The Presentation of Selfie in Everyday Life: Considering the Relationship Between Social Media Design and User in the Online Actions and Interactions of Young People

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ABSTRACT

Against a backdrop of young people increasingly using an array of social media platforms for a range of social activities [20], accessed through a variety of devices [27], this paper reports upon the findings of a research project considering the effect of these platforms upon the actions and interactions of young people.

Reporting on findings from a series of interviews conducted over the course of a year with nine participants, the research discusses the participants' thoughts and impressions of the platforms, their uses of specific features, their social actions and interactions, and the effects of changes in their offline lives and their specific socio- cultural situations upon their online interactions.

The findings reveal a range of social media engagements by young people across a wide array of platforms, with the participants' specific concerns and needs shaping how they engaged with social media. It was also found that the platforms played a role in shaping the actions and interactions of the young people, limiting what was possible for them and informing how they approached social interaction on each platform. As such, it was noted that online social interactions are increasingly nuanced and multi-faceted, and therefore an approach towards analyzing interactions online needs to account for the interplay between design and user from which unique and ongoing interactions emerge.

CCS Concepts

Human-centered Computing→ Collaborative and Social Computing →Collaborative and Social Computing Theory, Concepts, and Paradigms → Social Media

Keywords

Digital sociology; social media; Social Networking Sites; online interaction; SNS; platform design.

1. DEFINING SOCIAL MEDIA; BLURRING BOUNDARIES

This paper aims to discuss the relationship between socio-culturally grounded young users, and the specific designs of the social media platforms they utilize that result in unique user-and-platform specific social action and interaction online. Through an awareness of how young people's social-cultural resources shape their online experiences, and the role that the unique designs of social media platforms they access play in shaping

there online experience, a more complete and nuanced understanding of young people's online experiences can be gathered. Furthermore, the compromises and trade-offs between user and platform can be examined in order to understand what sacrifices and mediations are made in order for young people to successfully interact online. This paper argues that a balance needs to be struck between technological determinism and social constructivism in order to fully understand why online interactions take the form they do. As such, this paper positions itself within the wealth of literature discussing the interplay between human and non-human elements in shaping social interaction [see 5] This research is explicitly exploring how the increased importance of the ever expanding social media landscape impact the lives of many young people.

Given the growing importance of social media in the social lives of many young people [27], it is first worth discussing what exactly is meant here by 'social media' and if/how these platforms occupy a unique and boundaried space online. As social media has become ubiquitous [13] in the everyday social life for many young people [27], research has been keen to unpack the effects of social media upon our actions and interactions [3]. However, though social media may seem at first glance to be a relatively simple subject, it hides within its increasingly expansive scope a number of complexities for researchers. Questions such as exactly how broad an approach towards online social experiences the researcher needs to take, which platforms will (and will not) be considered, and how the researcher will define social media emerge when considering social media.

Indeed, any approach towards social media research is complicated given the growing range of social platforms. Recent PEW data suggests users are increasingly utilizing multiple social platforms frequently [19]. Beyond the well-known and much researched features and practices associated with platforms such as Facebook [6], a growing range of online platforms today purposefully attempt to utilize features that encourage varying forms of social interaction between users [41]. For instance, features such as comment sections and sharing buttons are increasingly common across a wide array of sites and have been noted for their ability to generate social interaction [19]. The ubiquity and commonality of this growing array of elements on a wide range of websites potentially blurs the line between 'dedicated' social media platforms and sites that contain some social elements [9].

Due to the growing variety of features that work to encourage social interaction, there is limited agreement about what exactly can be considered 'social media' and what cannot. Whilst platforms such as Twitter and Facebook are comfortably accepted as social media,

other platforms with social elements are often excluded from this discussion. Recent statistical data from PEW [27], for example, collected data on a range of platforms for their expansive survey on internet usage, but chose to delineate only seven platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Tumblr, Google+ and Vine) as social media platforms. This is despite the fact that in amongst the other 'non-social media' platforms they also collected data on were popular platforms with social elements, such as Pinterest, used by 22% of teens [27], and discussion boards, used by one in six teens. Nonetheless, platforms such as Pinterest have been highlighted as social platforms and noted for the communities that emerge around the sharing of content [42].

Interestingly for this paper, research has found that even if the social element does not serve as the site's primary purpose, the inclusion of interactive features can foster an attitude of social interaction and even of community [4, 9]. In their study of the comment section of two news websites, Manosevitch and Walker [30], noted that despite neither site explicitly encouraging it, there were ongoing social conversations in the comment sections of the sites. This suggested "that commenters did not simply 'parachute' in and leave their opinion. Instead, they engaged with one another as well as the issue under discussion" [30]. This sense of community and engagement has even been noted in comment sections that allow anonymity [12], strongly suggesting that there is a need to broaden approaches towards social interactions online beyond just Facebook and Twitter alone.

Further complicating any conclusive definition of social media, is the notion that the more 'conventional' social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, are increasingly extending beyond social peer-to-peer interactions [26]. Young people continue to utilize these socially-focused spaces for a growing range of reasons that go beyond strict social action and interaction, including news consumption [2], media consumption [8], and shopping [1]. Given the growing range of uses, the strict separation of dedicated social platforms from the rest of the Internet appears to be increasingly moot [15]. Aspects that were once considered essential in separating Social Networking Sites (SNSs) from other spaces online [6] are now questioned, with newer platforms removing aspects such as the need for public profiles or a dedicated list of connections [32].

With this increasingly complex social media landscape in mind, the research detailed in this paper was designed to purposefully look at a broad array of social spaces online beyond the traditionally considered SNSs. Obviously, due to the abundance of easily mineable data from a wide audience, Facebook and Twitter currently attract attention from researchers. Nonetheless single-platform research and the implications drawn from it do not match the experiences of many young users [45], who interact across a range of spaces [4]. As Carr and Hayes [10] highlight, a narrow focus "could impede theoretical development of social media more broadly". This paper provides an approach aimed at encouraging a broad definition of social media; moving beyond a reliance upon the structures and affordances of Facebook and Twitter alone.

