

UNDERSTANDING HOW STUDENTS' RELATIONSHIPS WITH THEIR CELLPHONES
INFORM THEIR EXPERIENCE OF SOCIAL PARTICIPATION
ONLINE AND OFFLINE

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ABSTRACT

The pervasive presence of cellphones in the lives of urban young people around the globe has led to widespread research to evaluate the impact that this device has on young people's overall psychosocial development. This relationship is often characterised as "addictive". This research study presents a unique South African youth perspective in a field of research that is predominantly conducted in the United States, Europe and Asia. It explores the relationship that students (ages 18–21) at Rhodes University have with their cellphones in order to understand how this device informs their experience of social participation online and offline. Central to the design of this study is a "social media detox" which involved the research participants volunteering to restrict their social media and cellphone use for an agreed-upon period of time. The study employs interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to uncover key themes from in-depth interviews before and after the detox. Eight respondents were interviewed twice; once before and once after their detox. This study provides insights into the integral role of a cellphone as reported from a young adult's perspective. Communicating on social media platforms using a cellphone has become normalised among this age-group and the respondents described how the cellphone feels like "a part of you". Unlike interacting face-to-face which is potentially awkward and involves effort, socialising on a cellphone offers the respondents a sense of companionship, control and instant access to their peer groups. The respondents in this study seemed unaware of their own agency in social situations until their participation in the social media detox. By participating in this study, the participants became more aware of how their cellphone use influences social behaviour, both online and offline. The study proposes that the term "addiction" undermines the positive association young people have with their cellphones. Instead, this study suggests that "social fitness" would be a more relevant construct through which to encourage and support young people to exercise agency in their social lives. This exploratory study raises new questions for researchers, programme developers and educators to take up in future studies and programme development.

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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my beloved grandmother
Eleanor Douglas

Rhodes University graduate, 1941

Hull, E.M.B. (Miss) 1941 (B.Sc.) B. C*

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Background and context to this study

The emergence of digital technologies at the turn of the century has added a new dimension to the debate around the impact of human-computer interaction (Ahn, 2011; Engelberg & Sjöberg, 2004; Joinson, 2003; Freier & Kahn, 2009; Palfrey & Gasser, 2010; Rosen, Cheever, & Carrier, 2012). Today's young people represent the first generation who have grown up surrounded by and immersed in these technologies and the term digital natives has been coined to describe them (Prensky, 2001).

Social media “is a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0¹, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Cellphones have made it possible for young people to access social media platforms anywhere and at anytime, which has given rise to a generation of young people with expectations of being “always online” and “always connected” (Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2010; Turkle, 2011). Heightened interest among young people towards social media platforms like Facebook have made them integral to the youth social experience (Ahn, 2011; Baker & White, 2010).

The social media platforms, or social media networks, referred to specifically in this study are Facebook, BlackBerry Messenger (BBM), WhatsApp, MXit and Twitter. Reference to ‘texting’ refers to typing a message on a cellphone which takes place on any of these social media platforms for the exception of Twitter. Twitter involves posting a ‘tweet’ or ‘tweeting’ and these terms are used throughout. In other parts of the world, a cellphone is called a mobile phone. Since this study makes reference to international studies, both terms are used to describe this device. Furthermore, in this study a “cellphone” refers to any internet-enabled cellular phone such as smartphones (e.g., BlackBerry, iPhone) or WAP²-enabled cellular phones (e.g., Nokia 3120). In some instances, the respondents refer to their cellphone as their ‘phone’ and it appears in the text as such. In this study social media use takes place on a cellphone so this activity is implicit in any reference made specifically to ‘cellphone use’.

An increasing number of research studies report on young people's preference for online social interactions instead of interactions face-to-face (Caplan, 2003, 2005; Casale,

¹Web 2.0 is a term that was first used in 2004 to describe a new way in which software developers and end-users started to utilize the World Wide Web in which content and applications are continuously modified by all users in a participatory and collaborative fashion (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61)

² Wireless Application Protocol (WAP)

Tella, & Fioravanti, 2013; Pierce, 2009; Walsh, White, Cox, & Young, 2011). In this study, social participation includes social interactions on social media that take place using a cellphone and interactions that happen face-to-face. Throughout this study, references are made to interactions online/on-screen or offline/off-screen to distinguish between the two forms of social participation.

One study argues that interaction patterns have evolved beyond “dichotomous ‘online’ and ‘offline’ social worlds” into “deeply integrated communicative spheres” and thus it implies that making a distinction between the two forms is futile (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011, p. 887). However, another study concludes that while young people’s online and offline worlds are connected, this connectedness does not imply that these worlds are identical (Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008). The purpose of identifying online and offline social contexts in this study is to explore how young people experience them in relation to each other to acquire deeper understanding of a young person’s overall social experience.

Whilst understanding how young people consume and interact with digital technology is an important field of research, most of the available research in this field reflects youth populations in North America, Europe and Asia. Despite reports on increasing cellphone ownership and internet access in South Africa (World Wide Worx, 2012), there is limited knowledge on understanding how South African youth engage with their cellphones and social media. This study offers a unique South African youth perspective and draws attention to the demand for more local research. This study focuses on both social media platforms and cellphone use since South Africans mostly go online using their cellphone (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2012).

This research study draws on developmental social psychology theories. Social psychology is the scientific study of the individual experience within society and involves looking at how individuals think, feel and behave within this context (Kassin, Fein, & Markus, 2008). Developmental social psychology is a hybrid of developmental psychology and social psychology and focuses on the overlap between each field, thus bringing attention to the development of the individual within the context of social interaction (Hewstone, Stroebe, Stephenson, & Codol, 1988). According to developmental social psychology theory, there are two parallel objectives necessary for development, which are: to acquire individual function and social function (Adams & Marshall, 1996). On an individual level, the socialisation process should function to “enhance one’s sense of self as a unique and individuated person” with the over-arching goal here being differentiation (Adams &

Marshall, 1996, p. 431). On a social level, the over-arching goal of the socialisation process is integration, which consolidates the individual's sense of belonging and capacity to care about their significant others (Adams & Marshall, 1996). It is widely agreed that "balance between the processes of interpersonal differentiation and integration is critical for healthy human development" (Erikson, 1968; Grotevant and Cooper, 1986; Papini, 1994 as cited in Adams & Marshall, 1996, p. 431).

Within social psychology, it is widely understood that social interactions have a central role in a young person's social development (e.g.; Bandura, 1990, 1999b; Erikson, 1968). In particular, adolescence³ represents a unique developmental period during which young people "need to learn to navigate complex social situations despite strong competing feelings" (Dahl, 2004, p. 18). Furthermore, during adolescence "skills in self-regulation of emotion and complex behaviour aligned to long-term goals must be developed" (Dahl, 2004, p. 18). Thus, understanding how young people's social involvement with these digital technologies influences their overall social development has become a highly contested area of debate.

Despite there being compelling arguments on either side of the debate, it has not yet been confirmed whether socialising online will support or undermine a young person's overall social development (Keegan, 2012; Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2010). Some studies (van der Aa et al., 2009; Kraut et al., 2002) argue that personality type is likely to influence the outcome of a young person's social media use and other studies point towards a deficit in social skills as contributing towards problematic internet use (Caplan, 2005; Casale et al., 2013). Recent research argues that the way in which young people use social media sites will determine whether its influence on their lives is likely to be positive or negative (Burke, Kraut, & Marlow, 2011; Shields & Kane, 2011). These debates draw attention towards understanding how young people negotiate their online social experience.

In this field, that strives to understand youth and their technology consumption habits, many studies (Baym, Zhang, & Lin, 2004; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011; Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006) are based on assumptions about young people's ability to exercise

³ Adolescence can be categorised into early, middle and late adolescence which starts at around 11 years old and spans until age 21 (Greydanus & Bashe, 2003). Late adolescence is "characterised by the capacity to form constructions of higher-order abstractions that represent the meaningful inter-coordination of single abstractions. The result is a more integrated theory of self" (Bacchini & Magliulo, 2003, p. 339)

their agency. These studies largely overlook the intellectual and emotional processes which influence – for example – how youth will navigate between their online and offline or on-screen and off-screen worlds. For example, Baym, Zhang and Lin (2004) discuss that internet use is shaped by user choices but they do not explore how these user choices come about. More recently, Antoci, Sabatini and Sodini (2011, p. 12) argue that agents “can choose to develop their social participation through online networking”. Whilst these authors do not explore how this choice comes about in their own research they identify that it is the next step to address in future studies. In light of this, this study explores how young people experience socialising across offline and online contexts in order to better understand their decision-making processes.

A growing number of articles that address the dangers of consuming too much social media are emerging in the popular press (e.g., Dokoupil, 2012; Konnikova, 2013; Peter Whybrow, 2012). This media interest, along with other factors, might influence some parents and the education community to clamp down and introduce a ban on access to these networks. However, rather than trying to stop young people from using social media platforms, boyd (2008, p. 138) argues that our focus on social media platforms should be to “educate teens to navigate social structures”.

In order to figure out how to help young people navigate social networks, boyd (2008, p. 138) argues that we “we should learn from what teens are experiencing”. This sentiment is shared by Palfrey and Gasser (2010, p. 9) who argue that the focus should be preparing young people to manage “a complex, exploding information environment”. Furthermore, empowerment and education is a better way of assisting young people to manage their internet use than adopting a protectionist approach (Moeller, Powers, & Roberts, 2012).

These arguments highlight the importance of conducting a study like this which explores how young people experience socialising on social networks as accessed by using their cellphone, in order to create support structures to aid their psychosocial development.

1.2. A brief overview of the research undertaken

This study aims to understand how young South Africans’ experience socialising on cellphones and social media platforms. The findings from this study raise important questions or new research. To my knowledge, no one else has approached this topic in this way before in South Africa or anywhere else.

This field of study is constantly changing and social media platforms inevitably peak and are replaced by new innovations. Therefore, researchers need to manage their studies accordingly (Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2010). Unlike other studies that focus their research on a single social media platform (e.g., Ellison et al., 2007; Gonzales & Hancock, 2011; Kalpidou, Costin, & Morris, 2011) this study is concerned with variety of different social media platforms. This study involves all the social media platforms that the participants in this study use frequently to socialise with their peers. The advantage here is that the findings from this study are not relevant to the longevity of a particular platform. Furthermore, this study explores how the respondents use these social media platforms as a reflection of their total online social experience rather than exploring a single platform in isolation without taking into consideration how it might be used in context to other social media platforms.

As discussed earlier, adolescence has been identified as an important period in a young person's social development during which they need to acquire key social skills (e.g., Dahl, 2004; Bandura 1990, 1999b; Erikson, 1968). It can be assumed that most of the available literature on adolescent social development is based on social interactions that take place face-to-face since digital technologies have only made it possible to socialise online in the last decade. The outcome of how these digital technologies will influence a young person's social development is not yet known for this generation of young people who increasingly socialise online rather than face-to-face. In order to gain a deeper understanding of online and offline social interactions, this study explores how young people navigate social situations that take place online and face-to-face.

The previously held view that regards adolescents as being immature and therefore incapable of taking responsibility for making informed decisions in their lives has been replaced by an understanding that they are in fact capable of doing so despite their young age (Albert & Steinberg, 2011; Cauffman & Steinberg, 1995). Thus, this study considers adolescents as possessing the potential agency to determine their social behaviour. In this study, agency "reflects the possibility of self-directed behaviour" (Beyers, Goossens, Vansant, & Moors, 2003, p. 360). Furthermore, Deneulin and Shahani (2009, p. 27) argue that "one of the central goals of human development is enabling people to become agents in their own lives". With this in mind, this study attempts to position young people as agents of their social lives by presenting them with the opportunity to evaluate and reflect on their own social behaviour. In order to achieve this, this study is structured around a "social media

detox” during which the respondents experience socialising with self-imposed restrictions on their cellphone use; specifically the social media platforms they access on this device.

Furthermore, this study involved interviewing the participants before and after this social media detox which provides multiple perspectives that enabled me to “develop a more detailed and multi-faceted account of that phenomenon” (Smith, Larkin, & Flowers, 2009, p. 52). This is particularly useful for understanding how young people experience socialising with their cellphones since it can be assumed that they have a limited memory of what it was like to socialise without this device. Thus the detox provided the respondents with the opportunity to reflect on their own social media and cellphone habits.

1.3. Theoretical point of departure

Most of the available research in this field tends to be quantitative. In contrast, this study employs the inductive approach of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to conduct exploratory research. Bonetti, Campbell and Gilmore (2010, p. 283) argue that a qualitative approach to research in this field will complement the existing quantitative findings “in order to better understand the relationship between internet use and personality/socio-demographic variables”. Qualitative research is endorsed by another study because it gives researchers the opportunity to “provide a thick description of participants’ subjective experiences” (Davis, 2012a, p. 1535).

IPA is concerned with understanding the personal lived experience and uncovering the ordinary everyday experience and how it becomes an experience of importance in the mind of the participant (Smith et al., 2009). This approach aims to capture and explore the meanings that participants assign to their experiences. IPA involves a “double hermeneutic” (Smith & Osborne, 2003 in Smith et al., 2009, p. 35). This means that taking the participants’ perspective is only one part of the analytic experience. In addition, the role of the researcher is to also offer an interpretative account of the participants’ experiences. This approach will be useful to understanding how young people experience socialising online using their cellphone and offline through face-to-face interactions.

Unlike most psychology which is ‘nomothetic’ and focused on population-level analysis, IPA is strongly influenced by idiography (Smith et al., 2009). With IPA, the focus is to understand the particular and to include a small purposively-selected homogenous sample for which the research will be meaningful (Smith et al., 2009). This type of inquiry positions

people's perspectives and experiences at the forefront of psychological study and in doing so, "reinforces the view that such 'personal' phenomena are an important part of psychology's subject-matter (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006, p. 118).

1.4. The chapters to follow

Chapter Two is a review of the literature and this chapter also covers key concepts and the central debates that relate to this field of study. Chapter Three discusses the methodology used in this study and provides a detailed background of the research aims and the theoretical underpinnings of IPA. The following two chapters (Chapters Four and Five) both cover the research findings. Chapter Four uncovers the findings from the first interviews before the social media detox. Thereafter, the findings emerging from the second interviews after the detox are discussed in Chapter Five. Finally, Chapter Six summarises the key findings of this project, assesses its validity and offers recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2: Review of the literature

2.1. Introduction to the literature

The arrival of digital communication platforms at the turn of the century has added more fervour to the highly contested and ongoing debate on the role of technology in the lives of people. Several decades ago, Williams (1974, as cited in Buckingham, 2008) pointed out that technology is both socially shaped and socially shaping. There is increasing interest in understanding how the pervasive presence of digital technology in our lives influences young people's psychosocial development (Ahn, 2011; Engelberg & Sjöberg, 2004; Joinson, 2003; Freier & Kahn, 2009; Palfrey & Gasser, 2010; Rosen, Cheever, & Carrier, 2012). Young people represent the first generation that have grown up and are growing up with direct and immediate access to digital technology and specialists in this field have coined the term digital natives to describe them (Palfrey & Gasser, 2010; Prensky, 2001).

International studies report on the influential role that computer-mediated interactions have on shaping young people's social identity and development (Flanagin & Metzger, 2008; Freier & Kahn, 2009). Social media has changed the way that young people engage with technology and the way in which they engage with each other (Qualman, 2012). One study reports that "youth spend a considerable portion of their daily life interacting through social media" (Ahn, 2011, p. 1435). Baker and White (2010, p. 1591) conclude that social networking sites are "emerging as a primary tool for adolescent socialisation".

Widespread access to the internet has led to a growing number of studies reporting on the incidence of problematic internet use. Several studies argue that problematic internet use is associated with personality type, such as introversion or extraversion (van der Aa et al., 2009; Kraut et al., 2002). However, these studies overlook the capacity of youth, regardless of personality type, to utilise and develop the necessary skills required to effectively self-regulate their online and offline social behaviour. In contrast, the social skills model of generalised problematic internet use predicts that young people who perceive themselves as having low social competencies are vulnerable to developing a preference for online social interactions (Caplan, 2005; Casale, Tella, & Fioravanti, 2013).

Social skills are employed during social interactions with other people and it is widely reported that deficits in these skills can have implications long into adulthood (Hargie, Saunders, & Dickson, 1994; Matson, Neal, Worley, Kozlowski, & Fodstad, 2012). Even

though Kim and Davis (2009) aimed to provide a comprehensive theory of problematic internet use they do not investigate the role that social skills (like self-efficacy) might have in influencing problematic internet use. However, these authors acknowledge that it would be necessary to evaluate the role of these factors in order to complete a comprehensive model of problematic internet use. Valkenburg and Peter (2011) refer to the rich-get-richer hypothesis which proposes that adolescents with strong social skills are more likely to benefit from the internet as a means to further consolidate and extend their friendship networks. If young people are spending more time relating to others online then it is important to establish how these online interactions support their social skills development.

The majority of available research in this field reports on highly-developed international communities in North America, Europe and Asia. However, the impact of both smartphones and WAP-enabled cellphones has led to a dramatic increase in the number of internet users in South Africa (World Wide Worx, 2012). The same study revealed that the South African internet user base had grown from 6.8 million in 2010 to 8.5 million at the end of 2011 which amounts to 25% growth during that period (World Wide Worx, 2012). According to another study, the total number of internet users will increase at a 27.3% compound annual rate to 29.8 million in 2016 with most South Africans using their cellphones to access the internet (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2012). According to the *Sunday Times* Generation Next 2013 study which polled the opinions of 2419 young urban and peri-urban South Africans, 91.7% of youth (ages 8–22) report having access to a cellphone, with 87.5% of children (ages 8–13), 96.3% of teenagers (ages 14–18) and 91.8% of young adults (ages 19–22) respectively (HDI Youth Marketeers, 2013). Furthermore, according to the same study: 62.9% of young South Africans (ages 19–22) say that they check their cellphone for messages at least every 15 minutes with 47.3% of teenagers (ages 14–18) saying they do the same thing. In the study, 36.1% of 19–22 year-olds claim to check their cellphone for messages every five minutes (HDI Youth Marketeers, 2013).

An increasing number of research studies report on young peoples' preference for online social interactions instead of face-to-face interactions (Caplan, 2003, 2005; Casale et al., 2013; Pierce, 2009; Walsh, White, Cox, & Young, 2011). These findings from international studies are reflected in local youth communication trends as reported by the annual *Sunday Times* Generation Next youth consumer and lifestyle study (HDI Youth Marketeers, 2013). In 2013, the study revealed that young South Africans (ages 8–22) prefer to communicate with their friends using WhatsApp and/or BlackBerry Messenger (BBM),

making face-to-face no longer their first choice (HDI Youth Marketeers, 2013). These findings point towards a growing need to understand the role of cellphones in the lives of young South Africans.

Young people's preference for communicating online rather than face-to-face raises important questions about how this preference impacts on their overall social development. It is widely understood that the self develops through interactions with others (Cooley, 1992; Rogers, 1951). Social interactions are fundamental to the process of identity development, which Erikson (1968) identified as being the central task of adolescence. Davis (2012) refers to Goffman's dramaturgic analysis of social life where the self is a 'collaborative manufacture' between a performer and his or her audience. Furthermore, the social conditions in which people develop and function will strongly influence whether they are "proactive and engaged or, alternatively, passive and alienated" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68). Since social interactions play a crucial role in a young person's social development, this study will comment on how young people's experience of social interactions happening on-screen on social media platforms compare to their experience of interacting with others face-to-face.

The social value of physical and face-to-face interactions have been widely researched for many decades and participation in these social activities is widely regarded to have a positive influence on a young person's social development (Allison, Dwyer, & Makin, 1999; Brown, 2010; Leyk et al., 2012; Weiss, 2000). Whilst the social function of cellphones is discussed in many studies (e.g., Campbell, 2005; Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, & Purcell, 2010; Srivastava, 2005; Stald, 2008) it has not yet been confirmed whether their social function supports or undermines a young person's psychosocial development. This is still a topic of considerable debate (this is discussed in more detail later). This study aims to contribute to this field of research by providing an in-depth understanding of how young people's experience of using their cellphone to socialise compares to their experience of socialising face-to-face.

In addition to understanding how young people's experience of socialising in both online and offline contexts, this study also explores how young people spend their time socialising using their cellphone on social media platforms. This is important because one study shows that the experience of consuming social media, is not simply a monolithic activity "in which all time is equally 'social' and its impact the same for all users" (Burke,

Kraut, & Marlow, 2011, p. 571). Instead, these authors argue that young people interact with social media in a variety of different ways with different results.

These varying ways of spending time online are discussed by Burke, Marlow and Lento (2010) who identify the following categories: directed communication and consuming content. In their study, directed communication refers to all interactions between one user and another person known to them. Consuming content refers broadly to consuming and/or monitoring content on social networking sites that is not specifically directed or associated with a particular person who is known to the individual. As with activities on social media, the way young people use their cellphones varies according to one study that showed that “different psychological process underpin how frequently people use their mobile phone and how involved they are with their phone” (Walsh et al., 2011, p. 339). This study aims to explore further the types of ways in which young people use their cellphones and social media platforms to socialise and engage with each other.

Furthermore, studies (Ahn, 2011; Valkenburg & Peter, 2011) show that the use of social media itself does not cause feelings of well-being or automatically influence psychosocial development. Rather, it is the reactions which youth experience within these social media platforms that are “a key mechanism for their social development” (Ahn, 2011, p. 1441). This highlights the importance of a study like this which focuses on how youth experience socialising on social media platforms.

Much of the existing research on young people’s involvement with technology (Baym, Zhang, & Lin, 2004; Ellison et al., 2011; P. Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006) makes assumptions about young people’s ability to exercise their agency and largely overlooks the intellectual and emotional processes which influence – for example – how youth will navigate between their online and offline or on-screen and off-screen worlds . Baym, Zhang and Lin (2004) discuss that internet use is shaped by user choices but they do not explore how these user choices come about. More recently, Antoci et al. (2011, p. 12) argue that agents “can choose to develop their social participation through online networking”. Whilst they do not explore how this choice comes about in their own research they do acknowledge that it is the next step.

