, relate more to dysfunctional body image than text-based platforms such as Twitter, because they provide users with greater opportunities to self-objectify and internalise body ideals (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015; Holland & Tiggeman, 2016; Vandenbosch et al., 2022). Additionally, Baker et al. (2019) found that users who subscribed to celebrities or models accounts that were primarily appearance-based reported greater body image difficulties. Rodgers et al. (2022) assert that comparison with these types of accounts reinforces physical appearance as having a central role in identity formation and contributes to the pursuit of unattainable ideals.

Social comparison theory

Several researchers have used social comparison theory (SCT; Festinger, 1954) to explain the relationship between social media and the negative consequences for body image (Betz et al., 2019; McComb & Mills, 2021; Stein et al., 2019). SCT posits that individuals have an inherent tendency to appraise their own appearance, beliefs and identity by comparing themselves with others, often resulting in problematic outcomes. Furthermore, studies show that social comparisons occur as a bidirectional process. That is, downward comparisons reinforce self-esteem through focus on those deemed to be lower in status (Wills, 1981). Whereas upward comparisons often result in reduced self-worth and psychological well-being due to comparisons with those that are deemed more successful (Stein et al., 2019).

A study conducted by McComb and Mills (2021) found that upward comparisons with thin ideal content on social media resulted in greater appearance and weight dissatisfaction and lowered ratings of confidence compared to control groups. Stein et al. (2019) further suggest that constant upward comparison is facilitated by social media platforms due to the commonplace practice of editing images and thus eliciting dysfunctional

self-perceptions. Additionally, participants in Baker et al. (2019) study reported that while they wanted to look like others on social media, they knew it was not possible and thus experienced feelings of inadequacy. Baker and colleagues also found that young people felt greater pressure to meet beauty ideals set by peers, (compared to those of celebrities) as peers were found to represent more attainable ideals. Importantly, peer comparisons and connections are a key aspect of the developmental stage of adolescence.

Cancel culture

Young people also have to contend with developing an online identity within the wider context of cancel culture. With the rise of social media platforms that allow self-publishing and provide the ability for any user to police or condemn others' behaviour online, the consequences for violating rules of social acceptability are greatly enhanced. Cancel culture has been defined as "the withdrawal of any kind of support" (Ng, 2020, p. 623), "a form of public shaming" (Velasco, 2020, p. 1), and an attempt to "erase someone from public discourse" (Beiner, 2020, para. 8), based on perceived transgressions towards social movements and cultural or political issues. Thus, the cancellation of an individual typically results in a reduction in social media followers, viewership and boycotts against products endorsed by the cancelled individual (Ng, 2020). The range of issues an individual could be cancelled for typically include perceived sexist, homophobic, racist, or bullying statements or comments on social media (Ng, 2020). For example, most famously the #MeToo movement that created debate concerning sexual harassment in 2017 fostered significant tensions regrading appropriate public responses online (Lewis & Christin, 2022).

However, the behaviours that are deemed unacceptable are argued by Velasco (2020) to be ambiguous and constantly evolving, making it difficult for individuals to assess the line of social acceptability and therefore determine whether their actions will result in condemnation or approval. Those that have social and cultural influence also dictate what is

acceptable and thus form dominant narratives against which to judge digressions. Further, cancel culture has been criticized for the oversimplification of complex issues, leading to moral rage and extreme perspectives (Ott, 2017). Additionally, (Bouvier, 2020) and Papacharissi (2015) argue that reducing social and political issues to binaries of good and evil is extremely problematic. Some authors have highlighted the positive aspect of cancel culture in its potential for democratization and social justice and challenging problematic ideologies perpetuated by mainstream media (Bouvier & Machin, 2021). On the contrary, it has also been argued that cancelling other individuals can create a sense of moral allegiance which becomes a method of judging those with different sociopolitical viewpoints (Bouvier, 2020). Therefore, other authors consider cancel culture a double-edged sword, for its ability to raise awareness regrading injustice and hold individuals accountable, yet also providing a space for digital vigilantism (Chiou, 2020). The consequences of cancel culture for young people and their engagement with social media platforms have not yet been explored in the research and as such, represent a gap in the existing literature.

Well-being

Studies investigating the effect of social media platforms for users' well-being have produced mixed findings, with some reporting small positive or negative effects, with others finding no effects (Bekalu et al., 2019; Vannucci et al., 2017; Wright et al., 2013). For example, Beyens et al. (2020) found that while 44% of participants did not feel better or worse after spending time on social media platforms, 46% reported feeling better, and 10% described feeling worse. Research demonstrating that social media can be detrimental to well-being has explored comparison as a mediating variable. For example, Lin et al. (2018) found that social comparisons with peers online can negatively influence young adults' self-concept clarity and self-esteem, thereby decreasing subjective well-being. The idea that social comparison can result in disintegration of identity has been termed the self-concept

fragmentation hypothesis and is supported by other researchers (Israelashvili et al., 2012; Matsuba, 2006; Mazalin & Moore, 2004). These inconclusive results may be partly due to multiple conceptualisations of well-being in the literature, such as equating well-being with subjective measures of life satisfaction (Lin et al., 2018), variables such as stress and depression (Sabik et al., 2020), and eudaimonic well-being (Gerson et al., 2016). Finally, the fear of missing out (FoMO) has been positively associated with the intensity of social media use, in that staying connected motivates being online for greater periods of time (Roberts & David, 2020). Thus, FoMO was found by the authors to have a negative indirect effect on well-being.

Counter Narrative

In contrast to the deficit and risk narratives described above, research claiming social media has directly caused damaging effects in young people's lives has been heavily critiqued by researchers as conflating correlation with causation (Pangrazio, 2019). Other academics have critiqued claims drawn from studies on the Internet that were conducted in the 1990s, due to the stark difference between early social networking sites and modern social media platforms. For example, Blais et al. (2008) have refuted reductionist hypotheses claiming that being online resulted in a disconnection from family and offline social networks. The authors argue that initial microblogging sites and chat rooms meant that previously users were more likely to be interacting with strangers than with people they knew well.

However, since the Internet has become commonplace in all households, online communication has been found to improve the quality of relationships with existing friends and known others. Pangrazio (2019) also disputes the argument of causation by noting that although the mental health difficulties experienced by young people have increased over time, there is insufficient evidence to suggest that this is related to social media use. Other

reviews of the literature have found a lack of consensus among researchers on specific issues related to Internet addiction, with some practitioners questioning the characteristics and the very existence of the phenomenon (Israelashvili et al., 2012).

There is also extensive research that challenges the biased views of social media as a negative phenomenon and as young people being irresponsible, passive users of the Internet. For example, Gibson and Trnka (2020)found that young people were capable of managing their own emotional safety and also that of others. Their participants provided nuanced, and careful responses to distress that they encountered online and demonstrated thoughtful concern in all their engagements. Other studies have also found young people to be conscientious and cautious users of the Internet, setting themselves positively-oriented goals to achieve online (Israelashvili et al., 2012).

Authors such as Valkenburg and Peter (2011) call for an integrative approach to understanding young people's engagement with social media that identifies the attraction and opportunity online platforms present, as well as the relevant risks young people are likely to experience. Shen et al. (2013) similarly argue that it is necessary to understand the protective factors that play a role in appropriate social media use to optimize the benefits for young people online. Critical scholars argue that there are opportunities for creativity, engagement and self-expression like never before, allowing young people to create content that represents youth culture and that counters the dominance of consumer companies (Livingstone, 2008). Young people in particular have normative needs to develop meaningful social relationships, which can be enhanced by social media use with more frequent opportunities to interact with peers (Mazalin & Moore, 2004). Subsequently, more recent research has demonstrated that there are numerous motivations young people have for being online and behaviours they would describe as affirmative, which are discussed below.

Online Behaviors and Motivations

Existing literature suggests that young peoples' motives for using social media platforms are varied but often include maintaining contact with friends, making new friends, or simply passing the time (Charmaraman et al., 2022; Davis, 2012). Another common motivation for young people being online is leisure, for example, posting status updates for entertainment and positive reinforcement (Utz, 2015). Further, Third et al. (2017) found that for participants in their study (young people aged 10 to 18 years of age across 26 countries) sharing, connection, and communication were aspects of social media platforms that were most valued. The features that platforms are used for also appear to be diverse: uploading photos, making videos, writing personal things, or simply browsing what others post (Pertegal-Vega et al., 2019). Research has also found that young people have reported benefits in the areas of learning, socialization, increased access to information, greater levels of social and emotional support, and creativity (Swist et al., 2015; Third et al., 2017). Consequently, there appear to be numerous positive experiences available to young people online, which risk discourses may overlook. To realize more of the positive opportunities for adolescents, it is important to better understand the potential of social media platforms to develop young people's knowledge, skills, relationships, and experiences.

Positive experiences

Literature surrounding social media platforms has typically evaluated the consequences of problematic use, resulting in factors leading to positive social media use being underexplored. As such, a widely agreed upon definition of positive social media use does not currently exist (Charmaraman et al., 2022). However, research indicates that positive social media use may include: 1) building online social support through connecting with others and strengthening friendships (Pouwels et al., 2021), 2) interest-driven learning (Ito et al., 2009), and 3) sharing resources with peers (Erreygers et al., 2018).

Beyond occupying free time, scholars argue that online spaces satisfy young peoples' needs in multifaceted ways, such as fulfilling the desire for autonomy, providing resources and opportunities for skill acquisition, choice, and avenues for problem-resolution to develop competence and channels for interaction with peer groups (Shen et al., 2013). Further, Livingstone (2008) suggests that the online environment offers young people the space to avert adult surveillance yet remain visible to their adolescent peers and experiment in social contexts.

Valkenburg and Peter (2011) also found that online communication enables teenagers to develop skills to control variables such as self-presentation and self-disclosure. These skills further help them fulfil important developmental psychosocial tasks, including reaffirming identity, discovering intimacy, and exploring sexuality. Youth can therefore leverage opportunities for self-expression, which enable self-reflection, catharsis, and validating feedback (Boyd, 2008; Stern, 2008). Online peer communication can also facilitate a sense of belonging, supporting identity development (Davis, 2012). These positive experiences will be discussed further below.

Friendships.

Niland et al. (2015) suggest that platforms like Facebook enable young people to engage in friendship practices and perform identify practices, forming impressions of each other's authenticity and co-constructing identity by representing themselves in relation to their friends. Goodwin et al. (2016) found that posting Facebook photos was valued by participants for two reasons. First, as a 'marker' for recording and displaying life events, and second, as resources drawn upon in subsequent conversations whereby an experience could be relived. Thus, this highlights the affordances of photo sharing as catalysts for ongoing exchanges and helping to cement friendship bonds, sustaining relationships across time and space.

Previous research has found that young people do not desire to increase their social networks online, suggesting instead they wish to maintain connection with their existing friends (Davis, 2012; Livingstone, 2008). Social media thus prevents friendship decay in the long-term for friends who may be geographically separated and indeed, online communication has been found to facilitate stronger bonds (Utz, 2015). Messages shared between friends were cited by Davis (2012) to consist of both casual exchanges and more intimate discussions involving personal feelings. The Internet thus provides social and practical advantages for young people by increasing the ease of communication. Further, young people in Blais et al.'s (2008) study reported that they felt they could be their true selves to higher degree online, compared to face-to-face relationships.

Particularly for self-conscious or shy teenagers, social media offers the benefit of enhanced controllability needed to overcome the social hindrances presented in offline environments (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). For participants in Davis' (2012) study, communicating online removed the anxiety of knowing what to say and how to say it right in face-to-face interactions, making it easier to share personal feelings and intimate disclosures. Similarly, participants in Gibson and Trnka's (2020) research discussed giving and receiving support on social media as a normative part of the development of a new relationship or the deepening of an existing friendship. The authors highlighted that young people used social media in different ways, but most of those who took part in the study emphasised the value they found in friendship and connection through social media platforms. Importantly, this research points to the way that online honesty might facilitate offline sharing and highlights the potential for using online support as a gateway to develop better offline support. Along with identity development and connection, other researchers have identified information and citizenship as affirmative elements of young peoples' social media use, as discussed below.

Information/resource.

Participants in Easton et al.'s (2018) research reported that following Fitspiration accounts on social media increased their accessibility to practical ideas and tips about healthy lifestyles i.e., healthy recipes, workouts, gym merchandise and exercise techniques. Further, this content boosted their motivation to attend a gym, follow a nutritious diet, and helped them to adopt a positive mindset. They suggested that this content also helped them attain their goals by boosting motivation for working toward their health targets. However, participants also discussed how they found content to be unrealistic and difficult to relate to. Wiklund et al. (2019) also found that social media platforms were viewed by young people as powerful arenas that promote new and unreachable fitness standards, suggesting contradicting experiences of fitness information. Thus, the existing literature suggests that there are generally two sides to the coin which respect to each aspect of social media.

Digital citizenship.

Another example of positive social media use explored in the literature is digital citizenship, with platforms providing young people the spaces to enact change, express voice, find community in shared social, political and environmental causes, as well as facilitate other opportunities for activism offline (Charmaraman et al., 2022). Other scholars suggest that social media platforms can offer a space for young people to voice their views, when traditionally they have been left out and deemed apathetic in political environments (Harris, 2008; Lee, 2018). Research has demonstrated that social media can serve as a positive force by promoting feelings of belonging, social connectedness, agency and a sense of control (Charmaraman et al., 2018).

Young female participants in Jackson's (2018b) research who were involved in feminist Facebook pages described these as sites or hubs from which they could explore feminist areas of interest through links that had been posted, thus expanding their access to

content. Focus groups and individual interviews demonstrated that for the participants in this research, getting the word out about important feminist topics was a highly valued practice in creating awareness and educating others. Participants also described a sense of belonging to a feminist community online, helping to offset feelings of isolation. Adolescent girls in Jackson's (2018) research further acknowledged that while they would regularly participate in these closed Facebook pages, they had a strong reluctance to post or engage with content on public social media sites due to their anxieties about not doing feminism correctly or perceiving these as emotionally unsafe places. Thus, social media engagement was dependent on the audience and perceived consequences from said audience. Participants in Cortés-Ramos et al. (2021) research demonstrated interest in several social campaigns and activism topics including equality, climate change, racism, discrimination, and gender violence. Participants in this study also referenced specific social movements, such as the Black Lives Matter movement (addressing racism in the United States) and did so with sensitivity.

Well-being

In contrast to the well-being literature from a harms narrative approach discussed above, other research suggests that social media can enhance adolescents' well-being through promoting self-disclosure with friends which improves the quality of relationships (Valkenburg & Peter, 2008). This is due to the finding that good quality friendships can act as buffers against stress. Similarly, Sabik et al. (2020) found that the feedback young people receive from peers online can influence their self-worth and consequently their psychological well-being. Further, the authors found that experiencing connectivity online resulted in an increase in well-being, while experiencing feelings of loneliness online resulted in a decrease in well-being.

What is problematic in the existing literature is that most studies have measured social media use in terms of the time and frequency spent on platforms, or the number of accounts

used by participants (Barry et al., 2017; Primack et al., 2019; Ra et al., 2018; Vannucci et al., 2017). Despite being widely used in the literature, Bekalu et al. (2019) have criticised these 'dose-effect' approaches for failing to take into account broader social media features, such as networked-ness and 'always on' capabilities. Additionally, other researchers have argued that most of the studies evaluating the impact of social media use for young peoples' well-being have focused on between-person associations i.e. whether adolescents who spend more time on platforms experience lower levels of well-being compared to peers spending less time on platforms (Beyens et al., 2020). While such research is valuable, the literature stands to benefit from evaluating person-specific effects, as well as between-person effects.

Consideration of mediating variables is also important, given that young peoples' social media experiences are influenced by the nature of their networked interactions and individual differences (Weinstein, 2018). Further, despite social media platforms achieving significant integration into the daily lives of young people, there is a lack of research exploring user's emotional investment into platforms (Jenkins-Guarnieri et al., 2012; Woods & Scott, 2016). Importantly, well-being involves not only the presence of positive and challenging experiences but also the ways individuals manage their experiences (Dodge et al., 2012). Previous research indicates that adolescents' online experiences can mirror their offline strengths and struggles (George & Odgers, 2015). Additionally, Rasmussen et al. (2020) explored well-being outcomes through the lens of emotion regulation difficulties and participants' perceived stress, finding that social media use was a risk factor for mental health difficulties, although it was unclear how this occurred. Other researchers suggest that the transition from normal to problematic social media use occurs when users regard the social media use as an important or even exclusive mechanism to relieve stress, loneliness, or depression (Xu & Tan, 2012). Interestingly, Vally and D'Souza (2019) found that abstaining from social media resulted in a deterioration of ratings in life satisfaction and an increase in

loneliness and negative affect, contradicting previous studies suggesting that deleting social media resulted in positive changes to well-being.

As well as person-specific effects, the type of social media users are engaging in should be considered in characterizing the link between social media use and mental health and well-being (Berryman et al., 2018; Woods & Scott, 2016). For example, in a longitudinal study, Frison and Eggermont (2015) found differential effects of Facebook use on adolescents' well-being depending on type of use—whether it was active or passive use. Lin et al. (2018) also found differences between passive social media use (observing or consuming others' content) versus active social media use (directly communicating with others via message or posting), with the former being a negative predictor of subjective well-being for young adults. They also found that social activities were more likely to increase well-being through building relationships compared to solitary activities online. Finally, research has suggested that other factors such as night-time-specific social media use is an important variable to consider in the relationship with well-being, rather than overall use. For example, Woods and Scott (2016) found that those using social media at night time specifically experienced poorer sleep quality after controlling for depression, self-esteem and anxiety.

More recently, researchers have argued against an either/or framework, suggesting that social media is weighted by both positive and negative influences, creating the experience of a metaphorical see-saw (Pertegal-Vega et al., 2019; Przybylski & Weinstein, 2017). Participants in Weinstein's (2018) study described positive and negative affect experiences across multiple dimensions of social media use (self-expression, relational interactions, exploration and browsing). For example, it was found that interacting with others online could provide both a sense of closeness, and other times disconnection. Additionally, browsing others' content could result in boredom, as well as entertainment.

The complexity of the relationship between positive and negative social media experiences has also been highlighted in a survey conducted by Anderson and Jiang (2018), whereby 81% of young people reported that social media makes them feel more connected to their friends and two-thirds reported that social media provided a sense of community for support through difficult times. In the same survey, however, teens reported that they felt overwhelmed by the drama (45%), pressured to only post content that makes them look good (43%) and to post content that receives more likes and comments (37%), supporting the position that there is a paradoxical double-edged sword with social media use. Another study found that young people reported social media use resulted in feeling closer to friends (78%), being more informed (49%), and having greater connections with family (42%), while others reported feeling pressure to constantly demonstrate the best versions of themselves (15%), being overwhelmed by information (10%), feeling generally overwhelmed (9%), and/or as though they were missing out (9%) (AP-NORC, 2017). These findings demonstrate the importance of nuanced approaches to exploring the intersection between social media and well-being and thinking beyond positive and negative outcomes.

Summary

This chapter has highlighted that while young people have previously been considered categorically different in their level of affinity, comfortability and expertise with digital technologies compared to other generations, assumptions accompanying the term ‘digital native’ are perhaps overly simplified and unhelpful in relation to young people seeking support from adults. Further, assumptions that young people are passive and problematic in their social media use contribute to the dominant risk discourse that results in parents denying the opportunities that platforms provide young people. While existing literature supports problematic aspects of social media relating to addiction, body image, cancel culture and well-being, critiques of this literature provide support for a counter narrative. Research

highlighting the affirmative experiences of young people online, including increased connection and friendship-building, access to information and resources, as well as opportunities for digital citizenship, demonstrates a more balanced approach to social media is required. Thus, qualitative research that accounts for mediating variables and that explores person-specific effects are needed to capture the complexities that exist in this research field.

Chapter Four: The Present Study

Statement of the Problem

Due to the complexity and contradiction identified in the literature review, further research is required to explore young peoples' social media use from their perspectives. Further, it has been argued that young people have been constructed as passive and uninterested, and thus excluded from political conversations regarding youth issues (Jackson, 2018b). Consequently, there is little systematic research that includes young peoples' own understandings and voices regarding the use of social media and the possibility the digital environment has for reshaping their lives (Niland et al., 2015). Many stakeholders who are interested in the well-being of young people are aware of the presence social media has in their world; however, they do not have a good understanding of how social media practices influence behaviour, social relations and identity (Goodyear et al., 2017). There is also a need to better understand the embedded cultural values within social media and how they may influence social participation and transparency online (Kimmons, 2014).

While some scholars have evaluated the impacts of technology and related challenges for parents (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020) and the subsequent parenting approaches they are likely to adopt (Daneels & Vanwynsberghe, 2017), there are few robust recommendations available to parents to directly support young people in their engagement and understanding of social media. The challenge comes in the advanced familiarity and knowledge young people have with social media that has created a gap between those who are adept to navigating the online world, and those who are not (Gibson & Trnka, 2020; Kimmons, 2014). The gap in this research area leaves stakeholders ill-equipped to provide young people with the relevant resources and support required to promote positive and educated interactions with social media. Psychologists working with young people have a responsibility to

understand the factors implicating their client's lives and mental health and wellbeing; and in today's digitalized society, social media cannot be overlooked.

Consequently, the purpose of the current study is to understand the lived experience of young people using social media platforms and the ways in which they might be best supported to engage in positive experiences online. It is hoped that by exploring how young people have navigated their social media journey, these understandings can inform how support and guidance may be offered to young people in the future. Given the context in which young people are made to feel their social media use is problematic, participatory, and affirmative approaches are needed to hear their voices.

Aims

It is clear that social media is embedded in many young peoples' lives. The existing research is deeply contradictory in terms of understanding how social media is shaping young people's experience and their understanding of themselves, as well as the potential for both positive and negative experiences depending on how it is used. The extant research has missed young peoples' voices in exploring this issue. Thus, it is important to conduct research that identifies how young people might best use social media to enhance rather than diminish their sense of self and well-being. Accordingly, this research project asks the following questions.

Research Questions

- How do young people who describe social media as a positive aspect of their lives define positive online experiences?
- What explanations do these young people draw on when talking about their journey to positive online engagement?
- How does social media inform young peoples' identity practices and sense of self?

Chapter Five: Methodology

This chapter provides a detailed account of the methodology used for this research and to address the research questions outlined in Chapter Four. Specifically, it includes discussion of research design and principles, recruitment, participants, procedure, data analysis and ethical considerations. This research was conducted using cooperative inquiry; an action research methodology that consisted of several workshops held with young people among their friendship groups. Audio recordings and other text collected from creative-art activities were analysed using phenomenologically informed thematic analysis.

Research Design

Cooperative inquiry (CI) is a participative, collaborative approach that seeks to conduct research *with* people, not *on* them or *about* them (Heron, 1996). The action research tradition is felt to be particularly applicable to conducting research with young people as it aspires to disrupt the power dynamics in traditional research that treat participants as passive subjects and researchers as active agents. Instead, CI includes all those involved in the research as co-researchers, with all members being involved in the design and execution of the inquiry (Heron & Reason, 2006). CI is therefore a democratic process that brings together action and reflection in an attempt to produce practical solutions to issues of significance (Reason & Bradbury, 2006). This process ensures that issues of concern are indeed shared by all members of the inquiry and that decisions made about the actions taken provide direct benefit to the co-researchers. Attempts to redress power imbalances also highlights the political dimension of CI in its desire to empower people through consciousness raising and constructing their own knowledge (Riley & Reason, 2008). Consequently, it embodies a liberationist spirit that affirms peoples' right to have a say in matters that are important to them (Riley & Reason, 2008). Baldwin et al. (2006) argues that knowledge has no meaning for participants unless they have played an active role in constructing it themselves.

Cooperative inquiry is strongly value-oriented and aims to generate individual behaviour change as well as engender social change among the collective (Borda et al., 2006).

CI critiques positivism for not considering other behavioural and affective ways of knowing (Baldwin et al., 2006) and for failing to connect the concerns of the participants with researchers' outputs (Heron & Reason, 2006). Heron (1996) argues that a social science that does justice to the human condition can only exist when experience and reflection are shared in reciprocal relationships.

Facilitating workshops with friendship groups was an intentional aspect of the research design for several reasons. Firstly, it was important that young people had a safe space in which they felt comfortable sharing their lived experience. Given that research spaces can be experienced as intimidating and artificial, it was hoped that participating with friends would provide a more natural setting for discussion, due to rapport having already been established. Developmentally, young people also engage in sense-making among peers, thus friendship groups can also include enhanced credibility as group discussions approximate the social environments where these conversations would typically take place (Lyons & Willot, 2008). It was also hoped that utilizing friendship groups would disrupt the power dynamic typically operating in research conducted with young people, due to the researcher being both an 'outsider' and outnumbered by participants (Niland, 2014).

Epistemology

Centering the concerns of research participants also shapes the epistemological approach of action research. Action research recognizes multiple forms of 'knowing', rather than the desire for 'objective truth' as in traditional positivistic research traditions. The epistemological framework underlying cooperative inquiry is described as an 'extended epistemology' wherein participative, experiential, and practical forms of knowing are

included beyond rational, empirical forms of knowledge production (Riley & Reason, 2008). CI emphasizes and embraces forms of knowing that develop out of relationships with others in everyday interactions. Consequently, CI draws on four forms of knowing: *experiential knowing* through day-to-day encounters with people, places and things; *presentational knowing* arises through creative expression in storytelling, sculpture, drawing, dance and movement; *propositional knowing* draws on ideas and concepts; and *practical knowing* exists from taking action in the world (Heron, 1996). Practical knowledge is considered to take predominance due to superiority over theoretical forms of knowledge (Riley & Reason, 2008). Reason and Bradbury (2006) assert that when knowing is grounded in experience, presented through stories and art, subjected to sense-making theories and expressed through practice, the validity of the knowledge is increased.

Ontology

CI rests on a model of reality as subjective-objective, in which a single objective account of reality doesn't exist; there is only *an* account which will still be subject to disagreement (Heron, 1996). This ontological view argues that the world is out there, but our view is shaped by our own terms of reference and we only come to know it as we subjectively change it (Reason & Bradbury, 2006). As co-researchers, each individual brings to the research their own experiences, memories, feelings and thoughts to generate ideas and contribute to the learning process (Reason, 1994). The ontological assumptions of CI are thus appropriate with the phenomenological approach of this research. Phenomenologically informed psychology is interested in the individual's account of their experience and seeks to better understand the meaning and interpretation of the experience for the individual (Willig, 2013). Phenomenological enquiry is interested in how something is experienced, in order to learn more about the nature of the phenomenon being investigated; it is not concerned with the psyche or the history of the individual (Willig, 2013).

Research Principles

The process of CI in this research consisted of 4 to 5 workshops with each friendship group, to explore the role that social media plays in helping them understand themselves and the world, and to investigate the positive aspects of being online. Cooperative inquiry is systematic in that it consists of cycles of action and reflection in four phases (Riley & Reason, 2008). In the first phase, the co-researchers agree on a common topic area of interest they wish to explore. The group start with a broad question, such as ‘How can young people use social media positively?’ Over time these tentative research questions become more focused and inform later action. Further, they negotiate the set of procedures to be carried out, agree upon action to be taken, and discuss how they will observe and record experiences.

During phase one the primary form of knowing is propositional; however, aspects of presentational knowing are also drawn upon to share findings. Phase two is characterised by action. Co-researchers consider how their observations conform or oppose their initial propositional frames and notice how this relates to the experiences of others. In this respect, phase two primarily consists of practical knowing. Phase three provides the opportunity for full immersion in experience and a chance for co-researchers to see phenomena in a new way. They may elaborate on previous understandings or be led in unpredictable new directions. In phase three, co-researchers are fully immersed in experiential knowing, although presentational knowledge will be occurring alongside. In the final phase, the co-researchers come together to reconsider the research questions and their initial propositions, this time with the new information garnered from cycles of action and reflection in phases two and three. Consequently, they may choose to alter, continue developing and reframing ideas, or reject them altogether and formulate new ways of thinking. This process informs the next cycle of action and inquiry. Ideally the inquiry is complete when the initial research

questions have been answered and there is congruence between the four forms of knowing (Riley & Reason, 2008).

Facilitation techniques were utilized in the workshops to enhance comfortability in the research space and to increase engagement by providing tools for participants to aid action and reflection. One of the principles of cooperative inquiry is to facilitate individuals into creative thinking, thus allowing them to think deeply about the topic and explore it more meaningfully. Facilitation techniques were considered as tools for understanding their experience in different mediums, thus tapping into the several ways of knowing discussed above. Importantly, due to the emergent design of cooperative inquiry, facilitation techniques were used with a toolbox approach, in which the researcher was able to select particular techniques based on the issues raised by participants over the course of the workshops. Consequently, facilitation techniques were designed tentatively prior to the workshops and were used flexibly as the needs of the group changed (Riley & Scharff, 2012). See the section below for discussion of the specific facilitation techniques used in this study.