With this in mind, I sought to offer no definition of social media platforms to the participants. Instead, I let the participants define and discuss with me how they socialized online: what form this took, what was involved in these actions and interactions, and on which platforms. We also discussed uses of traditionally social platforms such as Facebook for purposes beyond social interaction. As discussed later in this paper, the data showed a rich

range of uses for social media platforms, with approaches and uses largely varying from one user to the next.

1.1 Accounting for the Specifics of Design

Beyond the need to consider a broad range of platforms, there is also a need to consider the specificities of each platform and the unique ways in which they may be used. This is aptly highlighted by Stroud et al. [41], who note that across 155 news websites the use of social features (such as social media buttons, hyperlinks, polls, and comments) largely differed, with the context and exact design of the site affecting how these elements were engaged with. This suggests that merely noting the presence of these features is not enough to understand how they are being used to socially act and interact.

Existing research has begun to question the treatment of a vast range of social media platforms as analogous entities simply due to a commonality of features, and is instead highlighting that many factors and contexts can affect the ways in which users engage with features [24]. Duguay [14] for example notes variable and specific uses of photo-sharing features across a range of platforms. Focusing upon the affordances offered is not nearly enough to understand the platform; there is also a need to consider the use of those affordances on a platform-by-platform basis in relation to the individual user as well as the intended audience. As Katz and Crocker [23] note in their study of selfies across a range of platforms, "the platforms, subject matter, and audience all impact how users engage with selfies and the reasons for taking them".

Kowert et al. [24] in particular issue a call for researchers to "consider the idiosyncrasies of these different social platforms, particularly when one is discussing any potential positive or negative impacts they may have on individuals". They go on to highlight that:

"Recognizing the unique characteristics of different mediated, social spaces is key to understanding what role these different social services play in our everyday lives, how they are utilized, and what social impact (if any) they may have on users over time"

This paper aims to respond to Kowert et al.'s call for contextualization, by not only focusing on a wide range of platforms, but also considering the specificities of design within those platforms. The approach therefore needs to be both broad and specific, encompassing the increasingly wide array of social spaces online with a variety of designs.

1.2 User Variation in the Use of Social Media

As well as a sensitivity towards to design and layout of social media platforms, in order to consider the social interactions of young people online there is also the need to consider the variety of socio-cultural resources young people bring to these platforms.

A particularly useful example of these socio-culturally informed uses of social media is the growing body of research that specifically focuses upon the concept of 'Black Twitter'; the use of Twitter by black communities [38]. Florini [16], for example, notes that as the user's physical body can be obscured on Twitter. Black communities utilize "the linguistic practice of 'signifyin', which deploys figurative language, indirectness, doubleness, and wordplay as a means of conveying multiple layers of meaning". Sharma [38] similarly looks at the use of racialized hashtags, dubbed 'blacktags' to understand how online racial identities are materialized in unique socio-culturally informed manners through the technology of online platforms. Importantly for this research, Sharma [38] notes that: "software platforms, algorithms, digital networks and affects - are constitutive of online racialized identities". He identifies that the use of these features in a specific

manner and the emergent identities are unique to Twitter as a platform, and to this particular racial group. He suggests that, "beyond conceiving Black Twitter as a group of preconstituted users tweeting racialized hashtags, Blacktags are instrumental in producing networked subjects which have the capacity to multiply the possibilities of being raced online". As such, interactions online become framed as a mix of offline social ideals, concepts, and specific formats online and result in unique interactions in a specific medium.

It has been noted that a user's socio-cultural background not only affects their approach towards social media, but also their treatment online. Researchers have noted manifestations of online misogyny [11] and homophobia [37] amongst a large and sadly growing body of other online manifestations of existing toxic social discourses, suggesting that online interactions are not uniform. Instead the interactions are bound fast to each user's socio-cultural background. This is aptly highlighted in the cases of trolling and anti-social behavior on comment sections as seen in famous cases such as 'gamergate'. In this case female social media users were systematically hounded and abused largely because of their gender, and as such had to develop strategies for approaching and using social media [31]. Potential equal access therefore does not always mean equal treatment, equal representation, or equal voices [29]. Indeed, with design in mind, research has also noted that specific design choices can affect certain socio-cultural groups more than others [12]. Though social media has the potential to level user experiences, the reality is that systemic privileges and the prevalence of socially normative expectations still prevail online. This reality affects many aspects of the social media experience from how users access social media to how they are treated on it.

Users and their social media practices and identities cannot necessarily be understood in relation to broader affiliations alone. Researchers have also crucially pointed out the need to account for individual user nuances and experiences beyond their broad socio-cultural affiliations. Fox and Warber [17], note variation in how individual members of socio-cultural groups approached social media for social interaction, highlighting in particular LGBTQ+ users who interact differently based on whether they had publicly declared their sexuality or not. It is important to recognize that in order to understand online interactions, both individual context and broader offline socio-cultural influences, need to be taken into account, alongside the effects of aspects of design and technology.

In order to consider the complexities of social action and interaction online, an approach is needed that considers how a user's individual and broad socio-cultural resources become enmeshed with specific online platforms. An emphasis needs to be placed on how different users will bring different social resources to social media to produce unique social experiences online. The understanding that their performances will still be shaped to varying degrees by the design of the specific platforms and mediums through which they act and interact socially must also stay at the forefront [see 28].