In order to better understand the impact that socialising on social media platforms has on young people’s lives, Kalpidou et al. (2011) argue that future research should examine developmental factors, such as stronger self-concept, which they believe would lead to more effective Facebook use. In light of this, this research takes various developmental factors that

relate to adolescent social participation into consideration. The concepts involved in these processes are discussed in more detail in the section that follows.

2.2. Key concepts

As discussed earlier, social interactions have an important role in a young person's psychosocial development. Therefore, it is important to look at key aspects of the individual's psychological and emotional processes involved in shaping these social interactions. In this section, the following key concepts, which have a role to play in a young person's social experience, are discussed: agency, self-awareness, self-control, subjective norms and the concept of choice versus habit.

Agency refers to an individual's ability to recognise their goals, the value associated with these, and the ability to follow-through with pursuing them (Deneulin & Shahani, 2009). Schwartz, Pantin, Coatsworth and Szapocznik (2007, p. 135) refer to the three important aspects of agency as "self-direction, the presence of an inner-compass and the ability to redirect one's efforts if and when they are thwarted". The importance of agency is emphasised by Deneulin and Shahani (2009, p. 27) who argue "one of the central goals of human development is enabling people to become agents in their own lives". Furthermore, Steinberg (2008, as cited in Valkenburg & Peter, 2011) argues that the overarching goal for adolescents is to develop psychosocial autonomy.

The degree to which we can exert a measure of control over our decision-making is heavily debated in the field of psychology. For decades, leading researchers and psychologists have developed theories to establish the degree to which we have agency and self-determination over our behaviour (Ajzen, 2002, 2002; Bandura & Adams, 1977; Bandura, 1982). Self-determination theory focuses "on the social-contextual conditions that facilitate versus forestall the natural processes of self-motivation and healthy psychological development" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68). Within the context of self-determination theory, Ryan and Deci (2000) discuss the factors that either enhance or undermine intrinsic motivation, self-regulation and well-being. They refer to these factors as "three innate psychological needs – competence, autonomy and relatedness – which, when satisfied, yield enhanced self-motivation and mental health and when thwarted lead to diminished motivation and well-being" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68). Understanding self-regulation is considered to be "the single most crucial goal for advancing an understanding of development and

psychopathology” (Posner & Rothbart, 2000, p. 427). Before the arrival of social media platforms like Facebook, one study described internet addiction as “deficient self-regulation” (LaRose, Lin, & Eastin, 2003, p. 243).

It is widely a held psychological concept that evidence of agency within humans, is evidenced in our capacity to self-regulate our behaviour (Ryan & Deci, 2006). In order to self-regulate our behaviour, we must possess a measure of self-control. Self-control is referred to as the “behavioural repertoire of skills for regulating one’s choices or behaviour” (Audrain-McGovern, Rodriguez, Tercyak, Neuner, & Moss, 2006, p. 140).

In a study that looked at the role of self-control in unhealthy snack purchases with adolescents, Stok, De Ridder, Adriaanse and De Wit (2010) discuss two types of autonomy that are meaningfully distinctive. The first type is agentic autonomy and it describes an individual who is motivated by agentic reasons and has the ability to “exert self-control over the self and inhibit impulses that would be counterproductive in the long-term” (Stok et al., 2010, p. 608). The second type is self-presentational autonomy which is likely to result in the individual acting more impulsively. The results from this study showed that adolescents who were categorised as having agentic autonomy purchased fewer unhealthy snacks than their less agentic peers. As a result, the study highlighted the importance of stimulating agentic motives rather than the self-presentational ones in adolescent eating behaviour.

The importance of agency was also emphasised in another study that looked at the psychosocial correlates in physical activity in healthy children (Strauss, Rodzilsky, Burack, & Colin, 2001). The results from this study show that children who have a self-belief in their capacity to embrace physical activity are more likely to engage in it. Thus, self-efficacy is a major correlate in high-level activity in children (Strauss et al., 2001). In contrast, health beliefs about the benefits associated with physical activity were not related to actual activity levels. As a result Strauss et al. (2001) endorse the self-belief model in favour of the health-belief model in motivating young people to exercise. Even though the abovementioned studies discuss the importance of agency in eating behaviour and physical activity, they highlight an important component of this research study, which explores whether factors like agentic autonomy and self-efficacy influence the individual young person’s experience participating in off-screen and on-screen social activities.

Discussions about agency, self-control and self-efficacy often overlap with discussions about self-awareness (Froming, Nasby, & McManus, 1998; Goukens, Dewitte, &

Warlop, 2009; Hormuth, 1982; Ridley, 1991; Wyer, 1999). The concept of self-awareness is central to a person's sense of self and the individual's capacity to be self aware has a fundamental influence on their experience in personal, social and cultural contexts (Goukens et al., 2009). During adolescence, a young person's sense of self-awareness broadens "from proximal self-concerns about their bodies and primary family relations to more distal self-concerns about one's relationship with people and a wider world" (Chen, Mechanic, & Hansell, 1998, p. 731). The concept of self-awareness is linked to self-perception theory which argues that "change occurs because people infer how they feel by observing their own behaviour" (Kassin et al., 2008, p. 215).

The importance of self-awareness in managing our technology consumption behaviour is endorsed by Rosen and colleagues who argue: "We need to be aware of our relationship with technology in order to avoid being pulled into a world of button clicks, finger swipes and glowing screens" (Rosen et al., 2012, p. 5). Furthermore, Moeller et al. (2012, p. 50) state: "self-awareness is fundamental to empowerment – in order to understand how to make responsible use of the internet, students must first become aware of their own usage patterns and behaviours" (Moeller et al., 2012, p. 50). This highlights the value of conducting a study like this that explores how aware young people are of their cellphone use during social interactions to better understand the nature of the relationship between the young user and this device.

Discussions about the influential role of agency and self-awareness in the social experience of young people coincide with the concept of norms: social norms, group norms and subjective norms. Christakis and Fowler (2011, p. 113) describe a norm as a "shared expectation as to what is appropriate". In their discussion of Social Identity Theory, Rosen et al. (2012, p. 163) state that "our yearning to belong drives us to behave and think in ways that represent the values and norms of whatever group we identify with". Hoffer observed that when "people are free to do as they please, they usually imitate each other" (as cited in Christakis & Fowler, 2011, p. 112). This behavioural imitation can be either conscious or subconscious (Christakis & Fowler, 2011, p. 112). Young people, in particular, are influenced by the behaviour of other people in their peer groups and their interactions with their peers develop and reinforce shared norms (Davis, 2012a; Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Metzger, 2006). It is for this reason that Walsh et al (2011, p. 335) suggest that "in-group norms may be a particularly important influence on mobile phone behaviour in this cohort".

The importance of subjective norms is highlighted in the study by Hsu, Yu and Wu (2013) who examine the extrinsic and intrinsic motivations that influence continued use on Facebook. The results of this empirical research study show that “without the prerequisite of subjective norm, the individual will have a low intention to use social networking websites” (Hsu et al., 2013, p. 18). This research study builds on earlier research on the theory of planned behaviour (TPB), which argues that behaviour is a result of one’s intentions to carry out the behaviour and one’s intentions are influenced by attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioural control (Pelling & White, 2009). In a study that utilised an extended theory of planned behaviour perspective, the group norm construct was put forward as having more social influence in predicting behavioural intention than subjective norm (Terry & Hogg, 1996; Terry et al., 1999 in Baker & White, 2010).

Implicit in the argument that young people prefer to engage in online social interactions rather than interacting face-to-face is that this ‘preference’ has come about as a result of choice. However, one study on decision-making in health behaviour makes the distinction between choice and habit (Lindbladh & Lyttkens, 2002). According to these authors, the modern world has placed intense emphasis on the notion of individual choice and in doing so has overlooked the context of the habit-guided individual. In contrast to choice which involves a measure of reflection in making a decision about something, Lindbladh and Lyttkens (2002, p. 453) refer to habits as “repetitive and non-reflective behaviour”. Furthermore, they argue that “there is an explicit tendency to equate habits and preferences” (Lindbladh & Lyttkens, 2002, p. 454). Here, these authors bring forward the view that habits are not necessarily a result of individuals necessarily doing what is best for them, but rather a reflection of the individual’s decision to be satisfied with good-enough solutions to their daily problems, which they describe as “satisficing behaviour”. They categorise this type of behaviour within the context of bounded rationality in which “habits would be a natural part of an instrumental strategy of bounded rationality, where individual action is purposeful but not optimising” (Simon, 1987; Hodgson, 1997 in Lindbladh & Lyttkens, 2002, p. 460). This understanding of habit and choice questions the extent to which a young person’s cellphone use is about habit or choice or a combination of both. This research study explores how choices and habits contextualise and inform the individual young person’s experience of social participation online and offline.

This section outlined a few key concepts that have a role to play in a young person’s social experience and are relevant to this research study. Each of the concepts discussed in

the above section has been identified for its relevance to this research study as it relates to the psychosocial development process of young people and informs the way in which they socialise and navigate their social experience.

2.3. Key debates

Looking at the available research, a myriad of controversial issues can be identified that polarise the central argument over whether young people's involvement with their cellphone has a positive or negative influence on their social development. Discussions about social interactions online tend to fall into two schools of thought: the cyber-optimists and the cyber-pessimists. Cyber-optimists regard the role of social interactions taking place online as having a mostly positive influence on young people's overall social development (e.g., Valkenburg & Peter, 2007, 2011). In contrast, cyber-pessimists regard these social interactions as compromising and/or interfering with a young person's socialisation process (e.g., Rosen et al., 2012; Turkle, 2011). This section outlines the key debates associated with this topic and discusses the relevant arguments on each side of the debate.

Without fuelling either side of the broader debate over whether our involvement with technology is ultimately good or bad for us, this research study considers the possibility that socialising online can both skill and deskill us (Keegan, 2012). If we consider the possibility that our involvement with technology has the potential to both skill and deskill, the question arises as to whether or not young people have agency to determine the outcome. This relates to the earlier discussion which recognises that young people are in fact capable of taking responsibility for making informed decisions in their lives despite their young age (Albert & Steinberg, 2011; Cauffman & Steinberg, 1995).

The following section discusses three key debates that relate to a young person's online social experience. The first debate is entitled "communication online" and presents the arguments surrounding communicating and connecting with other people online. The second debate is called "social relationships online" and it discusses the arguments related to building and maintaining relationships online. The third debate is called "self-expression online" and it uncovers the relevant points of view that relate to self-expression and self-presentation online.

2.3.1. Debate 1: Communication online

Many studies discuss how young people in developed and developing countries are adapting to the experience of being continually connected to their peers through the use of cellphones and social media platforms (Katz & Aakhus, 2002; Kraut et al., 2002; Turkle, 2011; Walsh et al., 2011). There is a debate over whether the nature of these interactions taking place online support or undermine social participation and connectivity.

On the one side of this debate, the cellphone is regarded as a tool that has empowered and liberated individuals from the constraints of their physical boundaries whilst simultaneously bringing them closer together from across the globe (Geser, 2006; Katz & Aakhus, 2002). Shirky (2010) argues that social media platforms have provided individuals with new forms of social networking and collaboration which, when utilised effectively, contribute toward a more involved and civic-minded society. This sentiment is shared by Campbell (2005, p. 10) who believes that the cellphone has enabled “a truly networked society”. A local study argues that the free instant messaging application, MXit was so popular among South African youth because of its capacity to create a “full-time intimate community” (Chigona, Chigona, Ngqokelela, & Mpofu, 2009, p. 7).

Whilst claiming that face-to-face communication is socially optimal, Antoci, Sabatini and Sodini (2011) argue that social participation online has become the “defensive choice” within the context of the 21st Century where time pressure and time constraints characterise the lives of many individuals. Here, these authors argue that digital technology platforms play an important role in sustaining and creating interpersonal connections because it facilitates interactions between people who are not living in close proximity, it is less time-consuming than face-to-face and it builds towards the accumulation of ‘social capital’ on the internet (Antoci et al., 2011). The role of social capital is discussed in more detail in the second debate section.

However, the other side of this debate is centred around research studies that suggest that the experience of instant social connectivity through cellphone usage diminishes the quality of the social experience and subsequently has a negative impact on young people’s social development. Through access to digital technologies like cellphones and social media platforms, “participation is linearly routinised in a timescale of immediacy” (Lewis, Pea, & Rosen, 2010, p. 357). These authors argue that young people establish a sense of belonging to

these social media networks by “monitoring friends’ activities frequently, even obsessively” (Lewis et al., 2010, p. 355). Turkle (2011) discusses how our involvement with these technologies has brought people into a world of continuous partial attention to describe the experience of having to pay simultaneous attention to variety of different sources of incoming information which are all competing for an individual’s attention. She believes that the ties we establish online are ultimately not “the ties that bind – but they are the ties that preoccupy” (Turkle, 2011, p. 280). Similarly, Lewis, Pea and Rosen (2010) describe the pull of social media platforms as “dopamine driven slot machines of intermittent social reinforcement”. Furthermore, Walsh et al. (2011, p. 339) suggest that it is possible that young people who are frequently involved with their cellphone “may rely almost exclusively on the phone for their contact with others and may not develop other avenues for social connection”. The perception among these research studies is that socialising on social media platforms interfere with and distract young people from engaging in meaningful social interaction. Joinson (2003) advocates that when communication is technologically mediated the tools individuals have previously relied on to communicate become obsolete. This view is supported by Subrahmanyam and Greenfield (2008, p. 127) who observe that the “ease of electronic communication may be making teens less interested in face-to-face communication with their friends”.

Similarly, Hall & Parsons (2001, p. 317) refer to two studies (Kandell, 1998; Kraut et al., 1998) to support their argument “that replacing real-world relationships with online relationships may result in poorer quality relationships as well as diminished social capacity”. Furthermore, college students who go online excessively “may be escaping from rather than embracing important developmental tasks, leaving them unprepared for real-world relationships” (Hall & Parsons, 2001, p. 317). A pioneer in research on play, Brown argues that a true sense of “interpersonal nuance can only be achieved by a child who is engaging all five senses by playing in the three-dimensional world” (as cited in Henig, 2008). This outlook cautions against socialising on a cellphone because these types of interactions are taking place in two-dimensional or on-screen world. Furthermore, in their study on the effect of non-verbal cues on relationship formations, Kotlyar and Ariely (2013, p. 545) suggest that the “limited capacity of text-based communication to convey nonverbal cues may lead to an impoverished personal interaction”. According to Turkle (2011, p. 271), “digital life cheats people out of learning how to read a person’s face and their nuances of feeling”.

The immediacy and accessibility to technologies like cellphones has been compared to fast-food by Peterson, Maier and Seligman (1995, p. 307) who argue that “we have become ensconced in technological cocoons”. They argue that our technological world provides a quick fix, the psychological equivalent of junk food. Rather than enabling us “to get to the substance of life, hi-tech gadgets have become the substance itself and diminish the importance of other matters as a result” (Peterson et al., 1995, p. 308). Young people are growing up with the expectation of continuous connection to their peers and Turkle (2011, p. 16) argues that “with constant connection comes new anxieties of disconnection”. By this, she is suggesting that the more dependent young people become on being continuously connected to their peers, the more anxiety they will experience at the prospect of disconnecting from their peers. These views are shared by Rosen et al. (2012) who report on the heightened levels of anxiety experienced among cellphone users if they are not able to check their cellphones. Furthermore, recent international studies report on the emerging phenomenon called nomophobia (no-mobile-phobia), which is the term coined for the fear of being without your cellphone (Bivin, Mathew, Thulasi, & Philip, 2013; King et al., 2013).

Communicating on social media platforms “allows adolescents to maintain a sense of connection to each other regardless of their physical location or the time of day” (Davis, 2012a, p. 1534). One study refers to co-presence as “consisting of two dimensions: co-presence as mode of being with others, and co-presence as sense of being with others” (Zhao, 2003, p. 445). This experience of being able connect with their peers instantaneously whenever they want to through the use of a cellphone induces in young people an anticipation of togetherness and feelings of connectedness which Turkle (2011) argues is not the same as actually physically being together. Even though this state of co-presence fulfils the need for belonging, Davis (2012a, p. 1534) argues that “its constancy raises questions about adolescents’ ability to achieve an autonomous sense of self”. Davis (2012a, p. 1534) talks about teenagers who “reach for their phones and text a friend to ward off feelings of boredom” and she believes this shows that they are “unwilling to sit with their boredom for awhile and draw on their inner resources to work through it”. Furthermore, another study argues that cellphone use enables instant connectivity which subsequently encourages a flexible lifestyle where young people are more likely to be spontaneous and impulsive decision-makers (Thulin & Vilhelmson, 2007). This, in turn, leads to a greater dependency on the device (Thulin & Vilhelmson, 2007).

The arguments outlined in this section are clustered around the central debate over whether communicating and connecting with people online has a positive or negative impact on young people's overall social development. On the one side of this debate is a body of research that states that communicating online is not a suitable substitute for communicating face-to-face. On the other side of this debate, is the belief that communicating online is an effective means to connect with other people and is therefore beneficial to a young person's overall social development.

2.3.2. Debate 2: Social relationships online

Building close relationships with peers has an important role in young people's social development (Greenberg, Siegel, & Leitch, 1983). The use of social media platforms to develop and maintain these social relationships is the topic of another debate.

Researchers on the one side of this debate argue that social media platforms have a useful role to play in facilitating new opportunities for young people to establish social relationships where previous generations were limited to building relationships face-to-face. According to the stimulation hypothesis, involvement with technology stimulates young people's sense of well-being and subsequently contributes towards a person's capacity to engage more meaningfully in the world (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). According to the social compensation hypothesis, online communication offers lonely and socially anxious children and adolescents an appealing alternative to what they perceive to be more daunting face-to-face interaction (Bonetti, Campbell, & Gilmore, 2010).

The reported perception amongst young people is that their involvement with social media platforms broadens their sense of community and subsequently gives them a sense of belonging (Lewis et al., 2010). Facebook has been referred to as the "social glue" amongst university students reporting on their integration into life on campus (Madge, Meek, Wellens, & Hooley, 2009, p. 148). Furthermore, Antoci et al. (2011) believe that community involvement is enhanced by the presence of internet access and dispels previously-held theories presented by Weber (1963) and Wirth (1938) that communities lacking in closeness result in the absence of intimate personal relationship.

Another study concluded that Facebook serves as a "social lubricant" because it facilitates a process whereby individuals are encouraged to convert latent to weak ties and broadcast their requests for support or information (Ellison et al., 2011, p. 873). These

authors identified three dimensions to illustrate the ways in which Facebook supports social behaviours: Initiating, Maintaining and Social Information-seeking. Initiating refers to the use of Facebook to meet strangers or make new friends; Maintaining involves using the social media platform to maintain existing close ties; and Social Information-seeking is about using Facebook to learn more about someone with whom you have an offline connection (Ellison et al., 2011). Although this study looked only at Facebook, the authors conclude that their findings “shed light on the processes by which [social networking sites] can scaffold relationship development in both online and offline contexts” (Ellison et al., 2011, p. 888).

The value of building relationships online is discussed in relation to social capital. Like financial or human capital, social capital “can be understood as a form of capital that is embedded in the relationships between individuals and can be measured at an individual or group level” (Ellison et al., 2011, p. 875). Social capital can be categorised into bonding social capital – the benefits derived from close personal relationships – and bridging social capital – the benefits from casual acquaintances and connections (Ellison et al., 2011; Lee, 2013). Long before online social networks existed, the importance of weak ties was highlighted by Granovetter (1973) who regarded weak ties as representing crucial opportunities for cohesion between differentiated groups. The point is that the weak ties of a heterogeneous network introduce diverse information to a particular social context, whilst close ties found in typically homogenous networks tend not to do so. Thus, weak ties have a more important role in social networks than many people would think.

One study argues that internet use “supports increased contacts with weaker ties without bringing about a deterioration of strong ties” (Antoci et al., 2011, p. 4). One of the opportunities of social media use is that platforms such as Facebook enable students to review information about their peers. This, in turn, might encourage young people to initiate and/or nurture closer friendships with each other because they can find out information about each other online before meeting in person or after they have met but before the relationship goes any further (Antoci et al., 2011; Ellison et al., 2007).

In the context of social media, the concept of weak ties has been integrated into the concept of bridging social capital which “is a pattern of resources that can be accessed through external ties with people which builds weak, loose, or fragile connections between heterogeneous groups lacking internally cohesive or emotionally close relationships” (Granovetter, 1982 as cited in Lee, 2013, p. 1500). Ellison et al. (2007) demonstrate a

correlation between bridging social capital and subjective well-being measures: less intense Facebook users report lower levels of life satisfaction, self-esteem and bridging social capital. For this reason, Ellison et al. (2007) argues that internet use be attributed to the fact that Facebook provides students with low self-esteem the means to overcome the barriers they face in face-to-face interactions. A longitudinal study showed that interactions on Facebook were shown to relate to self-esteem and subsequently influenced bridging social capital (Steinfeld, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008). The authors argue that these results “demonstrate that social network sites can help to address the relationship development and maintenance needs of young adults at a point in their lives where they are moving away from home and into the university” (Steinfeld et al., 2008, p. 443). These findings are endorsed by Antoci et al. (2011, p. 5) who conclude that empirical research has shown that “online networking is a means for nurturing and articulating existing ties, as well as a fertile ground for the development of new ones”.