Recruitment

Once ethical approval (Appendix A) was granted by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (SOA 20/63), secondary schools were emailed a letter briefly outlining the research and requesting permission to access their students and conduct workshops (Appendix B). As well as this letter to senior management, the schools were also sent a copy of the advertising poster (Appendix C) and information sheet (Appendix D) that was later provided to interested participants. Requests to conduct research were also emailed to a youth organization and youth space within the region; however, no response to these requests were received.

In total, 6 schools within the lower North Island were invited to participate in the research. Of the 6 schools, 4 consented, 3 participated in the study, no response was received

from one school and another school declined access to their students. Due to the high response rate from students at the first 3 schools contacted, the fourth school that had provided consent was informed that the researcher had been fully subscribed and would not be recruiting any further participants in the study.

Of the 3 participating schools, two were co-educational schools (deciles[1] 3 and 5) and the other was a single sex all-boys' school which was decile 8 (Ministry of Education, 2023). After gaining consent to recruit participants, the author arranged with elected teachers at each school to present the research to Year 12 and 13 classes. The author explained the rationale for conducting the research and discussed the research design. Advertising posters with QR codes were also disseminated to students so that they could contact the author directly to ask further questions. Students were asked to contact the author using the QR code if they were part of a friendship group that may be interested in participating.

All participants that responded to the recruitment approaches were thanked for their interest in the study and each member of the friendship group was asked to provide demographic information and complete the online Qualtrics consent form (Appendices E and F). Through email correspondence, suitable workshop times and kai[2] options were then discussed. Participants were provided with one $40 Prezzy card each as thanks for their contribution.

Participants

Sixteen participants across four friendship groups took part in the research, all of whom were English-speaking students who attended a secondary school (Years 9 to 13) in

[1] A school's decile measures the extent to which the school's students live in low socio-economic or poorer communities. Decile 1 schools are the 10% of schools with the highest proportion of students from low socio-economic communities. Decile 10 schools are the 10% of schools with the lowest proportion of students from these communities. From January 2023 deciles were phased out and replaced by the Equity Index to calculate equity funding.

[2] Kai is the te reo Māori word for food. Te reo Māori is the indigenous language of Aotearoa, New Zealand.

the lower North Island and were part of a friendship group that could speak to positive experiences with social media platforms. All participants were either 16 or 17 years old. Of these participants, 12 identified as female and 4 identified as male. Participants identified themselves as New Zealand European (70%), Māori and New Zealand European (5.8%), Māori (5.8%), American (5.8%), Indian (5.8%) and Pasifika (5.8%). The only exclusion criteria were that participants had to be over the age of 16.

Table 1

Friendship groups and participants (N = 16)

Group	Participants	School information
1	Female, 16, NZ European	Co-educational
	Female, 16, Indian	
	Female, 16, Pasifika and Maori	
2	Female, 16, American	Co-educational
	Female, 16, NZ European	
	Female, 16, NZ European	
	Female, 17, NZ European	
	Female, 17, NZ European	
3	Female, 16, NZ European	Co-educational
	Female, 16, NZ European	
	Female, 17, NZ European	
	Female, 17, NZ European	
	Male, 17, Maori and NZ European	
	Male, 17, NZ European	
4	Male, 17, NZ European	Single sex
	Male, 17, NZ European	

Procedure

Workshops ranged from 45-60 minutes in length. Four workshops were conducted with two of the friendship groups and five workshops were held with the other two friendship groups. Decisions about the number of workshops conducted was in part based on school timetable structures, which meant that some groups had a shorter lunch break than others. However, in following with the cooperative inquiry methodology outlined by Riley and Reason (2008), the inquiry was completed when the questions first generated by the group were fully answered and there was congruence between experiential, presentational, propositional and practical knowing. Consequently, the number of workshops was not set by the author, instead the inquiry met a natural end following sufficient cycles of action and reflection.

Due to the focus of the inquiry being guided by group members and the design of cooperative inquiry being emergent, workshops were not planned or structured ahead of time. However, in consultation with the research supervisors, possible open-ended questions relating to the research questions were generated to facilitate discussion in the first workshop. Possible facilitation techniques (which are discussed below) were also brainstormed within supervision prior to conducting workshops, which the author could utilise depending on the topics raised by participants (see Appendix H for facilitation techniques used with each group). These facilitation techniques and creative art activities were developed according to existing cooperative inquiry literature, as well as adapted from evidence-based therapies to meet the particular goals and research questions of the current study. They were also utilised in response to participants' experiences and what they said as workshop topics developed; techniques were chosen based on their ability to facilitate deeper thought and inquiry into particular issues. Beyond open-ended questions and possible facilitation techniques, the primary role of the author was to provide space for discussion and gently guide participants

to speak from lived experience rather than sharing their observations of others. Minimal encouragers and active listening skills were utilised often, allowing dialogue to be relatively free-flowing. All workshops were digitally audiotaped (with consent) for transcription and analysis.

Initial Workshop

The intentions and aims of the first workshop were to develop rapport and provide participants with an understanding of what to expect from partaking in the research, such as the nature and structure of the workshops and between-workshop tasks. A key consideration at this first meeting was the importance of providing a relaxed, conversational space in which a shared concern and purpose could be established (Riley & Reason, 2008). The cycle of action and reflection in cooperative inquiry was explained and questions about the research process were invited. Other principles of cooperative inquiry were also discussed, such as the positioning of participants as experts, and the position of the author as facilitator and co-researcher. Group members were assured that there would be no “right or wrong” response, outlining the purpose of the research being to explore lived experience, rather than to determine a particular ‘result’ as might be the aim of quantitative research.

Initial workshops opened with the author welcoming participants and asking whether participants would like to open the workshops in any way, such as with prayer or karakia, to meet cultural needs in line with Te Tiriti o Waitangi. All friendship groups elected to have the author open the first workshop with a personal introduction. Participants were given the opportunity to go around the room, introduce themselves and share with the group what it was about the research study that made them interested in participating. They were also asked if there was something specifically that they either wanted to explore about social media or something they wanted to achieve by participating in the research. Matters of confidentiality, storage of personal information and publishing of findings were discussed in further than

detail than what was provided on the information sheet and consent form, and questions were again invited before participants completed the workshop group participant consent form and individual consent form.

To develop rapport and increase comfortability in the room (before delving into more personal topics, such as individual challenges and dilemmas), broad open-ended questions were asked initially to get a sense of the types of social media group members were engaging with. For example, typical questions included: What social media platforms do you use? What is the difference between platforms? What percentage of time do you spend on each? What are your main motivations for being online? What do platforms enable you to do as individuals versus as a collective? What functions do you enjoy or appreciate about the different platforms? How would you describe a positive experience on social media? These types of questions often invited the generation of a pros and cons list or a pie chart drawing to support participants in developing their ideas.

Subsequent Workshops

Each workshop would begin by sharing kai, and participants sharing any reflections they had from the previous workshop or new insights related to past topics that they noticed in their social media use following the previous workshop. Between workshop-tasks were then discussed, which often led to starting place of the current workshop. The author would often ask questions to elicit specific detail from participants related to taken for granted assumptions or rules they had discussed relating to social media. A creative art activity or facilitation technique would then be employed, or returned to, and workshops would end with the author thanking group members for their participation and insights and confirming details of the next workshop.

Final Workshop

As well as the typical format followed for workshops, discussed above, the final workshop concluded with group members partaking in an activity dubbed the 'fan of thanks', by one of the author's research supervisors. Each participant was provided with an A4 sheet of paper and asked to write their name at the top. Their piece of paper was then passed around each group member for them to write something that they had appreciated or enjoyed about the person participating in the research with them. Each compliment was written on alternating sides of the paper and folded, creating a fan of thanks for each group member to take away with them.

Between workshop-tasks

Action taken between workshops was framed by the author as *between-workshop tasks*. Due to participants' difficulties in self-generating an action point at the end of the first workshop, the author prompted group members to notice a time in which they were engaging with social media positively over the week and to take a screenshot as a time stamp. Discussion as to what made this experience positive then occurred during the next workshop. This aspect of the research study created opportunity for participants to engage in experiential and practical knowing. Subsequent between-workshop tasks were then generated by individual participants themselves. For example, one participant had identified a difficulty in his use of social media, and he opted to implement one solution over the week and share his findings and the following workshop.

Facilitation techniques

The Digital Journey

The concept of the digital journey was inspired by Pangrazio's (2019) research, which also explored young peoples' experiences with social media. Asking participants to plot their use of websites over time in a linear fashion was successful in supporting further discussion

and providing a temporal picture of digital practices over time in Pangrazio's (2019) research. However, this activity was adapted to align with the research questions, methodology and epistemology of the current study. For example, rather than instructing participants to construct their journey with social media in a linear fashion, participants were encouraged to design their journey with social media in whatever expression was meaningful to them and enabled them to express the nature of their relationship with social media over time. For example, one participant chose to express their experience with increasing dependency on social media over time by drawing a fire that became increasingly bigger in size over time (see Appendix I). Participants were provided with coloured pens, coloured paper, decorative tape, crayons, an array of magazines with which they could cut images from, glue sticks, scissors, printed emojis and common social media logos, and A3 sized white paper. Their instruction was to begin their timeline from the date they joined their first social media platform (approximately), to the present day. Participants were encouraged to document both social media timestamps in terms of the creation of different accounts over time, what they were using platforms for and their relationship with platforms, as well as relevant or meaningful life milestones or events that they thought may have influenced their social media use.

As participants began constructing their digital journeys, the author asked prompting questions related to motivations and experiences with social media. At other times, discussion was facilitated naturally between participants as they reflected on past practices and changes in their social media use over time, such as initial motivations for joining platforms, where they started and why, as well as how their motivations may have changed over time. The author also asked questions relating to different account types, such as public and private, rationale for creating these, screen time or usage patterns, and learning that they had taken from peers that informed their engagement. Participants were then invited to share

why they had created or drawn their timeline in a specific way, particularly when there was use of symbols or metaphors inherent in their design.

Values Bulls-Eye

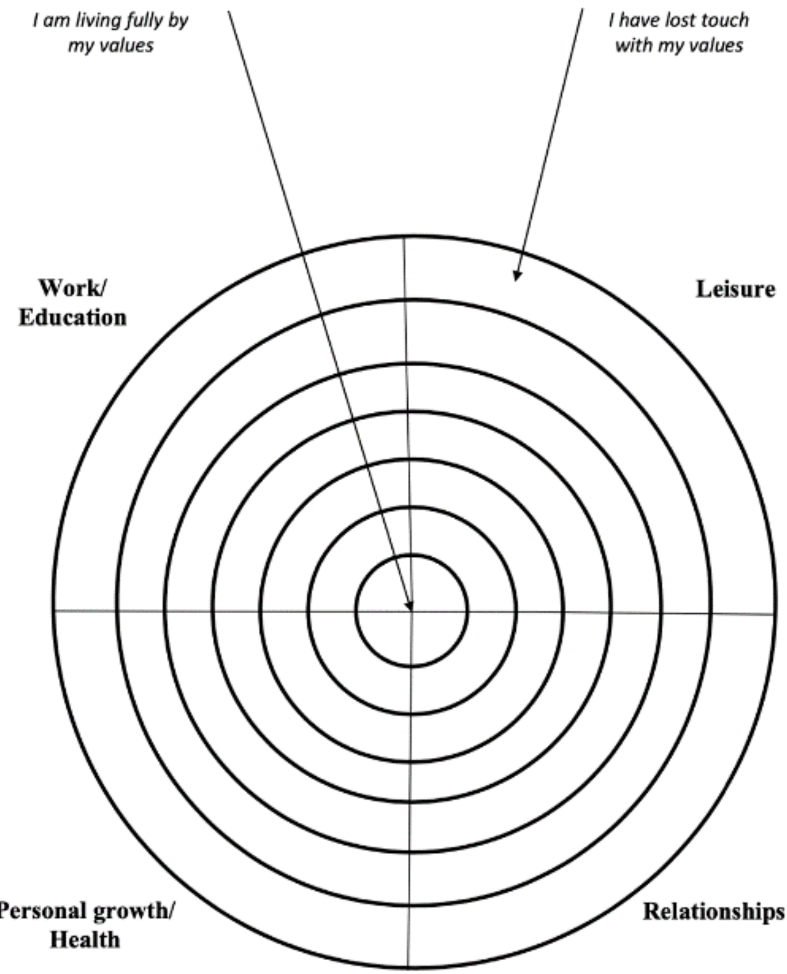
The values bulls-eye measure originally developed by Lundgren et al. (2012) is frequently used in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT; Hayes et al., 2003), which is a therapy that aims to enhance psychological flexibility. Typically used to support individuals to evaluate how closely they are living by their values, this exercise was adapted to support participants in evaluating the role of social media in this process. Introduction from the author included opening discussion around participants' understandings of values, and clarifying differences between values and goals, as well as how values would be understood in the context of this exercise. For example, values were discussed as leading principles that guide us as individuals. Values were highlighted as being personally meaningful qualities to cultivate that are never fully achieved and thus require ongoing action.

Participants were then prompted to consider their personal values in four different areas of their lives: physical health, relationships, work/education, and leisure. Participants were provided with a list of values to select from or were provided the option of generating their own values independently. Next participants were asked to consider how social media contributed to their ability to live by these values. Each participant was asked to place a cross in each quadrant of their bullseye to mark how closely they believed they were living by their values by using social media with an X (the center of the bullseye suggesting very closely, and the outer ring of the bullseye being poorly). Each quadrant was discussed separately, with participants articulating their rationale for the placement of their cross or expressing ambivalence regarding where they had placed their cross. They were then prompted to reflect on action that might take them closer to the center of the bullseye in each quadrant, including detail as to what this might look like in a practical sense. As with the other facilitation

techniques used in this study, this task informed new discussion concerning other related topics, with the author being required to then redirect discussion back to the values bullseye task.

Figure 1.

Values bullseye[3]



[3] Reprinted from The Bull's-Eye Values Survey: A Psychometric Evaluation, 19, 4, Tobias Lundgren, Jason B. Luoma, JoAnne Dahl, Kirk Strosahl, Lennart Melin, p. 525, Copyright (2012), with permission from Elsevier

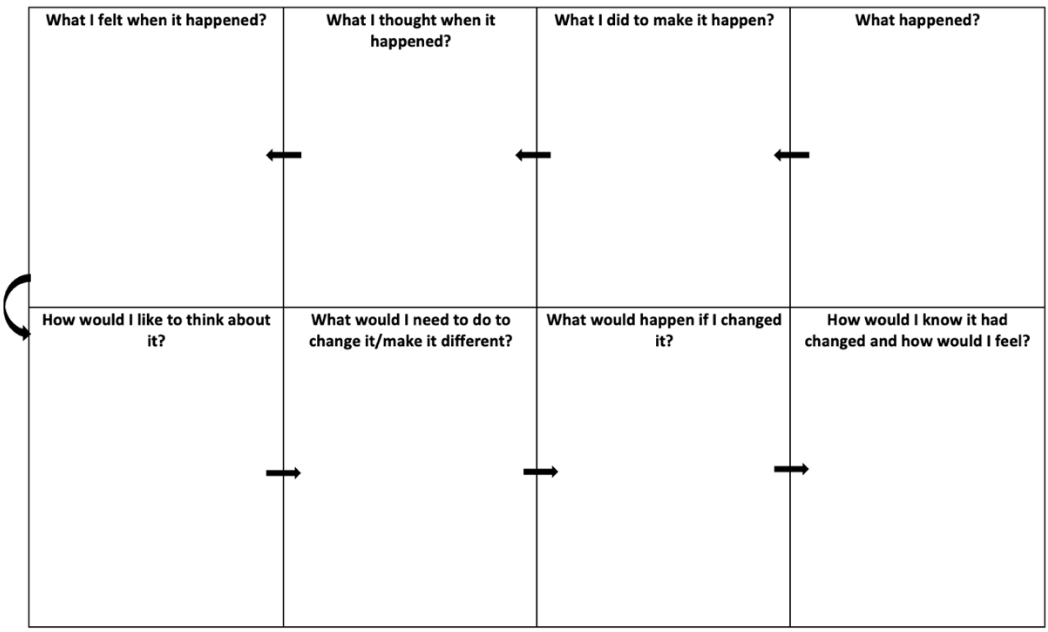
Learning pathways grid

The learning pathways grid (Figure 2.), originally developed by Rudolph et al. (2006) and adapted by Stafford-Smith (2010), was utilized as a framework in this study to support participants to evaluate a social media dilemma or challenge they had experienced. The learning pathways grid was designed by Rudolph et al. (2006) to generate a reflection process and illuminate the mismatch between an individual's actual results and desired results. It was adapted and utilized in this study to empower participants to develop their own solutions for more meaningful or positive social media engagement which would be used as practical knowing. Each participant was prompted to select a dilemma that was particularly pertinent to them or that they felt comfortable discussing in the friendship group setting. They were then guided by the author through completing each box of the grid. Any difficulties completing aspects of the grid provided a chance for collaboration and brainstorming with other participants. Socratic questioning was also utilised by the author to support young people in coming to their own solutions.

Stafford-Smith's (2010) use of the learning pathways grid was adapted further for use in this research by altering the language to reflect cognitive, behavioural and emotional aspects of behaviour change. Thus, the grid follows a path that begins in the top right box of 'What happened?', participants were then prompted to consider 'What I did to make it happen?', 'What I thought when it happened?', and 'What I felt when it happened?' Participants were then prompted to consider 'How would I like to think about it?', 'What would I need to do to change it/make it different?' and 'What would happen if I changed it?'. The final box asked participants to reflect, 'How would I know that it had changed and how would I feel?

Figure 2

Learning pathways grid



Visual images

Creating visual images was also utilised as a creative art activity to support participants in exploring some of their experiences with social media. For example, one of the groups talked considerably about the difference in posting practices between the various accounts that had created on one social media platform. Thus, in an effort to make sense of their experiences in greater depth, this group used coloured pens and paper to construct a visual image whereby their public account persona was depicted on one half of the paper and their private account on the other (see Appendix J).

Data Analysis

Transcription was completed by the author. Participants chose pseudonyms which were used at the beginning of the transcription to ensure confidentiality. Due to the focus of the research being to explore participants' lived experiences of social media, talk and text

were analysed using phenomenologically informed thematic analysis. Talk in this context refers to transcribed audio from workshops, while text refers to any other medium participants created during the workshops.

A phenomenological orientation was selected to emphasize the young peoples' subjective experiences and the meaning assigned to them, whilst thematic analysis enabled the identification of patterns of experience across friendship groups. Thematic analysis can produce rich descriptions of the data set through summary of key features and provides the first step in organizing concepts and bringing together shared understandings. Thematic analysis is also a highly flexible approach as it can be applied across a range of theoretical and epistemological frameworks and is a useful fit with collaborative research paradigms (Braun & Clarke, 2006). More specifically, phenomenological research offers the ability to capture the complexity of first-person accounts from those who have experienced the phenomenon of interest (Lawthom & Tindall, 2011). While this study invited young people to collectively explore the issue of social media, participants often shared their individual experiences with the group to think about them more deeply. Therefore, it was appropriate to apply a phenomenological framework to analyze the talk generated in collaboration. Further, this framework was particularly important to the aims of this research being to support young peoples' voices in a research field dominated by risk narratives perpetuated by adults. This research drew on a phenomenological perspective as it has previously been used in psychology, with the focus being on the ways in which individuals make meaning of their experience, whilst remaining cognizant of the broader social structures that influence these meanings (Willig, 1999, as cited in Lawthom & Tindall, 2011). Given the action research principles underpinning the project, it was important to highlight understandings that have the potential to inform change and advocate for young peoples' needs. Thus, considering the

social context that shapes the ability to experience the phenomenon in this way was a valuable aspect of this phenomenological orientation.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis were followed in the analysis of data. The first phase of thematic analysis involved familiarization with the data by reading and re-reading transcripts to search for repeated patterns and meanings. The second phase involved generating initial codes, or the 'most basic segment of the raw data that can be assessed in a meaningful way'. In phase three, codes and corresponding data extracts were sorted into potential themes. Phase four consisted of reviewing and refining themes. Coded extracts for each theme were read and assessed to decide whether they formed a coherent pattern. This process also occurred for candidate themes. New themes were created, or existing themes were reworked or discarded from the analysis. After collating a satisfactory map of the themes, defining and naming themes then occurred in phase five. Throughout this process, in line with phenomenologically informed, thematic analysis, attention was paid to how the experience of using social media positively was described by participants and how they interpreted their experiences. The fifth phase was the final analysis and write-up.

Ethical considerations

Identifying ethical implications of this research was informed by my previous research and two institutional ethical guidelines: Massey University's Code of Ethical Conduct for Research, Teaching and Evaluations Involving Human Participants and the Code of Ethics for Psychologists Working in Aotearoa/New Zealand. This process required examining potential ethical concerns, particularly regarding risk of harm, voluntary participation, informed and voluntary consent, privacy and confidentiality issues, conflicts of interest, cultural considerations and compensation to participants. Ethical issues were further analysed and discussed with my research supervisors. A full ethics notification was submitted

and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee on 15 February 2021 (Southern A Application– 20/63) (see Appendix A).

The ethical concerns identified in this research by both the researcher and the Massey University Human Ethics Committee were as follows:

Confidentiality

Due to the nature of the discussion involving social media, there was a possibility that participants would discuss the content of social media accounts outside of the group that pertained information to other individuals. There was also the possibility that participants would continue conversations related to the research outside of the workshops and unknowingly share this information with others. To mitigate these concerns, confidentiality was addressed with participants in the first workshop. It was requested that if they wished to discuss social media content belonging to individuals outside of the workshops, they would need to anonymize this by withholding the individual's name and identifying information. Any information that identified the school in which the research was conducted was anonymized by removing or modifying identifying details. This was done by the researcher during the transcription process. Schools were made aware of this during early communications. Identifying information captured within the audio recordings was anonymized when transcribed by the researcher; as such, the supervisors were not privy to this information. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identities of the participants in the thesis.

There was also the potential for school staff to learn the identity of participants if the participants remained in their own classrooms for workshops or asked their teachers to use a particular room. Thus, the author conducted all communication with the school regarding the booking of rooms/space to hold workshops to maintain participants' anonymity. However,

participants were made aware in the discussion of the consent form that complete anonymity could not be guaranteed due to the nature of the school environment.

Coercion/pressure from peers to take part

Given that the inclusion criteria for this research project required participants to be part of a friendship group, the author used presentations in schools to highlight the importance of autonomy and the need for all members of the friendship group to make their own decision about whether to participate. Potential participants were also reminded that if they were part of a friendship group that did not wish to participate, they could contact the researcher as an individual and be connected with other individuals to form a group. The concept of informed consent being ongoing was also discussed with participants at the first workshop.

Classroom performance

The workshops were designed to be a minimally-taxing experience for participants; the activities were planned to provide a fun and interactive way of opening discussion and reflection and were anticipated to be enjoyed by the participants. Lunchtime workshops were conducted within the hour and participants were provided with lunch and given time at the beginning of the hour to eat before discussion began. As described in the confidentiality agreement, participants were not permitted to discuss information from the study outside of the workshops, therefore there was low risk of the content disrupting classroom performance. Further, workshops were conducted in the first part of the year at time when students were not preparing for assessments or exams.

Discomfort/discussion of difficult or negative experiences

Despite recruiting participants who identified as having affirmative experiences with social media, it was acknowledged that discussion of how they had overcome negative

experiences was also likely to arise. Therefore, it was deemed necessary by the author and supervision team to put in a risk plan in place, if one of the participants became vulnerable or experienced emotional difficulty during the workshops. The agreed process for managing the safety of the individuals and the wider group was firstly, that the disclosure would be validated by the author and the participant would be acknowledged for their bravery in sharing with the group. The participant/s would then be provided with relevant helpline information and encouraged to access the support of a trusted adult or school counsellor and supported to do so. A debrief would then have been conducted with the group afterwards, the author would acknowledge that it may have been difficult for them to hear, and that they would also be supported to seek further support. Additionally, participants will have had peer support from their friendship group and be given power and voice to put forward their perspectives throughout the research. The workshops were designed to be empowering, not distressing, and the aim was to enhance social cohesion due to the sharing of experience. Therefore, anticipated risk was low and there was no occasion where these steps needed to be enacted. Instead, the participants vocalised their enjoyment of the research process.

Cultural considerations

Prior to submitting a full ethics application, cultural supervision was sought with a senior clinical psychologist. The incorporation of appropriate tikanga practices was discussed, particularly in a facilitating a supportive environment and providing space for co-researchers to introduce themselves in ways that would be meaningful to them, such as sharing their pepeha. This cultural supervisor offered his consultation services for the duration of the research project, and it was decided that he could be contacted to advise on next steps, should the researcher experience any issues or difficulties in either the engagement with participants or interpretation of data.

Researcher Reflexivity

Reflexivity is a central element of qualitative research as the notion of the researcher being a separated observer is highly contested (Dodgson, 2019). Thus, by increasing awareness of our own beliefs, ways of being and of doing, through 'critical subjectivity', we can recognise how we may shape the research projects we are involved in (Reason & Bradbury, 2006). The participatory nature of cooperative inquiry, being positioned as a co-researcher, makes being reflexive and explicit as the facilitator in this process even more important. Firstly, I am a young professional; female clinical psychologist in training; of mixed ethnicity and middle-class. Having been born in the mid 1990s, my first encounters with social media platforms occurred during my years at intermediate school and early secondary school; co-occurring with the rise of Facebook as one of the most popular and widely used platforms. Experiencing the trials and tribulations of navigating social media platforms myself throughout my early adolescence and adulthood piqued my interest in what this experience might be like for those of a younger generation who experienced even higher ubiquity with social media.

I also recognised that being in only a slightly older age bracket than my participants (8-9 years older), enabled rapport to develop quickly as I was not assumed to be a digital immigrant. Rather, I believe participants viewed me as somewhat of a digital native in that I demonstrated understanding of social media platforms with shared experiences closer to theirs than their parents. For example, I could understand pop culture references and share an understanding of the spaces they frequented online. However, given my own experiences of social media use, I made frequent strides to 'check' that my understanding of their responses were accurate, and that I had not heard their experience through my own interpretation. I found that participants were extremely adept at clarifying or explaining their position further when provided the opportunity.

To achieve reflective awareness in this study, I kept a free writing journal which I utilised both before and after meeting with groups, to identify and observe my own assumptions, beliefs, critiques, and reflections of the topics discussed and participants' responses to them. I approached each workshop with an open curiosity, positioning myself as a naïve enquirer eager to learn from and understand the participants' experiences. Participants often made statements with assumed knowledge, given that they were speaking among friends who had shared experiences, they would use slang or cultural references that I needed to be curious about, ask to clarify so as to not make assumptions. For example, engagement with online bots, trolling, or being 'cancelled' were common experiences referred to in one word, which could quickly be met with agreement or laughter. Thus, I had to prompt participants to explain concepts as if they were entirely foreign or were being explained to someone with no understanding of social media whatsoever.

In both my observations of participants during the workshops and in direct feedback they provided, it was clear that they really valued the opportunity to share their experiences and demonstrate their expertise and knowledge of platforms. It was evident that they took pride in their level of insight and awareness relating to online risks and challenges and gained a sense of satisfaction in being able to educate me on certain topics. Aside from occasions in which they had forgotten to complete between-workshop tasks, all participants engaged well in workshops discussions and creative-art techniques. The *Digital Journey* activity in particular was well-received by participants who seemingly enjoyed the opportunity to engage in a hands-on activity and express themselves creatively. Overall, a significant amount of laughter occurred during the workshops and a high level of comfortability was observed within the space, occurring naturally given the nature of participating in friendship groups. One group also went so far as to write a card thanking me for the opportunity to participate in the research.

Supervision was also utilised frequently throughout conducting the workshops, to discuss preliminary findings, challenge assumptions and devise appropriate facilitation techniques to utilise in subsequent workshops. My supervision team was made up of an associate professor and senior clinical psychologist specialising in clinical practice with children, adolescents, and families. My co-supervisor is a professor in critical health psychology with considerable experience in using cooperative inquiry as an action research methodology. Thus, being able to draw on the knowledge and experience of both of my supervisors was extremely valuable, and it was from their guidance that my affirmative approach to the research was shaped.