In essence, a balanced theoretical approach needs to be struck between social constructivism and technological determinism (see the field of sociomateriality [33] for example). A number of attempts have been made throughout the years to present such a framework from several schools of research. Researchers such as Marshall McLuhan, Bruno Latour, Gunther Kress, Henri Lefebvre, Karen Barad, and others have all detailed various frameworks that attempt to address this

need. A detailed critical discussion and comparison of these various approaches cannot be provided in a paper of this scope, but nonetheless it is apparent that digital researchers must continue to grapple with extant social theories around the interplay between human and non-human actants, especially given the overt physicality of online social spaces and the continued 'web 2:0' socialization of online spaces. My own attempt at a theoretical framework through which to unpack the intra-action between human and nonhuman elements can be found in my forthcoming monograph, which critically analyses various extant frameworks before proposing a new framework designed to tackle some of the specific particularities of digital spaces. For the purpose of this paper however, we will forgo this necessary detailed theoretical discussion to instead begin to explore and unpack how young people's online actions and interactions emerged through the interplay between their socio-cultural resources and platform design.

2. METHODOLOGY

Since the aim of this project was to explore the online actions and interactions of young people, the methodological approach adopted for this project revolved around a year-long series of semi-structured interviews [7] with the participants in order to understand how they had negotiated and navigated platform design to act and interact online.

This research seeks to explore how the interactions and actions of young people online manifest through the merging of sociocultural resources and specific platform designs, the decision was made to avoid analyzing the results of online interactions alone. Instead, the decision was made to give voice to the expertise of the participants, allowing them to discuss, explore, and explain the range of choices and decisions that went into their specific social actions and interactions online. This allowed the participants to both discuss their opinions and thoughts about social media on a broad scale, as well as discuss specific experiences and choices. As such, the methodological approach was largely inspired by interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA focusses on understanding how a person comprehends and makes sense of a phenomenon within a specific context. Such an approach prioritizes the experiences of the participants and allows them, through semi-structured interviews, to explore and unpack specific phenomena. As Smith and Osborn [40] suggest, "the aim of IPA is to explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world, and the main currency for IPA is the meaning that particular experiences, events, and states hold for participants".

Five rounds of one hour interviews were conducted with nine participants - 3 males and 6 females, between the ages of 15 and 27 - over a one-year period from summer 2014 to summer 2015. This time frame allowed me to discuss changes in the participants' socio-cultural situations and to track the types of actions and sites the participants were using. Ethical approval was granted on July 31st, 2013 by the University of East Anglia's School of Education and Lifelong Learning Ethics Committee. The data was collected via written notes and recorded interviews. Participants were chosen via the 'snowballing' method [36], with the initial two participants, chosen from known contacts, suggesting other suitable participants and so on. This provided several potential participants from which I selected the nine participants that I invited to participate in the final study. The sample size was chosen to allow suitable depth, producing a realistically manageable amount of material as well as a large enough sample for rich and deep understandings of their experiences. This sampling process also allowed me to find participants who interact with each other, helping further my

analysis of social performances and interactions as we discussed interaction with other participants when possible.

This project was eager to hear from a range of users exhibiting a variety of social media users. As such, this project did not aim to seek a 'perfect' or 'ideal' participant merely because they happened to produce large amounts of data [see 25]. Instead, this project set out to examine the embedded role of social media in the everyday lives of young people, looking beyond content production alone to examine a deeper engagement with these multi-faceted platforms. Nonetheless, young people between 17 and 25 were chosen due to their ongoing prevalence across a broad range of online spaces. Currently young people represent the most active and the largest demographic on social media. Indeed, it has been suggested that age the strongest correlation of social media usage when compared to other factors such as gender, educational level, and household income [34].

Of course, given this sampling, it is readily apparent that for such a small sample size, captured over a specific time period in the south of England, the specific results of this dataset cannot be generalized. This sample group is not representative and reflects a range of relatively affluent middle-class, mainly university-educated, and mainly white participants. Increased diversity of participants would have been useful in order to consider an array of socio-cultural influences upon social media engagement. What is presented here, however, is the start of a broader discussion around social action and interaction as a co-construction between socio-culturally grounded users and specific technical environments. It is hoped that other digital researchers continue to explore users from a diverse range of socio-cultural backgrounds, examining how their specific resources merge with technologies to produce unique uses of these social spaces. The data presented in this paper suggests the need for nuance and awareness of many mediating factors when considering online interactions.

Though there is no specific method of analysis suggested in the literature on IPA-inspired approaches, a commonly used method is through the use of axial coding [35]. Axial coding involves breaking the interviews down into emergent themes and issues from a close reading of the interviews, before putting these categories back together to make connections between the categories; in essence allowing the participant's voice and ideas to emerge into common themes [40]. The key aspect of axial coding then is the re-organization of coded data into larger emergent themes, creating groupings of data that are conceptually similar. This approach to coding has been utilized effectively by IPA inspired researchers as a manner to both detail the participants' thoughts and ideas on phenomena and importantly to provide deeper analysis of comparisons and ideas emerging between participants in line with reviews and analysis of extant literature and wider theoretical grounding.

For further verification, the initial coding was checked with the participants to make sure that the interpretation of their ideas and thoughts was truthful and credible from the perspective of the participants [35]. Themes were not selected only on the basis of the prevalence alone, but also "the manner in which the theme assists in the explanation of other aspects of the account" [7]. Verbatim extracts of the transcripts are provided below in the discussion to help further give voice to the ideas of the participants.

3. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

To begin I will briefly introduce the nine young people who participated in the research. Pseudonyms are used to protect the participant's identities.

Brandon was a 26 year-old white male, living in the south of England with his girlfriend, and working in accountancy. He frequently described himself as optimistic and happy. He used Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and Instagram at the start of the research period, and joined some forums towards the end specific to his interests in motorbikes.

Brian was a 26-year-old white male living in the south of England, and working at a university as a research assistant. He had a broad range of interests and spent a lot of his time with his research. He used Facebook and Twitter to produce content, but also regularly accessed a wide range of other platforms for reading, posting content, and discussing issues.

Isabel was a 25 year-old white female living in the south of England with her partner, and working in sales. She mainly used Facebook and Twitter, but also noted that she used WhatsApp, Instagram, and Snapchat on occasion for a variety of reasons. She described herself as 'bitchy', blunt, and acerbic, but loyal to her friends.