Other researchers in this field are less convinced about the perceived benefits associated with relationships created on social media platforms and they question whether these benefits are experienced in the long-term. Engelberg and Sjöberg (2004) make the important distinction between perceived social support and social integration. Referring to studies by Moody (2001), Weiser (2001) and Shaw and Grant (2002), Engelberg and Sjöberg (2004) argue that whilst the self-reported experience amongst internet users might be positive, their level of social integration is actually compromised. In their own study, Engelberg and Sjöberg (2004) conclude that emotional competence is lacking in people who frequently use the internet. Another study (Kalpidou et al., 2011) builds on these findings by looking at the role of Facebook in the lives of undergraduate college students. These authors argue that whilst Facebook might fulfil users’ social needs by stimulating social interaction, this engagement online does not fulfil their emotional needs. They make the distinction between social and emotional adjustment to convey their argument. Their study shows that Facebook strengthens social adjustment at college by enabling undergraduates to develop social networks. However, the number of friends acquired on Facebook does not necessarily translate into emotional adjustment. For example, the first year students with many Facebook friends in their study reported experiencing lower emotional adjustment in college than the senior students. Even though Kalpidou et al. (2011) and Engelberg and Sjöberg (2004) studies are relatively small, they bring into question whether young people’s positive perceptions of Facebook supports their overall social development.

This introduces the other side of this debate which regards the role of social media platforms like Facebook as largely undermining a young person's capacity to build relationships that contribute towards their overall social development. Osit (2008) maintains that when children spend more time relating to machines than they do relating to each other, it makes social skills more difficult to maintain. He believes that access to technologies like cellphones and excess use of these devices create real disruptions in children's development. Unlike face-to-face interactions, socialising on a cellphone means that the interactions taking place are hidden from other people who are occupying the same physical space as the cellphone user. Mesch (2012) talks about young people experiencing accelerated autonomy from their parents because they are able to socialise on digital devices – like cellphones – outside of their parents' knowledge and observation.

Valkenburg and Peter (2011) argue that the resulting impact of self-socialisation, which happens through young people's social interactions online, is not necessarily a reason for concern. However, they do acknowledge that it does raise "important questions about the future role of parents and schools in the psychosocial development of adolescents" (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011, p. 125). It also raises important questions about the role that parents and teachers play in the South African context and how capable and equipped both parties are to address the situation.

Srivastava (2005, p. 123) argues that the physical space has been extended "through the creation and juxtaposition of a mobile 'social space'" which she believes has given rise to the potential intrusion of remote others in any given social context. More recently, this argument is endorsed by Pomerantz (2013, p. 46) who reports that "interpersonal interactions have become imbued with an immediacy and connectedness unrelated to physical proximity". She believes that "instant access and immediate gratification have become the norm or expectation in interpersonal interactions and relationships" (Pomerantz, 2013, p. 46). In this way it is possible that the experience of socialising on a cellphone involves engaging on social media platforms whilst simultaneously disengaging in the physical context. This study explores how young people use a cellphone to socialise in order to understand how this device occupies their physical environment whilst they engage in online social networks.

Turkle calls into question the nature of our relationship with technology, particular a young person's attachment to his or her cellphone. Turkle (2011, p. 1) states that "technology proposes itself as the architect of our intimacies" and she talks about how we are increasingly

learning to ask less of people and more from technology. Similarly, Walsh et al. (2011) argue “that mobile phone use has become an intrinsic part of some young people’s self-concept, so much so that they are behaving in a manner similar to a behavioural addiction”. These views are endorsed by other authors in this field (e.g., Carr, 2011; Rosen et al., 2012) who argue that people are becoming too dependent on their cellphones which in turn compromises their capacity to develop meaningful relationships with others.

Furthermore, studies have shown that the social capital derived from social media usage depends on how the young person uses the site (Burke et al., 2010, 2011). As discussed earlier, these researchers identify two ways of using social media: directed communication and consuming content (recall Burke et al. (2010)). Burke et al. (2010, p. 1909) identified that “directed communication is associated with greater feelings of bonding social capital and lower loneliness”. In contrast, they report that users who “consume greater levels of content report reduced bonding and bridging social capital and increased loneliness” (Burke et al., 2010, p. 1909). These authors also point out that they cannot confirm whether “the loneliness causes the clicking, or the clicking causes the loneliness” (Burke et al., 2010, p. 1912). This highlights the importance of conducting research like this which uncovers a deeper understanding of the way in which young people use social media platforms and how using these platforms makes them feel.

This section presented the arguments on either side of the debate around the value of maintaining and initiating social relationships online. Research studies on the one side of this debate endorse the value of such relationships and believe that these relationships support the overall social development of young people. In contrast, studies on the other side of this debate oppose this argument because they believe that relationships maintained online undermine the process of acquiring key social skills that are learnt and acquired during offline face-to-face interactions.

2.3.3. Debate 3: Self-expression online

The function of self-expression has been widely researched in the context of social development for decades (Bridges, 1933; Buhrmester & Prager, 1995; Posner & Rothbart, 2000; Snyder, 1974). The arrival of social media platforms has brought with it new opportunities for self-expression. Valkenburg and Peter (2011, p.122) refer to several studies (Davis, 2010; Schmitt, Dayanim, & Matthias, 2008; Schouten, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2007)

that have identified that self-presentation – selectively presenting aspects of one’s self to others – and self-disclosure – revealing intimate aspects of one’s true self – are increasingly taking place online instead of through face-to-face or physical interactions. Studies like these contribute to a broader debate over how self-expression on social media platforms impacts young people’s social development.

The value of self-expression online is endorsed by Valkenburg and Peter (2011, p. 122) who state that self-presentation and self-disclosure “have to be learned, practiced, and rehearsed in adolescence, and they both are vital for the development of identity, intimacy, and sexuality”. These authors refer to their earlier longitudinal study (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009) which demonstrated the benefits of internet usage as a result of increased self-disclosure online. The results from this earlier study supported these three assumptions: the internet is a safe place that facilitates self-disclosure, higher online self-disclosure stimulates the quality of friendships between adolescents and online self-disclosure mediates the direct relationship between online communication and the quality of friendships. In her study, Davis (2012a, p. 1534) reveals that online communications between adolescents support a sense of belonging and self-disclosure which she points out are “two important mechanisms through which peers influence identity development during adolescence”.

Furthermore, Valkenburg and Peter (2011) argue that online communication enhances the controllability of self-presentation and self-disclosure among adolescents. These authors believe that this experience of “enhanced controllability” creates a safe space online which allows adolescents to express themselves more freely through online communication compared to interactions face-to-face. Furthermore, Valkenburg and Peter (2011, p. 122) believe that this “enhanced controllability” offers young people “the opportunity to overcome the social hindrances that they typically encounter in offline communication settings” (Valkenburg & Peter, 2011, p. 122). This view is supported by another study that identifies that control over social interactions is central to understanding what makes electronic media so appealing to young people (Madell & Muncer, 2007).

The notion that young people benefit from this experience of increased control is met with criticism from Palfrey and Gasser (2010) who believe that in reality, young people have far less control over the way in which they are perceived by others than in previous generations. Despite the fact that Valkenburg and Peter (2011, p. 122) support the role of social interactions taking place online, they do acknowledge that self-presentation and self-

disclosure in an online context “can affect adolescents’ psychosocial development in positive and negative ways”. This raises important questions about what determines whether the outcome is positive or negative and relates to the earlier discussion on the possible role of individual agency in mediating these outcomes.

Another study that supports the benefits of self-presentation online concludes that: “The Internet has not created new motivation for self-presentation, but provides new tools to implement such motives” (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011, p. 82). The same study argues that unlike looking in a mirror, the extra care involved in digital self-presentations – which allow the user to edit their profile – may actually improve self-esteem. These authors argue that Facebook “is a unique source of self-awareness stimuli in that it enhances awareness of the optimal self” (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011, p. 82). Whilst the study suggests that Facebook might activate the optimal self, these authors acknowledge that they “did not measure participant perceptions between the actual and ideal self⁴” which is relevant to understanding how information can affect self-esteem (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011, p. 82).

In contrast to the notion that Facebook enhances self-esteem through the development of an ‘optimal self’, Turkle (2011, p.258) argues that technology has provided us with the expectation that we are in a position to self-police ourselves to “the point of trying to achieve a pre-corrected self”. Whilst Turkle (2011, p. 12) agrees that our interactions online enable us to “project the self we want to be”, she also talks about how digital communication allows us to hide as much as we show. Turkle’s views differ from another study that showed that Facebook profiles reflect actual personality, not self-idealisation (Back et al., 2010). These authors conclude that that the popularity of social networking sites could be attributed to the fact that “they are an efficient medium for expressing and communicating real personality” (Back et al., 2010, p. 374).

Carter (2008, p. 111) discusses how self-expression is easier if it takes place online and she refers to the instant intimacy which is offered by these interactions and how “the relative anonymity of the internet makes people less restrained”. As a result, she believes that personalities expressed online are “more likely to be extroverted, flirtatious and provocative”(Carter, 2008, p. 111). This raises important questions about adolescents’ usage of social media platforms and how the increased freedom they feel around expressing themselves might also influence the types of relationships they create online. This study is

⁴Higgins (1987 in Whitty, 2008) classified three aspects of self: the ‘actual self’, ‘ideal self’ and ‘ought to self’ – where the actual self is a representation of who you are, the ideal self is a representation of how you would like to be and the ‘ought to self’ refers to the attributes you feel you ought to possess.

about social relationships and does not investigate the sexual relationships which might develop from the social ones.

The idea that online interactions contribute to uninhibited forms of self-expression is challenged by Davis (2012b). She explores how young people, particularly active internet users, manage their identities online. Her study identified four ‘spheres of obligation’ – to self, interpersonal relationships, online social norms, and broad community-level values – which, she argues, function as implicit limits on self-multiplicity. She argues that her research participants varied the weighting they gave to each sphere when deciding how to express themselves through the use of digital mediums. Despite the fact that digital technologies support multiplicity of life and offer young people multiple avenues through which to present themselves, Davis (2012b) argues that it also introduces a whole new level of tension into their lives as well. The more opportunities young people have to experiment with identities online, the more pressure they feel to manage and monitor these identities. Davis (2012b, p. 635) argues that it is “difficult to both cognitively and metacognitively monitor all of one’s selves and various audiences”.

The following section looked at the arguments surrounding the role of self-expression online and its subsequent impact and influence on young people’s overall social development. Arguments on the one side of this debate support the view that socialising online encourages self-expression and promotes social development. In contrast, the other side of this debate is informed by studies which argue that socialising online promotes a form of self-expression that negatively affects a young person’s identity development and their capacity to develop essential social skills.

2.3.4. Summary

The debates discussed in this section are underscored by the fact that prominent researchers question the validity of the early research conducted in this field. In some instances researchers, like Sherry Turkle, have even changed their views about the impact of digital technology in our lives. Valkenburg and Peter (2011) argue that the results from research studies conducted in the late nineties are not comparable to recent research. They suggest that, during this time, not all adolescents’ were online which meant that it was not possible for those adolescents who were online to enhance their friendships with their peers who were

not online. Furthermore, the ways in which people engage with online social platforms in constantly evolving as are the social networking sites that they use.

Keegan (2012) argues that it is too early to conclude whether the over-riding impact of technology on our lives will be overwhelmingly negative or positive. Involvement in activities that support a young person's social development must take place regularly over a long period of time in order to have any influence on their overall development (Wagnsson, Augustsson, & Patriksson, 2013). With this in mind, it is possible that social media platforms have not been around long enough in order for researchers to provide conclusive evidence as to whether their role in young people's lives undermines or promotes their social development in the long-term. In one study, van der Aa et al. (2009) call for future longitudinal studies to establish the prevalence of emotional maladjustment in adolescence as a result of compulsive internet use. Advancing these debates is even more important now than ever before given that access to these web-based products has grown and changed with the ubiquitous presence of smartphones.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1. Introduction to chapter

This chapter outlines the aims of this research study and presents a detailed discussion of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) which is the methodology used to conduct this research. This section also outlines the steps involved in the data collection process. In closing, this section reviews the validity of this study and presents the ethical considerations undertaken by the researcher.

3.2. Research aims

How South African undergraduate students (ages 18–21) experience social participation is what this study aims to understand, by exploring their personal accounts of socialising online – specifically on social media platforms using a cellphone – and offline through face-to-face interactions. To further understand their experience of social participation, this study also explores the relationships that undergraduate students have with their cellphones and how their experience of relating to this device impacts on their perceived agency in social situations. This study is guided by social development theories and considers the role that agency has in mediating how participants experience of online and offline social interactions.

3.3. Research method

Most of the available research in this field tends to be quantitative but the intention of this study was to obtain an in-depth understanding of how young people experience social participation online and offline. Therefore, a qualitative approach is better suited for this kind of inquiry. Bonetti, Campbell and Gilmore (2010) argue that a qualitative approach to research in this field will complement the existing quantitative findings and will offer a better understanding of the relationship between internet use and personality/socio-demographic variables. In order to achieve this, the inductive approach of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was employed to conduct this research.

3.3.1. Theoretical underpinnings of interpretive phenomenology

In this section, I provide an overview of IPA theoretical underpinnings in order to position it within psychological research. The theory of IPA is founded in phenomenology,

hermeneutics and idiography (Smith et al., 2009). Phenomenology is concerned with the study of experience. Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Sartre are leading theorists within this philosophical approach and IPA is richly influenced by their ideas. These ideas include Heidegger's view that a person is always a person-in-context, Sartre's emphasis on the developmental processual aspect of a human being and how we are always becoming ourselves, and Merleau-Ponty's ideas on the embodied nature of the relationship that we have with the world around us (Smith et al., 2009).

The focus of IPA research is to understand the meanings people derive from their everyday experience. From an IPA perspective our "social world is more than 'mere' context; it is the constituent ground of personhood, and a prerequisite for human being" (Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011, p. 324). Larkin, Watts and Clifton (2006, p. 118) emphasise the importance of phenomenology because it "returns people's perspectives and experiences to the forefront of psychological study". Unlike most psychology which is 'nomothetic' and focused on population-level analysis, IPA is strongly influenced by idiography which is concerned with the particular. At the heart of IPA, argues Smith (2004, p. 51) "is the idiographic commitment to the case".

IPA also draws on Hermeneutics which is the theory of interpretation. Key influential theories include Scheiermacher's proposal that interpretation is not about following mechanical rules but is a craft or an art involving a diverse set of skills (Smith et al., 2009). IPA is also strongly influenced by the 'hermeneutic circle' which considers that the meaning-making process takes place in a cyclical format. Within this approach a dynamic relationship exists between the "the whole" (e.g., sentence) and "the part" (e.g., single word) and applies to number of different variations of 'parts' and 'wholes'. Since being human is self-interpreting, Willig and Stainton-Rogers (2007, p. 181) argue that the use of the hermeneutic circle in IPA research "opens up rather than closes down the possibilities for new understandings". The process of analysis of IPA also draws on Gadamer's emphasis on the dialogue that happens between interpreting what we bring to the text and what the text brings to us (Smith et al., 2009).

Heidegger describes language as "the house of Being," and he discusses how our interpretations of experience are always shaped by – limited and enabled by – language (as cited in Larkin et al., 2011). Usually, IPA systematically makes formal theoretical connections after close textual analysis and guided by that emerging analysis (Smith, 2004).

Smith (2004, p. 44) concludes that IPA “operates at a level which is clearly grounded in the text but which also moves beyond the text to a more interpretative and psychological level”.

3.3.2. The aims of an interpretive phenomenological inquiry

IPA is concerned with understanding the personal lived experience (Smith et al., 2009). This approach aims to capture and explore the meanings that participants assign to their experiences. Smith (2004, p. 50) argues that “IPA has been developed as an approach committed to the detailed exploration of personal experience”. Furthermore, IPA is concerned with uncovering the ordinary everyday experience and how it becomes an experience of importance in the mind of the participant (Smith et al., 2009). The main aim of IPA research “is to examine in detail the perceptions and understandings of the specific group studied rather than make more general claims” (Chapman & Smith, 2002, p. 127).

IPA assumes that participants seek to interpret their experiences in a way that is understandable to them (Brocki & Wearden, 2006, p. 88). Furthermore, IPA aims to understand the first-person perspective from the third-person position (Larkin et al., 2011). As discussed earlier in this chapter, IPA involves a “double hermeneutic” (Smith & Osborne, 2003 in Smith et al., 2009, p. 35). Taking the participants’ perspective is only one part of the analytic experience. IPA is concerned with how the research participant is trying to make sense of his or her world as well as how the researcher makes sense of the participant making sense of his or her world through this research process (Smith, 2004). Most of the interpretive levels employed in IPA align with “hermeneutics centred in empathy and meaning recollection” (Smith, 2004, p. 46). However, IPA also accommodates for hermeneutics of questioning which allows the researcher to critically engage with the text and ask questions which the participants might not recognise for themselves and/or overlook in their own interpretation of their experience. Both of these stances “can be seen to contribute to a more complete understanding of the participant’s lived experience” (Smith, 2004, p. 46). Larkin et al. (2011) argue that “qualitative phenomenological approaches, such as interpretive phenomenological analysis, can illuminate the importance of situating embodied personal experience in the context of meaning, relationships, and the lived world”. These authors argue that this provides a “valuable hermeneutic counterpoint to the primacy of empiricist methods” (Larkin et al., 2011, p. 318).

With IPA, the focus is to understand the particular and to include a small purposively selected homogenous sample for whom the research will be meaningful (Smith et al., 2009).

Smith (2004, p. 42) argues that “it is only possible to do the detailed, nuanced analysis associated with IPA on a small sample”.

3.3.3. Limitations of IPA

As with other forms of phenomenological research, IPA is vulnerable to several conceptual and practical limitations. These limitations are discussed by Willig (2013), who identifies them as being concerned with the following: the role of language, the suitability of accounts and explanation versus description. Each limitation is outlined in more detail below.

The role of language is identified as a limitation of IPA research. Since IPA is concerned with the analysis of text, the underlying assumption here is that the language used by the research participants adequately describes and captures their experience. However, Willig (2013) points out that it could be argued that language constructs rather than describes reality because language precedes and therefore shapes the individual’s experience. With this in mind, some people might view it as a limitation that IPA does not focus on the origins of the language used by the participant to describe their experiences. However, whilst IPA acknowledges that language shapes experience, it is not a social constructivist approach. Rather, IPA locates itself between social cognition and discourse analysis (Smith, 1996). In this way, IPA is sensitive to the role of language without agreeing that it determines experience.

Since phenomenology is concerned with the “rich texture of experience”, Willig (2009) questions the extent to which the participants’ accounts constitute suitable material for analysis. She also questions whether the participants are able to successfully communicate “the rich texture of their experience” to the researcher (Willig, 2009, p. 67). However, in contrast, there is a growing body of published literature that demonstrates the utility of IPA research studies (e.g., Larkin et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2009; Smith, 2004).

As discussed earlier in this chapter, IPA is concerned with understanding experience. The quality of the data then depends on the respondents’ capacity to answer ‘how’ rather than ‘why’ so that the focus here is on making sense of the respondent’s experience and not their individual opinion. In this way it is primarily concerned with the description rather than the explanation. Furthermore, whilst IPA is able to generate rich descriptions of the participants experiences, Willig (2009, p. 68) argues that it “does not tend to further our understanding of why such experiences take place”. From a research methodological perspective, a categorical distinction can be made between hermeneutics of recollection, or restoration of meaning, and

a hermeneutics of suspicion. The former is concerned with meaning recollection and centred on empathy and the latter involves questioning and critical engagement (Smith, 2004). Broadly speaking, IPA is likely to employ more hermeneutics of recollection but it “also allows a hermeneutics of questioning, of critical engagement, as the reader may well ask questions and posit readings which the participants would be unlikely, unable or unwilling to see or acknowledge themselves” (Smith, 2004, p. 46). He concludes that “both stances can be seen to contribute to a more complete understanding of the participant’s lived experience” (Smith, 2004, p. 46).

A common misconception about IPA is that it is a ‘simply descriptive’ methodology (Larkin et al., 2006). These authors argue that the reasons IPA is considered attractive to researchers – its accessibility, flexibility and applicability – are the same reasons why its critics question the value of its contribution to qualitative psychological research. They declare that “it is easy for flexibility to be mistaken for lack of rigour – and the subtlety and complexity of phenomenology’s aims and origins are often overlooked” (Larkin et al., 2006, p. 103).

3.4. Participants

This study involved nine participants (ages 18–21) of different race and gender. Nine students participated in the focus groups and eight students participated in the individual interviews. All the participants were Rhodes University students who considered themselves to be “active users” (i.e. daily users) of a cellphone and social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, BBM, WhatsApp). After receiving approval to conduct this research, I advertised this study to Rhodes University students and received participants (see section on Ethical Considerations for more detail).

It should be noted that this is a relatively large sample for an IPA study as a sample size of three is considered the “default size” for a Masters-level study (Smith et al., 2009, p. 52). Additionally, as described below, the participants were all interviewed twice; once before and once after the negotiated social media detox.

In terms of sample size and complexity of the design, this study goes significantly beyond what Smith and colleagues (2009) consider to be acceptable for a typical masters study. However, the sample size and complexity of the design study employed in this study was considered necessary to be able to adequately address the research aims.

3.5. Data collection method

Data collection took place over three research phases as outlined in detail below.

3.5.1. Phase 1: Conducting focus groups

Two focus groups were conducted for this research study in order to accommodate the academic schedules of the student participants. The data from the focus groups was not analysed in detail. Instead, it was used to ensure that the researcher was aware of all the important issues surrounding online and offline participation –as they emerged from the focus group discussions –in order to fine-tune and develop the interview schedule for the individual interviews that followed.

It is widely understood that a defining characteristic of adolescent behaviour is the influence of their peer groups (Albert & Steinberg, 2011). For this reason, focus groups were conducted in order to establish the perceived role that social circles have in negating or promoting certain forms of social participation over others. Furthermore, focus groups are considered an effective method for research with youth because the group dynamic facilitates conversation in a supportive environment (Brockman, Jago, & Fox, 2011).