Chapter Six Analysis: Navingating A Digital Landscape

Beyond simple or straightforward understandings of social media, the participants in this research provided complex and nuanced discussion of their experiences. Despite using platforms for the range of positive tools they provided, participants were critically aware of the risks and challenges that being online presented. Thus, continually finding ways to balance opportunity and risk were normalised aspects of social media participation. Overall, it was apparent that young peoples' experiences were influenced by numerous contextual factors that reflected a long journey with social media over time. This research project asked participants to constantly reflect on their online and offline practices, including the ways they had experimented with, and cultivated their current level of engagement. It was acknowledged by many that social media use would still require negotiation in the future to maintain or achieve meaningful and positive engagement. The first subtheme of this chapter introduces social media as a complex phenomenon that participants experienced as switching between both positive and negative instantaneously and concurrently. The second subtheme explores the temporal and spatial factors that participants acknowledged as significant influences in their social media journeys. While this chapter highlights some important issues for young people, in-depth discussion of these issues will be explored further in subsequent chapters.

1. Two sides of the same coin

In contrast to previous research suggesting that young people are passive or naïve users of social media (Baxter & Connolly, 2014; Mascheroni et al., 2014), participants in this study acknowledged difficult aspects of being online and demonstrated thoughtful and considered approaches to their social media use. Their discussions extended beyond

traditional cost-benefit analyses and considered broader contextual factors that they believed influenced engagement. Furthermore, it was clear that participants' social media journey was complex and incomplete, and that navigating a digital landscape involved 'sitting with' ambiguity. Thus, their relationship with social media was ongoing and everchanging. Uncertainty was reflected in the language used by participants, with platforms themselves being considered a 'massive grey area' (Lucy), somewhat of a 'constant part of life' (Bradley), that 'can't be all that bad' (Rose).

1.1. "The flip side of that": Social media encompasses both positive and negative aspects

Participants took a balanced, sophisticated approach to their appraisal of social media, suggesting that (like many things) it has its positives and negatives and that almost every aspect of social media could be a 'good thing or a bad thing' (Lucy) that good elements will also have their flipside. Thus, being online required constant reflexivity and the development of social skills and technological savvy to respond effectively. These findings support the work of Weinstein (2018), who found that young people experienced social media much like an "emotional see-saw"; a dynamic, shifting phenomenon that changes based on the challenges they experience (p. 3597). One example of this dialectic was the acknowledgment that social media platforms provided individuals with a space to share their 'opinion' or 'voice'. While this aspect of social media was initially suggested as a positive, it was later discussed by Bradley as a negative, "*It gives a lot of people who shouldn't have a voice… ((General laughter))… the ability to throw their opinions into the world.*"

This discussion was continued by creating a pros and cons list (see Appendix K), with participants suggesting that having a voice enabled individuals to highlight important topics and enabled minority groups to be heard beyond their immediate communities. The negative aspects of platforms providing space for free speech included the potential of users to abuse this power, propagate 'wrong opinions' (Penelope) and thereby contribute to 'cancel culture'.

This tension and the inability to judge what was considered to be a ‘wrong opinion’ caused some hesitancy for participants about whether to engage in sharing on social media. Who exactly is given the power to make determinations about what is the right or wrong opinion was unclear; and this uncertainty perhaps illustrates why figuring this out can be so problematic for young people. ‘Wrong opinions’ were considered by participants to engender negative feedback online, with consequences for being ‘cancelled’; a finding which will be discussed in the third results chapter. This finding is supported in the literature, whereby Berriman and Thomson (2015) found that young people experienced tensions between striving for emotional pleasure through posting to obtain recognition and praise, whilst also attempting to avoid feelings of anxiety and distress that might arise from receiving criticism from others online.

In addition to social media affordances being perceived as positive and negative, participants also found that their responses to platforms influenced their emotion and affective well-being. The unpredictable nature of social media meant that for some participants like Bradley, subjective mood ratings were affected by the types of engagement with platforms:

> *Bradley: Well like just for me personally um when I go or if I’m on my way to bed I’ll be like messaging friends and I’ll have a really good chat with them and I’ll end up leaving it feeling like happier than when I went on*
>
> *Interviewer: Mm hm*
>
> *Bradley: But then like the flip side of that is that I might be just scrolling through Instagram and I see something sad that’s happened in the world or there’s no one to talk to online, I’ll just leave it feeling like either the same or worse, just like feeling bad about everything else that’s going on*

Bradley's extract suggests the presence of numerous factors that might influence not only how participants feel about social media, but also how they feel within themselves. For many participants, connection with others was sought online and having 'a really good chat' (Bradley) was perceived to strengthen relationships. This finding is supported in the literature, with researchers noting that instant messaging between young people facilitates self-disclosure, social support, and emotional relief, thus contributing positively to well-being (Luo & Hancock, 2020). Existing research also highlights young peoples' preference for expressing their distress in smaller friendship groups online rather than public forum, as well as the finding young people are skilled at actively responding to others' distress online in supportive ways (Gibson & Trnka, 2020). Given that adolescence is a critical time to establish and strengthen social ties (Dolev-Cohen & Barak, 2013), other researchers have highlighted the utility in social media improving young peoples' bonding and bridging capital (Chen & Li, 2017).

However, as acknowledged by Bradley, the 'flip side' of having 'no one to talk to online' and seeing 'something sad' resulted in feelings of loneliness, hopelessness, and isolation. For Bradley, talking to friends might have supported him to offset some of his distress by having someone to 'vent to', as research has found this to have a cathartic effect (Gibson & Trnka, 2020). However, the presence of supportive relationships appears to not be enough in Bradley's case, rather his extract highlights a desire for an immediacy of support to feel less alone. This emphasises the need for research to capture the nuanced factors that contribute to subjective well-being beyond dose-effect approaches (Bekalu et al., 2019), that is, *how* social media is being used, rather than *how much*.

Other participants described their experience of posting on social media as 'confidence gambling' due to the uncertainty involved regarding 'how other people interact with it [the post]' (Blake). Blake and Ben suggested that others' response to their pictures

often determined whether an individual would feel 'really good or really bad' after posting. This was experienced by Blake and Ben as problematic because they felt there was no 'middle ground' between positive and negative responses, and thus emotional states. They resonated with the gambling metaphor particularly due to the shared experience of users' knowing they are taking a risk but choosing to engage regardless. Here, their discussion highlights the problematic nature of establishing a sense of self based on the opinions of others yet reflects a common difficulty among adolescents. Valkenburg et al. (2006) also found that positive feedback online enhanced young peoples' well-being and self-esteem, while receiving negative feedback decreased these aspects. The topic of 'confidence gambling' led to thought-provoking discussion for Ben and Blake regarding how they wanted to engage with social media differently (see chapter 7 'Strategies for managing platforms' for analysis of this discussion).

1.2. Positive experiences- a balancing act

For young people, the enjoyable aspects of social media included: having a space to talk with each other without being limited by physical location; increased opportunity for connection and networking with different communities; and the ability to stay updated with global issues and current events. Thus, both expanding their social network and exposure to new people and experiences were viewed as positive aspects of platforms. However, challenging aspects of social media platforms included receiving negative criticism, inability to trust information sources, sitting with the discomfort of not knowing how posts/content would be received and other social media users sharing negative comments on their pages or through messages. While these difficulties will be discussed further in the following chapters, they are highlighted here to illustrate the tensions young people negotiate at all times when using social media, reflecting in their talk the constant predicament of all aspects of social media resulting in either positive affect or negative affect at any time.

For many of the participants, positive experiences of social media were influenced by interactions with others online, with platforms either providing the ability to connect, reconnect or facilitate friendship practices. For some this included an increased ability to be constantly connect with their existing group of friends. Blake valued a 24/7 level of communication with his close friends; social media platforms enabled him to 'know what we're up to' every day. The affordances of platforms, such as the video feature on Snapchat, were also praised by participants for their ability to reflect real-life interaction:

> *It's like you're talk- you're more talking face to face rather than on Instagram it's just messages whereas you're actually seeing someone's face which I feel is more I think people feel more connected with the person if they're talking on Snapchat because they can see a face and they might know their voice and they can put a voice to a face and it's almost like it's just talking (Blake)*

For Blake, the removal of traditional communication barriers such as typed messages and the closer approximation to face-to-face communication was a celebrated aspect of modern social media and enabled a greater sense of connection with friends. The ability to contact peers when physically separated and enjoy less goal-oriented exchanges was important to the young people in this research and helped to facilitate a sense of belonging; acknowledged by Davis (2012) to be a meaningful aspect of identity development in adolescence. For other participants, enhancing relationships with those they did not know well was considered a positive aspect of social media. Joy's acknowledgement that social media 'kinda helps' with getting to know people that she had met 'in real life' suggests that online environments are powerful spaces for adolescents to engage in friendship practices, enhance their social skills and strengthen connections.

The ability to 'check-in' with existing friends was also highlighted and experienced as an important aspect of engagement and an act that generated positive outcomes through providing a sense of being cared for:

> *He's like snapped [sent a picture on Snapchat] me a few times while I've been late for school like 'Where are you? What are you doing?' and it's like nice to have that little check-up (Bradley)*

Here, Bradley highlights the value in receiving a message from his friend and his understanding that this message conveyed a sense of caring through concern. For Bradley this was important because it was not uncommon for his friend to message "a few times", communicating that his absence did not go unnoticed, and this was experienced as "nice". Further, this is discussed by Bradley as a '*little* check-up'; a message that does not require considerable thought or time to craft, rather evidence of thoughtfulness. This level of accessibility that technology enables, therefore enables these small acts to be embedded into young peoples' everyday lives and represents opportunities for friendship practices highly valued by adolescents. In their research with young people, Gibson and Trnka (2020) found that young people were extremely tactful and sensitive to the needs of others and were highly skilled at using simple responses to demonstrate support. Given that young people are more willing to confide in their peers than adults or mental health professionals (Michelmore & Hindley, 2012), online platforms present key methods of social support, which may be important for alleviating distress.

Another positive aspect of social media that was discussed by several participants, was that platforms enabled them to evoke a sense of global citizenship. This finding contrasts with literature in the United States suggesting that young adults displayed 'moral and ethical insensitivity' and 'empathy gaps' online (Baxter & Connolly, 2014), as well as claims of

young peoples' expression of narcissism (Twenge, 2006). Rather, the participants in the study took pride in their awareness of global issues and current events and spoke passionately about wanting to enact change within the world. Of particular interest to participants in this research were current expressions of 'activism', including the 'Black Lives Matter' movement which has highlighted racial inequality and discrimination in the United States (Cortés-Ramos et al., 2021).

Participants referred to sourcing 'news' from viewing friends' Instagram Stories, as well as content from public pages such as the non-governmental organisation *Amnesty International* and popular culture news media company, *Pop Buzz Guide*. Some participants were particularly critical of mainstream media and journalists in their propagation of limited issues in the West, suggesting that social media provided perspectives that were not as 'censored' because proponents of news stories were 'just people' and 'not really journalists' (Marie).

Rachel: I think it's like any news or a lot of information that maybe news don't cover as well

Marie: Yeah

Rachel: Cause a lot of time news only cares about like what's happening in like America and things

((General laughter and agreement))

Rachel: Sometimes they don't really care about what's happening in like (.) I don't know the Middle East and things like that

Interviewer: Yep (.) so kind of different perspectives

Cate: Like at the moment everything is about Meghan and Harry

((General laughter))

In this extract, the limited coverage of global ‘news’ and issues covered is problematised by Rachel, as she criticises mainstream media for being too narrowed or focused on less relevant topics, such as the politics of members of the British Royal Family. The laughter engendered by the group when she pokes fun and trivialises ‘America’ and ‘Meghan and Harry’ demonstrated support for her argument and deepens sentiments when she later reflects on ‘important’ issues like global social and political movement. Further, knowledge about ‘what’s happening in the world’ (Rachel) was highly valued among the participants, and the ability of social media platforms to provide increased accessibility to information that was ‘easy to consume’ (Marie) compared to the ‘news’ was a celebrated aspect of online platforms. Some participants also referenced Emma Watson and her involvement with the United Nations, suggesting that political involvement and activism was an admired aspect of her celebrity position, representing a form of ‘cool citizenship’ (Hoad-Reddick, 2017). Other scholars, such as Jackson (2018) argue that social media provides young girls the space to contribute their voice to feminist issues, where traditionally their contributions have been left out of ‘what counts’ as politics. While some of the males in this research project also shared similar desires to be heard, more of the female participants in the study utilised social media platforms to effect social change through signing online petitions.

What the above extract also highlights is that participants were cynical of professional writers and news agents, interpreting non-journalists as providing more objective accounts of news stories, utilising social media platforms to seek news beyond mainstream media. On one hand this was experienced as affirmative and empowering; enabling the participants to broaden what is recognised as news. However, participants also commented that sourcing information online could be problematic due to not knowing ‘if it’s right’ (Darryl), highlighting the potential of spreading misinformation and the difficulty of social media being a double-sided coin.

Additionally, it was clear that demonstrating awareness and holding knowledge about relevant global topics provided the function of both being informed and 'staying updated' (Jane), but also being able to have conversations with others:

And I guess like being like (.) uh if someone's like really interested in something like having knowledge over what that is like what they're interested in and that's a good way about like (.) Instagram and stuff like that (.) they can post what they like and then you can look into it (Rachel)

Increased awareness was seen as a valuable first step in then being able to 'research ways to help' or to reshare to the Story function of Instagram to demonstrate or to say to others 'I support this' (Bradley). Although, risk of criticism or judgement when picking a side and publicly supporting an issue also had to be considered. Researchers have previously documented the benefit of civic engagement in providing an outlet for identity exploration, as well as strengthening feelings of agency and unity among communities (Baskin-Sommers et al., 2021). However, while mostly discussed as a positive aspect of social media use, being informed about global issues was also experienced by some as negative in that difficult emotional responses or reactions it could be invoked. At times, the sheer volume of upsetting news stories generated feelings of 'stress' and could be 'overwhelming'. 'Keeping up' was seen as stressful, as was being confronted by the inability to change anything about certain situations, as evidenced by Bradley:

I'd scroll through and people would be posting things like Black Lives Matter protest and I'd see all this stuff and be like I wish there was a like better way for me to help instead of just lying in bed reading everything (Bradley)

Evident in Bradley's extract is a sense of helplessness and guilt at being so far removed from the situation to enact real change. His extract also highlights a sentiment

shared by other participants in the inflated sense of responsibility the young people in this research experienced for issues that were far beyond their influence or control. This was a sentiment shared by the young women in Jackson's (2018) research, in which practices of knowledge sharing were not considered 'real' acts of feminism when contrasted with resistances in the offline world. For both Jackson's participants and the young people in this research, signing online petitions was not viewed as influential compared to more traditional political expression such as on-the-ground agitation and protest. This understanding left the young people in this research with a predicament; desiring to do more but being geographically distanced from the 'on-the-ground' action with little resources to contribute.

Thus, global citizenship was another aspect of social media experienced as having two sides of the coin. For example, on the one hand, young people have increased exposure to uncensored news and a multitude of global socio-political issues, which they valued, but on the other hand, increased awareness of issues combined with a perceived lack of agency through social media platforms, left participants with a sense of overwhelm and feelings of helplessness. Further, multiple news sources could also be experienced as a double-edged sword. For example, while non-journalists sharing news stories online was appreciated by participants due to the perceived bias of mainstream media, one participant also highlighted that this caused the problem of not knowing what was "right" or "correct" or "true". Thus, the potential for misinformation was considered to be problematic.

2. Navigating temporal and spatial contextual factors

Insights from multiple participants demonstrated that their current use and experience of social media was informed by several contextual factors. Several temporal and spatial variables such as age, developmental stage, location, and position as a generation of 'digital natives' informed their understandings of, and level of engagement with, social media platforms. Their reflections suggested that they had been required to continually adapt and

make changes to their current use according to their upbringing, parental influences, peer influences and past mistakes. These will be discussed further below.

2.1. Generational differences

Several participants spoke to the perceived difference between their own generation and that of their parents, suggesting that young people had knowledge and experience related to social media that their parents lacked. Blake also gave some indication that adults' view of social media was negatively biased:

> *You read a lot of stuff about social media saying its harmful but that's a lot of you know (.) not old people but thirty plus people that haven't grown up with that (.) but like like us young kids we've grown up with it, I see it as a useful tool rather than harmful (.) but then I also can see the harmful side as well (Blake)*

Here, Blake highlights the contrast in attitudes towards social media between young people and those he describes as 'thirty plus', alluding to feelings of being misunderstood by older generations and an inability of parents to recognise the positive or 'useful' aspects of social media. He expresses here a need for recognition of the expertise that comes from young peoples' experience of 'growing up' with social media and ability to adapt to evolving technology. Blake's sentiment also supports previous research suggesting parents prescribe to a risk discourse that overlooks the opportunities presented by social media, focusing more exclusively of the risks and dangers online (Gibson & Cartwright, 2014; Goodyear et al., 2019; Israelashvili et al., 2012; Retallack et al., 2016; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011). In this extract, Blake thus identifies as a 'digital native', reflecting on the generational attitudes that shape his social media use and how these differ compared to older populations. Blake's account of social media as a 'useful tool' rather than 'harmful' further conflicts with the 'moral panic' described in the literature (Charteris et al., 2018), offering a much more

balanced argument; acknowledging both positive and negative aspects of platforms. Ben's subsequent memory of being sat down by his parents to monitor his social media use also highlights young peoples' fight to have their perspectives heard that might encourage a more balanced approach, or at least some appreciation that their experience is not entirely negative. Both Blake and Ben suggest that their parents' risk discourse must first be navigating for them to access positive experiences online. The importance of parenting in the digital era has been researched by Davis (2013), who found that 'digital natives' still require supportive, face-to-face relationships to thrive. Davis argues that while the gap between digital natives and their 'digital immigrant' parents remains large, positive maternal relationships support higher self-concept clarity and peer relationships among adolescents.

Other participants spoke to the unskilled position of their parents by describing their lack of knowledge regarding specific platforms, suggesting they 'don't really know how Instagram works' (Leigh). Generational differences were apparent in the platforms used by different demographics, with participants suggesting people their age have Instagram, whereas Facebook was 'more for adults' (Laquesha) and primarily used to keep in contact with family. There were further acknowledgements that 'what some adults and my parents want to see could be different' (Blake) from what peers would want to see. This highlights young peoples' awareness of multiple audiences and the need to tailor their engagement for different age groups. Navigating audiences was an ongoing practice, which involved young people first recognising what content would be appropriate for sharing with which audience, and making decisions around sharing, utilising within-platform features or using different platforms to keep audiences separate. This ongoing practice of navigation thus enabled participants to create positive experiences in their social media engagement, while also being attuned to the needs and desires of others. The age of parents was further highlighted as a point of difference in the way individuals experienced social media during their upbringing,

with Blake suggesting that younger parents or those closer in age may be more receptive to social media use, "*So you could have real young parents that (.) you know are still into technology so they want you to have a phone and stuff so they can communicate with you*."

Being 'into' technology suggests a likeness or fondness towards it, that Blake contrasts to an older parent who may not share this sentiment. This enjoyment of social media and comfortability with platforms fits with identification as a 'digital native' (Prensky, 2001). For Ben the values and 'beliefs' of parents, 'circumstances' or 'environment' in which an individual was raised has implications for young peoples' 'perception' of social media platforms themselves, as well as how young people wanted to be perceived by others online. In the extract below, Ben's argument is that not only do parents' attitudes towards social media influence young people's engagement with platforms, but that parenting styles can also powerfully shape the experience of technology.

> *It's kind of the way you've grown up (.) if you've grown up with parents that love to show you off as a kid and they always want you to look good then you're always going to want to look good so you might feel insecure about stuff (Ben)*

In the above extract, Ben draws parallels between the influence of parents' behaviour and personality traits in the offline world and those in the online world, suggesting that they are not distinct. This sentiment is supported in the research which suggests that sociodemographic factors such as family composition, parents' media use and attitudes influence parental mediation strategies concerning social media (Daneels & Vanwynsberghe, 2017). Lack of divide between online and offline worlds became a recurrent pattern in discussions with these young people, with many participants arguing that relationships in the real world often determined the experience of social networking platforms online. What Ben highlights here is the extraordinary complexity of the relationship between platforms and

young peoples' engagement with them. For example, desires to 'look good' online were discussed as being driven by past experiences of insecurity, which could either be reinforced or challenged by parenting practices. Ben's extract thus illustrates the influence of individual differences, such as upbringing, on social media outcomes.

2.2. A developmental journey

Each of the participants provided a real sense that their journey with social media had evolved over time due to making mistakes, the influence of their peers, and general maturity that had come from getting older and moving through life stages and developmental phases. For Billy, the experience of using social media less had evolved due to sporting and work commitments, as well as a new relationship with her boyfriend. There was further suggestion that 'people around you' influence what 'kind' of person you are, and thus that identity or a sense of self influences social media use. For many participants, their current use of social media had been a gradual experience of learning about their own values and learning to distinguish these from the values of their wider peer group. For Joy, the realisation that friendships were an important aspect of her life influenced her to alter her type of engagement with social media platforms, "*Mm (.) I feel like (.) also (.) like further like towards now (.) it's a way of like connecting with friends whereas before it was more like a trend thing*".

The suggestion that social media was initially used as a 'trend' was a common experience for many participants, noting that motivations for downloading platforms was because 'it was the cool thing to have' (Billy) and for reasons such as 'just the other kids had them' (Ben). Other early experiences also shaped some participants' desire to change or evolve their use over time, as several spoke to 'really embarrassing', 'cringe' (Laquesha), 'horrendous' (Rachel) content they had posted when they were younger. It was apparent that at younger ages it was a normalised expectation to post one's 'entire life' (Cate) online

because 'everyone did' (Rachel). However, it was clear that matured ways of using social media was not to bare all or expose every aspect of one's life, rather to use it less regularly and more thoughtfully. Thus, in comparison to their earlier youth, young people desired to use social media with increased levels of intention and deliberateness. Marie spoke to the concept that her early social media use was a display targeted towards others, declaring 'This is my life', which had morphed into a space for her to explore her 'interests'. Thereby shifting the inspiration for posting from outwards (for others) to inwards (for the self).

Other participants reflected on earlier experiences or 'mistakes' they had made that influenced how they chose to use social media moving forward. Blake posed a hypothetical situation by way of providing an example:

> *Then like if I was (.) an example (.) if I was to say, if it was my first post on Instagram and I just got mad backlash for it, then I'm never gonna want to post that much on Instagram, but like if I posted something on Instagram and you know heaps of people liked it or heaps of my friends commented on it, then you want to do it again, so it's all about the early stages (Blake)*

Blake's extract points to the weight young people place on receiving acceptance from their peer group, a finding which is well supported in the literature. Young people are found to co-construct their identities online, representing themselves as who others deem them to be (Niland et al., 2015). As Blake suggests, during earlier stages of social media use, conforming to what is 'liked' by others and forming a stable position in the peer network, is more important than personal desires or establishing an accurate or authentic display of the self. Thus, Livingstone (2008) refers to the profile as a social 'place-marker' rather than a 'self-portrait' that shifts over time.

Contextual factors related to space and location was most apparent in participants' discussion of their education experience and school rules that heavily shaped their relationship and interaction with social media. For Bradley, moving schools had been a pivotal moment in his social media journey, from one environment with heavily enforced rules to another with far less:

Bradley: It [Screen Time] still hasn't peaked yet (.) it's like I've started (.) at [previous school] I wasn't allowed to use it at school and it was like a ((inaudible)) but now I'm at [current school] and I use it like throughout all of Maths cause I don't care about the subject enough right now so that's really bad

Interviewer: Mm hm
Bradley: Yeah it's been like this weird it's ((laughs)) it's like a luxury now
Interviewer: Right
Bradley: Cause it went from being like you couldn't get away with using your phone at all in school to like you can pull it out whenever and no one cares and I'm like 'this is amazing'

In this extract, Bradley refers to his increased level of engagement with social media in class as both 'really bad' and 'amazing', highlighting tensions between the joy of unregulated use and the acknowledgement that there would be detrimental impact on his education. Bradley's reflection can be viewed as a common developmental stage tension for young people, who are simultaneously experimenting with rebellious behaviour and striving for independence (Erikson, 1963). Here, Bradley muses 'it still hasn't peaked yet', demonstrating anticipation of continued increasing use, as well as acknowledgement, 'this weird… luxury', that he has become responsible for managing his own Screen Time. Evident in Bradley's discussion was an element of blame in that restricted use at his previous school

had caused him to overindulge in the freedom provided at his new school. Bradley's description of being able to use social media as much as he wanted as both 'really bad' and 'amazing' highlights the bind he found himself in, and the ambivalence experienced by other participants concerning whether to change behaviours that would reflect reduced Screen Time.

Further, one of the schools involved in the research project had played an active role in their students' engagement with social media through recruiting external speakers to provide seminars:

Blake: Or kinda ya know once we've got through high school we're having all these seminars about like (.) talking about you know 'we shouldn't cyberbully' and stuff like that (.) so I guess (.) at the time you don't think it's like, you weren't getting it

Ben: Yeah

Blake: But later on you realise that it is actually effecting you… it's just more it affects you over time

Interviewer: Yep

Blake: Rather than just affecting you right there and then like you might be listening to this speech thinking 'Oh this is boring I'm falling asleep' or something like that but once you have four or five of them you actually start to get the message and start to listen'

Interviewer: Yep (.) and maybe as you get more experience you can start to apply it more to your life

Both: Yeah

Ben: Like when we used to get the speeches in year nine (.) it'd be like 'Nah this doesn't even make sense' but now after like five years later you kind of get them and you're like 'Oh yeah I can relate to that'

Ben's suggestion that the initial speeches they received were 'boring' or 'didn't make sense', highlight the need for interventions for young people to be tailored to their age and to be made relevant for their developmental stage. The generational differences highlighted in the previous section, also support Blake and Ben's notion that seminars led by adults were not well received by digital natives. Ben's expression of needing to 'relate' to material highlights that content needs to be focused on issues relevant to young people's experience. Passage of time, maturity and repeated messaging were also highlighted as important in young peoples' ability to receive information from others regarding social media education.

Despite initial resistance, over time, Ben and Blake's shared experience were realisations that adults did have something meaningful to say relating to social media, demonstrated by their increased willingness to engage with the material. Blake's talk of the tone of the seminar, 'we shouldn't cyberbully and stuff like that', supports the views of the young people in Pangrazio's (2019) research that cybersafety programmes in schools were negative and repetitive and provided few opportunities to develop useful skills. As argued by Hope (2013), 'cybersafety' language positions young people as 'innocent', 'naïve victims' at risk from 'dangerous' others, further contributing to a protectionist discourse that limits the support young people are likely to receive. Other scholars have suggested education targeted at young people should include discussion of impression management strategies, friendship expectations and other relationship practices (Charteris et al., 2018; Goodyear et al., 2017).

Further, Ben discussed that his school sharing information to parents was experienced as unhelpful, "No offense but like the school ya know (.) my parents follow the school on Facebook (.) and they share all these bad articles and it's all negative stuff". Ben's remark that the school only shares negative articles and Blake's earlier comment that studies 'err on the side of negative the whole time', contribute to a sense of helplessness among young people who feel required to defend their social media use.

The importance of school as shaping the context of their experience of social media was also evident when they talked about noticeable changes to their Screen Time between the school term and school holidays and between weekdays and weekends. For some, increased Screen Time during holidays reflected time spent on their phones ‘talking to mates’ they would ordinarily spend time with at school. For others whose social engagement increased during the weekends, spending time on social media was a normalised way to fill time as ‘there’s not much else to do’. Given that participants referred to platforms as a source of ‘entertainment’, ‘boredom killer’ (Ben) and ‘time waster’ (Blake), spending free time online was not experienced by participants as problematic. Conversely, staying in touch or ‘hanging out’ (Bradley) with friends online was viewed as an important way to stay connected through the holiday period. Further, Marie spoke to increased use over lockdown due to the global Coronavirus pandemic, suggesting that increased accessibility to platforms was linked with increased Screen Time:

> *I used it way more frequently cause a lot of stuff is blocked on our school WIFI so we can’t really use it but then when I didn’t have a reason not to I was kind of on it all the time ((laughs)) (Marie)*

Again, Marie’s extract reflects the presence of school regulations in moderating social media use. Marie’s acknowledgement also suggests that ‘reasons not to’ are required for young people to reduce their time spent online, suggesting social media would be browsed if there was nothing better to do. Her laughter also reflects many participant responses when discussing Screen Time, with laughter often following acknowledgement of large periods of time spent online, suggesting an element of shame or embarrassment. Prolonged time spent on social media was experienced by some participants as problematic and will be discussed further in the subsequent chapter ‘The limits of individual solutions’.