Kirsty was a 24 year-old white female living on the south coast of England, and worked in the communications department of a charity whilst writing and publishing poetry on the side. She described herself as often whimsical and bubbly. She mainly used Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn at the start of the research.

Molly was a 17 year-old white female at the start of the research period. She had just sat her final exams for her A-Levels at a school in the south of England and lived at home with her mother, her step-father, her step-sister, and two brothers. She described herself frequently during the course of the interviews as a shy person, who spent a lot of time following her hobbies of dance and music. The research period coincided with several key events in Molly's life; turning 18, leaving school, going to university, and moving away from her family. She used Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat during the research period.

Nina was a 21 year-old white female living with her partner in the south of England after just moving out from her parent's home. She worked in construction and regularly used Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, and a musical theatre forum. She had many hobbies and was frequently busy fulfilling interests in music and culture and helping her local community.

Oliver was a 21 year-old white male living with his girlfriend in the south of England. He was working in a primary school and training towards being a teacher. He described himself as geeky and spent his free time playing videogames and watching TV. He used Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit regularly.

Sally was a 21-year-old British-Asian female, living in the south of England in her parents' house. She was in her final year of university at the beginning of the research period, and used Tumblr, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. She described herself as geeky, and obsessed with fandoms, and spent much of her free time updating Tumblr, reading books, and watching TV.

Willow was a 24 year-old British-Asian female living in the south of England. She worked in a local office as an office assistant. She was shy and geeky, and suffered from mental illnesses that often affected her social contact. She spent her free time indoors reading and playing videogames. At the start of the research period she used Reddit, Facebook, and Twitter regularly.

The use of axial coding led to the emergence of several key themes and sub-themes that present pertinent ideas for this research. In this section, I will briefly present and discuss some of these themes below.

3.1 Beyond Facebook and Twitter Alone

The interviews revealed a variety of platforms that were used by the participants for social interaction, suggesting the need to account for and consider more than just Facebook and Twitter when considering social interaction online. Despite all participants using Facebook and Twitter socially, there were a broad array of other platforms for social interaction, particularly by some participants. For example, Nina used a wide array beyond Facebook and Twitter, including platforms like Pinterest and a musical theatre forum that she accessed frequently and used in a variety of manners. Willow too discussed several platforms that fulfilled social functions for her, detailing how she used two video-gaming services, Raptr and Steam, socially. Willow noted that these platforms could be particularly social:

> You add your friends, like people you know, or people you like talk to on forums, like steam forums, and play the same games in, like, people that maybe you watch stream stuff or something, or you've met online. So it, like, and Steam I always thought is more for meeting up with people that you'd want to play with at the same time.

Beyond this, Willow also discussed comment boards, noting that they served as overtly social spaces for her. She notes that communities form around the discussion of certain topics:

> You don't really know each other, but because you're all talking about the same things in the same context, you definitely get a feel of personalities…people will refer back to comment boards from a couple of days ago, like 'oh yeah, you mentioned last article that your dog was dying, how's that going?' or something.

Willow noted that for her, the social experiences and relationship that are formed in these comment boards are different kinds of social relationships, but nonetheless are still purposeful and often intimate. She notes: "despite the fact that you have no idea of anything, like, I wanna say personal, but I know some really personal stuff about all of them, apart from the fact that I don't know their names and I don't know, umm, anything". She highlights one case in particular of a woman who had been talking in the comment section about living with her partner's ex-mistress, Willow says she knew:

> Like how she feels about the fact that she has to put up with her husband's mistress, although they're not having a thing anymore, and its stuff like that, except I have no idea what her name is, where she lives, how old she is, anything like that. And it's just odd.

These spaces then appear to fulfil different social functions and purposes, and provide different social experiences and understandings.

It was found that each participant experienced social media in broadly different manners, drawing upon different platforms and experiences. As such, each participant gained different social experiences from the internet, responding to, enacting, and fulfilling different practice, needs, and experiences. Nonetheless, it should be noted that Facebook and Twitter were used by all participants in some format, and appeared to be noted as the most explicitly social formats, though again with a variety of uses dependent upon a number of factors. Whilst Facebook and

Twitter are evidently popular, this research suggests that the use of multiple platforms is increasingly common, and that future research should consider more than just a few specific platforms when attempting to understand how user are using the Internet to socially act and interact.

3.2 Platform Design Shaping Social Media Use

During the interviews a number of the participants discussed how the designs and the specific features present on a range of platforms affected the manner in which they acted and interacted. The interviews highlighted that a range of design choices could guide and affect actions and interactions online, but also highlighted the need to also account for this is a non-deterministic fashion. It was apparent that the realization and actualization of social interaction and action online was unique to the enmeshing of a particular user with these design features; different users would interpret and utilize these features differently. This meant that the participants' actions and interactions were bound to, and emerged from, the specific platforms and their specific designs and features, but that the interactions and actions that emerged from the engagement with these features were realized in unique and individual manner.

Brian in particular discussed a range of features that he noted affected his actions and interactions online. For example, Brian discusses several design features on Twitter such as the 140 character restriction and the presence of hashtags, noting that their specific functionality affected how he considered interacting:

> The character limit really forces your hand though. It makes you think really carefully about what you want to say, and how you want to say it. You have to nail it quickly as well. Like if something is happening right then you want to be the first to talk about it, so you have to be quick and you have to be funny, and you have to be short.

For Brian, the particular design choice of 140 characters, along with the consistently active temporal nature of the platform, meant that he framed and approached his actions and interactions in a particular manner, aware that he had to rely upon both brevity and speed to interact in what he perceived to be an effective manner. Both Brian and Isabel later noted that Twitter's brevity and speed meant certain forms of content, such as selfies and pictures, were less likely to be shared, with Isabel noting: "I don't really see the point in it on Twitter cos it's gone in a second". For Brian this further extended to the content posted on each site, with specific content and specific ideas shared on certain platform due to the design features. For example, Brian noted that the ALS ice-bucket challenge that involved sharing videos of someone throwing ice on their head was often not present on Twitter "because it's a visual. People don't watch videos on Twitter".