Both focus groups required the participants to sign a consent form and included a comprehensive introduction provided by the researcher in which the participants were encouraged to share their honest opinions. The researcher made explicit reference to there being ‘no right or wrong answers’ so as to encourage the respondents to share their own experiences freely and openly. Before the focus group started, snacks and cold-drinks were served and participants were asked to introduce themselves in order to facilitate a comfortable and relaxed environment.

Each focus group provided a useful forum from which the researcher could observe the way in which a group of young people discuss the role of cellphones and social media platforms in their social lives. Kitzinger and Barber (1999, as cited in Madell & Muncer, 2007) point out that focus groups are useful for allowing participants to generate questions relating to the topic in their own terms in their own vocabulary. This provided the researcher with the opportunity to identify relevant themes relating to the research topic. Each focus group was moderated by the researcher so that each member was able to share their insights and experiences. It was important to observe peer interactions during the focus in order to

guide the research questions used in the individual interviews and even the interpretations of the data.

The focus groups also served as a useful medium through which to recruit participants for the social media detox and subsequent individual interviews. Some of the participants disclosed later on that they would not have agreed to participate in this study if they had been recruited to participate in the social media detox at the beginning of the study. Therefore, participation in the focus group appeared to prime the participants for involvement in Phase 2 and Phase 3 of this study. Furthermore, participation in the focus groups would have also primed the participants to think about the topics which enabled them to offer thoughtful feedback during their individual interview.

3.5.2. Phase 2: Conducting the individual interviews (before the detox)

The role of the interview in IPA research is emphasised by Harper and Thompson (2011, p. 104) who argue that the purpose here is “not about collecting facts, it is about exploring meanings”. This study involved conducting semi-structured interviews in order to allow each participant to describe their experiences and allow these to emerge spontaneously. This open-ended style of interviewing is an “integral part of the inductive principles of phenomenological research” where the objective is to find out about the participant’s lived experience (Smith et al., 2009, p. 65). Semi-structured interviews do not follow a rigid interview schedule in order to accommodate instances where the respondent might steer the interview in an unexpected direction. This is valuable in IPA research in which the respondent is considered the “experiential expert on the topic” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 64). During these interviews the researcher’s role was to listen attentively and probe for more details at appropriate moments during the discussion. The interviews were conducted in a relaxed environment and informal manner in order to create a space in which the participant felt comfortable and at ease.

The initial individual interviews were structured around how the respondents experienced socialising and what this involved for them. During the individual interviews, the respondents were asked to describe the aspects of their social experience that were most and least enjoyable and most and least comfortable. In addition, key themes that had emerged in the relevant focus group were discussed in more detail during these individual interviews. See Appendix A for a copy of the interview questions. At the end of the individual interview, the researcher discussed how they felt about doing the social media detox and arrangements were

made to schedule this detox consultation with the respondent. The social media detox is described in more detail in the following section.

3.5.3. The social media detox

This detox would require the respondents to voluntarily impose restrictions on their social media consumption habits for one or more days. The specific details of the detox varied according to what each respondent decided for themselves in consultation with the researcher. In this study, the Social Media Detox is frequently referred to as “the detox”. As outlined in the research aims, this study explores the relationship that young people have with their cellphone and how these devices inform, influence and shape their experience of social participation. Phenomenology involves stepping outside of one’s everyday experience (Smith et al., 2009). Thus, the detox provided the respondents with the opportunity to step out of their daily experience of using their cellphones to socialise.

Furthermore, I wanted to understand how they socialise in both online and offline contexts and their motivations for mediating between these two contexts. As discussed in the literature (recall Palfrey & Gasser (2010); Prensky (2001)), digital natives have little or no memory of what life was like before the onset of digital technologies. Furthermore, it is well documented that social media is pervasive in young people’s lives and is increasingly becoming their preferred medium of communicating with each other (Caplan, 2003, 2005; Casale, Tella, & Fioravanti, 2013; Pierce, 2009; Walsh, White, Cox, & Young, 2011).

The influence of social norms on individual behaviour is widely reported in the literature. Sunstein (1996, p. 909) argues that “individual rationality is a function of social norms”. Given the pervasive role of cellphone use among youth, the detox was a way of separating young people from these social norms. Furthermore, interpretations within the IPA approach are “bounded by participants’ abilities to articulate their thoughts and experiences adequately” (Brocki & Wearden, 2006, p. 88). Thus, the detox presented the respondents with the opportunity to reflect on their social behaviour and activities from a different perspective, which strengthens their capacity to articulate their experiences. The purpose of the social media detox was to establish whether it gave the participants a greater awareness of their cellphone use and social media consumption habits and whether it shifted their perspective. A similar approach to the detox has been used before in a study called ‘The World Unplugged’ (Moeller et al., 2012).

This research study involved a series of before (Phase 2) and after interviews (Phase 3) with the detox taking place between these interviews. According to Smith, Larkin and Flowers (2009, p.52), before and after interviews are useful to achieve multiple perspectives which “can help the IPA analyst develop a more detailed and multi-faceted account of that phenomenon”. IPA recognises that “a gap can exist between a situation or state and the individual’s perception of it” (Chapman & Smith, 2002, p. 126). Thus, the detox gave the researcher the opportunity to explore the nature of the gap that might exist between the respondent’s experience of socialising before and after the detox. Phase 2 and Phase 3 are outlined in more detail below.

3.5.4. The social media detox consultation with respondents

Each respondent met with the researcher to discuss the details of their social media detox. This consultation took place either immediately after the first interview or at an agreed upon time depending on when the participant decided to start their detox. The purpose of the consultation, which took no longer than 10–15 minutes, was to formalise the details of the respondent’s detox and to answer any queries or concerns that the respondents had with regards to participating in this research study.

The role of the researcher in this consultation was to document the agreed upon terms of the detox as decided by the respondent. A form was created for this purpose which outlined the specific details of the individual detox and the dates during which the detox would take place (See Appendix B). At no point during these consultations did the researcher insist on a particular format for the detox or instruct the respondent to structure their detox in a particular way. This was done to ensure that the respondent took ownership of the detox process and decided what would work best for them. At the end of the session the respondents were offered a photocopy of their completed forms if they wanted it for their own reference and the researcher kept the originals form.

Importantly, during this consultation the researcher emphasised that there were no penalties involved in the detox process should the respondent deviate from their agreed upon commitment in any way. During this consultation, it was made clear to each respondent that the inability to stick with terms they agreed to upfront was as interesting and useful as the ability to do so. The researcher explained that the focus of this study would be to understand their full experience of the detox. Each participant was encouraged to document their

experience in a journal or any other medium of their choice in order to recall their experiences in the follow-up interview.

During this consultation the respondents were also informed that the second interviews would have to take place within a day or two after their detox ended in order to access the very recent memories of their experiences. The dates for follow-up interviews were scheduled during this consultation and consideration was shown towards the respondent's academic commitments and the intended duration of their detox.

3.5.5. Phase 3: Conducting the individual interviews (after the detox)

Each participant who had been interviewed in Phase 2 was interviewed for a second time in Phase 3 after their social media detox experience. The same approach of semi-structured interviewing was used again in these interviews and the same consideration was given to creating a space in which the respondent felt comfortable and at ease See Appendix C for a copy of the interview questions.

The focus of these interviews was to find out what their experience of the social media detox was and to find out if it had shifted their perspective in any way. At the end of the interview, the researcher asked whether there was anything else that that the respondent wanted to discuss or share that had not been discussed.

3.6. Data interpretation: performing an interpretive phenomenological analysis

IPA can be characterised by “a set of common processes and principles which are applied flexibly according to the analytic task” (Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005, as cited by Smith et al., 2009, p. 79). The use of flexible analysis techniques “allow unanticipated topics or themes to emerge during analysis” (Smith, 2004, p. 43). The analysis process used in this study was informed by the four-phase analysis process outlined in the introductory presentation by Larkin (2013) and the six-step process outlined by Smith et al. (2009). The analysis process is described in detail below. It was used on the transcripts from the first interviews and it was repeated for the transcripts from the second interviews.

Larkin (2013) calls this initial step Analysis A. It involves a process of “free coding” which involves documenting your initial ideas and also “bracketing off” your preconceptions. Bracketing is putting aside the “taken-for-granted world in order to concentrate on our

perception of that world” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 13). Analysis A corresponds to the first and second step of the analysis process as outlined by Smith et al. (2009). The first step involved reading and re-reading each individual transcript in order for the researcher to be immersed in the data. The second step outlined by Smith et al. (2009) is referred to as “Initial noting”, which aims to examine the semantic content on an exploratory level. For this step, I inserted the each transcript into a table with three columns and printed these documents. Each transcript appeared in the centre column with a blank column on either side. During this process I wrote my notes in the blank column on the left. I also used a highlighter to highlight key comments in the text that were most relevant to the thesis topic. After the initial noting process, I re-read each transcript and paid close attention to the experiential claims, concerns and understandings of each participant.

Analysis B is described as ‘phenomenological coding’ and the aim is identify the things that matter to the participant, the meaning of those things and the way in which the researcher might characterise the participant’s stance in relation to those things (Larkin, 2013). At this stage, I began to record themes that were emerging from the data – that struck me as being particularly relevant to the literature and the research topic – in the blank column on the right. During this process I also recorded a list of key themes that emerged from the data on separate pieces of paper. This allowed me to develop a general idea of the themes that were emerging as unique to a particular transcript and themes that were repeated in other transcripts. Only once Analysis B was completed for each of the transcripts did I start Analysis C.

The focus of Analysis C is to identify emergent patterns and commonalities – starting with a single transcript and then subsequently across multiple transcripts. This process seems to coincide with Steps Three, Four, Five and Six as outlined by Smith et al. (2009). After the “Initial noting” in Step Two, the focus shifts to the larger data set to develop emergent themes in the third step. The fourth step involves searching for connections across emergent themes. Thereafter, the researcher will move to the next case in the fifth step. Once this process has been completed for each individual interview, the sixth step involves looking for patterns across cases (Smith et al., 2009). According to Larkin (2013) Analysis C involves the researcher shifting his or her focus from phenomenological coding into “interpretative coding” where the researcher will draw on their psychological knowledge to inform this process. At this stage I referred to the themes that I had recorded on separate pieces of paper that had emerged from each separate transcript. In order to consolidate these themes into a

single list, I highlighted the themes that were repeated across multiple transcripts and rejected the themes which seemed isolated to one transcript.

Analysis D as outlined Larkin (2013) involves developing a structure which “illustrates the relationships between themes” and “allows for coded data to be traced right through the analysis”. At this stage, I consulted the single list of themes that had been compiled from themes which had been repeated across multiple transcripts (as outlined in Analysis B and C above) to identify a list of superordinate themes. I used these themes to code the data. Each superordinate theme was assigned a different colour and sticky markers matching the colours of each theme were applied directly to the transcripts to identify the relevant excerpts in the text. Once sticky markers had been applied to each transcript, I created a table using Microsoft Excel to capture the data. All different coloured markers from all the different transcripts were then captured together in different Excel sheets so that all the excerpts identified with the same colour appeared together in the same Excel sheet. The coloured markers were not used on the second set of transcripts because by this stage I had streamlined my process for capturing the data in Excel. Instead of using different coloured sticky markers to identify coded data, the themes in the second interviews were identified with a letter. By using a letter to identify the superordinate themes I was able to use Excel to sort and then create separate sheets.

At this stage I began to identify sub-themes within each superordinate theme. Each sub-theme was numbered, which made it possible to cluster sub-themes within a superordinate theme which had already been identified by a single colour or letter. Working with Microsoft Excel enabled me to manage this process which would have been much more complex to achieve without such software to support it. Two examples follow below that show how the theme and sub-theme was captured in Excel.

Table below: Coding for first interviews

Name	Theme	Excerpt	Sub-theme
Gugu		You get used to that, so even when you grow up, it's a norm, it's something that happens; you don't even think about it. You don't even think that maybe I'm spending too much time with my phone, because it's something that you grew up doing, so it's just a part of you, if I can say that.	1

Table below: Coding for second interviews

Name	Theme	sub-theme	Excerpt
Natalie	B	1	I was very, I was very aware of other people on phones, because I didn't have one, and then I sort of thought they were being anti-social (chuckle), and then I was like hang on, I would do the same thing.

After documenting all the highlighted text from each transcript into the Excel table, I was able to sort my data according to their number codes provided. This proved to be very useful way of organising my data into a simple visual structure. This system allowed me to build on the existing superordinate themes and consolidate the themes within each category. Once all the relevant themes and their associated text had been combined into a single Excel spreadsheet, I was able to reassess the content of each sub-theme and refine these categories by moving verbatim from one category to another more appropriate category and/or integrating sub-themes that were too similar. The summary table of the structured themes “should only include those themes that capture something about the quality of the participant’s experience of the phenomenon under investigation” (Willig, 2009, p. 58). This process was maintained using various worksheets in Microsoft Excel. The tables below are extracted from the original spreadsheet to illustrate the process outlined above.

Table below: Structure for first interviews

Texting feels more natural than talking	Name	Theme	Excerpt	Sub-theme
Digital natives	Gugu		I'm not running to social media, but I prefer it because it's not too, too personal, so now why would you want to actually get too personal with me? For the fact that I actually chose social media, than getting <u>personal face-to-face with you</u> .	1
	Gugu		You get used to that, so even when you grow up, it's a norm, it's something that happens; you don't even think about it. You don't even think that maybe I'm spending too much time with my phone, because it's <u>something that you grew up doing, so it's just a part of you, if I can say that</u> .	1
	Natalie		MXIT was something that we had when we were young, so at that stage, we were still getting socialised into <u>the person we are and the things we do</u> .	1
	Josh		like our generation is a generation of kind of narcissistic people as well, who want the attention then also, but also we are really, I think maybe I, I don't know why, but I think people are less confident than they used to be, so they are able to be more confident in some ways and less in others, so then when they are not having everything focused on them as well, their self-consciousness comes out big time, where they sort of think everything is not on them now, or: 'oh god! everyone in the room as is avoid- is ignoring me!' -	1
	Josh		So it's very important to keep a balance between the two. Actually I don't even want to say balance because it's to me, it's not like I'm doing a different thing so it's not like I'm balancing social networking with social reality, so to me they're the same thing. When I'm on my phone I'm hanging out with people too, so.	1
	Thuli		Unlike generations before us, whereby socialising meant actually meeting physically. For us we've been brought up in the era whereby socialising can mean virtual socialisation - socialising I mean... So now it means that it's - uh - now taken over per se. As in people are now more likely to communicate virtually than they are to communicate personally... For us, that's all we know now. Our parents tell us that letters - it's nice to receive a letter, but then I can't relate because I've never received a letter before in my life. But then I'm trying to tell them, it's so nice when you get notification on Facebook and they can't fathom how that can <u>be interesting</u> .	1

Table below: Structure for second interviews

Mind the Gap	Name	Theme	sub-theme	Excerpt
Offline Outsider	Gugu	B	1	Ah, it felt, ahhhhhhh, I felt like, ugh, I was just in another world, because I, I used to be one of those people, now that I'm not, I just feel like people are just ignoring me too, you know, I feel like I'm ignored. Because everybody is just busy with their phones and I'm not, so I just feel again like I'm just missing out on things, which is frustrating. Because I need know why are you so on your phone, what are you doing on your phone? Why can't you say hi to me, you know? You know me, I know you so why can't you say hi to me? But because you're busy on your phone, you're not even like, take notice of me there, yeh.
	Thuli	B	1	I was walking with a group of friends. We were going up the hill [specific Rhodes campus reference] and everyone was on their phone and I was like: 'Wow! I would want to be on my phone right now!' and I tried to like start up conversations to try stop the other people from using their phones. I'm like 'yah, so how was your day?' - you know I'm trying to strike up conversations and people are still on their phones and like 'Yah, it was nice'. But I'm just thinking: 'You're on your phone, you're not even listening to what I'm saying'. I also just felt like - I snapped [verbally] at one of my friends <ehyeh!> and he was so shocked and he was like: 'Where is that coming from?' - and then I'm like 'sorry' that afternoon at lunchtime and then I explained to But now it's really emphasised, really how superficial it makes people seem. Because you know like if you are now on the other side - if you are now on the outside, you get a more objective view than if you're inside there. Because when I was a part of it, yah, I could see how there was some superficiality around me but then now that I'm outside, I actually get a better view to say actually: 'The social media world is actually a twisted world!'
	Thuli	B	1	So I was just thinking to myself that I was trying to include myself in the other people's shoes and see how they would perceive me. So, I was being hard on myself 'cause now I was thinking that if I was that girl there I would probably be thinking: 'She's trying too hard'. So now I was thinking I don't want to be that person who's trying to hard so yah
	Thabo	B	1	it wasn't nice at all, because mentions are part of the morning routine, you want someone to have said something to you. <Hm><pause> it wasn't nice, it didn't feel, I don't know, that's why it's just frustrating me this whole thing because it just made me realise my dependence on <pause> I don't know. And it's not, it's not like an affirmation thing, but it's along those lines, I don't know if that <pause> there's some sort of affirmation you get from sort of knowing people are wanting to speak to you and people are saying something to you. And when you don't get that and you're so used to it, it becomes very hard to adjust <hmm>
	Thabo	B	1	I didn't like other people because they were free <laughs> on their phones <hmm> and I wasn't <pause> as free as them <hmm> and I didn't like it because they provoked me. Even when I put up that status that picture, they'll be like "oh what detox" but I just said, "don't talk to me I'm on a..." So it would be, and for some of them you would see, that's exactly what they were doing, it just sort of to provoke the situation and it's working because I'm there and I'm telling them ubano and that's defeating the whole purpose of the whole thing <hmm>
	Natalie	B	1	I was very, I was very aware of other people on phones, because I didn't have one, and then I sort of thought they were being anti-social (chuckle), and then I was like hang on, I would do the same thing.
	Lucy	B	1	It's was just, like I was telling you, it's was just very abnormal for me because I am not used to that and so, in the way it was quite nice because I got to see people for what they were, even though it made me a little bit sad inside but it also give me a chance to actually speaks people and not actually try to avoid them [laughs] because I know I do that and also yeah
	Josh	B	1	I'd get really upset because they'd be on Facebook while sitting with me and was just like I want to tell you something, just want to go read something on Facebook, bro. But I promise you by Tuesday I was over it, hey. It didn't matter, at all.

As mentioned above, this process was repeated from Analysis A to Analysis D with the transcripts from the second interviews. However, at this stage careful consideration was given to the themes identified in the transcripts from the first interviews. Consequently, the themes emerging from the second interviews were informed by the themes which emerged from the first analysis process. The sub-themes continued to evolve and shift and some would even fall away during the writing process because “there is no clear-cut distinction between analysis and writing up” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 110). Furthermore, Willig (2009, p. 63) points out: “It’s important to ensure that analysis continues until the point at which full integration of themes has been achieved”. The depth of interpretation is crucial in IPA research and it is important to make sure that the themes and patterns emerging from the before and after series of interviews are taken into consideration.

3.7. Validity of the study

Yardley (2000) presents four principles that can be used to assess the quality of qualitative research. These principles are referred to by Smith et al. (2009) as providing useful guidelines for ensuring the validity of IPA research. These principles are: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, impact and importance.

This study took these principles into consideration and the study process was conducted with them in mind. Each principle is outlined in more detail below.

The first principle, sensitivity to context, involves maintaining awareness of IPA's philosophical influences (as outlined in the section above) that guide and inform this research approach (Yardley, 2000). With IPA, the context in which the respondent and the researcher is operating is very much a part of their experience. In turn, the context influences their perceptions of the world and the way in which they interpret their surroundings. Yardley (2000, p. 221) emphasises the importance of the researcher remaining cognisant of his or her own perspective and outlook with regards to how his or her own behaviour can influence the 'balance of power' during the analysis process. In this study, as the researcher I remained mindful of my own perspective and outlook so as not to disrupt this balance of power. I also consulted the available literature and had regular discussions with my supervisor in order to maintain a perspective of the broader context. Through reading the available literature and by running the focus groups, I was able to develop an informed understanding of the key issues associated with this topic of research. This enabled me to situate my knowledge of this research topic within the broader context.

The second principle, commitment and rigour, was maintained throughout each step of the analysis process. Here, Yardley (2000, p. 221) refers to the researcher's "prolonged engagement with the topic" which involves both being immersed in the data and the dedication to acquiring the skills and competence in the analysis process. In this study, the researcher was committed to acquiring the skills and competence required to conduct the analysis process. Since this study involved a two-part analysis which required the researcher to analyse a double set of transcripts as a result of the before and after interview process, the researcher invested a great deal of commitment and rigour to accomplish this. Furthermore, the researcher was supervised by an experienced IPA researcher.

The third principle, transparency and coherence, relates to what Yardley (2000, p. 222) describes as the “clarity and cogency” of the description and argumentation. Transparency is dealt with by disclosing the data-collection process used and by offering a detailed explanation of this process. Coherence is attained through selecting the appropriate “fit between research question and the philosophical perspective adopted, and the method of investigation and analysis undertaken” (Yardley, 2000, p. 222). In this study, the researcher was careful to provide a detailed description of all the phases of the research as they relate to this project. Since the research question is concerned with understanding how youth experience socialising online and offline, the theoretical underpinnings of IPA support this type of inquiry. Furthermore, textual excerpts taken from the data feature throughout the findings chapters which further endorse the transparency of this study.

The fourth principle, impact and importance, relates to the utility of the research which Yardley (2000, p. 223) considers to be the “decisive criterion by which any piece of research must be judged”. In this study the researcher aimed to make a meaningful contribution to the existing literature by expanding the available knowledge of the research topic.

3.8. Ethical Considerations

This research has been approved by the Rhodes University Psychology Department's Research Proposal and Ethical Review Committee (RPERC). See Appendix D for a copy of this letter of approval. Additionally, permission to conduct this study with Rhodes University students was received from the Registrar at Rhodes University, Dr Stephen Fourie, and the Dean of Students at Rhodes University, Dr Vivian de Klerk.