Summary

In summary, the nuanced ways in which young people discussed social media demonstrated their critical thinking ability and awareness of issues that are relevant to their developmental stage. They highlighted a process of constant navigation and attempts to balance both positive and negative aspects of platforms that required considerable knowledge of the ways platforms could be utilised. These understandings evolved over time and across platforms as technologies developed, creating a complex temporal, spatial and social space.

Overall, participants experienced social media as a dialectic of both positive and negative aspects that shifted instantaneously and thus required constant negotiation. Social media was spoken about with fondness and an appreciation of the benefits and opportunities it provides, as well as an appreciation of the challenges and risks it poses. Consequently, both the type of engagement and level of engagement with platforms changed as young people got older, learnt from past mistakes, and were influenced by others around them. Further, the focus of engagement tended to shift from prioritising social status and relationships, to posting and sharing for their own enjoyment and benefit and to explore their sense of self.

Importantly, the young people of this research conveyed a lived experience of contending with evolving technology and the ability to continually navigate new ways of being online that were not respected by older generations. The distance created between themselves and their parents or other older people in their lives, has implications for the help-seeking that young people are provided and will choose to engage in. Further, this chapter highlights the ability of social media to be harnessed as a tool of empowerment, liberation, voice, and safe space, but also the potential it has for producing negative affect in the form of overwhelm, stress and anxiety. These benefits and difficulties are the focus of the following chapters.

Chapter Seven: Strategies for Managing Platforms

Young people opted to participate in this research project to share their positive experiences with social media; nonetheless, their experiences were described in nuanced ways, indicating that being online is not without its challenges. Such challenges often centred around the way young people were perceived by others on social media and their desire to manage this perception. Many of these challenges were accepted and taken for granted as undisputed parts of being online and having an identity online, but ones that needed careful negotiation by participants. The young people in this research described numerous strategies and approaches to social media that enabled them to engage with both the platforms and with other users in more positive ways. Solutions to navigating the challenges presented by social media and discussed by participants were: 1) managing impressions through profile work, 2) creating safe spaces in private accounts, and 3) using strategies for positive engagement. Each of these subthemes is discussed below.

1. Managing impressions through profile work

All participants described feeling a pressure to present highly stylised, polished versions of themselves on their public profiles. Feeling constantly subjected to the 'judgement' and scrutiny of peers was a commonly feared consequence of not meeting standards of the 'perfect life' (Lucy). Who defined these standards for young people was unclear. Participants referred to 'people' being judgmental of posts that did not meet 'certain expectations' (Ben), suggesting that posts had to be 'cool', 'interesting', 'important' or 'aesthetically pleasing' (Laquesha). Thus, failing to post anything other than what was vaguely determined as the 'perfect life' led young people to reproduce this concept. These findings are well-supported in the literature, which suggest that young peoples' personal profiles are highly managed performances, presented in self-conscious and aspirational ways (Charteris et al., 2018; Uski & Lampinen, 2016). Aligned with such findings, the participants

in this study described deliberate, considered approaches to social media, using the affordances of platforms to curate their profiles and carefully manage their presentation. It was evident that reproducing standards of the ‘perfect life’ required constant negotiation and a high level of labour to manage one’s impression.

1.1. Reproducing the ‘perfect life’

Several participants spoke to the concept of the ‘perfect life’ as a central theme in decisions they made regarding impression management. The ‘perfect life’ was referred to and used by participants as a constant barometer by which to measure their profiles and performance, despite its vagueness and agreed definition. In contrast to their private profiles, which were reserved for close friends, young people expected a greater degree of judgement and scrutiny by wider, unfamiliar audiences on their public profiles. An inability to control visibility to online audiences caused participants notable anxiety, as the consequences of making a mistake or portraying the self in undesirable ways were heightened.

Consequently, high standards of self-presentation were used as a strategy to predict and manage the response of their online audience. Several participants described feeling pressured to meet a certain set of ‘standards’ or ‘fit in’ with the status quo; however, the actual definition of the concept of the ‘perfect life’ was ambiguous. The absence of specific criteria created uncertainty for the participants about what to present online and how it might be received. Thus, participants conceptualisations of the ‘perfect life’ life were aspirational and not well understood, as is evident when Ben for example, said: “*I feel like everyone’s trying to meet this certain expectation.”*

Although the definition of a ‘perfect’ life was vague, the language used by participants suggested that their public profile was experienced as the antithesis to their private profile in both aesthetic and emotive ways. Where private accounts were described as the space for posting ‘embarrassing’, ‘personal’, ‘ugly photos’ (Laquesha) that demonstrated

a more authentic representation of their lives, public profiles were described as much more calculated, stylised representations of the self. Participants felt pressure to post 'cool', 'interesting', or 'only really really good things' (Blake) on their public profiles, while private accounts were allowed to include 'all the bad things'. Young people were acutely aware that profiles needed to be 'presentable' (Laquesha) as a 'first impression' (Blake) to others; imperfections and flaws were not considered welcome in public spheres. Thus, descriptions of a 'good' public profile were related to aesthetic features, such as photos and content needing to be 'tidy', 'clean' or all related to one certain 'theme' (Laquesha).

Beyond visual descriptions, Leigh also acknowledged rules regarding displaying emotions online, suggesting that sadness was not considered to be part of the perfect life, "*Yeah and then if people put out like the sad stuff that happens, people are like 'Mm don't need to know your life story*". Here, Leigh describes how expressing perceived negative emotion can be considered undesirable by the online audience and that oversharing personal information should be reserved for private spaces. Sharing too much of oneself was considered a breach of 'feeling rules' online and highlights the presence of implicit boundaries regarding what is acceptable to express and share in terms of emotions, and what is not.

Feminist scholars have also argued that emotional management is promoted as necessary to a successful professional and personal life in the West, arguing that practices of positive thinking maintain girls' attachments to a "perfect life" (Calder-Dawe et al., 2021; Gill & Elias, 2014). Leigh's awareness of these boundaries demonstrates how feeling rules shape the way participants reproduce selves that are agreeable to their followers, thus providing them with ways to navigate social and cultural norms (Lehto, 2021). Her extract also suggests that public identity is not authentic, and thus represents a false 'perfect life'. In contrast, a private identity displays life with elements of both good and bad; thus, is flawed

but authentic. This contradiction was also recognised by Leigh, who recognised that not sharing the ‘sad stuff’ led to a reproduction of the ‘perfect life’; creating a vicious cycle where ‘perfect’ becomes normal, “*I guess that can also be a con (.) just cause if you control everything you put out it’s just like “Oh they all have the perfect life*”.

As a result of the increased pressure to reproduce the ‘perfect life’ in public spaces, young people engaged in several behaviours to tailor their profiles with the view to minimise negative judgment from followers and adhere to the social standards of a good impression. Several participants described ‘starting new’ (Billy) or deleting their ‘whole Feed’ (Laquesha), which reflects the dynamic nature of social media platforms and the ability of users to repeatedly recreate themselves online. Such behaviours suggest a desire to erase past mistakes and control their self-presentation, whereby identity is highly malleable and subject to change. Removing posts from profiles was a common practice, with participants suggesting they ‘do it all the time’. Deleting pictures means making past ‘mistakes’ and the shame of past mistakes invisible, complicating the ability of young people to get support for the difficulties they might experience online. Thus, interpreting the nuanced behaviours and responses of others online becomes a valuable skill for adolescents wishing to give and receive support. Other practices included ‘archiving’ photos (a feature on the platform Instagram that enables users to hide previously posted photos on their account), as described by Blake, “*So it’s the immediate feedback and then you kind of like overthink and take it down, then you might overthink again and put it back up*”.

Blake’s emphasis on the ‘immediate’ response to feedback suggests young people are quick to conform to the audience to prevent further judgement. For Blake this involved a significant period of evaluating his post, anticipating the response he might get from others before considering whether it should remain on his profile. The psychological and emotional tension he describes between posting to achieve positive feedback from peers versus wanting

to post for egocentric reasons was shared by several other participants. His reaction also supports previous research indicating young people are much more likely to post for the social group and prioritise being accepted by peers, above their individual needs and desires to post authentically (Niland et al., 2015). Evidently, the 'perfect life' was dictated by the feedback from others, rather than the participants themselves.

Several participants shared this analytic process along with Blake, engaging in processes of rumination and forecasting expected responses from peers to make decisions about whether to delete or archive posts. The language used by participants such as being 'scared' to post, experiences of 'worry' and 'preparing for judgement' (Lucy) all support the understanding that efforts to negotiate and maintain self-presentation produce significant anxiety. Consequently, large periods of time were spent on profile work and identity labour, "*Sometimes I'll literally Archive it before like half an hour before I post it and then like twenty minutes later I just stare at this thing for so long and then I go 'ugh' and delete it"* (Joy).

Joy's extract communicates a sense of frustration and exhaustion in the process of evaluating her photo, which ultimately leads to her giving up and deleting it. While Blake and Joy do not elaborate on the reasons for removing their posts, some participants reflected on processes of comparison that informed their decisions:

> *I think whenever I post something I'll post it and I'll think like 'that's a good photo' and then I go onto like my actual Home Screen and see all the other aesthetics that people have and how they pose and how they look and then you just want to get rid of it cause it doesn't fit with that (Rachel)*

It was apparent in the participants' talk that the 'perfect life' had been conceived of or informed by standards set by others online and in response to feedback, in the form of 'Likes'

from others. Given the large number of celebrities and influencers young people described following, standards of perfection in appearance, activities, and emotions, had become the new normal. These attempts to reproduce the lives of others are supported by previous research in which adolescent girls have been found to idealise and recreate the appearance of social media models in their images (Bell, 2019). These findings also speak to the rise of 'micro-celebrity' which reflects strategies to 'amp up' personal popularity with peers through social media (Goodwin et al., 2016). The pressures participants experienced in constant comparison with perceived standards and expectations of posting content were thus significant, resulting in strong emotions to guide their sharing practices. Managing this level of possible judgment therefore required adoption of attitudes that reduced the concern of others, or the adoption of strategies to manage audiences, which will be the focus of the rest of the chapter.

2. Creating safe spaces

Creating multiple accounts on Instagram was discussed by all friendship groups in this research project as a way to create a safe space in what might otherwise be a judgmental context. It was evident that operating both a public account (for multiple audiences such as friends, family and potentially strangers) as well as a private account (for a carefully controlled audience of close friends) was a common practice among young people. Participants were adept at utilising the technological affordances of this social media platform, using their knowledge of privacy and search functions to both increase their comfort with posting and to create specific rules of engagement that kept these spaces protected.

2.1. Separated audiences increases comfort in posting

Participants created private accounts that were described as 'exclusive', 'personal' accounts, visible only to a 'select few' of 'trusted' and 'close' friends, with the function of shielding themselves from the 'judgment' of wider audiences. In online environments, users are subjected to the converging of multiple audiences - what Brandtzaeg and Luders (2018) refer to as 'context collapse' - presenting users with conditions in which the audience viewing their profiles becomes ambiguous and 'undefined'. A sense of 'not knowing' provoked anxiety among participants; thus, managing their audiences enabled participants a greater sense of control and safety to post what they wanted without the threat of being judged negatively.

> *Like you know who it is that is seeing what you put out and that can like provide comfort so that you're comfortable with who's on there and you might know them in real life and you're like 'Okay well I can trust you with this' and so like I'm comfortable with putting it out (.) whereas otherwise if you have a public account and you just have like anyone on there like you don't know who they are and you might not feel as comfortable posting things or like saying something so like it's just a comfort thing (Rose)*

Here, Rose speaks to the 'comfort' that arises out of knowing 'who's on there', suggesting that posting or 'putting it out' there places the user in a vulnerable position, subject to potential judgement from the audience. Rose's description, 'you might know them in real life', demonstrates how young people use information from offline relationships and interactions to inform decisions made online about who can be 'trusted'. This demonstrates the inseparable connection between the online and the offline, as well as the high level of consideration needed to inform decision making. Such decisions are able to create boundaries

between close friends as an audience to feel comfortable with, and an 'other' audience with which trust and comfortability is not possible. Rose's acknowledgement that 'anyone' could be viewing a public account, demonstrates the understanding that the social media audience can be limitless, and that young people are highly attuned to the need to retain control and privacy.

In the absence of guaranteed knowledge about the audience, young people must take cues from the environment to construct an imagined audience (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). Further, the implications of a hypersocial society and 'cancel culture' as a form of public shaming (Velasco, 2020), mean that young people are hypervigilant to breaching the line of social acceptability and being condemned for any perceived wrongdoing. Thus, Rose's declaration 'I can trust you with this', illustrates that beyond general trust and openness, what the receiver will do with the content is just as important as being trustworthy enough to view it.

Controlling audiences enabled participants greater freedom to post authentic content, creating distance from the societal 'expectations' and 'pressure' they felt on their public accounts, which (as discussed above) were subject to emulating the 'perfect life'. Private accounts can therefore be viewed as a means of escape and flight to safety from the highly controlled and mediated public account. The safety of close friends and known audiences who are trusted not to judge, provide participants with the freedom to be themselves online without the rumination and associated anxiety that typically follows posting on a public account:

> *I think that's why like private accounts appeal to people because you just like (.) do whatever really (.) you just don't have to like think about posting anything (.) because I feel like before you post on your like actual account you have to like seriously think about it (Joy)*

A greater sense of freedom appeared to also provide a greater sense of user enjoyment through a loosening of the impression management rules and profile work typically required when posting, which was discussed as intensive, highly laborious work. Compared to the level of rumination prompted by posting publicly, Joy highlights the relief in not needing to 'think' when posting privately, suggesting that this is an unenjoyable element of social media use. Participants described differences between the type of content posted on private accounts, reporting that 'you don't have to care' (Ben), 'you can just post anything' (Laquesha), 'ugly pictures', or 'embarrassing' content because there is 'no need for it to look good' (Joy). This offered participants some reprieve from the 'expectations' they were subjected to on their public accounts. Consequently, they could share without 'being so sensitive about it' (Ben), and rather than feeling 'ashamed' were able to feel 'more safe' with their close friends.

These extracts also highlight the personal responsibility participants placed on themselves to manage their emotional well-being, with little acknowledgement of the role played by others in their reactions. Being 'sensitive' to others' responses also implies further self-deprecation and a desire to be unaffected by the feedback of their audience, despite the feedback at times being problematic, "*Cause you just like put it out there and like you know none of your close friends are gonna like judge you and even if they do it's like with sarcasm like it's not like actually judging you*" (Joy).

In contrast to their public account which required effortful strategies of impression management and profile work that lived up to societal 'expectations' in a deeply judgmental world, private accounts were described by participants as outlets for an 'anything goes' approach. Rather than posts needing to meet the criteria of 'cool' or 'interesting', private accounts were viewed with the understanding that these spaces consisted of 'embarrassing' and 'cringe' content. Participants were able to show different sides of themselves, more than

the one-dimensional ‘perfect life’. Further, they were able to share all of themselves, including the unfiltered, unedited versions of their behaviours, their visual appearances, and their emotions. Consequently, social media features, such as privacy settings and options, support young peoples’ identity practices by providing them the platform to explore aspects of themselves in experimental, ‘pick and mix’ ways, not possible in rigid offline environments. Private accounts, rather than public accounts, were therefore crucial in participants’ ability to navigate societal pressures and experiment with performing identity in ways that would not be desirable to audiences beyond close friends.

2.2 Utilising platform features – “You’re not even going to find me”

To create safe spaces online, participants demonstrated adept skills in using the affordances of platforms to remain hidden from public view. Findings support earlier research in the comfortability of young people, known as ‘digital natives’, in their use of social media, ‘feeling particularly at home with these modes of exchange’ (Gibson & Trnka, 2020). The young people demonstrated recognition at the fact that non-anonymous social media ‘changed the contextual conditions for socialising and self-performance’ (Zhao et al., 2008) and have actively moved back to anonymity for these reasons. Despite modern social media moving towards non-anonymity, young people are continuing to resist these barriers to self-presentation, and in their own ways recreate their own form of privacy and safety by creating fake pseudonyms, “*And they’re random names too [private account usernames] so you can’t really look up like ‘Laquesha private*’ (Laquesha)

Here, Laquesha highlights the underground nature of private accounts, that allows young people to experiment with versions of the self, away from adult surveillance, what Boyd (2014) refers to as ‘teenage underlife’. Participants were selective about when to obtain and avoid the gaze of others and used processes of social steganography to ‘hide in plain sight’ (Charteris et al., 2018). Engaging in these behaviours allows young people to exclude

those who are not part of their constructed ‘underlife’ while allowing engagement with those ‘in the know’. Public profiles present challenges in the visibility and perceived judgment faced; however, private profiles still present challenges, albeit with a smaller number of people. Using private profiles with pseudonyms takes a third step to delineate and further control the audience to safeguard the self from further impression management and profile work. Putting up technological boundaries online work effectively as physical boundaries in an offline sphere.

Maintaining a level of scepticism, some participants described further checks and balances used to ensure only trustworthy, ‘really close friends’ (Billy) were accepted into private spaces. Using a combination of built-in affordances of platforms (such as group chats and private messaging) and offline social networks, participants described negotiated rules and processes of engagement that provided an extra sense of security “*I always make sure it’s them [friends] by messaging like their main account and be like ‘Is this you?’ [private account]* (Billy).

Participants were acutely aware of the consequences that could follow if an untrustworthy user entered the private space and broke social norms by ‘sending screenshots’ (Wilhelmina) to others outside of the accepted group of followers. However, young people were savvy to these threats to privacy and used knowledge from their offline relationships to inform decision-making, “*Or like someone showing you someone else’s private you could like know that they’re doing the same to you*” (Wilhelmina). Being particularly mindful of those with a history of deceiving others provided Wilhelmina with a greater sense of security that her inner circle was not being infiltrated by untrustworthy individuals. The need to monitor and make judgements about others’ sincerity and the probability of being exposed was a constant, ongoing process in participants lives.

3. Utilising strategies for positive engagement

Beyond carefully managing impressions and creating safe spaces through private accounts, participants described a host of strategies and approaches to social media that enabled them to engage more positively with platforms or to manage their well-being. Positive online engagement was discussed within three subthemes: a) self-care, b) managing relationships with others, and c) negotiating parental involvement.

3.1 Self-care

Participants found that disengaging from social media and re-engaging with other interests or activities that led to positive emotions were helpful strategies to manage their well-being. Given the processes of rumination and experiences of anxiety often created by self-presentation pressures and profile work, participants utilised approaches to reduce the cognitive and emotional load of being online. Doing 'something else' (Blake) provided some relief from online experiences that were 'overwhelming' and enabled them to 'block it out momentarily' (Rose). Others described time away from social media as 'freeing', a sense of 'escape' (Leigh) and a 'good detox' (Blake). Physically distancing themselves from social media allowed participants 'time to process' (Rose) online activity, before resuming their social media presence. For example, Leigh stated, *"I'd just say go find something happy to do that will make you feel better (.) something you enjoy like just forget about what that is and just do something that you enjoy just to escape."*

Leigh's extract illuminates the experience of social media as an object to 'escape' from, rather than using social media as a form of escapism from the world. For Leigh, feeling 'better' was achieved offline and sources of pleasure or enjoyment were sought elsewhere. While for Joy, managing the content they were being exposed to online was key to maintaining well-being, "I only watch the Dodo [Facebook Page containing animal videos] now because I'm guaranteed it's going to be happy". Shaping her NewsFeed by only

following certain accounts allowed Joy to watch 'heartfelt' videos that she knew would produce positive emotions. Her extract also highlights the ability of this action to 'guarantee' the outcome emotionally, which as explained above is not often achievable on social media.

3.2 Thoughtful engagement in interpersonal relationships

Most participants recognised that creating caring relationships with close friends either contributed to their current positive online experiences or could be used to facilitate positive experiences in the future. Valued social practices included staying connected through 'reaching out' (Marie) to friends to offer support or acting as 'cheerleaders' for others by 'hyping them up' (Cate). Participants noted that these actions could be achieved through private messaging or by commenting publicly on others' profiles. In addition, participants used offline relationships as context for their interactions online, using social media communication functions to continue their support for a friend from afar. This was evident in Laquesha's description of positive social media use, "*Checking up on people like if they had a bad day or if you know they're going through something you can just message them quickly and check quickly like 'Hey how are you*?"

Laquesha's emphasis on the speed of the interaction also suggests that the reduced effort and efficient response were valued aspects of online forms of connection and support. These responses support Gibson and Trnka's (2020) findings that online environments are valuable spaces for young people to establish emotional safety and respond to other's needs. Participants illustrated that having well established relationships with individuals offline helped to interpret posts online and guide their behaviour accordingly. Being considerate of others' emotions was also suggested to influence positive engagement online.

Several participants recognised the importance of predicting future consequences of their online actions and considering the impact of others' emotions before making decisions about what to post. Thus, preventing 'hurt' or a negative experience for others was perceived

as a way of using social media positively, "*Like if you're commenting something (.) re-read what you're going to comment and then see if it hurts people*" (Rachel). These extracts suggest that using social media positively requires thoughtful, considerate engagement; requiring users to become self-reflective and empathetic towards others. This is in stark contrast to egotistical, self-centred depictions of youth usage of social media; the 'social' aspect of social media was highlighted in the need to relate well with others. In doing 'checking in' behaviours, participants acknowledged the reciprocal nature of online relationships and showcased the importance of peer group belonging in their Internet use.

The young people in the research also recognised the value in taking thoughtful, considered approaches to others' actions on social media, describing 'not jumping to conclusions' (Lucy) as an important practice. In response to the public shaming consequences typical of cancel culture, Bradley expressed a more compassionate response to those who had diverted from socially accepted online rules, "*Like not just seeing a tiny bit of something and then immediately assuming the whole story (.) and actually letting people make mistakes and like (.) learn from them (.) rather than just like 'We're cancelling bye by*e'. Through articulating an unhelpful approach to those who have made 'mistakes', Bradley's extract reflects a desire to support others through an approach of acceptance and encouragement of growth. His reference to 'cancelling' other users highlights experiences of cancel culture can be particularly dismissive and unproductive for those desiring social redemption. His talk therefore advocates for the social justice and accountability aspect of cancel culture, rather than the 'digital vigilantism' argued by Chiou (2020) as being problematic. Choosing to be forgiving and hoping others will do the same, is thus a strategy that helps Bradley to experience social media more positively.

3.3. Negotiating parental involvement

Ben and Blake spoke candidly about their opposition to the approaches used by both their parents and their peers' parents in managing their online interactions. Both participants expressed frustration with the authoritarian parenting styles they had experienced, which they felt failed to recognise their online skills and expertise. Referring to themselves as 'pretty much adults', it was evident in both Ben and Blake's accounts that their competence, maturity and experience with social media was not felt to be acknowledged or valued by their parents. However, their positioning as not yet fully-fledged adults also suggested they desired continued support from parents/caregivers in the form of open conversations that would facilitate communication, collaboration, and negotiation:

> *Maybe (.) cause like I know like a few younger people and their parents actually like control their Instagram or whatever (.) I reckon like give your kid a bit of independence but maybe have like an account as well that maybe you're interacting with him online, so you're following him or whatever like but don't be up his arse like you know going through each one of his messages and like have like (.) like healthy discussions about like what's good and bad online (Ben)*

In keeping with the adolescent developmental stage and challenging the naïve child position, the push back against parental management identified in Ben's talk highlights tensions concerning who holds expertise regarding social media, an issue particularly relevant for digital natives (Gibson & Cartwright, 2014; Goodyear et al., 2017; Pangrazio, 2019). Ben acknowledged that a balance was needed between input from parents in the form of 'healthy discussions', while still allowing them 'a bit of independence' and individual control. Both participants emphasised the need for interactions with parents to reflect relationships as 'co-workers' rather than 'boss and employee'. Interrogating young people or

making requests to ‘go through’ their social media were viewed by participants as intrusions into their safe ‘space’.

Participants weren’t dismissive to a partial degree of monitoring and recognised that there was a need to prevent other young people from being ‘exposed’ to some online content, but they highlighted the need for ‘freedom’. Thus, participants used othering to demonstrate opposing viewpoints and demonstrate that not all young people experienced the same challenges with social media. They also suggested that attempts to control or interrogate young peoples’ online practices would be counterproductive and ultimately lead to rebellion, “*Otherwise they just learn to rebel and they’re not going to tell you the truth, they’re always going to hide things from you*” (Blake).

Blake’s notion of ‘hiding’ suggests that any future difficulty or problem encountered online would likely be dealt with by the young person on their own, rather than in consultation with a parental figure. Both participants reflected a fear that their social media would be ‘taken away’, with parents making decisions based on assumptions and without consulting young people in the first instance. Ben and Blake explicitly identified that parents’ approaches were influenced by popular media and drew on dominant discourses of harm and risk, with decision-making based on an ‘article saying social media is bad’. Consequently, the participants felt misunderstood and constrained in their online social practices, noting that these approaches would likely lead to rebellion and secrecy in the future, rather than honesty, collaboration and openness.

Summary

In summary, participants demonstrated numerous strategies to manage the challenges and demands presented by social media platforms. Within the current research, these solutions were categorised into three subthemes: managing impressions through profile work, creating safe spaces, and utilising strategies for positive engagement. Largely, these strategies

provided some utility in helping participants foster positive interpersonal relationships, manage their emotional wellbeing, and explore their sense of self in ways they felt good about. However, it was acknowledged by participants that despite increasing their enjoyment with social media, these strategies still required an element of work and cognitive effort to manage and maintain. For these reasons, some of the participants described disengaging temporarily or having 'time out' from social media as a strategy. Further, these are individual or small group strategies, reliant on interpersonal relationships and feedback from others.

The relative success of several of the strategies discussed is conditional or dependent on the level of trust between close friends. Despite heavily guarded rules and impression management techniques, there exists an ever-present risk that judgement or perceived negative feedback might fall through their safety nets. Further, participants expressed a sense of personal responsibility for getting it right insofar as posting and interacting in socially acceptable ways and managing their own emotions, rather than placing some responsibility on others for the way they respond to content. Close friend audiences on private accounts demonstrated a level of thoughtfulness and consideration of the impact of the individual within the context of knowing the person well, which is unachievable in public spaces. For this reason, these strategies represent attempts to improve social media use that are not guaranteed panaceas to the wider problems associated with social media, which are beyond the control of individual users. These partial solutions will be discussed further in the next chapter, but it is recognised that the solutions discussed in the current chapter are not an exhaustive list of infallible strategies.

Chapter Eight: "It's Very Hard To Do That Though" – The Limits Of Individual Solutions

This theme expands (and builds) on subthemes from the previous chapter *Strategies for Managing Platforms.* One of the main findings of this chapter was that while participants had developed some individual strategies for engaging with social media positively, these strategies were only partial solutions in their attempts to navigate challenges they experienced online. Many of the difficulties faced by users were beyond their control and thus required wider consideration and solutions at a societal and community level. These challenges were a result of direct interaction with social media platforms that extended offline to permeate multiple areas of young peoples' lives, implicating relationships with themselves and others. It was apparent that wider issues of self-presentation, cancel culture and bullying were reflective of social, historical, and political processes underlying social media. Thus, despite their best efforts, participants' attempts to use social media positively were continually mediated by socio-political and cultural issues that limited their ability to have affirmative experiences of social media and practice self-care. Participants described unresolved dilemmas that were categorised into the following three subthemes: 1) negotiating the platform and its infrastructure 2) negotiating wider sociocultural issues, and 3) negotiating bullying practices.

1. Negotiating the platform and its infrastructure

1.1. "You have to have that thing between your fingers"

Several participants spoke explicitly to experiences of what they described as 'addiction' when using social media platforms, noting that 'endless scrolling' (Rachel) was particularly problematic. Modal verbs such as 'have to' and 'need' were expressed frequently, articulating the participants' perceived lack of control over their use. Varying

levels of this experience were discussed by participants, with some perceiving they were 'almost addicted' (Marie), while others described being 'very addicted' (Bradley). Other participants conceptualised social media as comparable with other addictive behaviours such as gambling (whereby posting was seen as a source of variable feedback on which to base one's confidence), and smoking (whereby the phone was the stimulus needed to have between one's fingers). The use of metaphor provided participants with the ability to make sense of a range of experiences and to communicate their experiences to others in a way that would make sense to non-digital natives. For example, Blake and Ben spoke to the finding that platforms were inherently designed to create dependency by keeping users 'hooked' into platforms 'without you realising':

> *Blake: Tik Tok* <u>*on purpose*</u> *they don't have like the top bar doesn't show the time, the battery percentage or anything so you never know what time it is until you exit out of the app*
>
> *Ben: That's like similar to the casinos and stuff, they don't have windows (.) so you can't see what hour of the day it is, like no clocks*

This extract demonstrates the level of insight that many of the participants shared in acknowledging the tactics employed by social media platforms, with some recognising the nature of these design features as 'actually quite scary' (Ben). Blake's emphasis that platforms hide the time 'on purpose' suggests an intentional ploy to keep users engaged for as long as possible, which for Blake appeared to be experienced as unjust, from the tone of his voice and the dismay indicated in his account. Existing literature supports the participants' interpretations, with researchers finding that social media platforms draw on the same design elements of electronic gambling machines (EGMs) developed to manipulate aspects of human behaviour (Price, 2018). Techniques used by the platform Tik Tok, such as hiding the

time from the screen and creating automated, 'roll on' videos, draw on theories of human behaviour such as classical and operant conditioning by distinguishing natural 'stopping cues' which would signal to users to leave the platform (Yücel et al., 2018). Thus, like the slot machine effect, these aspects of the platform entice them to remain online for longer periods of time. However, despite demonstrating awareness of these features, knowledge did not prevent participants from experiences of addiction.