For other participants, different aspects of platform design were highlighted as fostering specific manners of acting and interacting, unique to their given needs and situation. Isabel noted one aspect in particular that she felt changed the way that she was able to discuss subjects on Facebook, highlighting that the groups feature allowed dedicated places for like-minded users to discuss specific topics. In her particular case, influenced by her particular situation and needs, this manifested itself in discussions around politics. She suggested:

> It's hard to explain really, but the way that umm Facebook is set is kind of segregated into different stuff, isn't it, so you can literally go to groups and stuff like that, whereas Twitter's very much a stream of chat. Like individual profiles and then what they do, but all shouting at once in a never ending mess.

For Isabel the partitioning off of particular areas to discuss dedicated topics led to different social styles emerging on Facebook than on Twitter. She highlighted that this partitioning fostered a slower feel with dedicated group areas which she suggested meant that people could interact around content more easily. She noted: "I think Facebook is, it's got groups and sections and stuff so you can post images and videos and they'll stay there longer for people to talk about".

Other participants noted there were a range of other features that would affect how interactive they perceived the platforms to be. Oliver for example discussed the fact that Reddit allowed community moderators. By allowing for community self-moderation Oliver noted that often the level of interaction was variable depending on the quality of moderation, and as such his participation in the subReddit was therefore also variable:

> When you get a good moderated subReddit, like r/games, sticks to the point, keeps going with it, the mods are fantastic, who keep it on track. And then you get others that are just a chaos and you can't be bothered with it.

For Brian however, interactivity was bound up in the notion of current topics. In his comparison of the design of Facebook and Twitter he noted Twitter's specific design as fostering a greater sense of continual interactivity.

> Twitter has so many trends, so many fads that are so quick passing. And I think Twitter's an important (.) I think people would mind, but I don't think the world would mourn the loss of Facebook, whereas I think people would mourn the loss of Twitter, because of things like the live-tweeting of things, that you wouldn't get on Facebook in the same way, because the audience is live and commenting right then and there.

However, Willow noted that she felt she was more likely to interact around shared content on Facebook, not Twitter. In comparison to Brian, who suggested the ability to comment upon events as they were happen inspired ongoing interaction on Twitter, Willow noted her engagement with shared content was affected by being able to view a preview of that content on Facebook:

> If someone shares a link on Twitter and the tweet's not something I'm particularly interested in I won't click on it (.) if someone shares a share on Facebook I'll still have a general idea of what the thing they were sharing was, because there'll be a little picture and a little bit of blurb and sometimes if I'm really bored I'll just click on it to see what the hell it's about, because it's not just a web link, it's not just, it's got a tag line and a photo and a bit of text underneath, it's not just a web link, a site address, so. I'm more likely to click on it.

Sally on the other hand noted aspects of Facebook's design that she felt hindered the interactivity of the platform:

> Facebook (.) it's kind of hard to keep track of what's going on Facebook, I found…Just because their trending system is really bad. It's kind of like, you get three little items at the top right hand corner of your page and if you don't look at it you don't see it, whereas Twitter it's quite easy to kind of see what people are talking about? Especially because quite a lot of the trending tags there'll always be someone on the newsfeed talking about it, or commenting on it, or something like that.

Given this, it appears that engagement with, and perception of, the platforms appears to be largely individual and aligned to the specific needs of the user, but nonetheless intimately bound up in the design affordances of a given platform.

3.3 Socio-Cultural Resources Affecting Social Media Use

During the interviews a number of socio-cultural factors were discussed with the participants, who suggested that their specific socio-cultural resources affected how they chose to engage with, on, in, and through specific platforms.

Brian, for example discussed how he felt that his homosexuality often played a role in informing his interactions online. Elsewhere, Kirsty noted that her approach towards social media was largely influenced by her the interplay between her work life and her broader social life. As she worked in online communication she noted that her online interactions were "semi-formed by sort of professional concerns", and highlighted that her job largely effected how she understood and engage with social media. She provides a particular example of this:

> Yeah, and actually again from a sort of professional that works with social media on a daily basis, my boss regularly has said that he expects me to use my personal social media to promote the work that we do, and he has a real problem with me having separate work and personal Twitter feeds, for instance, or Facebook feeds. I put my foot down on it because I wasn't comfortable, but there is a question I think about authenticity and umm also, yeah, I dunno I guess you can't insist on it because of employment law and the rest of it, but umm, that's a dilemma that I face fairly regularly.

Another pertinent discussion of a specific socio-cultural situation affecting the participant's approach and attitude towards social media was found with Willow. She detailed her specific issues noting:

> I've got some mental illness, so I think I probably pay a huge amount of attention (.) because I pay a huge amount of attention to how I present myself in real life all the time ever (.) and I know I'm not necessarily the typical experience, because I've seen an awful lot of people with various mental illness have said that actually interacting online is a lot easier, whereas for me it carries exactly the same level of stress, apart from the fact that I can't see how a person is reacting. So it actually carries an added level of stress for me. I can't see how they react, I can see how they choose to react to it, but I can't see how they immediately react. So I don't like that as much. So I don't tend to put much up, basically, it's why I tend to sort of stay away.

Willow further noted that she would "struggle with the idea that I have anything worth saying" and expanded this, noting: "so I tend to stay away from, like, Facebook and Twitter, both feel like they need to be (.) I know a lot of people don't feel the same way, but they feel more important. It feels like there's more weight".

As the study was conducted over the course of a year, I was able to discuss with participants how changes in their lives affected their use of social media. A number of participants noted that shifts in their offline lives could lead to changes in how the engaged with social media. Sally, for example, transitioned from being a university student to starting a career during the course of the interviews. As a university student, Sally noted that social media provided a way to study efficiently. She highlighted Facebook, suggesting:

> It's kind of also an easy way to share documents from lectures from my uni mates, and you know, ask general questions for groups, like the anthropology group or my course group. So it's just an easier way to keep in contact with them because I don't have all their numbers.