At the start of the individual interviews and the focus group, the respondents were required to complete a consent form and read through a detailed information sheet which outlined the details of their involvement. The anonymity of each participant was maintained by providing each of them with an alias so that their identity was protected. Furthermore, the transcribers who were appointed to assist the researcher with transcribing were required to sign a detailed confidentiality agreement.

Since this study involved not using a cellphone the researcher held individual consultations with each respondent to discuss the terms of their “social media detox”. This was done to make sure that the terms agreed upon were voluntary and structured around the individual needs of each participant. Furthermore, the researcher was explicit about

informing the participants that their involvement in this process included both their experience of following and not following the detox. In this way, the participants were made aware of the fact that their participation in the study did not involve any penalties for non-compliance.

3.9. Summary

This chapter has described IPA and outlined the processes involved in conducting this research. The theoretical underpinnings of IPA were described in detail to aid the reader in understanding the background of interpretative phenomenology as a method of analysis and as an approach to data collection. This chapter also provided information on the validity of this study and the ethical considerations involved. In addition, the processes involved in the data interpretation were described, showing example tables that supported the researcher in mapping out the final presentation of the findings.

Chapter 4: Findings and discussion of the first interviews before the detox

An outline of the six overlapping superordinate themes that emerged from the data is listed below. Each theme will be explored in detail in this chapter. The table below presents the list of themes. Each theme is made up of a series of sub-themes as listed in the table below and these are discussed in detail in the following chapter.

4.1. The power is in my hand

- 4.1.1. Control over social interactions
- 4.1.2. I'm untouchable
- 4.1.3. On my terms: the power to connect and disconnect
- 4.1.4. The bigger the better: quantity vs. quality in social interactions
- 4.1.5. Effort-averse

4.2. Texting feels more natural than talking face-to-face

- 4.2.1. Digital natives
- 4.2.2. "It's just the norm"
- 4.2.3. Interface vs. face-to-face
- 4.2.4. Pluralistic ignorance
- 4.2.5. Awkward-averse

4.3. REALationships

- 4.3.1. Craving for real-life connections
- 4.3.2. Reading body language vs. reading texts
- 4.3.3. Onscreen vs. off-screen: the real you?

4.4. Behind the Screen: What makes youth text?

- 4.4.1. Habits versus choice
- 4.4.2. "My cellphone is my comfort zone"
- 4.4.3. FOMO: Fear of Missing Out
- 4.4.4. Comfort tweeting: Texting for perceived social fulfilment

4.5. A very peacock system

4.6. Audience Management

It is important to note that throughout this chapter, the respondents' reference to conversations (which includes chatting and talking) happen in both online or offline contexts. The participants' use of vocabulary is not explored in detail in a specific theme. However, for reading purposes, it is important to keep in mind that the same terms are used by the participants to describe communication that takes place in both online and offline contexts. Throughout this chapter and Chapter Five, the following formatting applies to the excerpts from the transcripts: the use of ellipsis (...) refers to copy that has been removed from original

transcript; the use of angle brackets (e.g. <pause>) or standard brackets (e.g. (laughs)) conveys body language, tone of voice or gestures belonging to the respondent and the use of square brackets in the excerpts (e.g. [with]) indicates that words have been inserted to add clarity to sentences that may not be easily understood by the reader.

4.1. The power is in my hand

The data from this study suggests that the respondents perceive the use of their cellphone to socialise as providing them with an increased sense of power. This section discusses how the respondents' experience of using their cellphones suggests that their perception is that the source of their social autonomy comes from outside of them – as attributed to their cellphone – rather than inside of them (as a function of their emotional intelligence or social skills, for example).

It is possible that this perception relates to what Zizek (1998, p. 483) described as “interpassivity” which is “the exact obverse of interactivity”. This involves feeling that you are being active through another subject who does the activity for you. In a discussion on the interpassivity of digital media communications, Dean (2009) argues that this constructs a ‘fantasy of participation’ in which the circulation of content feels like action (as cited in Payne, 2013, p. 553). In light of this, this study suggests that the participants' sense of being socially active is experienced through their cellphone. Thus, as the title of this section suggests, the perception among the participants is that their power in social situations comes from the cellphone that is held in their hand rather than from within themselves.

“...When it comes to talking to people, I rely more on my phone than myself.” [Gugu]

Despite providing young people with a sense of power in social situations, it is possible that relying on one's phone more than oneself diminishes a young person's capacity to recognise his or her own agency in social situations. The importance of agency is emphasised by Deneulin and Shahani (2009, p. 27) who argue “one of the central goals of human development is enabling people to become agents in their own lives”. However, the respondents sometimes forgot that a cellphone is a technological device that is separate from their physical bodies. This provides a possible explanation for why they are not aware that they have ‘externalised’ their source of social competency.

“I’m trying think what do I feel when I take my phone. That’s – I think what I’m trying describe is that, there’s not a particular feeling, you just, it just, it just happens, it’s just natural.” [Thabo]

“Because a phone is seen as such an important part of your life...it becomes – because you on it all the time – it becomes something that you do not even realise you’re on all the time...” [Natalie]

This section explores the nature of this power dynamic between the respondent and their cellphone in the sub-themes that follow. Throughout this chapter, many of the sub-themes discuss how the respondents’ use of cellphones has possibly shifted their perceived agency in social situations away from themselves as they rely on their cellphones to conduct and mediate their social lives. This relates to the earlier reference to self-determination theory in the literature. This involves understanding “the social-contextual conditions that facilitate versus forestall the natural processes of self-motivation and healthy psychological development” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 68). These findings raise questions about whether young people’s cellphone use facilitates or forestalls these processes.

4.1.1. Control over social interactions

The perception that young people feel they have more control over their social interactions through social media platforms than during face-to-face interactions is central to what makes these digital platforms so appealing to them (recall Madell and Muncer (2007); Valkenburg and Peter (2011)). These findings are borne out in this study, in which the respondents describe their experiences of being able to control their social interactions with others. One of the respondents describes how social media allowed her to feel more in control of her interactions with a guy whom she did not want to come across as being ‘too interested in’:

“Well, when someone is in front of you there are so many obligations per se because now you have to act in certain ways and you have to respond to things in certain ways. And even if sometimes if you're interested - you do not want to seem like you're too interested - if it's a guy per se. So now you have to be watching, did I flick my hair right, did I do that right...<big deep breath> there’s just so much pressure if the person is there. Unlike with social media whereby you get a chance to compose yourself and read it twice and then finally reply.” [Thuli]

Another respondent described how her phone makes her feel more confident, which is unlike her experience of interacting face-to-face:

“With... my phone, I am very confident because I take time to actually think about things before I do them, than when I’m actually in person. Because when you’re in person, you just do things without thinking sometimes... When you’re on your phone, you can actually choose the things you want to say, because I’m one of those people, who I do not want to get – when it comes to relationship-wise with boys and stuff – I do not want to get too attached, so when it comes to face-to-face, then maybe I might just be taken over by, “Okay! Let’s just do whatever!” but with my phone, like dude, we’re not gonna do such things whatever.” [Gugu]

It was evident from the interviews with the participants that possessing this level of control played an important role in their social experience. It is possible that – for this group of young people who have grown up with a cellphone – having this perceived level of control over their social interactions has in fact reduced their capacity to experience social interactions without this sense of control. The experience of behaving “involuntarily” in social interactions was not conveyed as a desirable attribute of face-to-face interactions.

“Yah, I’m in control with how people – of how much people can know and how people can perceive me to be, because like I said if we’re talking personally... you can draw your own conclusions because there are some things that I’ll do involuntarily, but then, if it’s on social media then I think that I have that chance to go over my response and say ‘Okay, this is how that person is going to receive it’ – so there is that control.” [Thuli]

“You’re able to control who you’re talking to and what you’re saying to them. Because in person, you might walk past someone who you do not particularly feel like talking to but you talk to them anyway. Whereas [with] BBM you’re able to control who you talk to.” [Natalie]

Another respondent described how her experience of being able to have more control over what she says in social media allows her to feel much safer:

“On social media - I definitely feel much safer... I battle with my speech a lot... I battle to pronounce things and often my sentence structure goes out the window. And also...I do not think before I speak. But when I’m on social media, I have spell check, so I can spell it correctly. I can organise my sentences, know where the punctuation goes before I’m going to post it...” [Lucy]

If you consider that their cellphone provides young people with more than a means to communicate but also the means to control how they communicate, it is quite possible that using it allows them to feel more in control in social situations. Compared to the feelings of control associated with using a cellphone, one of the respondents described how difficult he anticipated that the detox would be:

“But I guess now without the phone [when I go on the detox] you have to speak to people, if you wanna say something to someone, you literally have to go to them and say it. <Err> you have to experience their reaction and to deal with it <hmmm> it’s so much harder ... if I would have to experience socialising without a phone it would be harder <um>” [Thabo]

The next chapter reveals how the respondents experienced socialising with restricted cellphone use during their detox and whether this experience shifted their perceptions of control around their cellphone use.

4.1.2. I’m untouchable!

It is possible that the experience of feeling more in control over their social interactions allowed the respondents to feel that they were “untouchable”. In this way, the respondents seem to feel safe from the experience of relating face-to-face which is associated with interpersonal conflict and potential humiliation. One of the respondents described his experience of feeling ‘almost invincible’ when he is using his phone:

“I think it’s, it’s just, you’re so much more – you say so much more things on social media platforms that you would never actually say in real life. <Um> because the fear is absent and you’re, you’re almost invincible in a sense because <pause> Dingaan can’t punch me if I – let’s say we’re fighting about something on the phone. You can’t get angry, or I say something you can’t punch me whereas physically <pause> if you were to say something you would receive some sort of reaction. <Um> so there’s a sort of invincibility you feel on your, when you’re on your phone <pause> like you’re untouchable.” [Thabo]

Furthermore, another respondent described how he simply has to ‘slip into’ his cellphone in order to improve his situation. Despite the fact that a cellphone fits into the palm of his hand, his experience conveys how he feels he’s able to conceal himself in his phone in order to avoid uncomfortable social interactions.

“Well, it’s a device you’re capable of using to better your situation of like ‘I’m awkward right now, but I’m just going to slip into my phone’ [Josh]

It is possible that the expectation that one is capable of being ‘untouchable’ through social media, heightens a young person’s experience of being ‘touchable’. Furthermore, if the experience of being ‘untouchable’ is associated with feelings of increased social security, it is not surprising then that feelings of being ‘touchable’ are associated with feelings of insecurity. One respondent described how important it was for her to conceal the physical evidence (e.g., blushing and giggling) from the person who she liked:

“...when it's in person where people are worried about everyone else who's around them – what everyone else is looking, maybe thinking or whatever it is. Like I was saying – if it was a guy per se, I wouldn't want to be seen blushing right there and then. Because then everyone is going to know now that I like the guy! But then now, if he's on social media I can be giggling – I can be doing all sorts – but he doesn't know that. He's just reading the message only and now he has to deduct for himself whether or not I like him that much or whether or not I do not like him that much.” [Thuli]

In contrast to experiencing the feeling of feeling “invincible” in a positive light, another respondent described how speaking to someone on-screen feels like you are speaking to someone who ‘has no flaws’.

“...when you're speaking to them [on-screen], they have this mask on – this beautiful photo-shopped mask that has no flaws” [Lucy]

Later in this chapter I discuss this theme from another perspective which raises questions about whether the experience of being ‘untouchable’ benefits or undermines young people’s social relationships.

4.1.3. On my terms: the power to connect and disconnect

In addition to providing the respondents with the perception that they had more control over their social interactions, it seems that this experience relates to both: the power to include oneself into desirable social interactions and the power to exclude oneself from undesirable interactions.

“I feel like social media is letting people into your life <pause> basically. <Um> so the more ways in which you can do that, the better” [Thabo]

“Well for me it almost feels like when I'm by myself I'm not doing anything. It makes me feel like I should always be a part of something. So like when I'm by myself, social media allows me to always be a part of something.” [Thuli]

On the one hand, the cellphone appears to provide the respondents with the opportunity to feel more socially included and connected and on the other hand, these findings suggest that it is also possible that the cellphone enables them to retreat from social situations that they want to avoid. It seems that the participants do not feel apologetic or deterred by their motivations to avoid or escape a social situation in which they felt uncomfortable. One of the respondents described how “offended” she felt when her friend confronted her about not “talking” over social media.

“So me and my friend, because we constantly talk to each other every day [with our cellphones], then that day I didn’t want to talk to anybody, not that I didn’t want to talk to just her, I just didn’t want to talk to anybody else. [But] because she wanted to talk to me and she wanted to share her day with me, [and tell me] all her problems whatever, I wasn’t so keen on that. And then after a day or two, she was just grumpy towards me and she was like: “Yeh you want people to actually just listen to you but you do not listen to other people. So you are a bit selfish...”- whatever, whatever. So now I get offended by that because now you getting into my personal space and you're saying all these things about me, but again I had a choice, and I actually made that choice of not talking to you.” [Gugu]

One of the respondents giggled with delight as she disclosed how social media enabled her to get away with certain things.

“Being on social media it gives me the chance to get away with certain things. [Because] now I might say something but then now it's up to you to interpret to say 'Ah, she cares' or 'maybe she's being sarcastic' or whatever. So it's like an escape route for me to not be held accountable to for, what I'm saying. [Because] you do not actually realise in what sense I mean it - so yah <giggles>” [Thuli]

Another respondent described how the social media interactions – which take place on-screen – seem to establish a barrier between experiencing the other individual as human. It is possible that the experience of feeling disconnected from the human experience makes it easier to say hurtful things that they would not be able to say face-to-face.

“[Over social media] you can hurt someone and not really care too much about it... but if sitting there face-to-face and you’re attacking them, humanly you’re going to feel bad about it...” [Jude]

Later she said:

“It’s easier... [on BBM] you can engage in a fight but you can control it in your own time so you’re not standing there getting attacked by someone [face-to-face]...” [Jude]

Another respondent described how social media allows her to avoid having to confront people face-to-face which she feels takes too much of her time and involves listening to other people’s problems.

“I do not know, face-to-face is just, [I] feel like I do not have time – to actually just sit down and chat and you telling me your problems, your problems via face-to-face, I do not really want to hear about them at that moment...” [Gugu]

4.1.4. The bigger the better: quantity vs. quality in social interactions

These findings suggest that one of the appealing aspects of socialising on social media is the opportunity young people have to communicate with a large audience. Furthermore, the participants appear to equate more satisfaction with reaching as many people as possible than they do connecting with fewer people face-to-face. Interestingly, this preference seems to be founded on the principles of “bigger is better” – but does not necessarily yield personal fulfilment. Later, the topic of fulfilment is largely referred to in the context of smaller intimate connections.

“With Facebook you can get in touch with so many people at the same time. So with that, I think you actually become more socially active than when you [are] actually face-to-face” [Gugu]

“When you're talking to one person, yes in as much as it is interesting...I just feel like I'm not doing much but then...when I post something on Facebook I feel like I've said something to more people, I've made a difference even sometimes. Because there are some quotes that I find and when I post it and I see that seven people 'like' it, to me it shows I've made a difference or I've influenced seven people in a way - or even those other people that read it but didn't comment.” [Thuli]

It seems that another possible function of having large numbers of ‘Facebook friends’ is also interpreted as a measure of popularity. In response to what they thought of someone who has no friends on Facebook, one of the respondents said:

“Well, for the person without [Facebook friends]- wow! - <giggles> That would just be sad because I'm thinking 'This is the internet- you can be whoever you want to be!' - Surely you can find friends... and then for the person who has got a lot of friends, I'm going to think that, that's a very outgoing person. Because for you to maintain such large numbers, it must mean that you're entertaining or you're charming or whatever else it is. So personally, I'd be more likely to be drawn to the person with [more than] 700 friends, rather than the one with zero friends” [Thuli]

These respondents’ experiences suggest that social media platforms are advantageous because of their potential audience reach and ability to convey one’s level of popularity. However, one of the respondents described that connecting with huge numbers of people on social media meant that she was not able to connect with them on a “real level” which she believes happens in face-to-face situations.

“On a cellphone you have great communicative advantage because you're reaching so many more people because you have like 500, 600, 700 friends or like 500 followers on Tumblr - or like maybe 1000 on Twitter so you're always going to reach more people but the fault is that, is that you are not reaching any of them on a real level. Like in real life, you are reaching them [on] a real level but you're never going to...to reach 250 or 40 or 30 people...” [Lucy]

Similarly, another respondent described how unsatisfying it was to have access to “everything that you need to know” on Facebook but to still be left feeling that “you do not actually know [the person] at all”:

“People are over-sharing on Facebook... so you've seen what they've gone through and the memories that have been captured... but you do not really know anything about those memories... so you can find out everything that you need to know but you do not actually know them at all...” [Jude]

4.1.5. Effort-averse

It is possible that the experience of online communication as being convenient and easy makes face-to-face seem to involve too much effort. This is, by comparison because it is less instantaneous than simply connecting on-screen through social media. The findings from this study suggest that the effort associated with communicating face-to-face discourages the respondents from connecting with others in this way.

“Hmm, well like with, um, finding out about people's lives – that sounds really creepy when I say that. (laughs) – Ja, it's like, kind of it takes effort to sometimes catch up with people [face-to-face] and like you would have to be like, uh, "How're you doing?", "How's your life"... Whereas with Facebook or even BBM status's you can be like, oh, this person's doing this now, she's got a job here and you can just quickly see it, it's there for you to read” [Natalie]

Face-to-face communication also involves the effort of physical movement to reach the person, as one of the respondents described:

“I'm so used to communicating with people through cellphone usually because my friend lives like on the third floor, I do not want to walk up there... I suppose it's like a concept of laziness but like it's also that I love getting to people immediately... like for me everything is urgent... and my cellphone fulfils that for me....” [Lucy]

Another respondent described how it is easier to be outgoing on Facebook which would take a lot of effort to achieve:

“...It’s easier to be this very loud outgoing person on Facebook... but actually going out and doing all those things that you want to do and saying you want to do...that takes a lot of effort” [Jude]

The social media format allows people to preload and update data about themselves onto their relevant social media profile pages. This provides young people with opportunity to preview information on their peers without having to ask these people questions about their lives. Some studies (e.g., Antoci, Sabatini, & Sodini, 2011; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007) argue that previewing information about people allows young people to nurture closer friendships with their peers and encourages them to meet them face-to-face. But it is possible that the opportunity to preview people on social media platforms has actually made some young people less likely to ask each other about their lives in person because it is now considered too much effort. In the excerpt below, one respondent described how much effort is associated with getting ready to see someone face-to-face. In contrast, the experience of connecting with people using a cellphone can be done without getting out of bed.

“.. there are many things I must do before I see those people [in person]. Like just besides the effort of getting there, the effort of having to get out of bed, the effort of having to shower because... you can’t have smelly armpits. So now you have to shower, the effort of combing your hair, the effort of brushing your teeth. Because when you see people <pause> you do not want your breath stinking. <Um> The effort of having to try to put something on, I think everyone wants to look good, now you must think about what you wanna wear. And after you put that on, you must make sure that the windows are closed in the house, you must lock the door ...And then the next effort involved is actually getting there. Whereas on your phone<pause> if you’re in bed, you do not have to do all that, you just get up, with crystal [sleep] in your eyes and just socialise.” [Thabo]

“I hesitate to say I prefer social networking but sometimes I do. Um, especially if I’m feeling really like siff or ugly and do not feel like getting out of bed, it’s so much greater. Like you can just chat on here [your cellphone]” [Josh]

Not only does face-to-face involve too much effort but it is also perceived to be more ‘complicated’ in comparison to online interactions.

“I would never actually go out with people that I do not know... I think that when you try and go out with people that you do not know it just complicates things because now you have to be involved in all these other [face-to-face] conversations.” [Thuli]

Another respondent seems to feel that social media has stunted people’s emotional development because it has allowed people to deal with things over text message instead of face-to-face. He also described how much easier it is to maintain a friendship on social media:

“Social media has stunted people emotionally. Because it’s far easier to deal with something over a [text message].... [I have been raised] that if you have a problem with someone you go deal with it face-to-face” [Max]

Later he says:

“With [social media] it’s a lot less effort to maintain a friendship... you have a higher chance of offending someone without technology than when you have it” [Max]

4.2. Texting feels more natural than talking

4.2.1. Digital natives

Digital natives is a term coined to describe this current generation of young people who have grown up with the presence of cellphones and a host of other digital technologies (recall Palfrey and Gasser (2010)). A common characteristic observed among digital natives is that they have no memory of what their lives were like without access to cellphones. The respondents below describe how they have grown up with MXit and they feel that they have been ‘brought up’ in an environment in which ‘virtual socialisation’ is ‘all we know’:

“MXIT was something that we had when we were young, so at that stage, we were still getting socialised into the person we are and the things we do.” [Natalie]

“For us we've been brought up in the era whereby socialising can mean virtual socialisation - socialising I mean... So now it means that it's - uh - now taken over per se. As in people are now more likely to communicate virtually than they are to communicate personally... For us, that's all we know now. Our parents tell us that... it's nice to receive a letter, but then I can't relate because I've never received a letter before in my life. But then I'm trying to tell them, it's so nice when you get notification on Facebook and they can't fathom how that can be interesting...” [Thuli]

Furthermore, the respondents (see below) describe how their cellphone feels like “a part of you” which highlights just how integral they perceive these devices to be in their lives.

Cellphones have seemingly become entwined with their sense of self.

“[Being on your phone] it’s a norm, it’s something that happens; you do not even think about it. You do not even think that maybe I’m spending too much time with my phone, because it’s something that you grew up doing, so it’s just a part of you, if I can say that.” [Gugu]

“[Checking your cellphone has] become a part of being a teenager – of being a youth. In that it's just become <pause> it's just become a part of you if you are using social media because the moment you see that there's [a] notification it just draws you in. You just can't help yourself” [Thuli]

Furthermore, one of the respondents described how he does not distinguish between socialising online and offline because to him “they’re the same thing”.