This awareness was demonstrated in every participant who spoke to an experience of addiction. Young people were highly perceptive regarding how social media permeated their everyday life, noticing the negative consequences of spending long periods of time online. For many of the young people, being on social media was a 'time killer' (Blake) or 'distraction' (Ben) and form of 'procrastination' (Joy). During the workshops, participants further developed their awareness when they recognised that being on social media moved them further away from their values such as being outside or prioritising their health. Several also noted that social media had a negative impact on their education and 'focus' in class.

One of the more prominent difficulties expressed by several participants, was the notion that being on social media had shortened their 'attention span' (Cate). This was felt by participants to be a result of their brain becoming accustomed to 'constantly taking in different sets of data' (Blake). Consequently, they found themselves needing to be engaged in 'multiple things at a time' (Joy), which made sitting down to watch a movie no longer possible without also being on their phone simultaneously. These accounts have also been supported by previous research with young people, suggesting that multipurpose features, push notification features and information feeds that continually renew, increase the likelihood users will experience cognitive 'overload', dependence, and decreased concentration abilities (Salo et al., 2019). As well as implicating difficulties with attention,

Marie highlighted changes to another aspect of cognition, "*It's like overstimulating my brain so I'm like not thinking about anything in particular*" (Marie).

The concept of 'not thinking' was a common experience among participants who found themselves in what was described as being in 'autopilot' during times of 'endless scrolling' (Joy). At the time of scrolling, they noted feeling as though they had 'lost all mental awareness' (Rachel), becoming absorbed in the content they were viewing. Several participants shared the experience of liking content they later reflected they had not actually wanted to like, suggesting a large degree of unconscious processing and habit formation online. Unconscious behaviours also occurred when watching videos, with participants suggesting that when new videos populated their screen, they remained fixated and 'just kept going' (Rachel).

These processes are likely to be exacerbated by the time of day, potentially worsening late at night or during the early hours of the morning, with participants recalling times they had been scrolling at 'two in the morning'. Regret and frustration frequently followed long periods of time online, with several participants acknowledging 'I shouldn't have done that' (Rachel) just or asking themselves pensive questions such as, 'Why did I do that?' (Cate). They were able to reflect subsequently with 'mindful' awareness and describe their Screen Time as 'embarrassing'. However, it was apparent that 'endless scrolling' was typically the rule, not the exception. Thus, platform features were found to override young peoples' insight in terms of undesirable behaviour, negative affect, cognitive functioning, sleep, and their ability to engage in valued and/or required activities.

The degree to which participants could recognise patterns of behaviour seemed to have significant implications for their ability to intervene. For several participants, experiences of addiction were identified as problematic and an aspect of social media that they wanted to change in their own lives. For one of the between-workshop tasks, Blake

chose to decrease the time he spent online and explained the method used to increase his likelihood of success:

> *I'd leave it somewhere so like say I was going out, leave it in my car or I'd leave it all the way back at the hostel or sometimes it was just in my car in case I needed it or even if I had it in my pocket (.) I'd zip up my pocket so that I'd actually have to unzip it to grab it and it was just like ((inaudible)) and if I was with other people I'd talk instead of being on my phone (Blake)*

The degree of thoughtful and considered action required to reduce screen time illustrates the difficulty experienced in trying to achieve more positive social media use. The active work required to manage, or counter manage the attentional and behavioural demands of the technology was described by participants as a form of labour. Following this explanation, Blake noted that doing so had been a 'good detox' and that he 'didn't feel as tired', further speaking to the notion of social media as an addiction. However, other participants had greater difficulty identifying how they could change their behaviour; particularly when they described being 'sucked in' (Ben) or 'hooked', not having a 'thought process' (Rachel) or not 'knowing' what they were looking at, suggesting limited insight. Activities conducted during workshops, such as the learning pathway grids, proved useful in helping participants to identify patterns of behaviour and form solutions. For example, Cate recognised that she had been unconsciously liking videos and that doing so had become a habit, "*So I could stop doing that (.) I could actually <u>look</u> and actually listen and process it*".

Being more mindful and present in the moment was thus a strategy proposed by Cate, although, as discussed by other participants, possessing the awareness and knowledge concerning how to change was still not enough to influence behaviour change. Although the participants identified problematic aspects of being online, several expressed an ambivalence

towards change, noting that they 'need to stop' (Bradley) but 'don't want to' (Cate) or felt that it would be 'too hard' (Cate) to do. Some had tried in the past to limit their use but 'failed', while others noted that it required 'too much willpower' (Cate) or 'self-control'. It was experienced by many participants that breaking strong patterns of engagement could only be achieved with great difficulty. Cate's sentiment, "It is what it is", further reflects a sense of learned helplessness and lack of power in changing their circumstances.

The challenges experienced by young people in reducing their social media use are reflected in the literature and findings of critical scholars who argue that social media companies design their platforms in ways that render them addictive to boost profit (Bhargava & Velasquez, 2021). Thus, what young people are up against extends far beyond individual 'willpower' or 'self-control'; rather, they are subjected to a business model situated in an attention-economy in which users' attention is the product which can be sold to advertisers or other buyers (Andrejevic, 2002; Boyd, 2014; Davenport & Beck, 2001; Smythe, 1977; Zulli, 2018). Tiidenberg et al. (2017) also argue that today's young people are situated in a broader grand narrative of 'sharing', whereby marketing and platform architecture are designed to encourage increased connection and sharing among social networks. However, this aim has negative individual and interpersonal consequences for young people when it becomes overused and nears compulsion.

1.2. Exposure to inappropriate content

Participants also noted difficulty with the lack of control they experienced on social media in terms of the type of content they were exposed to. Young people acknowledged that being on Tik Tok was conducive with seeing 'the odd inappropriate crap' (Ben) that could be 'a bit dangerous', with the difficulty being that they couldn't control what video would 'pop up next'. In the following extract it became clear that Ben's use of 'dangerous' referred to his concern for younger audiences:

> *Like you see like you know you see like there'll be a ten-year-old girl or boy posting a Tik Tok you know that's like 'Oh yeah that's cute ya know look at them' and then you're a couple more down and then there's this like forty year old woman ya know like half naked and then you're like (.) you're a bit like 'Mm what if they see that?' ya know? (Ben)*

In this extract Ben highlights the problematic nature of young audiences being privy to explicit online content, unintentionally and without warning. Interestingly, his reflection focuses on the effect on the 'ten-year-old' rather than himself, suggesting he is not personally affected by the content as much as he demonstrates concern for those younger than him. This was discussed further, with participants noticing the absence of and the need for a 'kids mode' on Tik Tok, similar to what would be expected on television or on the platform YouTube. Ben's extract also speaks to the nature of Tik Tok as a platform, in the unpredictability of content and unintentional ways in which you can see things you 'don't want to see', potentially causing feelings of discomfort and unease for users.

Despite the complexity of platforms, some participants were savvy to the presence of an algorithm that dictated the content they were shown, suggesting that these computer-generated calculations often lead them to content they had not intended to see, "*Like when you're on Tik Tok for too long and then you go down that like worm hole of like really weird content that you didn't mean to go on*" (Cate). Other participants were able to make loose connections with past viewing history, suggesting that watching one video of 'boys jumping into swimming pools' (Ben) may have shared a hashtag which then led to being shown a video of 'bikini stuff', causing them to ask, 'What the hell?' or 'What did I like to get here?' (Ben). The participants' acknowledgment of algorithms and other platform features further resists the previous notion of young people as passive and uncritical users of social media (Charteris et al., 2018), instead supporting notions of digital natives as thoughtful and

insightful users of social media (Gibson & Trnka, 2020). However, this insight does not protect them from seeing things they do not want to see or experience as being harmful.

Another issue raised by participants was the presence and dissemination of 'nudes' of those they knew, that were initially shared on one platform, screenshot and then sent around by others through social media messaging. The ability to deceive others' trust by taking a screenshot was further implicated by evolving technology that prevented those people from being identified, as discussed by Laquesha, "*Oh did you know there's a new hack where you can screenshot without people seeing it and so I'm so wary now".* In this extract, Laquesha demonstrates the knowledge and expertise that young people possess online. Her extract also points to the challenging nature of social media and technology in that it is constantly changing and must be monitored to remain safe and protect privacy online.

It should be acknowledged that this discussion exists in the wider context of 'screenshots' on Snapchat being able to capture images that were designed to be ephemeral. In other words, screenshots enable the receiver to retain a permanent copy of videos or photos that were designed by the sender to only be viewed for a limited number of seconds by specific people, thus allowing copies to be disseminated to others who were not intended viewers by the poster. Consequently, the inability to trust the technology and the knowledge of methods that can exploit security controls, can create a feeling of anxiety, or what Laquesha refers to as 'weariness' in this extract.

Another participant went on to discuss the extent that others go to 'just to let anyone down' (Wilhelmina), alluding to the problematic nature of not only the technology, but also the users of the technology who choose to manipulate it in a way to exploit others. This points to the interaction between unscrupulous users and platforms that enable them to enact unhelpful choices, deception, and unregulated actions. Similarly, parallels can be drawn between the findings of this study and the work of Ringrose et al. (2013). The authors argue

that social media platforms, such as Facebook, enable the construction of visual subjectivities and body objectification; cultural practices which underly the phenomenon of 'sexting'.

Whilst participants were able to discuss the difficulties of being online and the types of content they were seeing, they lacked strategies for managing these and again accepted these as part of being online and something to be wary (and weary) of. One participant's suggestion that parents 'don't know half the shit' they see, illustrates that parents and caregivers are being left out of the conversation by young people and lack awareness regarding what their children are exposed to online. This points to the 'underlife' nature of social media that teenagers create online (Charteris et al., 2018), but also suggests there is space for parents to facilitate discussion and offer support to navigate some of the above challenges, as proposed in the previous chapter.

2. Negotiating broader sociocultural issues

2.1. Dissatisfaction with the body

For some of the female participants, being on social media over a long-term period was associated with increased comparison with others, highly self-conscious photo-taking practices, and relationships with themselves and their bodies that were mediated by social media. Many of the young women made reference to 'wanting to be perfect' or 'what society wants' (Neeve) and acknowledged the role of 'influencers' in setting standards for what was considered desirable. Despite using impression management strategies (such as those discussed in the previous chapter), the young women were still troubled by these issues and did not propose any further strategies that might remedy them, suggesting they were unable to come up with solutions to body image-related difficulties.

Ultimately, the young women in this research noticed and discussed increasing experiences of self-conscious practices over time, which were initially born out of interactions with others online and celebrity influence, but had become internalised messages

of inferiority and low self-worth through comparative practices they engaged in. These participants identified being self-conscious as the main reason for posting less or posting differently and agreed that being 'worried about what people will think' (Rachel) was underlying their posting practices. Taking multiple pictures that they deemed as 'ugly' or 'not good' and thus not posting them, as well as experiences of 'body dysmorphia' (Joy), were common experiences that they acknowledged as a 'sad reality' (Rachel).

The participants were disheartened, dejected, and dispirited by the knowledge that their innocence, naivety, and carefree attitude growing up had been damaged. They reflected on current feelings of significant self-consciousness, in ways that they could clearly see, but not separate themselves from, or do anything about. They recognised that it was 'sad' but spoke with a sense of helplessness and hopelessness at the lack of problem-solving they were able to engage in. These extracts of self-consciousness can be understood and connected with the young women's developmental stage; whereby self-conscious promoting technology intersects with a stage of life that is characterised by seeking a sense of self and identity.

Participants reflected fondly on times when they were younger and 'didn't care' what others thought of them, despite posting 'really bad' or 'horrendous' images. Together they shared 'cringey' pictures they had posted or embarrassing actions of their past, such as wearing 'light up shoes'. There was some suggestion that the naivety of early childhood was treasured, with one participant noting, 'I miss that' (Marie). It was evident that a shift began gradually as the participants transitioned through their schooling, with one participant noticing a change after beginning at intermediate school when 'people started being mean' (Cate). Such experiences also influenced posting behaviours, with many participants reducing the amount or the type of content that they shared on social media.

Existing literature has found that 'nostalgising' can support young people to manage the loss of innocence and an idealised childhood (Kaplan, 1987), by helping them to make

sense of personal changes and discontinuities in life. Other perspectives of nostalgia include that it provides a sense of escapism from present reality and can thus be criticised as a passive way of dealing with loss (Kalinina, 2016). While more in-depth explorations of nostalgia were beyond the scope of this study, previous research has suggested that media platforms provide creative space for nostalgia, act as triggers of nostalgia, and can either produce narratives of nostalgia or make it impossible (Niemeyer, 2014).

For Cate, posting selfies when she was younger had been an enjoyable practice, but due to changing cultural trends she acknowledged, 'I don't do that anymore'. Cate suggested that selfies were no longer an acceptable form of photo-taking and might have been received poorly by her peers. This was particularly problematic for Rachel, who had successfully used selfies in the past as a strategy to deflect attention from her body by posting photos of her face instead:

Rachel: The problem is is that (.) now selfies are going out of fashion it's really annoying cause I don't want full body shots

Joy: No! ((inaudible))

Rachel: I don't want people to take photos of me! I'd rather just the face, that's bad enough, I don't need that

Rachel's extract points to the frustration she experienced after finding a strategy that satisfied her self-presentation aims, which was later superseded by online social norms. Selfies becoming unfashionable was experienced by Rachel as problematic and thus further intensified pressures to conform, rather than relieving them. Rather than resisting this posting trend, it is absorbed by Rachel, and she must again negotiate self-presentation. For example, she now must photograph her whole body, which presents even more of the self on display, thereby intensifying body image concerns and a focus on the self. This demonstrates how individual strategies are undermined by contextual factors not of participants choosing. Her

extract also highlights a reluctance to post and a tension between wanting to be active online while negotiating how much of the self to expose, as well as a requirement to follow 'fashion' trends. Thus, creating a Catch-22 for young people whereby to exist they must be on social media, and yet to be on social media makes them vulnerable to critique. Rachel's solution to this pressure was to develop a new strategy of only posting pictures on her profile that included others, so that her online audience would 'stare at everyone else' and reduce the gaze on herself.

Postfeminist research has explored the influence of "looking talk" for female subjectivity and the ways in which women understand their bodies and appearance, finding that looking works to increase self-awareness, anxiety, and judgement (Riley et al., 2016). Further, being looked at contributes to women understanding their bodies as 'objects' or as 'projects' requiring self-transformation (Bauman, 2000; Shilling, 2016). Thus, the extracts of female participants in this study can be understood in the context of neoliberal societies which encourage consumption to self-improve through self-scrutiny and bodywork (Riley et al., 2016). These authors argue that the postfeminist gaze positions appearance as the determinant of female validation and recognition, further generating the desire to work on oneself.

Joy also identified the growth of social media platforms and influencers as a key determinant of their posting behaviours.

Joy: I feel like also we started caring more because social media started getting a [bigger thing] and then influencers came

Rachel: [Yeah]

Joy: And then like editing came

By reflecting that social media became more prevalent in the lives of young people during her upbringing, Joy makes a correlation here between 'caring' about the opinions of others and increased visibility of the self. She also acknowledges the presence of editing and digital enhancement of images, often used by celebrities or influencers, thus supporting findings that adolescents are critical social media users (Goodyear et al., 2019). Joy's extract also suggests a tendency for social media users to engage in photo editing practices to match standards set by microcelebrities, often referred to as social media influencers (Chae, 2018). Abidin (2016) notes that influencers may include rising models, actors, wealthy people, friends of celebrities, to attractive high school girls. Regardless, influencers achieve visibility through portraying themselves as "having it all" through display of their often-glamourised lifestyles and effortless self-presentation (Duffy & Hund, 2015). However, as Abidin (2016) writes, social media images posted by influencers are curated carefully and can be expertly produced with photo-editing apps. It should be acknowledged that this type of engagement has only been made possible by tools unique to Web 2.0 in which users are able to create extensive social networks and facilitate activity traditionally associated with celebrity (Stefanone et al., 2008). Participants described using *Photoshop* to edit their pictures before posting, demonstrating their expertise utilising high level technologies. Thus, behaviour traditionally associated with celebrities and influencers is being adopted en masse as young people's interpersonal communication becomes increasingly mediated.

Another strategy used by participants to increase their positive engagement with social media (in the context of body image) was to only follow those that they considered to be positive role models. Positive role models in this instance were those who didn't make an individual 'feel bad' about themselves and might 'look like you' but are still 'loving themselves'.

> *It's really weird though because I like I'd feel better taking advice from someone who like is like 'Self-love' and they're like kind of like my size or like a little bit bigger but like when someone really really like small and like skinny is like 'Self-love' you know I don't really (Neeve)*

Despite trying to enact a positive strategy, Neeve highlights a tension in the need to resonate with the individual giving the 'advice'. Evident in her extract is the perception that those of a smaller body 'size' do not know that 'hardships' of being outside of what 'society wants'. For Neeve, being able to connect with someone through shared struggles and feel understood was an important consideration when choosing role models to follow online. She later went on to share her impression that those who fit the Western thin ideal have it 'easier' and therefore enacting 'self-love' was a much more straightforward affair. The participants in this research shared Western cultural ideals of the female body as thin and slender, but equally evidenced resonating with more curvy female bodies, such as the singer Lizzo. Despite increasing inclusivity of broader range of female bodies, researchers have argued that idealising curvy bodies can still enforce aesthetic expectations on female bodies, and thus be equally harmful for young women's' body satisfaction (Betz et al., 2019). Joy similarly talked to the difficulty of embodying 'self-love', *"Yeah and then on Instagram I'm like preaching self-love, I'm like 'Guys we all need to love ourselves' when I'm like 'Mm".*

The contradictions of this discourse have been highlighted in previous research by critical researchers (Gill & Elias, 2014; Riley et al., 2022), noting that while love your body (LYB) discourses appear to interrupt the normalised scrutiny of women's bodies, they ultimately reinforce understandings of the female body as 'difficult to love'. In some ways, this directive can be near impossible to live, thus intensifying the sense of failure that occurs when the mind failures to love the body. For example, messages that expect 'normal' perfection from women illustrate how contradictions in these messages are rife.

Oversimplified messages for women to feel appreciative and confident about their bodies instead represents a sharp disjuncture in the level of distress expressed by the girls in this study.

Postfeminist scholars also argue that within a broader political economy, young women are disciplined by gendered norms and self-esteem is problematised in a consumer culture in which companies profit (Banet-Weiser, 2014). Critical researchers have thus highlighted concerns that these companies are exploiting authenticity and 'feel good' content to generate visibility and thus sell more products (Riley et al., 2022). Calls for confidence by these companies hide the fact that they are part of the reason young women require directives to feel positive about themselves (Banet-Weiser, 2014). As such, the problem is framed as being in the individual, rather than broader sociocultural norms. In the above extract, Joy attempts to support self-love but finds herself failing, and criticises herself implicitly on this talk rather than the impossibility of this demand. Rather than yet another prescription, the directive to 'love yourself' is viewed as a solution.

2.2. Bullying practices

When discussing negative experiences on social media, several participants spoke to instances of bullying. However, when exploring these issues further, it was apparent that the young peoples' conceptualisations of bullying were quite broad. For some participants these included expected practices such as others 'writing negative comments or messaging people' (Laquesha) and 'posting other people on your private' (Wilhelmina). Bullying also included more subtle forms of engagement such as 'talking badly' (Wilhelmina) about others, 'ranting about them' (Laquesha) so that others 'like you more' or to 'make yourself feel better' (Wilhelmina). Interestingly, Laquesha acknowledged 'putting yourself down' as a negative experience, suggesting that negative self-concept can also be problematic for young people.

Thus, self-judgment and self-criticism was interpreted as a form of self-bullying. In terms of prevalence, being bullied or 'put down' by others was a common experience and ubiquitous for Ben, who again acknowledged age as a contributing factor.

> *I feel like probably most people in our generation have probably gotten someone just post something on their account just like oh 'you're ugly' or whatever like ((laughs)) you know like everyone I feel like gets a little bit of it (Ben)*

Some of the participants noticed a shift in their experience over time, suggesting that experiences of bullying had decreased as they got older. Ben's language in his use of 'just like' and 'a little bit' minimises the experience of receiving negative comments and somewhat minimises the experience as normal. Given the following context, there was some suggestion that having experienced subjectively more bullying at a younger age, Blake had become desensitised to these behaviours and they were considered to be a part of growing up:

> *Blake: Like bullying doesn't happen as much now but like (.) a couple of years ago when we were juniors (.) I feel like*
> *Interviewer: You think it was worse then?*
> *Blake: Yeah I reckon it was worse then (.) even like online and stuff*

Blake's assertion 'even like online' suggests that bullying had occurred both face-to-face and online, potentially representing a continuation online of offline difficulties and making interpersonal conflict difficult to escape. Consequences of such negative experiences were discussed by participants, which included changes to affect and self-esteem, noticing 'you feel like shit' (Blake) and experience 'lowered self-esteem' (Ben). There was also a connection between experiences of bullying and the internalisation of criticism, resulting in participants engaging in more self-conscious practices and evaluating the self, causing young

people to consider how they ‘appear’ to others. These internalisations led to further use of impression management strategies or caused participants to discontinue posting.

Bullying was discussed by participants in the context of ‘cancel culture’ within broader society, which in the previous chapter was discussed in regard to the impact this concept had on the impression management strategies and profile work utilised by participants. Here, the discussion focusses on the overlap between what participants felt could be considered ‘judgement’ or ‘bullying’ and the dialectic between the two that caused participants anxiety and unease. Cancel culture was described by Rachel as ‘toxic’ and ‘really bad’. It was acknowledged by Bradley that cancel culture allowed others the ‘ability to throw their opinions into the world’, which was useful for him to conceptualise others ‘opinions’ as potentially being wrong. However, this understanding made it challenging for young people to make a judgement about the validity of others’ opinions and what they should do with this information (i.e. whether this said something about them as a person and consequently, whether they should change something about their life). Joy’s acknowledgement that it was ‘not constructive’, further illustrates the inability of participants to work on the self with the comments they received from others:

> *I think people like (.) I don’t know it’s harder to know the difference now between like what is genuine criticism that you should think about and take to heart and what is just somebody being an asshole (Joy)*

Here, Joy illustrates the dilemma of being receptive to others’ opinions and implementing feedback through working on the self, while also being aware of the perils of cancel culture and bullying. Given that learning from past mistakes was described by participants at other points during the workshop as helpful in their journey to more positive

engagement with social media, cancel culture has important implications for how young people experiment with their identity and engage with others.

Finally, similar to the previous subtheme, despite having some strategies to minimise negative effects of social media, there was an element of resignation that some aspects of being online were out of individual control, "*I mean if you don't like someone (.) block them, but if they don't like you enough they'll just make a new account and keep hating you*" (Darryl). Here, Darryl illustrates how platform features interact with bullying practices, enabling bullies to create new identities and continue 'hating', despite the best efforts of those being bullied. Thus, platforms create conditions whereby interpersonal conflict can extend beyond face-to-face settings and permeate their lives in indiscriminate ways, making bullying or 'hating' very difficult to escape. As evident at other points of this chapter, participants frequently identified broader social and cultural contextual factors that limited their ability to use social media affirmatively. However, participants did not explicit recognise these contextual factors as such; rather the awareness of difficulties they experienced online were reflected on with a sense of resignation and at times, helplessness. Nonetheless, desires to remain engaged online demonstrate the power of collective social norms and the catch-22 of young peoples' participation. For example, dilemmas between wanting to visible, active and involved with peers, yet not wanting to be too visible or visible for the wrong reasons was a common experience. Further, it was evident that participants recognised these inherent challenges of being online yet felt compelled to remain online despite these.

Summary

In summary, this chapter has highlighted some of the themes and topics that are more contentious and often unresolved for young people on social media. Despite the implementation of individual strategies outlined in the previous chapter, participants found

that they remained unable to find adequate solutions for negotiating platforms and their infrastructure, as well as with broader sociocultural issues that permeated their lives. Feeling unable to reduce time spent on social media led to unwanted cognitive consequences and further distancing from important personal values. Inability to control platform algorithms (and thus content that they were exposed to) created some unease and weariness when engaging with platforms. Exposure to influencers and edited images increased self-conscious practices and body dissatisfaction for which participants found 'love your body' discourses were difficult to embody.

Finally, cancel culture was viewed as detrimental to an individual's ability to make mistakes and learn from them. In each of these areas, participants were acutely aware of the flaws of the platforms, demonstrating their ability to be critical users of social media. Reflective of their position in society, as having less power than adults, participants demonstrated learned helplessness around these issues. They recognised the limits of their individual problem-solving abilities in the face of technological strategies and societal norms, yet they were reluctant to engage adults in additional problem-solving. In doing so, they feared adults would be swayed by the dominant risk discourse and harms narrative and enforce increased surveillance or exiting of social media platforms entirely.

Further, participants voiced a catch-22 around self-efficacy, as increased awareness of the sociocultural and political influences did not prevent them from experiencing the subsequent challenges. Rather, participants experienced further overwhelm at their inability to enact change, resulting in a decrease in self-efficacy. In this chapter lies the opportunity for parents and other adults relevant in young peoples' lives to facilitate discussion and provide support for issues well beyond their capability to manage on their own. More specific recommendations will be discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter Nine: Discussion

The aims of this study were to provide space for the voices of young people to be heard and to explore, from their perspectives, their lived experience of social media platforms. It was hoped that findings might inform how young people can be supported further to use social media platforms in ways that are meaningful to them. Thus, the research questions were to explore how young people defined positive online experiences; explore the explanations they drew on when talking about their journey to positive online engagement; and investigate how social media informs young peoples' identity practices and sense of self.

The current research project sought to explore these research questions with an emergent design and use of cooperative inquiry as an action research methodology. The primary study involved workshops with four friendship groups recruited from three local secondary schools; and who met between 4-5 times to discuss their experiences of social media for this project. Though topics were guided by the young people, facilitation techniques were used to prompt discussion.

The findings from these focus groups and individuals were discussed in Chapters Six, Seven and Eight. This final chapter will summarise the main findings of the research, outline the contributions to the literature, including implications for clinical practice, highlight the author's reflections, suggest limitations, and offer areas for future research.

Summary of Main Findings

The main findings are divided into three key areas of importance, the implications of which are discussed below. The first concerns intrapersonal experiences of balancing affective well-being, psychological tensions, and individual journeys with social media over time. The second area of importance concerns interpersonal experiences, including creating safe spaces to manage audiences, and contextual factors such as navigating parental involvement. The final area of importance refers to societal influences and systems that

impact social media use which are beyond individuals' control. Despite presenting these findings as three distinct categories, a core finding across this thesis was that the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and societal are highly intertwined and interconnected. The findings were thus much more complex and nuanced than these simple delineations, and in many ways are entangled. For example, young people readily identified individual values but demonstrated great difficulty in enacting these values independently on social media platforms that are inherently social and interrelated.

Intrapersonal

Double-sided coin

Participants' positive experiences with social media largely aligned with those found in existing literature. Regarding intrapersonal experiences, the young people enjoyed social media platforms for leisure/entertainment purposes and positive reinforcement (Utz, 2015), which also alleviated boredom and provided emotional relief. Further, participants used social media platforms to explore new topics and personal interests which contributed to identity exploration (Weinstein, 2018). Developing knowledge in their interest areas also supported young people to establish what was important to them and provided a sense of mastery when discussing these topics with others.