However, Sally noted that her engagement with the platforms changed after leaving university and beginning to work at an office:

> One of the guys I work with, we don't have each other's phone numbers, but we message a fair bit outside of work (h) and at work too (h) over Facebook messenger. It's useful like that because sometimes he gives me a lift home or if one of us is on holiday and we need to get in contact we can, or if I'm ill I can message him and ask him to tell my boss I'm not in. I think (.) it's interesting that we've been working together for almost a year now and we only talk over Facebook Messenger, like we don't use our phones as phones with text messages or calls.

Sally noted changes in both her content and her attitudes towards social media. She highlights that:

> Tumblr I used to go on every day, I'd check it as soon as I got in and just kept scrolling down until I caught up with the previous night. But I just don't have the time anymore now I'm at work, it's a lot to keep it going so if I have a spare fifteen or twenty minutes I'll load it up and scroll until I give up and then I'll move onto something else. I used to religiously refresh Tumblr every ten minutes because I followed so many people there would be loads of new posts, but yeah, now I just check it once a week or once every two weeks.

The ongoing and malleable influence of offline situations upon the social media usage of young people suggests that there is a need to re-consider the notion of a strict online/offline binary divide and a need to contextualize social media usage [22]. The participants' specific offline contexts evidently produced unique engagement with social media. Though, depending on the user, this did not always change the content created, it was evident that this did change their engagement with the platforms in line with their given concerns and interests.

3.4 Negotiation Between User and Design

Throughout the interviews it became evident that online actions and interactions often arose through a negotiation between individual users and specific platform design elements, with compromises often made in the manner in which social media platforms were utilized. For the participants, much of this manifested itself in concerns and compromises over the scope of online audiences.

For example, because of Twitter's open and public design, Brian felt that he had to actively alter how he presented his identity, controlling and tapering the content of his messages. He noted: "Facebook is there for me to, to socialize with my friends, I suppose, to put my opinions. I wouldn't dare put my opinions on Twitter, because you can't restrict it". Interestingly, the idea that "you can't restrict" audience on Twitter is not entirely true as users are able to set their profile to private and choose who views their content. When I question him on this he replied:

> Oh sure, yeah, you can (.) but it's a catch-22 sort of thing. If you want to get everything out of Twitter you have to accept that it's going to have to be public. You just have to restrict what you say. You play the game and change what you say.

Brian later expanded on this to note when asked about audience control on Twitter:

> It's not something you can do on Twitter if you want to go online. You kinda want attention, you just don't get to decide what attention, so you have to be more (.) careful with what

you say. You have to hold yourself back and think 'what would someone think about this?'

Despite being offered the option through design to protect his content, Brian seemed to think this was simply not an option if he wanted to use Twitter. He felt therefore that he had no control of the public nature of the platform, and that this was bound in the design of the platform. Instead, for Brian, the boundaries had to be negotiated by altering his content rather than by negotiating with design. Brian later expanded upon this notion, and discussed that platform-specificity of this boundaried negotiation, noting:

> But I think in a way Facebook does have more permanence, but you can doctor that permanence to people you trust easier, whereas Twitter you either get all public or all private, there's no in-between.

Brian was not the only participant to grapple with the need to be public on Twitter. Brandon also felt that the control of privacy was non-negotiable on Twitter and therefore he felt he had to accept that this aspect was out of his control, and instead alter his content: "Twitter I feel I have no real control at all, because I know fully that everything I put on there is available to everyone, umm, which probably limits my use of it a bit".

He later noted that this negotiation of the boundaries of his materially heterogeneous identity was not only platform specific, but also affected his subsequent performances on each platform:

> I share more specific info, like what I'm doing and where I am on Facebook as well, because its, to me, it's safe and I trust the people I let follow me. On Twitter or Instagram, because I don't know who's going to see it, all the stuff I share is vague and kinda loose.

However, on some platforms the participants felt that the scope of the audience could be controlled through the design affordances of the platform, allowing the participants freer reign over the content and subject matter of their posts. For example, Kirsty noted that design features in Facebook could be utilized to the user's benefit in order to patrol who could access and read their posts:

> I've started to use the privacy filters on things a lot more than I ever used to. Now that I sort of have to think about it, I've got a lot more careful about making sure that everything's friend locked and that sort of people that are in the same groups as me can't necessarily see what I'm putting out.

Here then we see Kirsty using the design of Facebook to make sure that her content was only available to the intended audience, meaning that the trade-off in topic was not necessary and design was instead utilized to set boundaries. Similarly, Brian noted he felt that he could utilize the design to his advantage of Facebook, rather than accept it the openness of the design as he had done on Twitter, in order to change the audience of his content:

> If I want to I'll restrict the post to people that I know won't go crazy if I share a liberal opinion or a sex positive thing, or whatever, a non-gender binary thing or whatever, like, to people that I know would be offended, and I can doctor them out of it.

He noted that this level of control was nuanced on Facebook, and that he was able to negotiate control over many aspects of his performance: "I can even control the comments on Facebook if I want. And once it's out there, I can change how public or private it gets without really worrying. It doesn't feel as (.) risky as Twitter does".

Similar sentiments were noted by Brandon, who suggested that: "I think Facebook is just safer. I know who's seeing it so I can let my

hair down. I can say whatever I like really. It's not as much of an issue". Indeed, Brandon noted that his reliance upon design features of Facebook to maintain audiences for him could occasionally lull him into a false sense of security, leading to him to take less care over his content. He noted: "I possibly put up quite a lot about my life, knowing that the privacy settings I've given, sort of shield a lot of people from seeing it, so I possibly take less care now than I used to".