“...To me, it's not like I'm doing a different thing so it's not like I'm balancing social networking with social reality, so to me they're the same thing. When I'm on my phone I'm hanging out with people too, so.” [Josh]

It is possible that the perception that socialising online is the “same thing” as socialising offline compounds the situation whereby young people might forget that their cellphone is a separate device and not a part of themselves. This is discussed further in another theme later in this chapter.

4.2.2. “It’s just the norm”

The findings of this study endorse the view that norms have an influential role in young people’s cellphone behaviour (recall Walsh, White, Cox and Young (2011)). As discussed in the literature review, Christakis and Fowler (2011, p. 113) describe a norm as a ‘shared expectation as to what is appropriate’. During their interactions with peers, adolescents develop and reinforce shared norms, which is evident in their language use, fashion, and music tastes (Arnett, 1996; Brake, 1985 as cited in Davis, 2012a).

These findings suggest that it is possible that cellphone use has become a part of these shared social norms within this age-group which gives individual users the sense that they belong to their peer group. This sense of belonging as derived from social norms “plays an important role in validating adolescents' developing sense of identity” (Davis, 2012a, p. 1528). The participants in this study describe how they observe that their peers are “always on their phones” which influences their own cellphone behaviour.

“... in life we see everyone is doing it so we are, sort of, socialised into it. I mean, we will, we'll see that our friends are always on their phones and... So it becomes, because you on it all the time, it becomes something that you do not even realise you're on all the time ja.” [Natalie]

“I didn't want anything to do with Twitter because I didn't get the concept of following someone because I was thinking: ‘Why would I want to be regarded as a follower when I'm my own person?’. But then because of social pressures from everyone else [and] because now it was the ‘in thing’ to do, I felt compelled because everyone keeps on asking ‘So, what's your Twitter handle?’ So it was like pressure to say that. And sadly I conformed. <giggles>” [Thuli]

Despite being aware of what’s going around them because of social media, one of the respondents described that people are unaware of how reliant they are on it. This feeling of being connected and distant informed the title of the book *Alone Together* (recall Turkle (2011)).

“We’re constantly aware of what’s going on around us through social media and you do not realise how reliant everyone is... It’s a strange thing to thing we have all these things and they all keeping us so connected but so distant at the same time” [Jude]

One of the respondents described how being seen to be on your phone communicates to other people around you that you do not want to talk to them. In this way, it is possible that the act of being on your phone is not viewed in peer groups as being antisocial but is in fact an acceptable social norm.

“You know when that person has his or her phone and the earphones are in, it means: do not come near me, like do not talk to me because I’m not listening to you.” [Gugu]

4.2.3. Interface vs. face-to-face

The findings from this study suggest that social interactions that take place on social media are distinct from the interactions that take place face-to-face because of the presence of the screen interface. This view is shared by Turkle (2011, p. 216) who argues that cellphones are teaching us to “take people at interface value” instead of face value. The respondents below describe what it feels like to have maintained a connection with someone through a cellphone interface and how this does not necessarily translate into a connection face-to-face:

“You'll have long conversations with [another person] like, long, like from seven o'clock at night and you're still, you like actually I have to go to sleep, I have a *dawnie* [first period lecture] in an hour, like. And then you'll walk into BP [late that night] and they'll walk right past you. [And I'll think to myself] ‘Oh, okay but now why you not greeting now?’ ‘Why you no greet, you know?’ <laughs> So – and you also do not greet first either, because you're like: ‘What if I'm initiating a conversation in real life – might not be such a good idea, what if this person doesn't greet back?’ It's very complicated and weird, I get that...” [Josh]

“...you’re in my life if you’re following me on Twitter. But when we see each other face-to-face, you do not even greet each other but you are very aware of each other. <Um> I think that’s one element of the pretentiousness of social media, does that make sense? Because how can you be interactive, how can you be so fully involved in my life, how can you even comment even on things that are happening in my life but when you actually do see me in real life you can’t even say ‘Hi’?”[Thabo]

Furthermore, it seems that communication on a cellphone interface is allowed to interfere with communication taking place face-to-face. One of the respondents described how her face-to-face interactions are often interrupted by people’s agitation and urgency to connect with others on their cellphone:

“These days [people checking their phones] happens – sadly – a lot... the moment someone feels their phone vibrating they automatically take it out. Or even if they do not read it, you’ll see that they’ll be itching to read it because they’ll be like glancing at it. Like if the phone is here [indicates next to her on the table] and I see that red light flashing I’ll continue [talking] and check [my phone] and look at you and be like ‘uhumuhummm’ – yeah, like I keep looking at my phone and I keep looking at you. Like it’s almost like a cue for you [the person I’m talking to] to say ‘Okay stop now’ – so that you allow me to open up my message – yah.” [Thuli]

By allowing cellphone communication to interrupt interactions taking place, it is possible that young people are allowing ‘interface value’ to take precedence over face-to-face interactions. Another respondent reveals how connecting on social media involves the risk of causing a “big emotional mess”. However, despite her awareness of the risks involved in connecting through a cellphone interface, the same respondent described how “so many people” including herself continue to use their cellphone interface instead of resolving things face-to-face.

“I love helping people and if people aren’t telling me what’s going on or if they misunderstand what I’m saying [on social media] then it can lead to one big emotional mess which you eventually have to talk about in real life! BUT because so many people - and I suppose including myself - use cellphones to do it... I suppose it never really does get sorted out... Because once again you’re creating this new superficial level and you’re never really going to get much deeper than that....” [Lucy]

It seems that social interactions that take place a two-dimension context are vulnerable to a different set of social norms than those taking place face-to-face. This relates to Brown’s argument that a true sense of “interpersonal nuance can only be achieved by a child who is engaging all five senses by playing in the three-dimensional world” (as cited in Henig, 2008). Some of the issues raised here are addressed further in a related theme later in this chapter.

4.2.4. Pluralistic ignorance

Earlier in this chapter the activity of constantly checking your cellphone was discussed in the context of social norms and it seems that this activity is considered to be socially acceptable and expected as a means of connecting with each other. However, further discussion with the participants revealed that this activity might not be as socially acceptable as it was perceived to be. The excerpt below reveals that the respondent seems to accept the social norm of checking your cellphone despite her assertion that it irritates her when other people do it.

“[When other people are always checking their cellphones] It is very irritating <almost whispering>; I think it’s very irritating. Because, like again when I am doing it I think it’s ok, maybe you might not think it’s ok, but I think it’s ok. But when I actually see another person doing it, then it is a bit annoying, because sometimes I actually want talk to you guys... anyway it’s disrespectful, because now I think because I want to talk to you guys, and I wanted us to actually be in the room with each other to talk, so why are you guys busy on your phones!... when I’m in that situation with those people... I’ll just go out of the room. Or I’ll just take my phone and do the same thing as you guys are doing.” [Gugu]

Despite feeling that her own beliefs are in conflict with the social norm, the respondent seems unable to challenge her peers’ cellphone behaviour and is likely to let it continue or join them in doing it. Similarly, another respondent conveys her experience of a similar situation which she admits is ‘like a bad influence’.

“...if I am chilling in my room and all my friends come and sit there with me and then they’re on the phone, I am going to check out my phone [too] otherwise I am just staring at them with a mouth full of teeth, while they’re checking their recent updates. So, I will also do it. So it’s like a bad influence, always.” [Natalie]

The process of participating in the interview might have prompted the respondents to reflect more critically on the group dynamics of their peer groups. The outcome of this might have resulted in the participants voicing their dislike of what is largely considered a social norm among their peers. Floyd Allport (1924) coined the term “pluralistic ignorance” to “describe the situation in which virtually all members of a group privately reject group norms yet believe that virtually all other group members accept them” (as cited in Miller & McFarland, 1987, p. 298). Miller and McFarland (1987, p. 298) report that pluralistic ignorance “occurs in interpersonal contexts where people have behavioural evidence that they are, in fact, identical to others”. This argument is supported in a more recent study which aimed to reduce alcohol use among college students by exposing pluralistic ignorance. This study showed that

“behavioural norms depend for their prescriptive power on the perception that they have private support, and that individuals overestimate the uniformity of that support, even when they themselves feel otherwise” (Schroeder & Prentice, 1998, p. 2174). It is possible that pluralistic ignorance relates to young people’s non-stop cellphone use. Some respondents in this study express their distaste towards their peers’ cellphone behaviour without acknowledging their own behaviour:

“Well, because my friends [are on their phones] the whole time it does make me feel uncomfortable because I’m like [thinking to myself] ‘You’re supposed to be chatting to us - not to that person over the phone! We should be more interesting than what’s on your phone!’” [Lucy]

“Going out, I can’t stand people who, I can’t stand it when you go out and then you’ll have your one friend who’s on their phone the whole night when you’re in a night club, which is a place for talking and dancing and being really drunk and unruly, I mean you know, it’s just, I do not know.” [Josh]

It is also interesting that despite their dislike of the behaviour in the group, the participants seem unlikely to assert themselves in front of their peers to challenge the social norm and request that their peers disengage from using their cellphone. The participants seem to deal with the situation by walking away or matching their behaviour. It is possible that the reasons for this could be linked to their feelings of discomfort around speaking up for fear of being perceived as deviant. This was shown to be the cause in the abovementioned study on students and alcohol use. This study showed that students “experience pressure to drink and feelings of alienation not because they believe that they are in the bottom half of the distribution of comfort with drinking, but because they believe that they are outliers, that they are deviant in their level of discomfort” (Schroeder & Prentice, 1998, p. 2174). As a result of participating in a peer-orientated discussion on the topic of alcohol consumption among students, participants in this discussion reported drinking less alcohol six months later (Schroeder & Prentice, 1998). The authors of this study argue that participation in the group discussion exposed the participants to the pluralistic ignorance of the group. In the same way that a focus group was effective in curbing alcohol use in the study referenced above, it is possible that the focus group in this study had a similar impact. In response to what his experience was of participating in the focus group, one respondent described how his involvement in the focus group made him realise that his own views of social media were shared.

“<um> It was very nice to know that <um><pause> how do I put it? I do not wanna say ‘we experience it the same’ but I wanna say ‘we experience it the same’. It was nice to find out what other people think and that they actually think what I think as well. <Um> I do not know if that makes sense.” [Thabo]

“[During the focus group] I also realised that we contradict ourselves so much, like, on one hand I’d be so like: ‘Ah! Technology is so bad and I can’t believe we use it so much!’ and on the other hand I’m like: ‘Well, it’s good for socialising, it’s got lots of benefits’. So, it’s just interesting to see that we all have mixed feelings about it.” [Natalie]

More recently, in his discussion on using the social norms approach to prevent substance abuse, Perkins (2003) refers to “patterns of misperception” that existed among college students. Here he discusses how “regardless of actual problem level, perception of the pervasiveness of these problems far outpaces actuality”. According to the social norms approach model, “much of the problem behaviour may come from students following ‘imaginary peers’ as they wish to, or feel pressured to, conform to erroneously perceived group patterns” (Perkins, 2003, p. 8). Although Perkins' (2003) research relates to substance abuse among students, it is possible that his findings can be used to understand social media and cellphone use among students. Perkins (2003, p. 11) concludes: “communicating the truth about student norms becomes a constraining intervention on problem behaviour, no matter what the actual norms are”. There is the potential for this theme to be explored further in future studies on developing effective social media interventions for use among students.

4.2.5. Awkward-averse

During adolescence, young people experience heightened self-consciousness (Sebastian, Burnett, & Blakemore, 2008). This might contribute to their fears of feeling awkward in social situations. In this study, the experience of awkwardness was considered to be wholly socially undesirable and inappropriate by the participants. It seemed that the most appropriate response to feeling awkward was to avoid it by being “on your phone”. I wondered whether this positioned the cellphone as more than a device to communicate with others, but also as a device that protects and rescues young people from experiencing potential social embarrassment.

“[If] I walked into a room and I felt awkward vibes I would definitely be on my phone, I’d find a spot to sit and I would be on my phone. If someone came to me to try start a conversation, I would <pause> I would <um> I would converse with them but when conversation dies again I would go back to my phone <um>” [Thabo]

“You first try and engage with everyone in the room and then it kind of feels like every word you’re putting out is contrived and it’s like: “Oh god! This word is so forced!” –er-, and everything you say just doesn’t feel, I do not know, it’s almost like that feeling of you know: I’m digging myself deeper with every word I say. So I’m just going to shut the fuck up and sit down and text” [Josh]

Interestingly, descriptions of feeling awkward were not linked to a particular personality type but to a particular ‘social context’ which was regarded as being potentially awkward. Most notable was the polarisation between online and offline social settings in terms of relating to the experience of awkwardness. All experiences of awkwardness were almost guaranteed to happen in the physical or offline context.

“I think the first distinction [between socialising on social media and in real life] is, there’s no <pause>...fear you feel you do not have that... [on social media] there’s no fear, you could start a conversation with whoever. Whereas, in real life the fear is always here for me. I think that’s the most important sort of distinction...” [Thabo]

“I think, um, socially awkward is definitely something that is offline... because um, it’s, it’s much easier online to be sociable and to hide <um> awkwardness, like, being shy or not having anything in common with someone” [Natalie]

“[socialising on social media] about 97% of the time [there is] no awkwardness, so it’s a very free flowing conversation...” [Josh]

One of the respondents described how communicating over social media allowed her to feel in control. This enabled her to confront an awkward situation which she believes is not possible face-to-face:

“[On social media] I’m still speaking to someone on my own terms so there’s no confrontation, there’s no awkwardness because I’m controlling it. So I think people choose it...I can get into an awkward situation because I have control over it and I can delete the person off Facebook, I can block them – and they do not have to know that I’ve done that... If I was in front of that person I couldn’t just do that” [Jude]

Another respondent highlighted that despite his being able recognise that his feelings of being awkward might be self-deceptive, he still grabs his phone in situations in which his feelings of being awkward arise.

“You know logically and from an educated point of view that they’re probably not looking at you going: ‘Ah, that poor guy sitting at his table alone!’, but from an insecure young person’s point of view you’re like ‘everyone thinks I’m alone’ like you know, ‘He’s got no one’, ‘Ah! look he’s been ditched – kind of thing – at the table’. So you’d use, like you know you just grab your phone and then use it as a way of communicating, not feeling so socially awkward” [Josh]

One of the respondents described Facebook and Twitter as an “escape” because it allows people to avoid dealing with their real-life insecurities by directing their attention towards creating a “perfect life” online.

“People’s real-life insecurities invade their online profile...” [Max]

In response to why he thinks people are not dealing with their real-life insecurities, he says:

“...Facebook and Twitter are an escape because you can create your perfect life on Facebook. You can only share the photos that you look really good in. Or you can only have statuses that are really positive... People create entire personalities online” [Max]

This raises important questions about the role that this seemingly awkward-averse response has in determining the respondents’ online and offline social behaviour. Furthermore, it seems that often the choice involved in deciding whether to socialise on social media or face-to-face did not arise out of preference for social media as much as it was the result of an avoidance of real life social interactions.

“...when I’m using social media, I’ve saved your names so even when I’m talking [using social media platforms] I can always go back to our messages. Because I – people always seem to have a problem when you forget what they think is important – but you thought it’s not that important. That’s why I cringe at the thought of having to socialise like in person because now I have so much pressure to try and be attentive and everything else. Unlike when I’m using social media, I can always be doing my work at the same time but I’m also replying to you without being rude...” [Thuli]

One of the participants reflected on the possibility that real friendship could emerge between young people if both individuals are willing to overcome being awkward with each other.

“And it’s funny how, like with awkward vibes, it will always be on both sides. Let’s say when you [first meet]<hmmm> there was that tension, you just didn’t know what to say to each other and then let’s say like three months later you guys are *besties* [best friends]. And you will always talk about it [to each other] <laughs>, ‘Do you remember in the beginning like how awkward it was!’ There was just this tension and you always discover that it wasn’t just you feeling [awkward but] it was the other person as well. So I do not, I do not know why that is, it just happens <laughs>” [Thabo]

However, the same respondent seemed unaware of the fact that he had also described how he

avoided “awkward vibes” by using his cellphone (as mentioned earlier in this theme). In this way, it is possible that he is not aware that by using his cellphone to avoid awkward social situations he is also missing out on making new friendships. Whilst young people might feel their cellphone gives them a social advantage in potentially awkward situations, I wondered whether the presence of having a cellphone in their lives was perhaps allowing them to take what could be perceived as the “easy way out” (recall Turkle (2011)). Another respondent described her experience of observing her friend respond to an awkward situation. In the excerpt below, she realised that her friend did not have the capacity to confront an awkward situation which she believed would impact her friend later in life.

“The other day I was walking with a friend between lectures and the guy that she has naps [sleepovers] with was walking past and she didn’t want to speak to him so she pretended to be on her phone...” [Jude]

Later she says...

“And I realised [my friend] is just one of those people on Facebook who has lots of photos...she’s very active in that way. But when it comes to actual human communication though – like an awkward situation for example... she can’t confront it, so she’d rather use her phone to hide it... It’s a problem because [one day] when you’re sitting in a business meeting [once we’ve graduated]... and you’ve given [feedback] to something that someone has suggested... you can’t now pull your phone out and sit there and be like ‘Oh okay, now this is awkward now let’s check Facebook’... You actually have to stand up [and defend yourself]” [Jude]

This raises questions about whether or not young people are in fact at a social disadvantage in the long-run, if they consistently avoid potentially awkward face-to-face social situations. One study on the importance of feeling awkward showed that “the participants whose responses to socially awkward situations centred on avoiding uncomfortable social interactions reported an exacerbated and extended sense of social awkwardness” (Clegg, 2012, p. 274). This corresponds with another author’s argument (recall Osit (2008)) who maintains that when children spend more time “relating to machines than each other it makes social skills more difficult to maintain”.

4.3. REALationships

The role of their cellphone in their social lives was referenced throughout the interviews with the respondents. As discussed in the sections above, the associated social value of their

cellphones is that they perceive it to be a highly functional social tool because it enables them to take charge, feel more in control and connect with each other more efficiently and effortlessly. In comparison, interacting face-to-face is associated with feeling awkward and feeling less in control of oneself in a social situation. In addition, the use of cellphones is endorsed by social norms. Since the participants perceive their cellphone use to be the norm, it is possible that its constant presence in their lives feels familiar. However, this familiarity with cellphone use might not be a reflection of what feels “much more real” to the participants. This section is called ‘REALationships’ to characterise the relationships that feel authentic and “real” to the participants. One of the respondents described his experience of REALationships as follows:

“I think I really, I prefer face-to-face, I enjoy, I enjoy that sort of interaction cause its-its, it’s more real; it’s so much more real. <Um> you feel in face-to-face interactions <hmmm> even if it’s not like a physical feel, you feel. <Hmmm> when someone says something you are able to understand them , the realness of what that person is saying, you are able to observe the way they’re saying it, you observe <um><pause> I do not know. When people laugh, you know it’s different to say LOL” [Thabo]

4.3.1. Craving for real-life connections

The findings emerging from this research study bring into question whether relationships maintained through social media platforms are in fact sufficiently satisfying for the participants. Interestingly, when the respondents discussed social interactions that brought them the most fulfilment, the discussion tended to steer itself towards face-to-face interactions.

“I mean it’s nice to always be on your phone, to always be talking to someone... But then when there comes a time of need, like of needing a friend, of needing someone. And we all have those times in our lives when you’re – I do not know – you think too much about your life and all of a sudden you are depressed, you’re sad you just wanna speak to someone. And <pause> even doing it on social media is <soooo> <pause> cause I could pick up my phone and say [on social media] ‘Oh my god! I’m so sad today’ <um>... The response would be: ‘Oh man I’m so sorry, sad face aahh!; ‘You know I’m always there for you’ tahtahtah... but that’s not <pause> I do not know, that’s not <pause> in those times I think you just rather prefer a real person...I do not wanna say [receiving text messages] is not making you feel better because people read it and feel encouraged. But it’s not that interaction you yearn for in those moments, in those moments maybe <pause> I do not know you want a hug but I guess, I do not know...” [Thabo]

The excerpt above reveals the respondent's distinction between interactions on your cellphone which feel 'nice' and interactions that you 'yearn for' such as receiving a hug face-to-face.

"I mean people have so many layers, they're so complicated and everyone's got this aspect and that aspect and good and bad in their personality and you can't find that out on a phone so I would say that people are more interesting face-to-face." [Natalie]

"I'm... going to go off social media [during the detox for this research] and if I was talking to a person ... I would know if someone was talking to me they could look into my eyes and they would be facing towards me and it's just so much more real and so much more in-depth. And when you do have those deep chats you know that that person is really wanting to speak to you and you want to speak to them back... and that makes me feel so good because it's almost like peeling away that superficial level and then you can finally reach the real person inside." [Lucy]

The references above to people having 'so many layers' and the experience of 'peeling away that superficial level' reinforce the earlier discussion in section 4.2.3 entitled 'Interface vs. face-to-face'. Here, the respondent's emphasis on layers highlights the distinction between face-to-face and screen-based interaction.

"Having a conversation with someone face-to-face is more valuable than over any type of social media because you can actually read the person and understand what they're saying, look at their emotions and try work through emotions... and you can actually be there for a person whereas over social media you can send your friend a hugging face [emoticon] but it doesn't really do much" [Jude]

"...When I'm at a braai, it's more peaceful [than socialising online] ... [because] in that moment, I tend to forget whatever else is happening around me – it's like you're in that moment with your friends. So it's more fulfilling because you can actually share and laugh together... unlike when you're on social media now, whereby the laughs have been turned into 'LOLs' – so now it's... you get that the person is laughing but then it doesn't feel as good as it does when the person is actually there and you do laugh together. Because now it's been reduced to just letters to say 'LMFAO' [laughing my funny/fat arse off] unlike when you're together you can high-five each other...it just gives you – it's like you become more involved. You share all these things better when you're actually there physically. That's why it feels like it's more fulfilling." [Thuli]

The next chapter reports on the respondents' experience of the detox and discusses their experience of face-to-face interactions and how these compare to their interactions taking place online in more detail.