However, all participants acknowledged that positive experiences on social media were inextricably linked to negative experiences. Experiencing social media as a double-sided coin was a common experience, with participants noting that their affective experience could vary depending on the content they were engaging with. Thus, findings in this study support the "social media see-saw" phenomenon described by Weinstein (2018), whereby the see-saw can be tipped positively or negatively at any time. For example, while cute animal videos would elicit emotions such as joy and contentment, with another scroll this could switch to exposure to natural disasters happening anywhere across the world. Thus, the

participants in the study described being at the mercy of platforms and their algorithms, describing a lack of control over the content they viewed and consequently less stability in their emotional experience.

The findings also demonstrated that experiencing social media positively was dependent on participants' awareness of the ways in which social media was having a negative influence on their lives, the repertoire of strategies they could utilise to improve their experience of social media; and their ability to implement these strategies. Several participants demonstrated awareness of the relationship between their online engagement and affective experience and could identify strategies that might improve their relationship with social media. Consistent with the findings of Charmaraman and Delcourt (2021), participants were selective about the accounts they followed to pursue more positive content and purposefully took time away from social media to engage in pleasurable activities offline.

However, the present research also demonstrated that recognition of self-care strategies was not always reflective of improved social media use. For example, taking a break from social media to bolster well-being was practiced with relative ease for some, whereas for others enacting strategies could be challenging and required well-planned and thoughtful implementation to be successful. The level of difficulty in behaviour change appeared to vary depending on the particular issue young people were facing and individual differences. For example, those who described being highly dependent or 'addicted' to social media required creative brainstorming to limit use and exposure, such as making conscious decisions to leave their phone behind or place it in a zipped pocket. Whereas for others, extracurricular activities in their lives meant that targeted and intentional interventions to reduce screen time were not required. This finding reflects that of George and Odgers (2015) who also found that young peoples' online experiences mirror their struggles and strengths offline.

These findings therefore support research that argues for more sophisticated conceptualisations of social media that investigate factors beyond frequency and duration of use. Understanding young peoples' emotional connections with social media and evaluating what they are doing, rather than how much time they spend online, will provide more insight into the aspects of platforms that contribute to positive well-being. Further, interventions that support young people to identify and implement self-care strategies are likely to be beneficial. Importantly, participants reflected on the value they found in generating their own solutions, and in being recognised for the expertise and knowledge they already had in using social media positively.

Psychological tensions and conflicts

Despite using some promising strategies for positive online engagement, most participants described experiences whereby their online behaviours did not align with their values, creating a sense of discomfort and inner conflict. For example, several young people expressed a desire to 'not care what other people think', instead wanting to post content that was meaningful to them or that they enjoyed as individuals. However, simply 'not caring' was experienced by participants as an oversimplified directive that was difficult to enact. Thus, psychological tensions occurred between wanting to portray the self authentically and feeling constrained by the potential of being judged negatively by others. This supports Goffman's (1959) work regarding self-presentation, in that some aspects of the self are emphasized, while other aspects are concealed in social contexts. Such patterns appear to have intensified through social media, with participants feeling that they constantly had to negotiate how much of the self to display to others. Further, they spoke to experiences of what they described as 'confidence gambling', whereby how they felt about themselves was dependent on the feedback of others, which was amplified by their developmental stage.

Self-presentation was complicated further by attempting to meet standards of the 'perfect life', which was vague, aspirational, and often unattainable. Thus, overwhelm was a common experience, with so many decisions to be made about what to post, with no real direction or prescription of the 'perfect life'. This finding is supported by other researchers in that a process of trial and error was required to learn what made a 'successful' post due to uncertainty of platform expectations (Pangrazio, 2019; Uski & Lampinen, 2016). Thus, despite some attempts to engage with social media for personal causes and intrinsic desires, participants in this research continued to experience social media as inherently social, with their engagement shaped by their peers. This research therefore supports Marwick and Boyd's (2011) finding that social media users' use knowledge about their audiences (or construct ideas about possible audiences) to make stylistic and linguistic decisions about what they post. However, the participants in this study tended to 'opt out' of posting by posting less over time, rather than simply adapting or adjusting their content. The ever-present fear of being cancelled also meant that the stakes for getting it wrong interpersonally and publicly were experienced as being extremely high.

Another example of the double-sided coin experience of social media was illustrated in particpants' awarenesss that platforms could be a distraction and negatively influence their physical and psychological health, yet were also important mediums to fulfil relationship obligations. Evidenced in their talk were high levels of ambivalence, confusion, and tensions concerning how they would like to engage with platforms versus acknowledging that they were acting in ways that were incongruent with their values. This study therefore highlights the dichotomous ideas and dilemmas platforms can present and the resultant psychological difficulties experienced when attempting to make sense of these.

Individual journeys

The road to positive engagement with social media was described by participants as a journey that had evolved over time with ongoing experience as they moved through developmental stages. For most participants, early engagement with social media was characterised as unfiltered and unconstrained. Following trends, using filters to alter appearance and 'vlogging' (video logging their lives) were described as normative practices associated with a sense of freedom in posting and experimenting with different sides of the self. Despite labelling early use as 'embarrassing' and 'cringey', many reflected on initial posting practices with a sense of nostalgia; expressing appreciation for the 'not caring what others think' attitude they had once adopted. With increasing age and experiences of bullying or exposure to others' receiving negative feedback, participants became less willing to display themselves in unfavourable ways to the peer group. Each participant spoke to making what they perceived as past mistakes, which had contributed to heightened self-consciousness and a more curated, intentional way of using social media, thereby reducing the likelihood of making further mistakes. Thus, decisions on what to post or what not to post, as well as how to engage with others, were dictated by and geared towards avoiding criticism or rejection from peers. These findings are consistent with the psychosocial stages of development (Erikson, 1994), in which a key task of adolescence is to strengthen the sense of self through negotiation of self-knowledge and society.

In their later teenage years, with what participants described as increasing maturity, they experienced another evolution in their relationship with social media. For some, external factors or life commitments synonymous with 'growing up' (such as being employed) directly impacted either the way they engaged with social media or the frequency with which they engaged with social media. Participants viewed this shift as a natural part of their development and growth as individuals, suggesting that these experiences enabled greater

ability to distance themselves psychologically from social media. Others reflected the understanding that they no longer wanted to care about others' opinions of them, wanting instead to post for themselves. This shift reflected a desire to develop a stronger sense of identity; representing a move away from activities and behaviours that contributed to popularity or position within social hierarchies.

Transitions away from using platforms to follow trends - to desiring to use platforms to pursue individual interests, passions, and social causes - was common. This finding was also reported by Weinstein (2018) who found that young people enjoyed using social media platforms to learn more about the world, existing interests and specific topics like cooking. Consequently, the present research has demonstrated that identity practices on social media are intimately linked with developmental age and stage. These findings highlight the importance of supporting young people to engage with social media in ways that are personally meaningful and fulfilling, rather than to derive a sense of self-worth or source of validation from others, whilst acknowledging this is likely to occur with maturity and experience over time.

Interpersonal

Positive experiences

Consistent with past literature, positive experiences for young people in this research were typically linked with connection to peers and to online communities (Luo & Hancock, 2020). For most participants, positive experiences pertained to sharing and connecting with others; utilising platforms to celebrate personal achievements with friends and family, increased ability to reach new audiences and the ability to enhance existing connections (Charmaraman et al., 2022; Livingstone, 2008; Niland et al., 2015). Further supporting existing research, social media platforms were highly valued for the quality of connection and technological affordances (Blais et al., 2008; Davis, 2013; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011).

Participants appreciated the convenience of instant communication and video-compatible platforms, such as Snapchat, which enabled real-time engagement.

Additionally, the benefit of overcoming geographical constraints to spending time with friends was also highlighted. Consistent with Davis (2013), the ability to contact peers when physically separated and enjoy less goal-oriented exchanges was important to the young people in this research and helped to facilitate a sense of belonging. Participants deeply valued the ability to know almost constantly what their friends were doing and exhibited high levels of socialising and care for others. Being able to support others and check in 24/7 with a short message was essential. This finding supports Gibson and Trnka's (2020) research whereby young people were found to be extremely tactful and sensitive to the needs of others and used nuanced responses to demonstrate support. Further, young people also demonstrated reflective engagement with others in forecasting how their actions might affect others affective well-being. For example, they used their own past experiences to predict what type of support or positive comment others might want to receive online.

Creating safe spaces

However, positive experiences were also dependent on being able to create safe spaces online, where young people felt free to be themselves without fearing the judgement of others. Participants use of a 'private' account that could only be 'followed' by close friends was one of the key methods for controlling their audience. Doing so enabled the presentation of an 'authentic' self to their inner circle, and a more tailored, curated self to wider audiences on their 'public' account. These findings support the research of Leavitt (2015), who found that the use of 'throwaway accounts' on Reddit was utilised by users to manage boundaries and information disclosure, allowing for negotiation of temporary identities. However, where participants in Leavitt's (2015) study used throwaway accounts as temporary outlets for disclosure, the young people in the current study used permanent

accounts alongside their ‘public’ accounts. Thus, the use of additional accounts appears dependent on the platform itself.

The participants in this study were highly attuned to differences in comfortability, closeness and emotional safety among different groups of peers, differentiating carefully between those friends who were ‘close’ and could be trusted not to judge negatively, versus those who could not. This ability to evaluate nuances in relationships and develop trust was key to successful or non-problematic engagement and again highlights the key finding that offline behaviours and relationships were intimately connected to those online. Participants were highly adept at utilising platform affordances (such as obscure usernames) and being savvy to ways in which they could remain hidden from others with private accounts. Controlling their audiences meant participants could post what they wanted and not experience the constant rumination and anxiety that accompanied posting on their public accounts. These findings support the research of Brandtzaeg and Luders (2018), who found that social media users perform impression management to navigate multiple and diverse audiences online.

Contextual factors

What this study also contributes to existing literature is the consideration of young peoples’ social media use in the context of their broader sociocultural environments. Contextual factors, such as the rules and assumptions of social media platforms that schools enforce, offline extracurricular activities, employment status, identity in groups and sports team and familial attitudes and rules around social media use, were all found to influence engagement with social media. For example, some participants drew on identities of themselves as “[secondary school] boarders”, which had shaped their interaction with technology from a young age. Other factors, such as strict boarding house rules of limited phone use and reliance on social media for communication with peers during the school

holidays, further illustrate how young peoples' external environment influences experiences of dependency.

Parental involvement. The participants of this research challenged dominant discourses of youth 'innocence and risk' and online 'dangers' (Charteris et al., 2018; Goodwin et al., 2016; Pangrazio, 2019) by demonstrating they are highly skilled and knowledgeable users of social media. Far from passive and naïve, they spoke to online risks with caution, and acknowledged risks their parents were oblivious to. Supporting the work of Gibson and Trnka (2020), the young people in this research demonstrated that they were highly capable of thoughtful, considered, online engagement despite the persistent difficulties they also experienced. The young people frequently spoke to the positives, negatives, and dilemmas they faced and were highly reflective of past and current engagement. They acknowledged risks that they mitigated in the past, such as exposure to inappropriate content, yet also described ongoing challenges that they required support from others to manage. Participants also 'othered' younger users, expressing concern regarding online safety and reproducing risk discourses as well as naïve child narratives.

Further contributing to the 'digital divide' discourse (Davis, 2013; Seland & Hyggen, 2021), participants shared sentiments that their parents lacked knowledge and understanding of social media platforms due to their comparative inexperience. Participants also felt that adults had failed to recognise their online skills and expertise and appreciate the true challenges they face online. They referenced disagreement with the 'moral panic' (Pangrazio, 2019) that ensues when parents are exposed to articles reporting on the negative consequences associated with social media and develop a negative view of social media. Participants were particularly frustrated by how easily parents were influenced by mainstream media and how quick they had been to make assumptions about their child's use before consulting them. The young people that participated in this study supported the work

of Goodyear (2017), arguing that risk narratives have implications for the way adults view social media and may cause them to deny online platforms as positive tools for engagement.

Participants suggested that parents overly protectionist or high surveillance parenting approaches were likely to cause young people to rebel and withdraw, rather than seek support. Instead, they argued for higher levels of trust and a desire for adults to respect their level of knowledge and understanding of social media platforms. These findings support the desire of young people for autonomy, control and agency and collaborative approaches from parents which recognises their level of expertise (Bhattacharya et al., 2019; Charmaraman & Delcourt, 2021). Young people acknowledged that fears their social media accounts would be taken away by parents prevented their openness and willingness to engage in conversations. However, they acknowledged the value in the research space for providing an opportunity to have open discussions that led to greater insight, awareness, and shared understandings to inform future social media use. Consequently, participants requested collaborative input and space for healthy discussion that they could lead.

Thus, a further contribution to the field pertains to the methodology utilized in this research and *how* participants were engaged with on this matter in ways that their voices were evoked and perspectives were respected. The cooperative inquiry approach used presents one example of the collaborative communication processes that young people spoke of wishing to have with key adults in their life. Rather than receiving directives, they requested open discussions with Socratic dialogue and review of the positives and negatives of social media to inform their decision making. Participants also spoke metaphorically to the relationship they desired with parents being one of colleagues, rather than an employee-employer relationship. In other words, they wished to be treated as equals without the power dynamic that they explained is typically present in these conversations.

As discussed in Chapter 8 '*The limits of individual solutions'*, young people themselves highlighted that there remains a role for parents, caregivers, and educators to support young people with online difficulties they are unable to manage on their own. For example, examining the role of wider cultural and economic structures in society that implicate their experience of social media and overall well-being (which will discussed further in the following section). This research thus supports Davis' (2013) sentiment that young people are likely to benefit from face-to-face relationships to support their social media use, and that social media interventions need to go beyond cybersafety (Charteris et al., 2018; Goodyear et al., 2019). Wider discussions regarding authenticity, values and ethical citizenship were highlighted in this research as key areas of focus.

Societal

Positive experiences

Consistent with the literature, positive experiences with social media for the young people in this research included greater ability to influence change, as well as giving voice to, and being involved in social and political causes that were important to them (Hoad-Reddick, 2017; Jackson, 2018b; Keller, 2015). In line with Baskin-Sommers et al. (2021), it was evident that online opportunities for civic engagement enabled identity exploration for young people. Participants valued exposure to current events and news that would otherwise not receive coverage through mainstream media and felt deeply compelled to share these with their online audiences.

Corroborating the findings of Charmaraman and Delcourt (2021), participants demonstrated interest in environmental issues, human rights, and animal rights issues. They described this awareness as allowing them to research ways they could then action or motivate change. They also acknowledged signing petitions that were linked through social media and sharing posts on their profiles to provide others the opportunity to learn more in an

accessible fashion. They deeply valued being informed of the realities of injustices across the world and often felt that they would be 'oblivious' if it were not for social media.

Similar to the research of Keller (2015) and Schuster (2013), the young women in this research highly valued the sense of connection with other young feminists and relished the opportunity to resist mainstream cultural norms. This research therefore further supported the work of Jackson (2018) in demonstrating that social media platforms create a space for young women for political engagement that they are not afforded offline. Thus, in contrast to the dominant risk discourse, this research points to young peoples' desire to engage and participate in political issues.

However, despite appreciating the vast coverage of important issues at their fingertips, participants also discussed the feelings of overwhelm, powerlessness and hopelessness that were sometimes engendered by seeing a multitude of world issues simultaneously. Participants described desires to help and support causes beyond the online consciousness raising and petition-signing in which they were engaging. They also experienced feelings of angst and stress due to the absence of clear guidance or pathways for effective action that could lead to change. These findings are consistent with Weinstein (2018) that exploration of current events on social media resulted in negative effect for young people. Further, these sentiments also align with findings from Jackson (2018) and Christensen (2011) that young people are quick to dismiss online activism as "clicktivism" or "slactivism", and that offline action is viewed as having greater effect or importance. These studies show that even for young people who experience social media positively, there remain limits to agentically use platforms in ways that meet their needs.

Systems beyond individual control

Despite opportunities for empowerment, inclusion, and activism, societal consequences of social media use were described as the most problematic for the young

people who participated in this research. As discussed previously, the narrative adopted by participants was one of individual responsibility and consequently online difficulties were experienced as individual failings. Yet, many participants expressed feeling powerless to address these perceived failings. The demands of broad sociocultural and political systems, such as addiction, body image and cancel culture, were experienced by participants as contradictory and often impossible to meet. However, the young people were unable to recognise these as such due to their invisible nature, thus a sense of hopelessness and helplessness was reflected in their talk. This research study therefore acknowledges and explores the intersection between the individual and societal systems, which are not always obvious to its users but highly influential to engagement.

Experiences of addiction. This research study supports Tiidenberg et al.'s (2017) finding that young people draw on narratives of addiction when describing patterns of engagement on social media. Experiences of addiction were a pervasive problem for most participants who described frustration at recognising behaviour that did not align with their values yet felt powerless to change their behaviour. Participants' narratives also supported Pangrazio's (2017) finding that young people support the need to limit time spent on social media and recognised the potential for social media platforms to create dependency. Most of the participants acknowledged desires to use platforms less; however, found that stopping the endless pattern of scrolling feeds was extremely challenging. This is consistent with Salo et al.'s (2019) finding that push notification features, constantly renewing information and multipurpose features created dependency and cognitive overload for users.

Some participants acknowledged the ploy of social media platforms and companies, speaking to the construction and development of technology that contributed to addictive tendencies, while others did not appear to recognise the underlying influence of social media companies. Some of the young people were cognizant of techniques used by engineers

trained in this field, such as variable reinforcement (Cash et al., 2012), that are designed to keep users engaged for longer periods of time. This demonstrates that while some young people have some awareness of the motivations and tactics of social media companies, there are gaps in their knowledge reducing their ability to affirmatively engage with social media.

Importantly, the extent to which social media companies and engineers draw on behavioural psychology principles were perhaps not recognised by participants. Drawing on literature critiquing the business model of social media companies, some scholars have identified the presence of an attention economy, whereby the user's attention is the product which is sold to advertisers or other buyers (Williams, 2018). Thus, the longer a user is active and engaged on a platform, the more likely the user will be exposed to advertisements, the more the social media company can charge its advertisers, and the more profitable it becomes. Social media companies thus spend considerable money and time employing engineers who utilise techniques within the gambling industry to keep gamblers seated in front of electronic gambling machines (EGMs). These techniques are aimed at modifying fundamental aspects of human decision-making, such as through classic and operant conditioning, cognitive biases and dopamine signals (Cash et al., 2012). For these reasons, researchers have begun to address the ethics of the attention economy, arguing that social media is a 'serious moral problem' that deserves the attention of scholars, policy makers and the managers of social media companies (Bhargava & Velasquez, 2021).

This study supports previous research implementing interventions designed to support young people to recognise the negative consequences of their social media use, as well the potential benefits to reducing their social media use (Hou et al., 2019). Such interventions have explored the use of reminder cards on phone lock screens and daily reflection practices. As discussed above, supporting creative problem-solving approaches led by young people themselves are required to achieve sufficient buy-in and workability. The level of insight and

awareness young people demonstrate when prompted to consider options available to them suggest that they are capable of developing cost-efficient self-help interventions. The findings from this study are also consistent with Tiidenberg et al. (2017), who found that techniques and tools to prompt critical reflections from young people about their own lived experience were highly successful. Rather than being directed by adults, who they perceived as not understanding their realties, the young people appreciated the opportunity to generate their own thoughts and ideas.

Body image. The young women that took part in this study acknowledged body dissatisfaction and reduced self-esteem resulting from upward comparison with others on social media, in line with Stein et al.'s (2019) findings. These results corroborate findings of existing literature that young women spend considerable time viewing celebrities and peers' profiles and are thus continually exposed to unrealistic and edited images (Baker, 2019). Further, participant experiences of 'body dysmorphia' and evaluations of the self as 'ugly', further support literature that 'thin ideal' content results in increased self-objection and body dissatisfaction, poor self-esteem and negative mood (Betz, 2019). These adverse effects are also reported by Baker's (2019), finding that feelings of inadequacy are generated when individuals perceive discrepancies between their 'actual self' and 'ideal self'.

Body image ideals heavily influenced participants' posting practices, which resulted in either posting less or closely following online trends such as using filters. The young women in this study exhibited highly curated posting practices that were time-consuming and involved significant levels of rumination and analysing against sociocultural ideals. Young women described frequently editing before posting (including using specialist software to do so), only posting their best photos, or taking down photos with an insufficient number of likes.

Consistent with past research (Baker, 2019; Rodgers et al., 2022), participants in this research recognised the prominence and influence of celebrity culture and editing on social media platforms, and their influence on Western thin ideals and standards of perfection online. However, despite recognition of the harm of comparison, the young women that participated in this study continued to strive to meet unrealistic body image standards and reproduce beauty ideals. This is consistent with Camacho-Minano and Gray's (2021) findings that despite critiquing the damaging effects comparisons with the 'perfect body' could have, participants continued to admire idealised images of influencers and celebrities. These negative effects on psychological and physical health seemed to persist despite individuals acknowledging that the material can be unrealistic (Easton et al., 2018).

For several of the young women who participated in this research, body image and body positivity discourses dominated their narratives. They referred to desires to 'love themselves' as a method of responding to negative body image or self-conscious photo-taking practices, acknowledging this as a solution to these difficulties. However, this was described as a difficult practice to enact, or at least one that was easy to communicate or share with others, but one that was difficult to achieve as an individual. Thus, the self-love narrative caused the young women to feel hypocritical.

In contrast with Davies et al. (2020) findings, body-positive messages on Instagram were not helpful in reducing social comparisons and acceptance of different body types. Rather, this study found that the effectiveness of body positivity narratives was dependent on the individual sharing the message. For example, participants in this study identified positive body image role models, such as the singer Lizzo, who demonstrated an image more representative of women's bodies and celebrated her 'self-love' message. Whereas participants found that this advice was not appreciated coming from Kim Kardashian, due to her meeting society's expectations or standards of beauty. Rodgers et al. (2022) also found

that posts from individuals more similar to the user were found to be more beneficial than those more difficult to identify with. This research extends this finding further by demonstrating that authenticity is also a criteria for accepting body positive narratives.

The young women in this research were deeply frustrated and felt ‘wrong’ or ‘bad’ for not loving the self, expressing ‘wishes’ to not feel this way. Thus, young women experience failure of the body to meet thin ideals, and failure of the mind in not being able to love themselves, i.e. a beautiful mind. As Gill and Elias (2014) argue, ‘love your body’ discourses created by companies (such as diet cereal brand ‘Special K’) to maintain female body dissatisfaction and thus sell more of their products becomes problematic for the regulation of women. Advertisements such as those that aim to reduce ‘fat talk’ and slogans promoting ‘discovering a more confident you’, further position these as individual women’s problems, rather than being intimately connected to culture. Further, offering overly simplified solutions, such as simply stopping because ‘the power is in your hands’, is deeply invalidating and fails to acknowledge the cultural pathologisation of women. This ‘love your body’ discourse therefore posits beauty as a ‘state of mind’ and requires women to undergo ‘body work’ and ‘psychic labour’. It was evident that for the young women in this research, the influence of corporations, companies and wider discourses in society was not clear to them. Thus, failing to enact self-love was a criticism of the self, rather than recognising the impossibility of this demand. Orgad and Gill (2022) write that neoliberalism intensifies the psychological project, working to encourage forms of self-care, as well as shaping how individuals should feel. Further, body work is linked to feelings of empowerment and choice, again redirecting attention to women for the responsibility of healing relationships with the body and mind.

Cancel culture. Finally, participants discussed posting practices in the broader context of cancel culture, whereby their exposure to others’ condemnation created further

anxiety concerning what they shared on platforms. Young people again recognised two sides of the same coin, in the freedom of speech and opportunity platforms provide for the dissemination of voices, while also recognising that this could become problematic in the sense that anyone could express views and become subject to cancel culture. This finding is consistent with Chiou's (2020) claim that cancel culture is a double-edged sword, whereby awareness can be created around injustices, though cancelling public figures could also become digital vigilantism. Further, cancel culture is argued by some to become a way of rejecting anyone who holds opposing socio-political viewpoints, and to demonstrate or perform moral allegiance over others (Bouvier, 2020). Several participants expressed cancel culture as being unhelpful or 'toxic', sharing sadness for people that they follow being cancelled, and disagreeing with the nature in which these people are made to repent for their mistakes in the form of public humiliation or shame. In their own lives, participants reflected on cancel culture blurring the lines between genuine criticism and others simply desiring to cause defamation.

Young people were acutely aware of the consequences of being cancelled, acknowledging the permanency of mistakes. They highlighted that while posts could be deleted, they might still be available to those who have taken screenshots as a form of social "receipts" that become an indefinite public record (Ng, 2022). Young people of this generation have had a front-row seat to observe first-hand the consequences of transgressions that are visible and able to be conserved over time for later use, creating increased pressure to get it right, despite vague principles as to what "getting it right" looks like. The consequences of making mistakes in an environment where all information is time stamped and capsuled, are highly elevated. Persistent digital traces have particularly significant consequences for young people, whose self-identity is evolving and changing (Brandtzaeg & Luders, 2018). Cancel culture is further complicated by the inability to assess the opinions and behaviours

likely to result in disapproval, as well as the vague and unclear pathway an individual must take to redeem themselves (Velasco, 2020). Due to constantly evolving social norms and attitudes, participants expressed a reluctance to make mistakes, fearing they would be met with intense critique and shame rather than receiving constructive feedback. The participants' talk of cancel culture thus highlights how the offline intersects with the online, and the influence of broader discourses within society that influence online behaviours, identity practices and sense of self.

In sum, the findings of this study show that young people who describe social media as a positive aspect of their lives defined positive online experiences as those that met needs for autonomy, entertainment, social connection, identity formation and civic engagement. Consistent with their age and developmental stage, they valued platform features and technological affordances which enabled greater ease of communication with peers and transcended geographical barriers that would typically prevent them from relationship building. Feeling cared for and supported by friends by enacting "checking in" practices were also described as positive forms of engagement online.

However, despite recognition of numerous opportunities for positive experiences online, participants were also cognizant of the risks and challenges that being online presented. Thus, they discussed the constant negotiation required to use social media affirmatively, reflecting on the ability for any aspect of social media use to switch from positive to negative. Participants' understandings of negative experiences primarily reflected being judged, criticised, bullied by others or the absence of positive feedback through 'Likes'. They also described their experiences with social media as evolving over time as they made what they perceived as mistakes, observed others making mistakes and subsequently learnt from these. Their ability to access positive experiences also developed over time as they shifted from valuing peer group approval to prioritising posting what was

important to them as individuals. Finally, it was apparent that contextuakl factors such as upbringing, parenting styles and individual differences influenced both how frequently young people engaged with social media platforms and the level of engagement or type of engagement they described.

Secondly, participants generated thoughtful, insightful explanations when talking about their social media journeys. They refuted harms narratives and dominant discourses of young people being naïve and passive users of social media, instead expressing heightened awareness of the challenges and risks presented online. They also expressed frustration at adults' inability to appreciate their expertise and their parents' tendencies to respond in punitive rather than supportive ways. The young people in this study attributed the authoritarian style parenting they had experienced to generational differences, drawing on 'digital natives' discourse to explain parents' relative inexperience with social media and their tendencies to respond based on harms narratives propelled by mainstream news or messages circulated by schools. Thus, participants advocated for parents to collaborate with their children rather than acting on assumptions. They requested that parents respect their autonomy while also being available for consultation where required. Further, narratives of addiction were also prominent in young peoples' talk. They pathologized social media use by comparing their behaviour with other addictions such as smoking and gambling. Consequently, experiences of reduced control, dependence and impaired functioning in social and occupational contexts were evident in their accounts. Participants identified their social media use as problematic in this sense but felt at the mercy of platforms, powerless to enact behaviour change. As such, they voiced a considerable sense of personal responsibility and helplessness.

Finally, social media platforms informed young peoples' identity practices through aesthetic representations of the 'perfect life' which engendered comparison against societal

ideals of who one should be and what one should have. Vague understandings of the posting standards young people expected themselves to live up to resulted in significant rumination and self-doubt regarding whether posts, and thus the self, would be celebrated or criticised. Fear of perceived judgment also resulted in participants engaging in impression management strategies such as presenting themselves in highly stylised, edited or filtered ways. Recognising that they were unable to present themselves authentically in public spaces, participants utilised private accounts to control their audiences and ensure that their embarrassing or unfiltered content would only be shared with trusted others or close friends. Young people also described comparison with Western thin ideals and celebrities which resulted in greater body image concerns, self-objectification and discrepancies between their ideal and actual self. Upward comparisons with others were also found to reduce self-worth and psychological well-being.