This suggests then that an ongoing negotiation occur on a platform-by-platform basis for the users, who reach their own conclusions about how they choose to present themselves within the confines of the specific platform and its affordances. On some platforms, this seems to manifest itself in active and conscious monitoring of the user's activity, and on others, it manifests in a reliance upon the design features. In each case, it is clear that it is not possible to separate the resulting social interactions from either the user or the platform design; the performances emerge from the enmeshing of these elements to produce specific performances with their own negotiated boundaries. Again of course, this is specific to the individual user. For example, contrary to the previous examples provided above, Isabel noted that she was largely concerned with policing her interaction on Facebook because of the specific audience present there, rather than the more generalized audience on Twitter. She noted that she had to temper her responses on Facebook at times, noting: "I try not to reply. I usually write it and then just delete it", and later adding: "If I was gonna write something and I know that I had friends that would be completely offended by it, I wouldn't put it up". Similar content regulation on Facebook was noted by Willow, who unlike other participants did not utilize the affordances of Facebook to control the specific audiences of her post, meaning she felt she had to temper the content of her messages. She noted: "I know you can set different settings so that only some people see your Facebook stuff and other people don't, but that's just too much hassle and I can't be arsed". Instead Willow chose to doctor and curtail her performance on Facebook, so much so that she noted "my stuff on Twitter is actually more personal" than the doctored content she placed on Facebook. She suggests this was because she felt she could curate the audience on Twitter effectively with the design features there. She noted "you've gotta add people on Facebook that you know, because otherwise it's insulting apparently". Whereas in regards to Twitter she noted:

> I have curated who I have on Twitter, so they tend to be people who have fairly similar viewpoints to me, um, politically, so I tend not to sort of have to put up with the same level of crap.

This therefore highlights the need to consider the enmeshing of individual user with individual platform design. The negotiation and trade-offs between user and design are enacted in an individual manner, informed by the specific user and their needs, and bound to the specific design of the platform.

4. CONCLUSION

The literature review established that young people's experiences online are diversifying increasingly, both in terms of the platforms they are using [27] and in their social experiences and engagements with these platforms [21]. Of course, the ability to socially interact is not without boundaries and limitations that restrict, shape, and effect how an individual engages in social interaction. For a long time in digital research -and in sociology as a whole- the restrictions that have been studied and considered are social restrictions. Discourses and audiences have been

unpacked through multiple lenses as aspects that shape and restrict actions and interactions, both online and offline. This research was keen to understand the interplay between other mediating factors that have been largely unaccounted for; specifically drawing attention to the effect of design. This focus appears to be especially necessary online given that the platforms present us with specific designs through which to act and interact, restricting the modes and methods through which we are able to present ourselves, be they the ways we can talk, the amount we can say, the topics we can discuss, the ways we can move through these spaces, the representations and image we can use, the color pallet we are afforded, and a myriad other design choices. Online, every pixel of these social spaces is explicitly designed, and this design is highly curated. As such there is a desperate need in online research to consider how users are able to present themselves, and how they deal with and negotiation these limitations and restrictions on social action and interaction across a diverse array of platforms that make up the social reality for young people online [45]. This is incredibly vital not only as there is a need to understand the increasingly diverse online experiences of young people, but also as educators continue to integrate social media into the classroom environment. Whilst this inclusion is vital and can be engaging, educators must not only be aware of the reality of the increasingly diverse social media landscape of young people, but also must consider what social discourses and ideals they may be implicitly introducing to the classroom.

It is apparent therefore that there is a need to understand how these curated design features are engaged with. Goffman's [18] research suggests that social actions and interactions are largely location specific, changing from location to location as the audience for that presentation shifts. However, the data from this research suggests that there is a need to alter the manner in which we consider the location-specific nature of social experiences, particularly in highly curated online spaces. Social actions and interactions are not just a result of an individual considering the appropriate action for a given location, but are instead enmeshed with, bound to, and emergent from that location. This means that social interactions and actions are not just something that happens to take place on a stage, but something that emerges from the specifics of that stage. As such, a social constructivist approach cannot readily be maintained when considering digital research, which demands that the user grapples with the physicality of these online spaces in there continued actions and interactions.

The data shows that the trade-offs between location and performer that result in location-bound social engagements need to be accounted for in a nuanced and malleable manner that allows for variation in the performance, variation in the user, and variation in location. Malleability is crucial, given that it is established that users can be widely variable in terms of their socio-cultural backgrounds, which they bring with them to these platforms. It is also crucial given that the platforms themselves are largely variable in how they frame social interaction and in how they allow the user to act and interact. Any theoretical framework through which to consider social action and interaction needs to be equally malleable and adaptive, especially given the constantly changing nature of the social media landscape, which makes any long-lasting conclusions of digital research notoriously difficult.

Understanding the participants' contextualization of these platforms was therefore vital in order to proceed to unpack their actions and interactions within those spaces. Through this process, it became apparent that the participants' contextualization of the platforms were widely variable and dependent upon their specific situation. Working, studying, friendship groups, and family were

all noted as aspects that shaped how and why the participants were engaging with the features. Their uses of the platforms were not uniform, as different concerns shaped how they made use of the platforms and engaged with the various design options and restrictions. Therefore, it is not enough to note which features are engaged with. There is a need to understand why these specific features are used in the manner they are.

The data suggests that not only does the role of the design need to be accounted for, but that it needs to be considered in a nuanced manner. It was apparent that it was through the negotiated enmeshing of user and design that the online social experiences emerged. It is critical that research consider the specificities of a given platform, as the platforms are curated and designed to allow certain manners of acting and interacting. However, it is equally apparent that this consideration is done in a non-deterministic approach that considers and accounts for individual variation. This research, and other similar projects, continue to lay the foundation for a new theoretical framework to consider online action and interaction; one that is grounded in many of the extant social frameworks, but that acknowledges the specificities of digital landscapes. Such a model needs to grapple with the overt physicality of social interaction online, and the manner in which the growing variations in social landscapes are understood, parsed, and negotiated by the diversity of socio-culturally grounded users online. Again, given the scope of this paper, there is not room to detail such a framework here, but it is hoped that these issues will continue to be explored from a number of angles in the still-emerging inter-disciplinary field of Digital Sociology. Thanks to the increasingly popular work of theorist such as Bruno Latour, Gunther Kress, and Karen Barad, social theorist are continuing to interrogate the role of the non-human in shaping our social realities. It is the hope of this researcher that Digital Sociology takes a leading role in this discussion, pioneering new frameworks to reflect the new and emerging realities open to us online.