4.3.2. Reading body language vs. reading texts

In contrast to connecting with their peers on-screen, face-to-face engagement seemed to offer the respondents more depth to their experience of socialising. It became quite clear that the pleasure experience from socialising face-to-face related to it being a multi-sensory and tactile experience. However, it is ironic that – as it is discussed in the section above – the respondents seem to avoid socialising for the very reasons that they enjoy it.

Throughout the interviews with the respondents I identified that the presence of the physical body in social interactions both repels and attracts young people. In this way there appears to be a duality assigned to the presence of the physical body within social interactions. On the one hand, there is this perception that the screen interface protects or shields young people from the presence of their physical body which may blush, say too much or feel awkward. On the other hand, the absence of the screen interface allows people to connect with each other in a more “real” way.

Shilling (2012) discusses the role of the physical body in social theory. The author states that the body – as expressed in the term embodiment in the literature – is often sidelined in Western philosophical tradition in favour of the mind, which is deemed more reliable. Within this context, the author argues that ‘our thoughts’ are considered to be more reliable than the so-called ‘unreliable body’. This perception encourages people to seek out ways to live apart from their physical bodies. In contrast to this perception, Shilling (2012) refers to the “enfleshment of social interactions” to emphasise the presence of the physical body in social interactions. Damasio (2010) argues that the body does not exist in isolation from thought, but “constitutes a foundation of the conscious mind” (as cited in Shilling, 2012).

“Well, words [said on Skype] do not have the same effect because it's hitting the computer screen – it's not actually reaching their ears like physically and you know what I mean... If someone was to come talk to me in my res [residence] room I'd prefer that because they're being there with me. They're showing me their body language.” [Lucy]

“Okay <um>... with human touch <um> it's – I get the sense that it's actually more genuine because this is the person who's actually taking their time out to listen and everything. Unlike now, if it's on social media whereby someone will say: 'I understand'. It's different from when you actually get to see the understanding in someone's eyes. Because you know that how we conduct ourselves says a lot about what we are saying... Unlike when someone is on the phone, they can be multi-tasking - maybe they are actually in the middle of watching something - and then they just say "Ahh shame, I understand" then that's it.” [Thuli]

Another respondent compared the experience of face-to-face interaction with the sensation of drinking Coca-Cola:

“I think when you're enjoying something there's a sense of you, like from drinking coke you just enjoy it, your heart is fulfilled and your thirst is quenched...I love face-to-face interaction because like I described it, I just, I enjoy the realness of someone actually being there.” [Thabo]

Earlier sections in this chapter have identified young people's preference to disconnect from their physical bodies. However, the presence of the physical body – as identified by the respondents' references to ears, eyes, touch and heart – seems to be an essential component to experiencing “deep” and “completely honest” social interactions. This raises important questions about why young people seem to prefer online communication despite suggesting that face-to-face communication is more fulfilling and honest. One possible explanation is that young people are unaware of the degree to which their use of cellphones to socialise supports or undermines their participation in face-to-face interactions.

“<laughs> so I think to some degree [social media] has encouraged pretentiousness and you realise man you can have 150 BBM contacts but <pause> there's no one of that value to you in terms of <pause> like the real things in your life. Someone you can be completely honest with, where you come from, <um> I mean completely honest about where you come from, about your actual life, about the things you are experiencing, about the pain you are experiencing.” [Thabo]

‘Social media I find is quite a false thing – especially if you're trying to have a deep emotional chat for example...like when people (on social media) are like ‘I'm feeling suicidal - can you help me!’ – but then next day they [are] like ‘I'm fine <smiley face>’ And the thing is then you do not know what people's true intentions are because that's the one thing about humanity is that we rely on expressions to tell us when we're talking in real life...’ [Lucy]

Another respondent described her experience of being in conflict with her boyfriend over BBM and how the absence of tone of voice resulted in miscommunication:

“With my ex-boyfriend... him and I would have a fight over BBM and it would be over something mediocre – but because of the way I was interpreting his cellphone messages it came across as differently...So there’s always that miscommunication with communication...purely because you... you can’t sit down with that person and hear the tone of voice...” [Jude]

Similarly, another respondent shared her experience of having a relationship with her boyfriend that was “all about social media”:

“I think like these days, relationships are based on social media. It’s easier that way actually... So me and my boyfriend we used to chat [on social media]... all the time and stuff, and then I guess mainly that is the problem, that’s why we didn’t actually make it, because it was all about social media. When we fight, we fight through social media. When we are happy again, we [are] happy through social media. So you do not actually get to know a person, [and when] it comes to [meeting them] face-to-face [it] becomes very awkward when you guys are actually together. And you do not really know what to say because you so used to actually talking over the phone.” [Gugu]

It seems that even though it might be “easier” to have a relationship with someone else through social media that in fact the respondents quoted above realised that it makes relating to the actual person behind the screen more difficult.

4.3.3. Onscreen vs. off-screen: the real you?

Whilst there is evidence in the literature (e.g.,Carter, 2008; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007) to show that social media platforms support young people’s psychosocial development by facilitating their self-expression and encourages them to practice self-disclosure, there are also counter-arguments (e.g., Turkle, 2011) which question whether social media platforms have enabled young people to develop identities that are not representative of their authentic selves. Turkle (2011, p.258) argues that technology has provided us with the expectation that we are in a position to self-police ourselves “to the point of trying to achieve a pre-corrected self”.

In this research study, it was interesting to observe that on the one hand, young people experience feelings of power through communicating with their cellphone (as detailed in the ‘The Power is in My Hand’ section above), but on the other hand, it seems that young people are also increasingly vulnerable among their peer groups as a result of this perceived power. In this way, the power they feel on social media gives them a feeling of ‘freedom’ to control how they communicate and who they communicate with. However, there appears to be a

flipside to experiencing this level of control because the respondents in this study question the nature of their relationships on social media and whether they can trust the authenticity of these interactions.

“That is very scary because now when you're on Facebook, we actually see you as a certain person and then <um> when you [are] out of the screen, when you [are] outside the screen, you [are] something different. Now because I'm used to talking to you in a certain way, when I see you face-to-face, then I talk to you like that but then your reaction is different to when you on-screen.” [Gugu]

“...words [shared on social media] can only do so much for you. Like, you can't really read sarcasm on the internet – or sadness or happiness. You can use as many exclamation marks or ellipsis as you want to but it doesn't really show the person's feelings because they're hiding behind a screen” [Lucy]

The respondent's reference to “hiding behind a screen” positions the cellphone as a potential barrier to interactions with another individual. Furthermore, other respondents discuss how social media platforms allow you to ‘mould’ yourself into the person that you want to be.

“.. [Someone] who you know [in person]... is lazy, they do not do sport or whatever – but then on the social sites you see them playing with a soccer ball. They're moulding that person, they're moulding that jock that they would want to be but they actually aren't.” [Thuli]

“...I see that people put up their pictures [on Facebook], these edited pictures of themselves looking fabulous and you know, putting up pictures of them drunk at Tri-Var [annual Triversity sport competition] having a great time when actually they end up on the bathroom floor or whatever.” [Natalie]

In the literature, some studies support the view that social media platforms provide young people with new opportunities to present and express themselves online (e.g., Valkenburg and Peter (2011)). In this study one respondent experienced some people online as expressing themselves in a way that is “outside of” who they really are in order to separate themselves from the discomfort associated with being “just who we are”.

“...We're actually a very like complex group of young people – or rather we have a lot of complexes where we just feel very uncomfortable just who we are. [Voice softens] I think some people really do just create personas outside of – I do not know which [persona] is the real one – it's so difficult to say like.” [Josh]

It was interesting to observe that this theme emerged in discussions about how the respondents experienced other people on-screen and off-screen. Here, their experiences describe other people not being the same on-screen and off-screen. Interestingly, most of the respondents did not spontaneously share how they themselves might create an online identity

that other people might question as being inconsistent with their offline identity. In fact, during the interview one of the participants seemed to come to this realisation about herself for the first time:

“[On social media] you [are] always perfect all the time which is a bit deceiving if you think about it. Because, like... I obviously do not want people to see me looking bad so I, I’m painting like everybody else, a picture whereby I’m always perfect, I’m always clean, I’m lighter [skin toned] than I am” [Gugu]

Similarly, this experience of presenting yourself as “perfect” was reinforced by other respondents who spoke about social media platforms as only showcasing one’s positive attributes.

“[When you meet face-to-face] you get to see things about people that maybe are unconscious to them... you’ll meet a friend and you’ll see that they act a certain way about certain things and they do not necessarily know about it but you know that that’s who they are. Whereas they’re not going to put that on Facebook ... [but] you get to see all sides of people in person” [Natalie]

Despite the fact that the respondents seem to be untrusting of people’s profiles and identities on social media, there seems to be an understanding that this is socially appropriate because expressing yourself in a way that is possibly more exposing or “too personal” is scorned upon. One of the respondents described his experience of receiving details about someone online which was not positive and therefore warranted the mockery of others.

“<laughs> There’s actually a girl who took a picture of herself crying and Instagramed it [uploaded it onto Instagram]. <Uhm>... and it went viral and everyone was just on her... Like people were just teasing her, the tag line on [her] picture was actually ‘I hate my life blah blah... I just wanna die dah dah’...” [Thabo]

In response to the question of what his experience was of seeing this on Twitter, he says:

“I thought it was lame and so fake... I do not know it’s fake...I do not, it’s not something I can believe <um> when you’re crying man you’re not thinking of taking pictures of yourself and showing people that I’m actually crying... So it’s fake, it’s fake and you <err err> it’s different man if you make a status of your sadness and that’s also, I find that to be very lame as well... I imagine now she wants, I’m sure she wants to kill herself even more because the picture is viral and people are laughing, people have [her crying photo] as their profile pictures...” [Thabo]

In response to the question as to how he reacted to seeing other people respond in this way, he says:

“I’m one of the people who re-tweets and laughs you know... how can you expect to be taken seriously? What sort of comfort are you looking for? ...On social media you do not get that comfort that <extended pause> that you yearn for in those times. And I think, that’s why I’m saying you just want a physical person there because they are able to, you are able to receive that comfort.” [Thabo]

Another respondent described how her experience of being severely bullied in high school led her to go on Facebook to “cheer myself up”. She described how she slowly realised that Facebook was “actually such a harmful tool”:

“I was severely bullied in high school and I would often go to Facebook to cheer myself up but I would see all these photographs of these people, these people at my school having this amazing time without me...I knew it was hurting me inside and that it was making my parents so emotional because they didn’t know how to deal with it. They wanted me to switch off my Facebook because it was becoming actually such a harmful tool to me... But as I grew up over the years, I realised, that once again they’re all creating a facade. They’re saying: ‘Look at what a great time we’re having! Let’s show it off to other people!’... So, I told myself I would never use [Facebook] as a tool to make people jealous, or to make people feel ashamed of themselves. I’d use it as a tool to communicate my ideas and to share ideas.” [Lucy]

It seems that both the producer and the consumer of content on Facebook are caught up with using this platform as a means to feel better about themselves. This raises important questions about whether the perceived ‘freedom to be who you want to be’ online, actually frees young people to be their uninhibited authentic selves or whether platforms like Facebook achieve the opposite because people feel under pressure to present themselves as ‘perfect’ online. In the excerpt below, one of the participants identified that people who are ‘true to themselves’ are more likely to be consistent online and offline.

“I know with a lot of my friends, like, they’ll talk to me on BBM, and I will be like: ‘This does not sound like them, they’re saying things that they would never say in reality!’... I think, and this might be a very terrible thing to say but I think it’s often whether a person is true to themselves. Like if, to be one person on BBM and one person in reality I feel, like, they’re a bit confused. And then, like, some of my friends, I know they have their heads screwed on straight and they are the same in all aspects (laughs)...” [Natalie]

Another respondent shares a similar experience of feeling that the way people present themselves on social media is not the same as they would present themselves face-to-face:

“...people do some crazy things on Facebook that they won't do [in person]. You'd find that on Facebook, people seem as if they extroverts. They just say whatever they want, they start fights on Facebook, they post crazy ridiculous pictures on Facebook ... [But] when you meet them face-to-face, then they're ...shy people in their own little cocoon. They do not want to talk to people, they just introverts when you see me [in person]... so now I think when they go to Facebook, they just believe that [alter] ego, they want to be something else” [Gugu]

One of the respondents made an interesting comparison between her experience of competing in a hockey match and her experience of competition on Facebook. Unlike in hockey in which a person can only compete “as far as your abilities allow”, she described how there are “no boundaries” when it comes to competing on Facebook. On this social media platform, she described how people “go all out” in order “just to try keep up” with their peers.

“Well, with hockey <um> yes, it's competitive. But then <um> that's only natural. But then I feel like the competition on Facebook now, it makes people go out of their way – sometimes even out of their means – just so that they can stay or keep up. But when it comes to hockey you can only be as competitive as far as your abilities allow you because yah, in as much as you might not like NMMU [Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University] you in your mind know that generally they might just have a better team, in as much as you're competitive and you're trying to do your best, you won't be able to do any better because you've accepted that they have better skill. But on Facebook now it seems like there's no boundaries per se, so people tend to go all out, beyond what they're actually doing just to try keep up.” [Thuli]

It seems that performance in a hockey match is dependent on one's natural abilities but when it comes to competing on Facebook, there is no limit on the abilities one is able to showcase. In addition, it seems this participant is more accepting of “abilities” in the context of a sports match because there is physical evidence that they exist. In contrast, the “abilities” exhibited by a person's Facebook persona is perceived to be unproven.

This raises questions about whether young people are capable of connecting to their so-called ‘true self’ if they have been socialised in an environment in which their social identities have been shaped by the social norms and conventions associated with online social interactions. Within Social Cognitive Theory, “human agency is embedded in a self theory encompassing self-organising, proactive, self-reflective and self-regulative mechanisms” (Bandura, 1999b, p. 21). This identifies the importance of recognising ‘self’ as a feature of human agency and points towards a notion of ‘true self’ as involving these mechanisms associated with agency. Future research could explore this relationship further to establish how social media platforms contribute to the development of these mechanisms associated with agency.

4.4. Behind the screen: what makes youth text?

As discussed in the literature review, the way in which young people use social media varies. Therefore, it is important to understand how young people experience socialising on social media in order to understand the influence it has on their social development (recall Burke, Kraut and Marlow (2011); Burke, Marlow and Lento (2010)). This section explores what goes on “behind the screen” in order to understand better what motivates and influences how the respondents use social media.

4.4.1. Habits versus choice

The findings emerging from this research study question whether young people’s preference for online social interactions is a result of a conscious decision or whether it is a habit. The distinction between choice and habit is raised by Lindbladh and Lyttkens (2002). Lindbladh and Lyttkens (2002, p. 453) refer to habits as “repetitive and non-reflective behaviour”. This is distinct from choices whereby an individual makes a conscious decision.

“... we do not actually know why we do them ... it’s almost like – our muscles are so used to it. We just – it’s I mean, I know people, people get habits like for example someone might <um> always chew their fingernails or <um> play with their hair or we all have these little things that we do and if you do it often enough you do not even realise you are doing it. And because we are on our phones so much, even when we do not have a purpose in going on our phone” [Natalie]

“I’m used to [checking my phone every minute] – It’s just like...you [are] blinking. You do not actually have control over that it just happens. [Like] you [are] breathing, you do not actually choose to, it just happens...you know like it’s a reflex.” [Gugu]

The respondents describe checking their cellphone with reference to bodily functions such as blinking, using muscles and breathing which illustrates just how integral their cellphone use is to their social lives. Furthermore, another respondent described feeling like he has an “E.S.P. [Extra Sensory Perception] vibe” with his phone:

“I check [my phone] pretty frequently, but to be really honest I feel like I do have sort of an E.S.P. [Extra Sensory Perception] vibe going on with my phone. Somehow when I check it’s exactly at the right time. Even if my phone is on silent...” [Josh]

Interestingly, the same respondent described how checking his phone is woven into his daily routine, which possibly explains how he manages to check his phone at just the right time:

“I wake up, I check my phone, then... I take my phone with me to the shower, like start the shower up will text, text, whatever: ‘I’m going to shower now, bye’. Put my phone under my towel because steam doesn’t damage it, whatever. Go shower, get out the shower, walk back to my room and start drying my hair, whatever, then look at my phone... then I’ll get dressed check my phone again, then use my phone to check the time, or read some news things online...then I will eat breakfast and walk out. Then I’ll [still] text while I’m walking out the door...” [Josh]

The respondents also describe their experience of feeling that checking their phone is instinctive or something they have to do. Here, their experiences seem to convey that their experience of checking their cellphone is not a conscious choice:

“[Checking my cellphone] is actually rather instinctive for me... If I’m walking [to campus] with friends and I’m leaving my room, the first thing I’m going to do is grab my phone and go to all these social sites...” [Thuli]

“...with BlackBerries, the red light is <pause> I think it was the *most cleverest* invention ever because you can’t – you can’t not heed to its call. And when the red light flashes you cannot <laughs> You cannot just let it, and not do anything about it, you just have to pick up your phone, you have to see who’s messaging me and you have to respond” [Thabo]

Later, the same respondent described his fear that his Twitter use would make him fail matric:

“I was very worried in my matric because <pause> I thought I would fail matric because of tweeting. I’d even use to tweet it, I’d be like [on Twitter]: ‘I can’t actually be failing matric because of Twitter’” [Thabo]

It seems that the habit of checking a cellphone can be so pervasive that it can put young people’s studies at risk. Another respondent described how she does not “really think about” using Twitter and Facebook because using a cellphone is “part of your life”.

“ [using a cellphone] – It’s just part of your life - you do not really think about it - when you go onto Facebook and when you go onto Twitter...it’s just become such a habit. You just do it because you can...” [Lucy]

It is possible that the participants are not aware of the choices they make around using or not using social media. This highlights the importance of a study like this which aims to explore this theme of young people’s self-awareness of cellphone use further.

4.4.2. “My cellphone is my comfort zone”

The findings from this study suggest that using a cellphone is perceived to be comforting. The respondents’ associations of a “comfort zone” is likely to reflect the interpretation offered in the popular press which identifies one’s comfort zone as a behavioural state or position from which one struggles to escape for fear of the unknown (Ballach & Brede, 2011). In a similar vein, Brown (2008, p. 3) discusses the comfort zone model within adventure education and describes how “students are encouraged to think about ‘stretching themselves’ by moving outside their comfort zone. He argues that through this process students “expand their preconceived limits and by inference learn” (Brown, 2008, p. 3). Another paper also discusses the struggle involved in stepping out of one’s comfort zone (Sadowska & Laffy, 2011) . Two respondents made direct reference to their cellphone as being associated with their ‘comfort zone’:

“Um... being socially active with my phone is much, much easier and is in my comfort zone...” [Thuli]

“I have my phone with me 24/7... I know I get too comfortable when it comes to me chatting [on my phone] or whatever, unlike when we just here face-to-face... we just communicate everyday via social media... it's my comfort zone...” [Gugu]

It seems that while their cellphones are a source of comfort that allow the respondents to feel safer, using these devices also encourages the respondents to become “too comfortable”. Following on from the earlier theme which discussed some of the respondents’ experience of feeling awkward in social interactions, it is possible that the potential awkwardness associated with face-to-face social interactions makes the prospect of avoiding these interactions by using their cellphones as a source of comfort. For example, one respondent described face-to-face interactions as feeling like you are “out of your comfort zone” in the excerpt below.

“In person, if you’re talking to someone that you are sort of uncomfortable around you’ll have an awkward silence, and [think to yourself] ‘Ooh, what am I trying to say now?’ – Um – so it’s more uncomfortable in person if you, if you do not gel with the person or if you’re feeling like you [are] out of your comfort zone with people you do not know” [Natalie]

“...when I'm relaxing from other people...it's become a symbol now that when you're on your phone that people won't come and bug you 99% of the time because it looks like you're busy - even though I'm just scrolling through my Facebook just looking at random statuses that I do not care about most of the time... So for me, it's just a way so that I can get away from people or if I'm in a completely strange place where I do not know anyone at all, then I will be on my cellphone to create that safe place...” [Lucy]

Similarly, another respondent described how “daunting” and “exposing” it feels to confront a social situation without her cellphone:

“I avoid taking my phone to events where I know that there will be alcohol because I know that <giggles> once I have taken a certain amount of alcohol I might lose track of it. So it's safer in my room if I'm going out at night or to a huge party. So when I get there, I feel exposed. Now it's like I'm out there. I've got nothing to save me from – there's nothing to stop me from talking to them – so now I have to talk to them - like. So it's a very overwhelming feeling actually because I can't be quiet the entire time. I'm someone who loves talking – but then still it's daunting if I do not have my phone on me because I'm feeling like 'but I do not know all these people'. Unlike if it's on social media whereby that's the whole point of not knowing people then getting to know them...” [Thuli]

It is possible that the experience of a cellphone as a ‘comfort zone’ is exacerbated by nomophobia. Nomophobia [no-mobile-phobia] refers to the discomfort or anxiety caused by the non-availability of a cellphone (Bivin, Mathew, Thulasi, & Philip, 2013; King et al., 2013).

“I feel safer when it comes to social media... I am the most, like I'm just bubbly; I talk too much like I do on social media.” [Gugu]

There are conflicting opinions over whether or not nomophobia is a form of a behavioural addiction as described Bivin et al. (2013). Unlike Bivin et al. (2013), King et al. (2013, p.144) argue that “that the condition was not about a behavioural dependency on online communication, but rather a means of escape that originated from the impossibility of facing reality”. Future research could explore the nature of this attachment further.