Developing the field

This research contributes novel findings to the literature in several ways. Firstly, this study provides nuanced qualitative data to support the extensive quantitative research evaluating social media and well-being outcomes. Phenomenological research represents only a small portion of existing social media literature yet is invaluable to understanding the complexities of platforms and the ways in which users experience them. Therefore, this study has developed the literature by arguing that contextual factors, such as home and educational environments, parental attitudes and parenting styles, individual differences, and personality factors, as well as developmental age and stage-related factors contribute to social media engagement and the type of affirmative experiences young people can access. Learning through observation and analysis of others' mistakes online, as well as reflection on 'embarrassing' posting practices of their younger selves also informed online engagement

and demonstrates the benefit in evaluating changes to social media use over time. What this study highlights is the need for future research to account for the dynamic complexitiesa and nuanced nature of social media use with qualitative and longitudinal methods.

In addition to gaining deeper insight into young peoples' lived experience both online and offline, broader understandings of areas that have previously received minimal research attention were also obtained. For instance, this study explored young peoples' understandings of broader societal issues such as political activism and global movements, addiction, bullying, body image and cancel culture, all within the context of social media platforms. Where existing literature has critically examined the nature of these phenomena or explored the quantitative effects of these phenomena for adolescents and adults, this study has combined critical literature with the lived experience of young people. Subsequently, this study has developed the research field by outlining the tensions, dilemmas and paradoxes experienced by young people and the individual solutions they utilise to manage these by controlling their audiences, adjusting their level and type of sharing practices, and the affective responses that are generated when their strategies for managing fall short.

Further, young peoples' desires for the ways in which they can be supported, and how they can best be engaged in these conversations is novel to the research field. This study has supported past research findings that peers are highly adept at reaching out to provide support (Gibson & Trnka, 2020), and developed the literature by showing that young people also desire support from parents and other adults but in ways that respect their expertise and independence. Consequently, the knowledge and information obtained from young people can now be used to help inform future supports and youth-led initiatives. The participants voiced value in discussing their challenges with each other in a safe, non-judgmental environment with support to engender their own solutions which was experienced as an

empowering approach. Thus, this research has demonstrated that young people are insightful, informed, capable of critical thinking, and should be treated as such.

Secondly, the novel methodological approach taken to the research - utilising cooperative inquiry as an action research methodology - provides a successful approach to working with young people and creates a road map for how they can be included in academic research, as well as engaged with by parents, teachers and adults generally. As Gibson (2022) notes, utilisation of research methods that enhance young peoples' sense of freedom, comfort and control with the researcher are important. Rather than asking young people to come to the researcher's setting, this methodology enabled young people to speak in their own language, with their friends, in environments that were familiar to them.

Thus, cooperative inquiry represents a meaningful methodology for youth participation in research and helps to reduce the power imbalance that exists within traditional research settings. The positive response and engagement generated through the creative art activities and consequent discussions also provide rationale for this way of working with young people in the future. By approaching the research from a youth-led perspective, space was created for the participants to direct discussion about topics that were relevant and pertinent to them and issues that are most prevalent in their daily lives. By positioning young people as the experts, and the facilitator taking the position of the naïve enquirer, the participants in this research project felt empowered to share their views and insights and felt respected and as the 'knowers'. In other aspects of their lives, young people are treated as the 'learners' and not as those acquiring knowledge.

The emergent design of cooperative inquiry was also critical to the research's success in adapting to the needs of participants and allowing for creativity and flexibility as new topics arose. Participants felt empowered by this approach and expressed enjoyment and appreciation of the Socratic nature of the workshops, in allowing them to discover their own

understandings and develop solutions to personal difficulties. By tailoring each workshop according to the topics raised by each friendship group, this project demonstrated that research with young people does not need to follow a standardised procedure, and as such participant insights can be further developed and ensures that they have input.

This study also highlights the importance of intentionally designing affirmative oriented research in this area. Due to inclusion criteria targeting young people who described positive experiences with social media, those who participated in the research may have had attitudes, attributes or motivations that were different from those who had not experienced social media as positive. The intention was to learn how social media is used positively, to provide learnings for those who might be having hard experiences currently and who might want to learn how to use social media in a positive way.

Beyond the above ontological and epistemological implications, this thesis aimed to bring together phenomenology and critical literature from numerous fields including media studies, communications, information technology, psychology, economics and business, consumer studies, and cultural studies. This holistic, contextual approach to understanding young peoples' experiences of using social media is necessary to appreciate the gravity of the social, political, and economic forces underpinning social media platforms. Further, critical analysis is crucial to supporting young people to improve their use and understanding of social media, allow them to make informed decisions and support improved engagement in ongoing digital literacy, increasing their ability to be informed consumers and users of social media.

Clinical implications

For young people

The implications for participants in this research were threefold. Firstly, young people were provided the opportunity to explore the topic of social media themselves. They were

prompted to question taken-for-granted understandings, consider assumptions or unconscious behaviours, brainstorm creative ways of addressing these, and learn more about their own relationship with platforms. Secondly, participants were able to explore social media in discussion with their peer group. Participating in workshops within existing friendship groups was both a developmentally appropriate method of engaging participants effectively and was also a framework for making sense of their talk. They listened to others' reflections, found common ground, and learnt they were not alone in many of their experiences. Workshops encouraged them to help others in brainstorming solutions and thus supported their own learning regarding new methods of engagement.

Finally, this research enabled young people to explore social media with an educated young professional with training in clinical psychology. Therefore, purpose-built, creative art activities were designed to support consciousness raising and in-depth discussion. For many participants in this research, this type of discussion regarding social media was novel; many reflected on the ambiguity that arose when questions were posed and valued the non-judgemental space provided to discuss tensions. Given the negative bias that parents held toward social media (as discussed by participants), the young people reported finding the ability to talk about problematic issues without negative consequences refreshing. This study has thus demonstrated that adults' uptake of dominant risk discourses and tendencies to enforce increased surveillance or policing of platform engagement has implications for young peoples' help-seeking practices. The participants in this research demonstrated that they are very capable of exploring, discussing and reflecting on their experiences with social media, when given the space to do so.

For parents

There is a uniqueness in today's digital era that is unlike anything experienced by previous generations (Davis, 2013). Nuanced understandings of the way in which young

people use and understand social media has important implications for how parents support and encourage their children to become critically aware users (Goodyear et al., 2019). Authors such as Charteris et al. (2018) have cautioned against the desire to protect young people completely from the unknown online, arguing instead that young people should be provided the information to equip themselves and make informed decisions. Pangrazio (2019) found in interviews with young people that adults in their lives took on the role of overseeing and checking on them, rather than supporting and trusting them to make the right decisions. They felt they had been made individually responsible for their safety and privacy practices because of parent pressure and the cybersafety lessons provided by their school. Previous research has suggested that the quality of the parent-child relationship is associated with young people's behaviours on the Internet, and therefore a close relationship can provide a buffer against the adverse impact of social networking use (Ho et al., 2017). This research has further demonstrated that parents need to seek to understand and work alongside their young person, rather than determine rules or regulations based on harms-based/risk narratives. Creating space for conversations and being curious and willing to implement strategies for and with young people, was identified as being a helpful approach.

For educators

Goodyear et al. (2019) argue that strengths-based approaches are needed within classrooms to enable young people to talk about their experiences openly without the fear of being marginalized. The authors suggest that 'context-dependent' learning is developed in which social media content and affordances provide the framework for discussion. Such learning would empower young people to understand their relationships and experiences in reference to popular culture. Social media literacies also need to be developed in the classroom to equip young people with the skills required to enter an increasingly technological workplace and facilitate peer-to-peer learning (Kimmons, 2014). Previous

research has shown that young people are critically aware users of social media; thus the challenge for educators is to identify when adolescents are in control of their social media use and when it switches to controlling them (Goodyear et al., 2019). Finally, the ability to discuss ethical citizenship and support critical thinking skills is also important.

For clinicians and researchers

There is opportunity in the online context for clinicians and researchers to explore interventions that meet young people in digital spaces to improve their mental health and well-being. Gibson and Trnka (2020) argue for innovative methods to provide young people with support and resources, such as: developing mental health information that can be dispersed online; text-based counselling and targeted support on social media for teenagers who display high levels of distress. Goodyear et al. (2019) similarly argue for the need to use social media as a positive educational tool to help young people filter the vast amount of material available to them. Intervening online requires psychologists to understand not only their target audience, but also the nature of the platform they use for communication (Tonks et al., 2015). Mental health professionals also need to engage with young people in way that respects their autonomy and need for agency online. To do so effectively, Gibson and Trnka (2020) argue the importance of not overlooking how young people currently use online support and to build on their willingness to engage. As previously discussed, adolescents are used to the freedom from adults that the online environment brings; thus, any intervention should be tactful and acknowledge young people as active participants in their own well-being. More research is required to determine online support practices of young people that already exist.

Researcher Reflections

At the time of facilitating these workshops, I was a clinical psychology student completing my second year of clinical training in a doctoral programme. This involved previously completing a year of cognitive-behavioural therapy training in assessment and clinical micro-skills, along with a 300 hour placement in a psychology clinic. These skills (open-ended questions, summaries, reflections and minimal encouragers e.g. body language and empathetic utterances) were particularly beneficial in talking with young people to communicate understanding, empathy and positive regard. This was especially important as I wanted the young people to feel heard and to create a non-judgmental space where they felt safe to share their lived experiences. I believe that being somewhat close in age to their generation (and therefore also representative of a 'digital native') was key in developing rapport and reflecting genuine understanding of technological affordances and platform nuances. My position as a young professional, but also as someone who they could relate to, thus provided me credibility that young people could then entrust me with personal experiences and messages they needed to share.

Reflecting on the findings following the workshops with the young people in this research, I recognised that I was somewhat surprised by the level of insight, maturity, reflection, openness and vulnerability my participants shared, and how cognizant they were of the difficulties and downfalls of social media. Considering I undertook this research topic because I had wanted to demonstrate they possessed these qualities, I recognised that I too had subconsciously bought into the discourse of young people as passive and naïve. In discussion of the research questions and research design, it therefore took real conscious effort and discussion with my supervisors to frame questions affirmatively. It was thus a personal reminder that there is much to learn from this generation and the challenges that we all face as social media users. I also sympathised with them deeply as they described

experiences of cognitive dissonance and tensions they come up against as they resist the social, political and cultural systems that underpin platforms.

My training as a clinical psychologist influenced my decision-making throughout this study in several ways. This was true with regards to the design of the workshops, the creative art activities selected, my facilitation and questions asked during the workshops, analysis of data and write-up of the thesis. Given my position as researcher, facilitator and author, I acknowledge that this would impact my interpretation of the data, which is discussed further in the limitations and future research sections below.

Limitations

Due to the purpose and the methodological design of this study being to provide in depth, rich engagement with the issue, the outcome was a very focused study. However, it is recognised that cultural contexts play a significant role in shaping experience, and in considering the parameters of this research, it is noted that this study drew from participants who were of a similar age (16/17 years old) from one geographical area (though inclusive of both an urban and more rural population). The findings are therefore most transferable to social media users in contexts with these elements. While the current study included some diversity across ethnicities, socioeconomic status and available cultural resources, the intention was to capture a snapshot of understandings of a particular time (given the participants age and the current status of technological advancement).

However, the findings of this study have supported existing research in other countries, suggesting that other young people using the same social media platforms are likely to resonate with many of the findings. Further, the intention of qualitative methods is not to achieve statistical representation, rather to offer one of many possible interpretations of the research phenomenon (Yardley, 2000). The validity of cooperative inquiry research, can thus be considered against the procedures outlined by Riley and Reason (2008) who argue

that balancing cycles of action and reflection, collaborating authentically, challenging collusion, managing distress, and sitting with confusion and group tension until creative resolution, can free the inquiry process from uncritical subjectivity.

Additionally, the inclusion criteria for participants required them to be part of a friendship group, thus, privileging those who have been able to form close friendship groups and leaving out those who have not. Further, the parameters of the study might have been different if all participants identified as female (or equally all as male), as discussions concerning body image were primarily raised by females. Other contextual elements, such as some of the participants participating in paid employment at the time of the study or shortly exiting secondary school and moving into apprenticeships, also influence the parameters of the findings. However, these aspects of identity development were not engaged with significantly in this study due to the focus being on individual sense making.

Further, the choice of creative art activities and decisions to pursue certain topics were decided by only one researcher (in collaboration with research supervisors). Thus, differentiating between the success of the workshops that were due to the selected methodology or due to the researcher is not possible in this study. Also, it remains unknown whether the same findings would have been reported if there were multiple facilitators involved in the workshops.

Another limitation was created by working in schools, as the time available for workshops was dictated by school timetables and other variables such as participants coming from other classes or needing to leave early. Time for participants to eat was also factored in, shortening time for discussion to under an hour. However, culturally, sharing kai is important so allocating time to eat is considered necessary. Thus, there were times that discussion was cut short due to external factors, rather than organically ending at the end of a conversation or activity.

A final limitation of the methodology was due to the emergent design of the workshops giving rise to different topics across different friendship groups. This meant that conceptual ideas and higher-level thinking generated by participants in the later stages of data collection were unable to be tested with other groups. Therefore, it is unclear how prevalent some of their insights were and whether participants in other groups shared this awareness, as they were not given the chance to speak to all topics. Similarly, I was cognizant of the potential for some of the male voices to dominate some of the analysis, which may represent gendered patterns of behaviour in mixed sex groups. And at other times, male voices were underrepresented in topics such as body image. However, as existing research shows that body image issues are more prevalent and impactful for females, female voices were explicitly captured in this study.

Future Research

Further research is needed with young people at the centre of developing their own solutions so that interventions are relevant and meaningful to them. It is recommended that the current study is replicated to explore factors that contribute to its success, such as different workshop facilitators. Based on the above limitations, it is recommended that if such a research project were replicated in the future, attempts should be made to obtain perspectives from a wide range of participants, including those older and younger than those in the current study, urban and rural locations, as well as varied school environments to further explore the influence of contextual factors and cultural resources. Future research would also need to include more gender diverse voices, which may require different forms of recruitment such as connecting with rainbow community groups. The current study could be reproduced to explore operating in spaces whereby time is not constrained by school timetables, allowing discussion beyond artificial endpoints. Other opportunities for expanding research design or workshop possibilities include involving more senior students

to speak to juniors within their school and share their experiences, with facilitation by young professionals.

Methodological findings from this research can also be used to inform other projects with young people. This study utilised an emergent design, guided by a set of principles rather than following a prescribed method or set of techniques. For example, positioning young people as experts, utilising creative art activities and Socratic questioning to guide self-discovery, and following topics that are participant-led and meaningful to each group. Thus, this study demonstrated that designing a flexible toolkit that can be adapted to the needs of a group can be highly beneficial when working with young people.

In addition, there were small patterns highlighted in the data that were not established in the discussion of this study, however, demonstrate the potential if facilitated in future research. These include the exploration of support required by others. For example, young people reflected on feelings of self-consciousness in ways they could recognise, but not separate themselves from or find effective solutions for. This presents an opportunity to consider the appropriate type of guidance and/or intervention that could best support young people and their parents as they navigate these challenges.

The findings of this study present a foundation in terms of how to engage with young people, upon which further workshops could be established. The emotion regulation strategies and self-care practices used by the participants in this study, also provided some insight into the affective experiences of young people, highlighting difficulties with feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness. Thus, providing support for young people to manage the overwhelm and lack of agency experienced when engaging with platforms, would also be a valuable area of future research. Although in general the findings presented were the same across all four schools, there were subtle differences relating to school values, rules, and education regarding social media, which could be a direction for future research.

Finally, considerations for practical applications beyond academia for this project include possible collaborations with community partners and schools. There is significant potential for the methodology of this study to shape media literacy development and education in schools, following further development. Additionally, developing partnerships for co-facilitation of workshops could enable young people to engage in discussions with young professionals who are also viewed as digital natives. Developing relationships with school counsellors, may also allow those working with young people to be better informed of the difficulties and challenges involved with social media. Multidisciplinary team approaches are likely to be useful to draw on the knowledge and skills of different people working with young people.

Conclusion

This research sought to explore the experiences of young people who identified as using social media affirmatively. In discussing their personal journeys with platforms, participants identified benefits, challenges, formed queries, challenged taken-for-granted assumptions, and demonstrated critical thinking in their use of social media. They described social media as a useful tool but were also cognizant of the risks and harms inherent in platforms. Participants demonstrated that they are highly skilled and knowledgeable users of social media and respond well to being positioned as experts. The methodology outlined in this thesis proved to resonate with the young people and supported them to generate their own solutions. They acknowledged that they already have a toolkit of positive strategies for engagement that harness their understanding of technological affordances and social skills.

However, while young people were highly perceptive regarding how social media permeated their life and recognised the negative consequences of spending long periods of time online, knowledge and awareness were not enough to enact behavioural change. Thus, they expressed a desire to be supported by others to navigate challenges in ways that would

allow them to maintain their independence and autonomy. They envisioned a role for parents and other relevant adults in accommodating discussion that is led by young people, that acknowledges their strengths, provides a space to review both good and bad aspects of being online, rather than an approach that is protectionist, disciplinary or based on assumptions. Thus, more research and further studies conducted with young people at the centre of creating their solutions are needed to develop supports that are relevant and helpful to them.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Ethics Approval

Date: 15 February 2021

Dear Alana Clapperton

Re: Ethics Notification - **SOA 20/63 - Gaining deeper insight into the role of social media in young peoples' lives: developing a sense of self in the modern world.**

Thank you for the above application that was considered by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: **Human Ethics Southern A Committee** at their meeting held on **Monday, 15 February,**

Approval is for three years. If this project has not been completed within three years from the date of this letter, reapproval must be requested.

If the nature, content, location, procedures or personnel of your approved application change, please advise the Secretary of the Committee.

Yours sincerely

Professor Craig Johnson
Chair, Human Ethics Chairs' Committee and Director (Research Ethics)

Research Ethics Office, Research and Enterprise
Massey University, Private Bag 11 222, Palmerston North, 4442, New Zealand **T** 06 350 5573; 06 350 5575 **F** 06 355 7973
E humanethics@massey.ac.nz **W** http://humanethics.massey.ac.nz

Appendix B: Letter to request permission to conduct research in schools

To whom it may concern,

Re: the possibility of conducting research

My name is Alana Clapperton and I am writing to you regarding my planned research for my doctoral thesis at Massey University.

I am in the first year of the Doctorate of Clinical Psychology programme, having already completed a Bachelor of Arts (Honors) in Psychology, with the aim of graduating and beginning a career as a registered psychologist. The project will be conducted under the supervision of Dr Kirsty Ross, a clinical psychologist, and Prof Sarah Riley, an experienced qualitative researcher.

My research reflects my passion in working with young people and exploring the modern challenges they face, particularly in regard to social media. I am interested in giving young people a voice to share their experience on this topic as findings in this area are often dominated by the mass media and framed in a way that magnifies risk and the dangers of being online. For this reason, I am taking a strengths-based approach to understand how young people wish to be guided through forming critical responses to social media engagement. The research aims are:

- To explore how social media informs young peoples' understanding of their sense of self and their world, and
- To investigate what understandings are enabled when exploring the experiences of young people who describe social media as a positive aspect of their lives

I am writing to request permission to conduct some of this work in your school. Specifically, I would like to explain the project to, and recruit for participation, Year 12 and 13 students. The project would require students to participate in a weekly workshop within the school

over the course of the 3 to 5-week data collection period. This timeframe is flexible, depending on the enthusiasm of the students and requirements of your school. Ideally the workshops would take place during a lunchtime in a free classroom or comfortable/neutral school space selected by the students. It would be completely voluntary for those students who wish to take part.

The workshops will involve group discussion and activities that facilitate the production of shared understandings between members. Topics may include, but are not limited to: navigating online interactions, managing self-presentation and disclosure, strategies of emotion-regulation, and developing the ability to resist online pressures. The research will also involve small tasks for participants to complete outside of the workshop. These activities are ones that the students themselves will decide on, and might for example involve paying more attention to the ways in which they manage their engagement with social media in ways that feel good or protective. The workshops will be audio recorded with the student's permission, to document the process and allow talk to be transcribed for data analysis. The recordings will be stored securely on the researcher's password protected computer and will be fully anonymized for use in research publication to protect privacy and confidentiality.

If approval is granted, it would be beneficial for recruitment purposes if I could advertise the research by placing posters within the school. Posters will display QR codes that will allow students to access further information and sign up to participate in the research. Interested students, who volunteer to participate, will be given a consent form to sign and return to the researcher before the workshops commence. Information packs outlining what is involved, what will happen with the data and information, aims, research background and purpose, details concerning confidentiality etc, will be provided to the school to enable open communication with parents. If possible, it would be great to discuss any other appropriate forum I could use to explain the project face-to-face with students, for example, speaking in assembly.

As this project is in the early stages, I am currently in the process of completing a full ethics application, therefore it should be made clear that this project has not yet been approved. However, a risk assessment has been conducted with my supervisors, Dr Kirsty Ross and Prof Sarah Riley, and we are confident that the appropriate measures are in place to ensure the safety and best interests of the participants. It was considered sensible to begin early

communication with schools, to support an application for ethical approval to the Ethics Board. Partnership with schools and student bodies is crucial for the success of this project, as is a willingness within schools to take part in the research. Provided ethics is approved in November, my intention would be to begin recruitment at the beginning of Term 1 in 2021 and start conducting workshops shortly thereafter.

We hope that you would be interested in offering your students the opportunity to participate in this project. We anticipate it to be an enjoyable experience for students, and validating in terms of recognising their expertise and experience in using social media. Being able to recruit in your school would also benefit me in my training to become a registered psychologist

I am happy to meet or talk with you over the phone to answer any questions you might have before you make your decision. If you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact me on [redacted] or email me at alana.clapperton.1@uni.massey.ac.nz

Thank you for your time and consideration in this matter.

Yours sincerely,
Alana Clapperton

Appendix C: Advertising poster distributed in schools

Appendix D: Participant Information Sheet

Developing a sense of self in the modern world: exploring young peoples' positive experiences of social media.

INFORMATION SHEET

My name is Alana Clapperton and I am a 24-year-old psychology student at Massey University studying towards my Doctorate in Clinical Psychology. I am inviting you to participate in a research project that hopes to understand more about the experiences of young people and social media.

What is the purpose of this research?

The purpose of this study is to talk to young people who have positive experiences of social media and explore how being online may have shaped their identity. The study involves workshops where young people can come together with the researcher to talk about what strategies or ways of thinking have helped them enjoy being online, with the hope that this knowledge might benefit others on their own digital journey. Exploring how young people have found ways to engage in meaningful ways is also important because it can help parents, caregivers, policymakers, psychologists and others concerned with their well-being to understand what adolescents may need to feel supported.

Who can participate?

I am inviting friendship groups of 2 or more people to participate in this study. Please note that not all members of your friendship group have to take part, if only half of your friends want to participate, that is okay. I am inviting friendship groups so that you can feel comfortable talking with each other. However, if you would like to participate and don't have friends that want to, please let me know and I can try to create a group for you to join in with. To participate in the research, you must be between the ages of 16 and 18. Your group of friends need to attend the same school, but you don't all need to be in the same classes.

What does the study involve?

This study will involve 3 to 5 workshops, each one hour long, at a lunchtime, free period or allocated time after school once a week for 3-5 weeks depending on your availability (total time= 3 to 5 hours).

Food will be provided at these times. During the workshops there will be a series of activities designed to help us creatively explore your experiences of social media. Activities will involve finding out what you enjoy about social media and any strategies you've developed to help you either use it positively or manage some of the challenges you've faced. We will also talk about some ideas that psychologists use to deal with things people find challenging in social interactions and hear your thoughts about how useful these strategies would be for you in using social media. With your permission these activities will be audio recorded.

What happens to my contribution?

Your details and audio recordings taken during the workshops will be kept on a password-protected computer that only I, as the researcher, will have access to. All of the data will be deleted at the completion of the research. I will use the recordings of your activities to learn more about young peoples' experiences of social media and what can help other people think about these issues. My analysis will be reported in my thesis as a requirement of my degree, but I will remove or change any information that could identify you (e.g. your name). Your contribution to the research will therefore be anonymous.

Why participate?

Being involved in research is a great opportunity to have your say about issues that matter to you. By participating in this project, you will learn self-reflection tools, gain experience of qualitative research methods and hopefully have fun engaging in some thought-provoking discussions with your friends. Your contribution could make a difference to other young people navigating their own social media journey and influence the decision-making of others interested in the well-being of young people. Food will be provided, and you will also receive $40 Prezzy cards as a gift for your contribution.

Are there risks?

This project does not aim to elicit information that is upsetting, but if any sensitive subjects are raised, they will be addressed in a supportive way. During the first meeting, we will agree on ground rules including the need to create a safe environment where people will not be judged by what they say, have it used against them in anyway, or have it repeated outside of the meetings. While I cannot guarantee this will be followed, the chances of this happening are expected to be very low. I will not disclose what is said in the class to other members of staff and any reports on the study will exclude information that could identify you. The only time I will need to break confidentiality is if you disclose that you are experiencing a situation in which you may be harmed, harm yourself or be a danger to others; if this happens, I will discuss with you what the next steps might be, and which adults/services would be able to be brought in to provide you with support.

What if I change my mind?

At any time before or during the research you can change your mind and leave the study without giving a reason. If you change your mind after the meetings, you will be able to have your data removed until six months after the workshops. You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- *decline to answer any particular question;*
- *withdraw from the study;*
- *ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;*
- *provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used;*
- *be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded;*
- *ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the workshops.*

What to do next?

If you would like more information or are interested in participating please email me: alana.clapperton.1@uni.massey.ac.nz. If you wish you can also contact my supervisors at Massey University that will be overseeing the research:

Dr. Kirsty Ross: k.j.ross@massey.ac.nz
Prof. Sarah Riley: s.riley@massey.ac.nz

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern A, Application 20/63. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Negar Partow, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern A, telephone 04 801 5799 x 63363, email humanethicsoutha@massey.ac.nz

Appendix E: Individual Consent Form

Participant Consent Form

Developing a sense of self in the modern world: exploring young peoples' positive experiences of social media.

I have read or have had read to me in my first language, and I understand the Information Sheet provided. I have had the details of the study explained to me, any questions I had have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time. I have been given sufficient time to consider whether to participate in this study and I understand participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw from the study at any time.

1. I agree/do not agree to the workshops being sound recorded.
2. I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Declaration by Participant:

I ___________________________________ [print full name] hereby consent to take part in this study.

Signature: ____________________________ Date: ___________________

Appendix F: Group consent form

Developing a sense of self in the modern world: exploring young peoples' positive experiences of social media.

WORKSHOP GROUP PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

I have read,or have had read to me in my first language, and I understand the Information Sheet attached. I have had the details of the study explained to me, my questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time. I have been given sufficient time to consider whether to participate in this study and I understand participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw from the study at any time.

1. I understand that I have an obligation to respect the privacy of the other members of the group by not disclosing any personal information that they share during our discussion.
2. I understand that all the information I provide will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law, and the names of all people in the study will be kept confidential by the researcher.

Note: There are limits on confidentiality as there are no formal sanctions on other group participants from disclosing your involvement, identity or what you say to others in the workshops. There are risks in taking part in group research and taking part assumes that you are willing to assume those risks.

3. I agree to participate in the group workshops under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet attached.

Declaration by Participant:

I ________________________________ [print full name] hereby consent to take part in this study.