This can be highlighted if we what this data reveals about the relationship between user and audience. The discussions around the participants' considerations of audience in some ways confirms Goffman's [18] notion that social interaction is crafted for a specific audience, but also importantly adds an overt awareness that the audience emerges in a specific location, tied to the design and constraints of that location. Whilst this research is keen to question 'digital duality' [22], it is worth noting that the translation of offline reality into the online realm is not a direct and perfect translation, but instead it is a specific translation, that has the effect of emphasizing certain aspects and minimizing the importance of others. The interpretation of, and subsequent engagement with, this translation may vary from user-to-user as they bring their own experiences of online texts and of offline reality to bear on the specific online stage. As such, though it is clear that the offline is translated online, future research should consider unpacking what aspects of the offline are overtly emphasized, and which aspects are minimized, with a consideration of what the effects of this may be. This perspective is also vital for educators who wish to use social media in the classroom. It should not be assumed that offline reality is presented neutrally online. The Internet is always and purposefully curated, and an awareness of this must be prevalent. This is of particular importance when tying the emergence of audience to the design of platform, given that, through design, certain communities may be minimized or silenced on specific platforms [31].

The data matches findings from other studies [10, 27] in reflecting that young people are currently using multiple platforms for social interaction. All participants made use of at least two social media platforms during the study, with some using up to nine different platforms. Whilst it is readily apparent that Facebook and Twitter are popular (all participants used thm in some capacity), and that they are currently an integral aspect of social interaction, this research highlights that a focus on these two platforms alone is not enough to understand the entirety of young peoples' diverse experiences of social media. A need to move beyond a focus on one or two platforms is all the more apparent given the growing array of platforms through which users can now interact [45], each offering different ways of expressing identity, consuming and producing content, and socially interacting. As such, not only is there a need to consider a broad approach towards social media, particularly when considering the social media uses of young people [43], it is also clear that there is a need to consider the specificities of these platforms in their own right and to examine the diversity of experiences and uses they can offer, especially if we are to integrate social media into classrooms.

Further to this, it is apparent that through asking the participants to define social media, a potentially broader array of platforms and experiences were considered. This raises an important consideration for future research into social media; that the researcher's conception and understanding of social media may not match the user. Further to this, just as researchers cannot seem to quite agree on the specific definition of social media, it appears that social media is not understood or used uniformly by users. As such, it seems odd that research should attempt to take a uniform approach towards social media when collecting data. Doing so risks prioritizing a certain approach over other, equally legitimate, understandings of social media. It is suggested therefore that a similar approach -placing the definition and scope of social media in the hands of participants- should be included in future research to understand what these spaces mean to the participants. Asking the participants to define social media allowed this research to consider what social media was to the participants, and helped in an understanding of how they conceived of these spaces.

Interestingly, the data suggests that researchers should be particularly careful when gathering data from Facebook alone and generalizing from this; several participants suggested that Facebook was in fact noticeably different to other social platforms. In essence, the uniqueness of Facebook made the platform an outlier in their social experiences online; it was the exception, not the rule. Because of this participants interacted with it differently from other platforms. As Brian put it:

> I guess they're all kinda the same, but all other social media feel like (.) community. And if you're not talking it's just (.) it's snooping without being part of that community. I don't know. It just feels (.) Facebook is different.

Researchers should therefore show caution when using Facebook as an example of social media. As the social experiences of young people online are increasingly diversifying [45], research should be cautious about relying too heavily on one platform alone.

It is apparent that social media experiences are varied and largely grounded in the socio-cultural resources of the user. However, it is important to note that these experiences are not formless, but that the platforms themselves play a role in shaping the experiences of young people online. Indeed, the full research project that this paper is drawn from detailed other elements, such as the devices used to access the platforms and the use of third-party applications that changed how young people engaged with social media platforms. As we gain more and more devices connected to the Internet, there

is a growing range of ways that even a single platform can be presented to us; further changing our experiences and uses of that platform. It is, for example, evident that Facebook on a phone is different to Facebook on a desktop computer, or on a smart watch. This would suggest that beyond paying attention to the nuances of a range of platforms, there is a need to consider that individual social media platforms themselves may not be consistent and may vary based upon the devices that users are using to access them. We should not assume that the platforms themselves are a constant, but should instead understand that their uses and layouts are also specific to the devices through which we access them. Platforms should not be considered amorphous across technology, but instead technology specific.

In the age of 'Big Data' there is growing emphasis on collecting and comparing online interactions, but little thought given as to how these interactions come to take the form they do. A detailed consideration of the elements that lead to specific social media experiences shows us that there are a number of interacting variables that result in each specific interaction; not only including user variation, but also the constraints of the platform itself. Whilst Digital Sociology as a field should continue to explore uses for the vast and growing data available online, we should not assume that these masses of interactions come from the same beginning point. Instead, we should attempt to view the whole interaction with social media, and not just analyze the end result. Indeed, through discussing their online actions and interactions, participants were able to discuss experiences that cannot always be captured and accounted for when considering social interaction online, such as the use of location-specific services such as Yik-Yak, or the use of more 'private' mediums such as Whatsapp, Grindr, and Snapchat. Through discussing social media usage with the participants, it is apparent that there are a range of issues and decisions that go into creating specific social media experiences. Additionally, these experiences vary from one user to the next, and from one platform to the next. It is the enmeshing of these elements that create the specific engagements. As such, it is suggested that future research should engage with participants to understand why social media engagements, uses, and experiences take the form that they do, rather than just analyzing the end product of these many interacting elements.

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