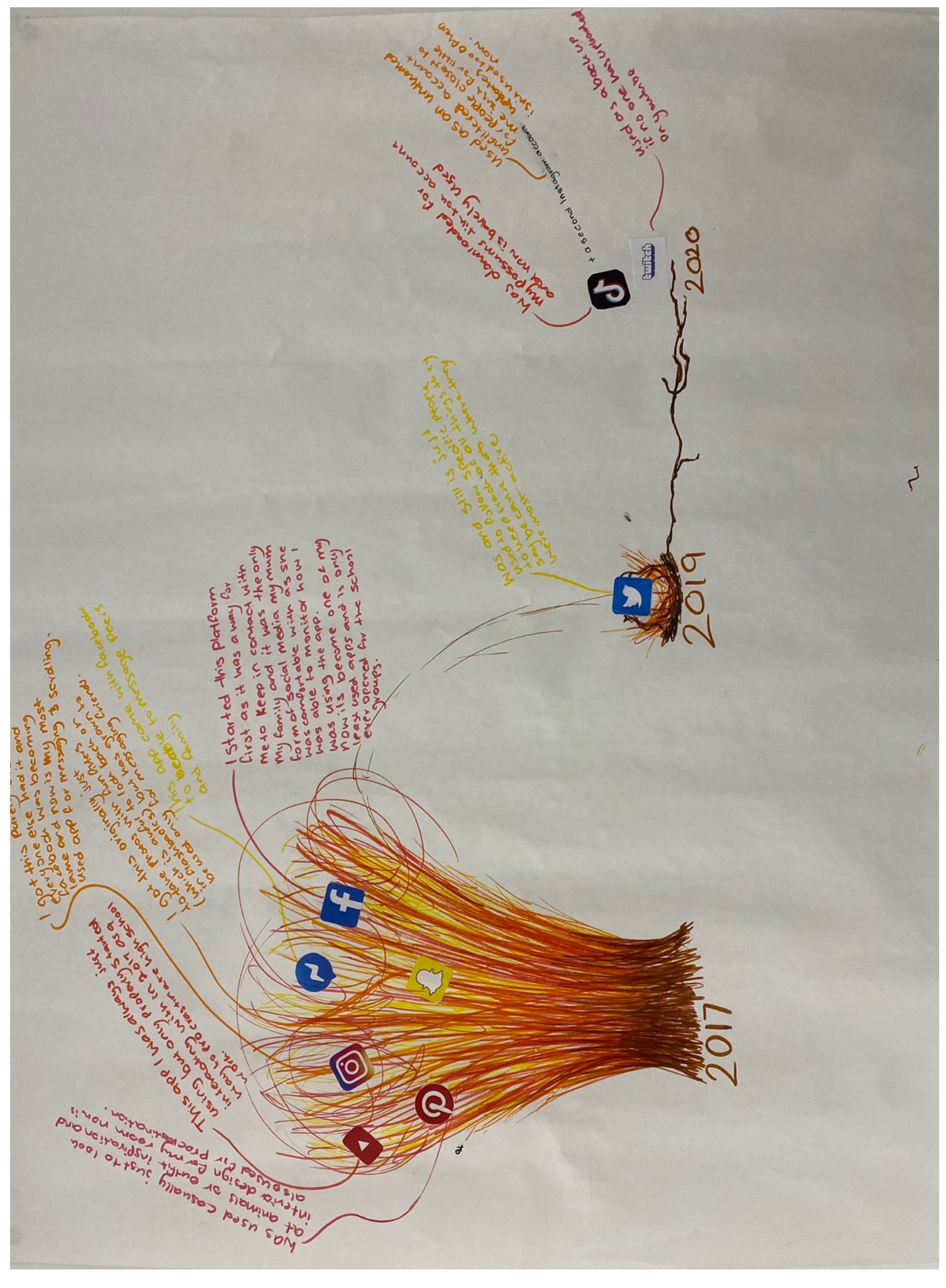
Signature: ________________________ **Date:** ________________

Appendix G: Outline of facilitation techniques utilised

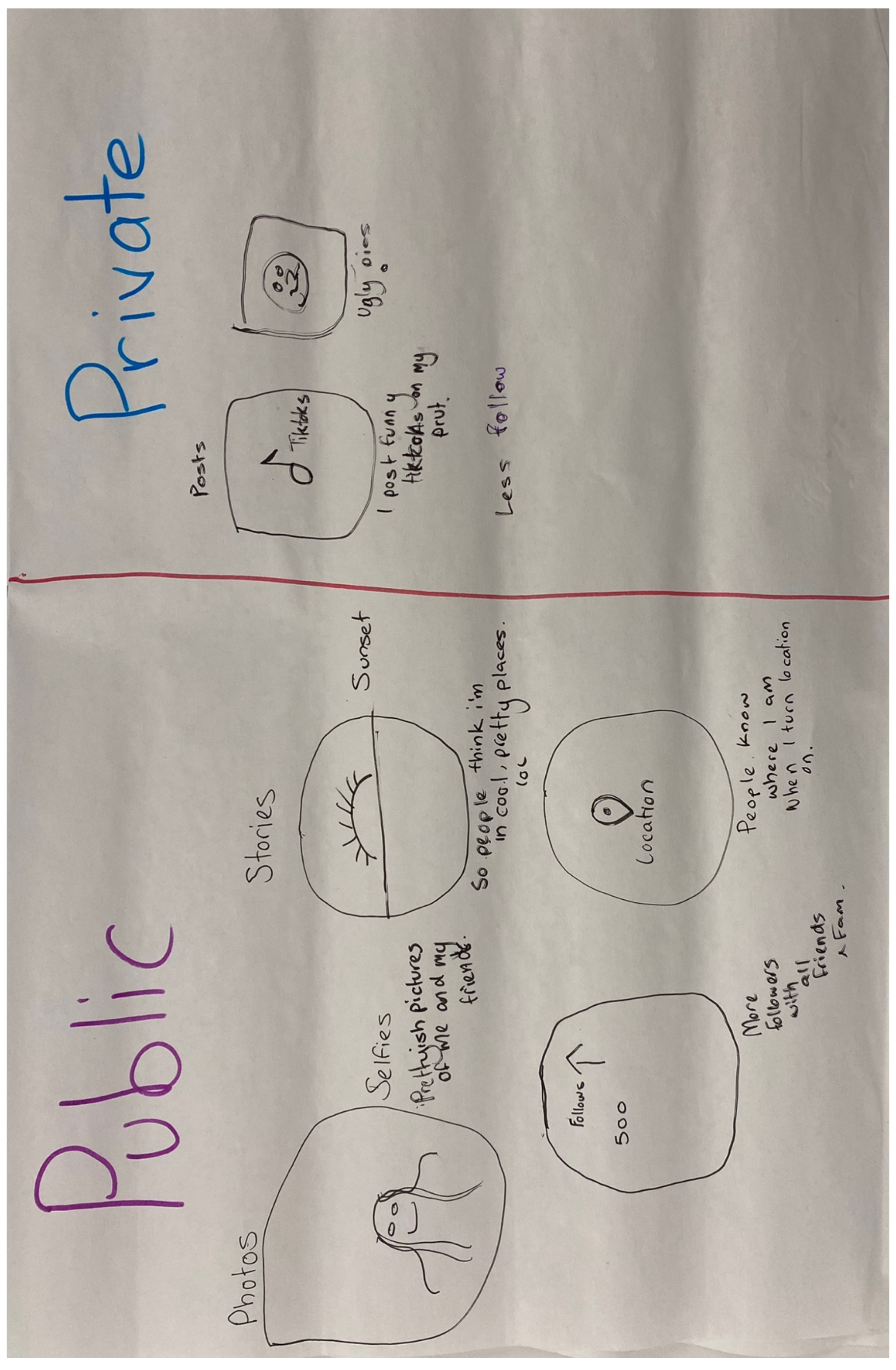
School	Workshop 1	Workshop 2	Workshop 3	Workshop 4	Workshop 5
1	Orientation to cooperative inquiry workshops, table of individual, collective and task needs, exploration of positive experiences			Digital Journey and Visual Image (Identity activity)	Values Bullseye
2	Orientation to cooperative inquiry workshops, table of individual, collective and task needs, exploration of positive experiences	Digital Journey		Values bullseye and learning pathways grid	
3	Orientation to cooperative inquiry workshops, table of individual, collective and task needs, exploration of	Pros and cons	Digital Journey	Digital Journey	Values bullseye and learning pathways grid

	positive experiences		
4	Orientation to cooperative inquiry workshops, table of individual, collective and task needs, exploration of positive experiences	Digital Journey	Values bullseye and learning pathways grid

Appendix H: 'The Digital Journey' facilitation technique (included with permission)



Appendix I: Visual image facilitation technique (included with permission)



Appendix J: Pros and cons list facilitation technique

Pros of using social media	Cons of using social media
• You can speak up about lots of really important things which is liberating – your opinion is heard beyond local audiences • Provides minority groups with a voice • Increases awareness of sociocultural and political issues • Enables increased ability to support causes e.g., by signing petitions • Source of information • Easy way to connect • You get to choose what you share and who you share with through choosing your own privacy settings and deciding who you allow to follow you	• People can attack your opinion – cancel culture – doesn't allow people to make mistakes • Harder to know what is genuine criticism • People can abuse the power they hold with their voice – e.g., Donald Trump • Sometimes wish there was a better way to help e.g., beyond reading about the Black Lives Matter movement • Uncertain whether information online is right • Exposed to negative feedback • The ability to control self-presentation can give others the impression of the 'perfect life' • Criticism for sharing 'sad stuff' • Hard to find the fine line between oversharing and not sharing enough

Appendix K: Research Case Study

Reflection of the Research Process and its Application to Clinical Practice

This case study was completed during the period of an internship as part of a Doctor of Clinical Psychology, and represents the work of

Alana Clapperton

Clinical Psychology Programme Massey University
Student ID:
Setting: Mental Health and Addictions Service, Manawatu Locality, Te Whatu Ora Health New Zealand
Word count: 5, 088

Supervisor:
Dr Kirsty Ross
Senior Clinical Psychologist
Senior Lecturer
Massey University

Candidate
Alana Clapperton
Intern Psychologist
Mental Health and Addictions
Service- Manawatu Locality

Abstract

The scientist-practitioner model is the basis for efficacious clinical practice and requires clinical psychologists to evaluate research to offer evidence-based interventions. The following case study outlines the influences of my doctoral research on my practice as an intern psychologist. My doctoral thesis offers a contribution to the existing literature by providing insight into young peoples' experience of social media and the ways in which they can be supported to engage in ways that are personally meaningful and empowering. Completing this thesis provided opportunities to hone both my research skills and interventions in clinical practice which have been highly beneficial to my internship this year. Areas of focus will include skills for developing rapport, increasing flexibility and adaptability within practice, skills development, understanding systems approaches, recognising differences between research and reality and exposure to experiences of addiction.

Doctoral Thesis Overview

My doctoral thesis explored young peoples' positive experiences of using social media, as well as the ways in which platforms influenced their identity practices and informed their sense of self. Topics participants deemed relevant to their social media use included contextual factors, the dialectic between positive and negative experiences, creating safe spaces online, impression management, strategies to increase positive engagement, experiences of addiction, negotiating broader sociocultural issues, platform infrastructure and bullying practices. Cooperative inquiry was used as an action research methodology in the form of workshops with friendship groups at local schools. Talk and text was analysed using phenomenologically informed thematic analysis. Overall, the study demonstrated that while young people are highly skilled and knowledgeable users of social media and respond well to being positioned as experts, they still envisioned a role for parents and other relevant adults in accommodating discussion. They wanted space to acknowledge their strengths, and review both good and bad aspects of being online, rather than an approach that is protectionist, disciplinary or based on assumptions.

Study Beginnings

The idea for my doctoral thesis was inspired by the young people (aged 16-17) of our modern world whom I have known in my personal and professional life to be insightful, resourceful and critical thinkers. My own experiences with, and understandings of young people have previously been at odds with how they are viewed within the literature and treated by academics as passive, uneducated and naïve users of social media. At a more personal level, the decision to undertake this research was influenced by my own curiosity and fascination with the evolution of social media platforms through my early adulthood, observing both my own and others' interactions with developing technology and the resultant

Web 2.0 culture. With technology and social media becoming an ever-present feature of our modern lives that is likely to continue evolving and creating more opportunities and challenges in the future, I believe this research to be an important contribution to the current literature to develop ways of working with young people.

Study Rationale and Aims

The past decade has seen a radical period of technological change, with more than two-thirds of all Internet users worldwide now present on at least one social media platform (Ortiz-Ospina, 2019). In January 2020, Hootsuite & We Are Social (2019) reported that of the 4.47 million internet users in New Zealand, 3.6 million were social media users. Unlike previous generations, contemporary young people in societies where Internet use is normalized represent the first generation to have grown up with 24-hour access to online communication (Brandtzaeg & Lüders, 2018; Gibson & Trnka, 2020; Pangrazio, 2019). However, previous research concerning youth and social media evidences a dominant narrative assuming young people are naïve, problematic and passive in their use of online networks (Retallack et al., 2016). The risk discourses driven by mainstream media and parent-reporting fail to acknowledge the perspective of young people (Pangrazio, 2019), resulting in this demographic being ‘researched on’ rather than ‘researched with’. The current ‘danger’ narrative regarding social media also has implications for the education that young people receive (Gibson, 2021).

Despite the pervasive use of social media in society and the finding that young people are among its most prolific users, relationships between social media use and identity practices, self-concept clarity, well-being and emotion-regulation remain small and unclear. Psychologists working with young people have a responsibility to understand the factors implicating their client’s lives; and in today’s digitalised society, social media cannot be

overlooked. Consequently, the purpose of the research is to understand the experience of young people using social media platforms and how this experience contributes to the development of their identity and self-image in positive ways. It is hoped that by exploring how young people have navigated their social media journey through managing online relationships, experimenting with self-presentation and resisting online pressures, these understandings can inform how support and guidance is tailored to their needs.

It has been argued that young people have been constructed as passive and uninterested, and thus excluded from political conversations regarding youth issues (Jackson, 2018a). Consequently, there is little systematic research that includes young peoples' own understandings and voices regarding the use of social media and the possibility the digital environment has for reshaping their lives (Niland et al., 2015). Many stakeholders who are interested in the well-being of young people are aware of the presence social media has in their world, however they do not have a good understanding of how social media practices influence behaviour, social relations and identity (Goodyear et al., 2017). There is also a need to better understand the embedded cultural values within social media and how they may influence social participation and transparency online (Kimmons, 2014). Currently, there are no robust recommendations available to parents, practitioners or researchers to help support young people in their engagement and understanding of social media. The challenge comes in the advanced familiarity and knowledge young people have with social media that has created a gap between those who are adept to navigating the online world, and those who are not (Gibson & Trnka, 2020; Kimmons, 2014). The gap in this research area leaves stakeholders ill-equipped to provide young people with the relevant resources and support required to promote positive and educated interactions with social media. An examination of the voices of young people is required to understand what implications social media use has for reshaping their social lives (Niland et al., 2015).

My aims with this research project were to provide space for the voices of young people to be heard and to explore, from their perspectives, lived experience of social media platforms that might inform how young people can be best supported in the future. Thus, the research questions were: to explore how young people defined positive online experiences; explore the narratives they drew on when talking about their journey to positive online engagement; and investigate how social media informed young peoples' identity practices and sense of self.

Methods

The current research project sought to explore these research questions with an emergent design and use of cooperative inquiry (CI) as an action research methodology. Cooperative inquiry is a participative, collaborative approach that seeks to conduct research *with* people, not *on* them or *about* them (Heron, 1996). Thus, this action research methodology is felt to be particularly applicable to conducting research with young people as it aspires to disrupt the power dynamics in traditional research that treat participants as passive subjects and researchers as active agents. Rather, CI includes all those involved in the research as co-researchers, with all members being involved in the design and execution of the inquiry (Heron & Reason, 2006). The study involved four friendship groups recruited from three local secondary schools whom participated in 4 to 5 weekly workshops.

Participants

16 participants between the ages of 16 and 17 years volunteered to participate in this research. Of these 16 participants, 4 were male and 12 were female. Participants were recruited through advertisements and Year 12 and 13 secondary school classes at several schools in the region. They were provided with a $50 Prezzy Card voucher and food over

lunch to compensate for their time given to the research. Three other participants also contributed to the research by providing responses to the research questions via Google Forms and were compensated with a $20 Prezzy Card voucher.

Procedure

Young people were recruited through local secondary schools where the researcher gave presentations about the research and what it would involve to Year 12 and 13 classes. Initially contact was made with senior management staff within these schools who were able to facilitate attending classes to give presentations. Advertising posters were then disseminated around the school and QR codes printed on these posters directed potential participants to complete an online Qualtrics survey with their demographic information and contact details so that the researcher could make contact to arrange workshops. This recruitment process seemed to engage young people well, and meeting young people in their space (school classrooms) enabled them to meet the researcher and provided opportunities to ask questions. Weekly workshops were held at a lunchtime on school grounds and participants were provided with kai as a small koha for their contribution to the research.

Ethics

The current study was reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern A, Application 20/63. The process of the ethics application prior to the collection of data was very detailed and ensured all aspects of the study were carefully considered to ensure all ethical considerations were appropriately managed to maintain the safety of participants. Ethical factors considered and mitigated included confidentiality, coercion from peers to take part, classroom performance, discussion of difficult experiences and cultural considerations.

Data Analysis

The text and talk produced through CI workshops was analysed using phenomenologically informed thematic analysis. Talk in this context refers to transcribed audio from workshops, while text refers to any other medium participants created during the workshops. A phenomenological orientation was selected to emphasize the young peoples' subjective experiences and the meaning assigned to them, whilst thematic analysis enabled the identification of patterns of experience across friendship groups. More specifically, phenomenological research offers the ability to capture the complexity of first-person accounts from those who have experienced the phenomenon of interest (Lawthom & Tindall, 2011). Thematic analysis is also a highly flexible approach as it can be applied across a range of theoretical and epistemological frameworks and is a useful fit with collaborative research paradigms (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Results

Data analysis resulted in three major themes:

Navigating a Digital Landscape

Beyond simple or straightforward understandings of social media, the nuanced ways in which young people discussed social media demonstrated their critical thinking ability and awareness of issues that are relevant to young people in contemporary society. Despite using platforms for the range of positive tools they provided, participants were critically aware of the risks and challenges that being online presented. Thus, continually finding ways to balance opportunity and risk were normalised aspects of social media participation. Participants' experiences of social media were identified as a complex dialectic of both positive and negative aspects that shift dynamically between time and space. Consequently,

both the type of engagement and level of engagement with platforms evolved with young people as they matured, learnt from past mistakes, and were influenced by others around them. Importantly, young people conveyed a lived experience of contending with evolving technology and the ability to continually navigate new ways of being online that they felt were not respected by older generations. Overall, it was apparent that young peoples' experiences were influenced by numerous contextual factors that reflected a long journey with social media over time. The current research project asked participants to constantly reflect on their online and offline practices, including the ways they had experimented with, and cultivated their current level of engagement. It was acknowledged by many that social media use would still require negotiation in the future to maintain or achieve meaningful and positive engagement. In distancing themselves from their parents and other adults, 'digital natives' have separated themselves as the knowers or experts, who have 'grown up' with social media and thus are the only ones who truly know what it means to live in a digital landscape. The distance created between themselves and their forebearers has implications for the help-seeking that young people are provided and will choose to engage in. Further, this highlights the ability of social media to be harnessed as a tool of empowerment, liberation, voice, and safe space, but also the potential it has for producing negative affect in the form of overwhelm, stress and anxiety.

Strategies for Managing the Internet

Young people opted to participate in this research project to share their positive experiences with social media; nonetheless, their experiences were described in nuanced ways, indicating that being online is not without its challenges. Such challenges often centred around the way young people were perceived by others on social media and their desire to manage this perception. Many of these challenges were accepted and taken for granted as

undisputed parts of being online, but ones that needed careful negotiation by participants. The participants in this research described numerous strategies and approaches to social media that enabled them to engage with both the platforms and with other users in more positive ways. Solutions to navigating the challenges presented by social media and discussed by participants were managing impressions through profile work, creating safe spaces, and utilising strategies for positive engagement. Largely, these strategies provided some utility in helping participants foster positive interpersonal relationships, manage their emotional wellbeing, and explore their sense of self in ways they felt good about. However, it was acknowledged by participants that despite increasing their enjoyment with social media, these strategies still required an element of work and cognitive effort to manage and maintain. For these reasons, some of the participants described disengaging temporarily and taking time out from social media as a strategy to improve their well-being. The relative success of several of the strategies discussed was dependent on relationships and the level of trust between close friends. Despite heavily guarded rules and impression management techniques, participants described an ever-present risk that judgement or perceived negative feedback might fall through their safety nets. For this reason, strategies used to improve social media use were not guaranteed panaceas to the wider problems associated with social media, which are beyond the control of individual users. Yet, the responsibility for getting it right was still found to rest with the individual, rather than accountability given to other’ responses in public forums. Thus, the solutions presented are not an exhaustive list of infallible strategies. Rather, these are individual or small group strategies, reliant on interpersonal relationships and feedback from others.

Limits of Individual Solutions

While solutions generated by the young people increased their ability to interact with social media in personally meaningful ways, many of the difficulties faced by users were beyond their control and thus required wider consideration and solutions at a societal and community level. These challenges were a result of direct interaction with social media platforms that extended offline and permeated multiple areas of young peoples' lives, implicating relationships with themselves and others. It was apparent that wider issues of self-presentation, cancel culture and bullying were reflective of social, historical, and political processes underlying social media. Feeling unable to reduce time spent on social media led to unwanted cognitive consequences and further distancing from important personal values. Inability to control platform algorithms (and thus content that they were exposed to) created some unease and weariness when engaging with platforms. Exposure to influencers and edited images increased self-conscious practices and body dissatisfaction for which participants found 'love your body' discourses were difficult to embody. Finally, cancel culture was viewed as detrimental to individual's ability to make mistakes and learn from them. However, in each of these areas, participants were acutely aware of the flaws of the platforms, demonstrating their ability to be critical users of social media. These contentious and often unresolved issues provide the opportunity for parents and other adults relevant in young peoples' lives to facilitate discussion and provide support for issues well beyond their capability to manage on their own.

Conclusion

Participants in this research demonstrated that they are highly skilled and knowledgeable users of social media and respond well to being positioned as experts. Findings highlighted that numerous contextual factors influenced young peoples' experience of social media, and that new ways of balancing opportunity and risk were needed to negotiation their participation. Their experiences were described in nuanced ways and participants described using a myriad of strategies to manage challenges, navigate peer relationships and manage their impressions online. Despite increasing their enjoyment in using social media, these strategies were only found to be partial solutions in managing the challenges presented by being online. Further, participants acknowledged that many of their attempts to use social media positively were mediated by social, historical and political processes beyond their individual control. Young people have developed awareness and insight into some of the challenges and difficulties that being online present but wish to be supported in ways that allow them to maintain their independence and autonomy. They envisioned a role for parents and other relevant adults in accommodating discussion that is led by young people, that acknowledges their strengths, provides a space to review both good and bad aspects of being online, rather than an approach that is protectionist, disciplinary or based on assumptions. More research and further studies conducted with young people at the centre of creating their solutions are needed to develop supports that are relevant and helpful to them.

Reflections

My doctoral thesis explored the influence of social media on young peoples' lives and their development of self. While my current internship role is based with an adult population in a Mental Health and Addictions Service, the knowledge gained and skills identified in this

thesis are still highly relevant and have contributed to my clinical practice in a myriad of ways. The same psychological factors which impacted young people, and the methods of engagement used are transferable to the care of clients at Te Whatu Ora Health New Zealand. These factors include developing rapport, flexibility and adaptability, skills development, systems approaches, research vs reality and experiences of addiction.

Developing Rapport

Establishing rapport with clients is a crucial aspect of efficacious treatment and is well documented within the literature (Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2017). Adolescents are typically difficult populations for clinicians to develop rapport with due to their developmental stage, stigma associated with therapy and parental coercion they may experience (Bolton-Oetzel & Scherer, 2003). Working with young people in my research provided me the opportunity to carefully consider my approach and spend time from the outset to build trust and establish rapport. In a therapeutic setting, adolescents need to feel that their therapist will understand them and that they will be a source of support. Bolton-Oetzel and Scherer (2003) found that empathy and genuineness are both necessary for developing a therapeutic alliance, noting more favourable outcomes when therapists were perceived as caring, open and sincere. Further, Sommers-Flanagan and Sommers-Flanagan (1995) suggest that extending non-judgemental acceptance and respecting adolescents' perspectives can result in higher engagement.

A key part of developing rapport during my research was to spend time during the first workshop introducing myself and explaining the rationale for the research in a participant-friendly manner. I was particularly attuned to my position as a researcher and the power imbalance typical in research settings, whereby the academic takes the position of the 'expert' that holds more knowledge over the young people as 'participants'. Thus, the

research methodology and naïve enquirer approach taken was critically important to the success of the research by tipping the scales and empowering the students to shared their lived experience as experts in their own lives and as social media users. Further, I found taking a genuine and curious approach to their experiences, as well as utilising active listening and other clinical micro skills to be beneficial in encouraging this process.

I have found this non-judgmental, accepting stance that I was able to cultivate during my research to be very helpful in my internship this year, particularly with clients that have a background of illicit substance use and consequently engaged in unfavourable behaviours that may generate feelings of shame. Holding this position of unconditional positive regard, while also advocating for change and teaching skills that align with their goals has been beneficial in developing this rapport whereby the client feels understood, with the understanding that change is required for them to move toward their goals.

Flexibility and Adaptability

Due to the emergent design of the research, I was required to constantly reflect on the experience of my participants, discuss my findings with my supervisors and respond to participants' needs during workshops. As the facilitator, my role was to develop activities that would best explore their ideas further and capture the discussions that were happening organically in the room. While I had structured the initial workshops and prepared activities that were conducted with all groups, other activities emerged from topics raised by participants, such as the creative art drawings of the difference between public and private accounts. Pre-prepared tasks, such as the creative art 'Digital Journey' timeline and constructing a pros and cons grid, were helpful in the early stages to reinforce shared lived experience as central to the research. As participants became socialised to the research and comfortable with the process, I found that they took a greater sense of partnership in sharing

what was meaningful to them. This ability to improvise and be flexible to participants in my research mirrors the same process I now follow in clinical practice by preparing material ahead of sessions, yet being reflexive and responding to my client's needs in session by teaching a different skill or adapting my approach where necessary. Utilising supervision during my research was also invaluable in learning how I could draw on the knowledge and experience of a senior clinical psychologist and established researcher. I learnt how to maximise my supervision sessions by preparing an agenda beforehand and brainstorming responses to queries so that I could have more meaningful discussion. I have found that taking this initiative has also been a helpful approach to supervision during my internship when there is limited time to consult with supervisors.

Experiences of Addiction

One of the main findings of my doctoral research was that participants experienced addiction when using social media platforms, making direct comparisons to addictive substances and behaviours such as smoking and gambling. The opportunity to work with addictive behaviours and difficulties with dependency in my research has been particularly relevant to my work in a Mental Health and Addictions Service in numerous ways. Firstly, exposure to the lived experience of addiction, particularly struggles with ambivalence and the difficulty in enacting change, was hugely beneficial in learning to walk alongside clients at different stages in their recovery journey. Prochaska and DiClemente's (1982) stages of change model has been highly influential in identifying change readiness and advocating for the need to tailor treatment to the individual client, with research demonstrating links between utilising this transtheoretical model and improved treatment outcomes (Krebs et al., 2018). Given my research identified that it was a common experience for my participants to be situated in the pre-contemplative stage of change, this meant that utilisation of

motivational interviewing techniques such as evaluating the pros and cons of social media use were helpful tools to increase insight and elicit change talk among participants. These are skills I have found to be crucial in my internship this year, particularly in learning to work with clients who shift between various stages of change over the course of treatment. Subsequently, I have been able to integrate other skills into my clinical practice, such as holding space to explore unwanted consequences and evaluating whether behaviours were aligned with participant values. During the research workshops, I also recognised that feelings of helplessness and hopelessness were common and that just providing space for participants to recognise their patterns of use was cathartic. Activities such as the learning pathways grid also helped to increase their level of insight and suggested opportunities for intervention which subsequently empowered them to behave differently. The increased awareness of their own self-efficacy helped to instil hope and combat feelings of helplessness. This highlighted to me the value in providing psychoeducation and explaining models of behaviour to clients and the crucial role this plays in enabling them to enact change.

Systems Approach

One of the main findings of my research was that despite individuals' intentions and attempts to enact change, broader societal systems and structures constrained their ability to use social media in ways that they desired. This finding is highly transferable and an important consideration for clients in the community who face stigma and discrimination, and must contend with slow policy and service reform, as well as overreliance on the medical model in some instances, preventing them from accessing more holistic approaches to improved mental health (Gee et al., 2016). Importantly, this aspect of my research was a reminder that clients do not exist in silos and therefore assessment and intervention should be

holistic, taking into consideration, family, cultural, financial and accessibility barriers to treatment. Awareness of these factors has also reminded me that my role as a psychologist may involve advocacy for clients where appropriate, particularly when factors outside the therapy room impact their presentation.

Balancing research vs lived experience

The voices and lived experience reflected in my research thesis contributed to a new understanding of the complex ways in which young people interact with social media and the often contradictory, confusing nature of engagement that they navigate between peer relationships, aspects of consumerism, and identity exploration. These narratives provide new perspectives that current literature and research has not yet explored, providing nuance to previously simplified understandings of young social media users. My research highlights that failing to account for these nuances means we run the risk of invalidating those who do not 'fit' into simple categorisations. Similarly, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)* provides a set of criteria to describe presenting problems, which in reality are experienced very differently by clients. In clinical practice, extensive knowledge of diagnostic criteria is essential to providing evidence-based care for clients, however being attuned what this looks like in reality is crucial to being responsive to clients.

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