4.4.3. FOMO: Fear of Missing Out

‘FOMO’ stands for the ‘Fear of missing out’ and it is a term that’s often cited in social circles among young people. Such a phrase has not been documented in the literature, but it is often given as an explanation for why young people feel compelled to get involved and not to miss out on any social activities happening around them. This research study suggests that a

cellphone plays a central role in mitigating young people's experience of FOMO by providing them with a means to access their peers immediately.

“You have that feeling of being left out or... not in the know, FOMO – fear of missing out – kind of thing when you do not have a cellphone on you...” [Josh]

“I need to be in touch all the time. I need to know what is going on all the time. I do not like to feel like I'm shut down... when... I'm not in constant communication with people, I feel like there are certain things that are happening that I do not know about and I need to know about everything that's going on.” [Gugu]

Later, the same respondent described how she goes to sleep with her cellphone on her pillow:

“So next to my pillow, there's my phone, and it vibrates so that I can actually hear it when somebody is communicating with me. So if I'm sleeping...say it's 3 o'clock in the morning and somebody like sends me a text, then I'll probably wake up and view and reply and sleep again.” [Gugu]

Young people are the first generation to grow up with the “expectation of continuous connection” (Turkle, 2011, p. 17). This is borne out in this study in which the respondents have repeatedly referred to the frequency with which they communicate on their cellphone. It is possible that the experience of FOMO is exacerbated by the fact that young people expect to maintain constant connectivity with each other. Turkle (2011, p. 16) cautions: “with constant connection come new anxieties of disconnection”.

“Because things are always moving ... So the moment you get a message, you want to catch up. So the moment you see that red light on your BlackBerry start popping up - you grab it so that you do not get left behind. So it's almost like a matter of not wanting to be out of the loop per se. You want to stay in the know.” [Thuli]

“You're constantly just sort of feeding each other with information it could be deep it could be shallow but you know. So I think what motivates me to be social is that desire to want to know.” [Thabo]

Only one of the respondents questioned whether, in the absence of his cellphone, he would actually miss out or whether this is just a feeling of missing out.

“Without [my phone] it’s just <pause> it’s just difficult to find out things even. <Um><pause> ...there are many things that I’ve only found out [on my phone] and I never received any sort of confirmation from a person. And I would have missed, you miss out or, maybe you do not actually miss out but you feel like you would.” [Thabo]

4.4.4. Comfort tweeting: Texting for perceived social fulfilment

The respondents’ description of their cellphone use as being a “comfort zone” highlights the feelings of comfort that they associate with using the device. Shields and Kane (2011) argue that online use is associated with both positive and negative psychological variables. In light of this, it is possible that the cellphone use is potentially both useful and not useful to the respondents. This relates to the earlier discussion in the literature review about how internet use should be understood in terms of how it is used and not simply as time spent online (recall Burke et al. (2011); Shields, & Kane, (2011)). The findings from this study suggest that the way young people use their cellphones is not always providing them with a sense of comfort that supports their psychosocial development. While using a cellphone provides the comfort of meeting new people and feeling connected to others, it seems that it also provides feelings of comfort by allowing young people to escape or avoid dealing with issues that happen offline.

“[My cellphone] it’s sort of a superficial friend because it’s, it’s so easy to go on your phone when you’re feeling uncomfortable when you’re around people that you do not know or anything, I mean you can go on your phone but in a way that’s preventing us from socialising and, and putting ourselves out there.” [Natalie]

One of the respondents described using her phone in order to forget what is happening in the outside world:

“Onscreen I’m pretty content. It makes me forget about what’s happening in the outside world and I can focus on one sole thing...” [Lucy]

Another respondent described how the act of being busy on his cellphone feels “socially fulfilling” but then his experience of fulfilment also appears to be deceptive. Later he identified that the excitement and expectation of being on your phone can sometimes be a ‘mirage’.

“...When you’re very busy on your phone and you are talking [through text message] to five people; in that moment you’re feeling socially fulfilled, you’re happy, you’re busy” [Thabo]

The same respondent says:

“...There’s a sense of sadness you get because now you were so excited that there was actually a message and now there actually isn’t. It was just a mirage or whatever. <Um> but – ja – you constantly have to check your phone because you – It’s nice to know that people want to speak to you.” [Thabo]

One of the respondents described how he resists having to spend time in his own company and his phone enables him to avoid confronting feelings of isolation because he is busy texting and checking messages from the time that he wakes up until he goes to sleep at night.

“...being alone is feeling isolated... maybe I just do not like my own company...okay, being alone is, is when you really have [conversations with yourself] 'Hi, this you, it's time to talk to yourself'...No, I do not know... I text until I go to sleep at night and when I wake up in the morning, first thing that I do is check all my messages. I feel a little empty if I do not have any...” [Josh]

It seems that the comfort associated with using a cellphone, provides young people with a means to escape confronting feelings of loneliness. I have coined the expression ‘comfort tweeting’ to describe this theme emerging from the findings. ‘Comfort tweeting’ relates to ‘comfort eating’ (which has several variations as referred to in the literature such as emotional eating, eating mindlessly or binge eating). Emotional eating is broadly characterised by the need to use eating to alleviate negative mood states and not as means to satisfy one’s hunger (Ganley, 1989; Van Strien, Frijters, Bergers, & Defares, 1986). In this study, the term does not describe eating behaviour but relates to the respondent’s consumption of social media. Furthermore, another study on emotional eating describes the escape theory which argues that “overeating in response to negative emotions results from an attempt to escape or shift attention away from an ego-threatening stimulus that causes aversive self-awareness” (Heatherton & Baumeister, 1991 as cited in Spoor et al., 2007, p. 365).

Furthermore, one study on overeating suggests that it “might serve a defensive or masking function” (Herman & Polivy, 1988 as cited by Polivy & Herman, 1999, p. 155). Heatherton and Baumeister (1991) refer to binge-eating as an escape from self-awareness in

which the overeater avoids broadly meaningful thought by narrowing their attention towards the immediate stimulus in their environment. The findings from this study suggest that there are similarities in the type of eating behaviour that prompts ‘comfort eating’ and the type of cellphone behaviour that prompts “comfort tweeting”. This is discussed in more detail in the section below.

This relates to the earlier reference in the literature review to Turkle’s (2011, p. 280) argument that the social ties we establish online are not “the ties that bind – but they are the ties that preoccupy”. However, it is also possible that socialising online is not only one or the other but can facilitate both. In this way, these findings propose that ‘comfort tweeting’ happens when the user goes online to keep themselves preoccupied as a means of avoiding dealing with or confronting a particular situation or feeling. For example, it seems that the respondents tended to use their phones to avoid confronting social situations in which they feel awkward.

4.5. A very peacock system

Since social networking sites have been positioned as another platform through which young people socialise, it is possible that they have simultaneously become a new forum through which young people seek out and offer social validation to their peers.

“[People] are looking for online validation. They’re looking for people to say: ‘Oh you look so good in that photo – you’ve lost so much weight’. And I’m like [to myself]: ‘You do not know what that person looks like in real life – that [photo online] could be Photoshopped!’” [Max]

“...Being online is just like a validation from the community or from the friends to say ‘I’m interesting’. So that’s the main purpose for me of going there [on social media]. That’s why I take time to think about what I’m going to tweet because I would love for it to be re-tweeted. I would love for someone to ‘favourite’ it. So yah, that’s the purpose of it...” [Thuli]

The purpose of using social networks seems to be more than just a communication platform. They are also a platform through which to receive validation and affirmation from peers. However, unlike face-to-face interactions, Facebook allows people to edit the photos they post on their social media profile pages using Photoshop.

“[Facebook] is also a very peacock system, people love using Facebook to show off their lives. It’s all about who has the best holiday, you know, 'want to look at my new cat I got', 'Oh I just bought these gorgeous like shitty ornaments from Pep, what do you think guys?’” [Josh]

As described above, one of the respondents referred to Facebook as “a very peacock system” and another respondent discussed her how she will edit her profile photo to make hers “prettier than yours”.

“I think that is the most irritating part of Facebook – because now you will edit your picture. Now I have to edit mine prettier than yours and then I’ll make my picture different from the person I actually am at the moment. So now it’s a competition between who has the lightest skin, who has – um – this kind of brand of clothes, who has this and that? And so me, when it comes to such things, I do not really care about it.” [Gugu]

“Even when it comes to posting pictures [on Facebook] as well, it's also a competition as to who's the prettiest. That's why people have to do this Photoshop business because they're trying to stay like in competition with the next person...I'm noticing more and more that people are wanting to take pictures. Before [we were on Facebook] people weren't as interested in taking pictures because the pictures were just for them. But then now, because they know that those pictures can be posted to be for everyone, more and more people take pictures just to prove people that 'I'm also interesting – I also do this and that!' So yah, it becomes very, very competitive.” [Thuli]

The competitiveness associated with the Facebook platform has introduced young people to a new playing field for acquiring and seeking out social validation.

“Well, um, sometimes I would have just woken up and then I see something interesting and then I’m like 'Oh yah, let me tweet about that' – but the only reason I’m thinking of even tweeting it, is because I think it will be interesting for everyone else. So it’ll be like, I’m trying to find something that I think everyone else or people are going to see it or find it interesting. That's why I do not post that 'I'm eating' – because that's of no interest to everyone else. But if I'm eating ostrich eggs at that moment, then I'll be like 'Ah! People will think this is so cool – So then I will post: 'oh yah! enjoying this ostrich eggs'. So yah <giggles>” [Thuli]

It appears that although Facebook is used to seek out validation from your peers, it is important not to come across to everyone else that you are ‘too desperate’ for their approval or appear to be too ‘attention-seeking’.

“...it just feels like you are displaying your insecurities to everyone else. Because almost everyone has access to the internet. So by doing this, you're exposing yourself by telling everyone that you need their approval. You're supposed to make it subtle; you're not supposed to show everyone that you're so desperate for them to like that picture.” [Thuli]

“When I'm like lurking on Facebook you always notice the person who... updates their profile picture every single week with this new place they've been to or the new Photoshopped face...and you can see people getting 20, 30, 50 ‘likes’ and you can see that people are attention-seeking and they have that hunger for that...” [Lucy]

Interestingly, the competition seemed to be associated primarily with Facebook. Other social media platforms such as WhatsApp were considered to be less ‘competitive’ as described by the respondent below.

“[If you] post a status and then you make spelling errors and whatever, and then people will judge you on that; people will be like ok so now you do not know this and this and that. It means now you are actually comparing yourself with the person who actually posted the status. Now it's a competition of who's actually most intelligent? Who's actually prettier? Who knows- like things? Maybe who has DSTV at home? Things like that, unlike with WhatsApp, people do not actually care about that because sometimes spelling mistakes do happen.” [Thuli]

4.6. Audience Management

While many research studies focus exclusively on a specific social media platform, this study explored the way in which young people socialise across all the different social media platforms using their cellphones. This approach uncovered very interesting insights into the choices young people make when deciding which social media platform they want to use. I've called this section ‘audience management’ because managing their social profiles seems to involve a great deal of effort and time to construct and maintain these identities.

“Facebook; it's about creating, like, an identity on line that people can look at. Whereas, BBM is more about chatting to people... BBM and WhatsApp [are] more about connecting with people, so, more socialising, whereas I think Facebook is more about presenting yourself a certain way.” [Natalie]

“On Whatsapp and Tumblr I'd definitely be more expressive about my opinions and maybe just add in a few swear words if I really wanted to get my point across. I would definitely be more opinionated, more loud, very intense... I'd post a lot more pictures or statuses.... but if it's on BBM or Facebook, I moderate what I do. I check if I've said something wrong that could offend someone - if it's going to cause rifts...” [Lucy]

Both of the participants referenced above seem to moderate their communication on Facebook in order to present themselves in a “certain way”. Another respondent described

how he “wants to manage each [social media network] differently” because he does not want to disclose details about himself to his pastor in the same way he would to his “buddies”. It seems that one of the perceived benefits of communicating across these platforms is that young people are able to manage how they present themselves to different social media audiences.

“I want to manage each of them differently... I’m constantly updating on Twitter cause that’s the constantly updating platform.... And the thing about Facebook you must also remember, you have like your family, your school principal, your pastor. So even the things you want to share on your Facebook will be different from things you wanna share on your Twitter. [On] Twitter, there <um> you have your friends, every friend, your buddies, so they will say: ‘*Yho!* last night was such a jol’ but you would not want to say that on Facebook because you do not want your aunts and uncles thinking that you were drunk last night.” [Thabo]

Another respondent makes the distinction between social media platforms where she talks to people that she knows, compared to Facebook which is primarily used for meeting new people.

“...the personal one is...WhatsApp because those are the people that know. [On] Facebook it would be different because it is just a completely different –ah – ball game. Because there're so many people that sometimes you do not even know them. They just add you on, on Facebook and then bam! People just want to talk to you. So with Facebook it serves a purpose whereby you just meet people from other countries... sometimes you do not even want to know a person, you just want to see their pictures... But with WhatsApp it’s different because you do not even need to post pictures, you just need to talk to them.” [Gugu]

The perception that Facebook is ‘more public’ than other platforms is shared by many of the respondents. However, one respondent described his Facebook as being for ‘friends only’:

“WhatsApp: that's for chatting to people who firstly aren't always near a computer. It's your on-the-go system, whatever <um> Then you have Twitter, which is just kind of like where you can rant and rave and send everything out and it's fun because you can kind of get your stuff read by random people all over the world, it's not like Facebook which is reserved for friends only...” [Josh]

One respondent described how she feels she has to maintain the different personas she creates for each different platform which involves balancing her “prim and proper” persona with her “drinking socialite” persona.

“On WhatsApp, because my parents are also on WhatsApp – it means that my status can't be provocative <giggles> ...It means that I have to maintain the prim and proper child, the one who says 'Do not disturb, I'm reading!' – yeah, that one. But then now when I'm on BBM, that's the one where I'll be like 'Yeah! We're getting wasted tonight!' or 'That was an epic night!' - Because I know this forum is for my friends, people who understand me - who are also <uh> it's like each social media is its own context” [Thuli]

Later she says:

“On BBM, it's a select group. It's much smaller [so we'll] most likely be more revealing. On Facebook now, there's also the issue of the general public that's there. I feel like I also have to maintain that persona as well... Maybe – now I'm trying to balance the prim and proper one and the <um> drinking socialite per se” [Thuli]

It appears that each different social media platform has its own distinct social purpose which informs how the respondent decides to use it to communicate. This seems to influence the way in which the participants present themselves online. Furthermore, each social media platform seems to impose a particular set of social conventions on the people who use them.

“It means that you can have <um> sort of a more complicated way of representing yourself on Facebook and everything, because you can have your different selves, almost on different [social media platforms]...” [Natalie]

It seems that respondents are very aware of how they present themselves on the different social media platforms that they use in order to maintain how they come across to each audience. It is possible that some of their decision-making was informed by social norms, which have created a sort of 'etiquette' that provides guidelines for what is deemed appropriate and inappropriate forms of online social behaviour (Buckingham, 2008). For example, the respondents pointed out that frequently updating your Facebook status was a social *faux-pas* because it implies that you're desperate for attention. However, the respondents disclosed that they are free to update their Twitter status as frequently as they like without risking their social reputation.

“..Twitter is about updating your status so you do not look like, I mean on Facebook you even though it's got a status function everyone is always like <sarcastic voice> 'Oh, you know Jess is always is like updating her Facebook status – she has no life!' Whereas, on Twitter they're like 'Oh cool, Jess just made the funniest tweet ever. You should follow her [on Twitter], she's hilarious!'” [Josh]

It seems that a considerable amount of decision-making is involved in selecting which social media platform to use and how to use it which is strongly motivated by an underlying concern about “what people think of me”. Furthermore, the desire to communicate to

different audiences across different social media platforms could also be a function of what happens in late adolescence during which individuals move away from identifying with a core group of friends or clique towards identifying with multiple peer groups whose boundaries are increasingly fluid (Brown, 1990; Rubin et al., 2006 as cited in Davis, 2012a). Davis (2012a p. 1528) reports that studies have shown that this loosening of peer bonds during late adolescence “coincides with a growing sense of autonomy”.

4.7. Conclusion

In this chapter, six overlapping superordinate themes emerged from the data collected during the first interviews – before their social media detoxes – with the participants. This chapter provides insights into understanding how young people experience a cellphone in their lives and highlights the integral role that this device has in mediating the way in which the respondents navigate their social lives. Use of a cellphone is so pervasive within their peer groups that its presence and perceived value in their lives has been normalised. The next chapter presents the findings from the second interviews with the participants after their experience of the social media detox.

Chapter 5: Findings and discussion of the second interviews after the detox

Following on from the previous chapter which reported on the findings from the individual interviews which took place before the social media detox, this chapter uncovers the findings from the second interviews with the participants after their social media detoxes. A great deal of the data obtained from these interviews supports the findings discussed in the previous chapter. This chapter highlights novel findings following the social media detox. Three overlapping superordinate themes emerged from the second interviews and these are listed in the table below. As seen in the table below, each theme consists of several sub-themes which are discussed in detail in this chapter.

5.1. The power is in me

- 5.1.1. Me, My Cell & I
- 5.1.2. Co-dependent relationship
- 5.1.3. Self-control vs. cell control
- 5.1.4. Offline social ability

5.2. Mind the gap

- 5.2.1. Offline social alternatives
- 5.2.2. Offline Outsider
- 5.2.3. Levels of self-awareness: before and after the detox

5.3. Social me sans social media

- 5.3.1. "On your toes" online
- 5.3.2. Socially unfit = socially awkward
- 5.3.3. Face-to-face is actually fulfilling
- 5.3.4. "Quality" levels with "quantity"

5.1. The power is in me

5.1.1. Me, My Cell & I

In the previous chapter I discussed how the perception among the respondents was that their cellphones enable them to feel more in control in social situations. In this way their capacity to engage and interact in social situations is literally in the hand that holds the cellphone. Furthermore, the previous chapter also uncovered that – to these respondents – their cellphone was considered to be “a part of you”. In the second interviews after the detox, the respondents became more aware of their relationship with this device. I have called this

section “Me, My Cell & I” as derived from the phrase: “Me, Myself and I” but unlike the latter, the emphasis here is on recognising oneself in relation to one’s cellphone.

“...Before the detox my phone was just a part of me, me and my phone we could not get separated. Wherever I went, I took my phone with me, even to classes. But now, and during the detox, I just, I had to leave my phone at home... it felt awkward at first, but then when the days actually just went along, it just felt a bit normal. Because I could actually <um> see things around me, what was going on around me, and see that there are actually other people who are actually doing the same thing as I am. So now me and my phone do not have that attachment anymore...” [Gugu]

Despite expressing her enjoyment at not having to reply to text messages, one of the respondents spoke about her experience of feeling abandoned during the detox. From the excerpts below it seems that her cellphone was entwined with her sense of belonging and being connected to the world. She compares being able to check her cellphone before she goes to bed with the comfort of being “tucked into bed”:

“Sometimes [during the detox] I enjoyed just being by myself and being [without any] pressure to talk to people and reply. But then at the same time I also felt like I was by myself and that I had been abandoned. So it was like mixed feelings. But I actually like to think that for most of the time I did enjoy the peace and quiet without all the hassles of having to reply or having to keep up with whatever is happening.” [Thuli]

Later she says:

“The least enjoyable [experience during the detox] was when I was trying to sleep <giggles> ...usually [just before I go to sleep] I’m also on WhatsApp... it’s almost like being tucked into bed... But now without my phone it was very quiet... The room was very still and I just felt like there was no action whatsoever. It just felt as though there was no progress. There was nothing in my life. Yeah, so that was the most difficult. When I was now going to bed because that’s when I’m really online, that’s when I’m most active because that’s the time when I’m by myself now. So like I said I need someone or something to always fill that gap so that I do not feel like I’m missing out anything. So, now, when I’m about to sleep I just take out my phone and I start talking to people and then I go to bed. But then during the detox now, I couldn’t do that. And that’s when I was feeling abandonment and all that. Those were the low times for me, when I was about to sleep.” [Thuli]

One of the respondents described his anger when he realised how dependent he had become on BBM and how it felt like a part of him was gone during the detox.

“...I do not know man, it just makes me angry to think that <pause> you do not realise that you – because when you’re doing it [using your cellphone]... it’s just... it’s part of your life or whatever. But <pause> the feeling that you get when that thing is taken away [during the detox], you feel so, there’s a part of you that’s gone. But actually, it isn’t a part of you that’s gone because you’re still a whole person... So it makes me angry to think... how can I be dependent on, on BBM?” [Thabo]

Through their social media detox the respondents experienced what it felt like to be separated from their cellphones and social media networks. On the one hand, this experience evoked negative feelings of anger and abandonment and on the other hand it brought positive feelings of being less hassled and more engaged in one’s physical surroundings.

“[The detox] made me feel quite – what’s the word? – it made me come in feel quite, like I was thinking about it ... when you're just thinking about something quite deeply...yeah, I just went through like a lot of self-reflection and was just [asking myself]: ‘Was I communicating effectively through this superficial media?’, ‘Would I do better in real-life?’ ...” [Lucy]

“[During the detox] it was quite weird because I’m mean it’s not like the phone has some supernatural power, it’s just that, that, it unconsciously demands your attention because you’ll see a little flashing light and you’ll want to go on your phone” [Natalie]

Using their cellphone was so seemingly an integral part of their lives that the experience of not using their cellphone was described as being “quite weird”. It seems that the detox experience prompted the respondents to question the way in which they related to their cellphone and in doing so realise truths about themselves.

5.1.2. Co-dependent relationship

The view that co-dependency exists between society and technology is not new (Berthon, DesAutels, & Butaney, 2010). These authors argue that “technology and society are reciprocally linked, such that the trajectory of each is co-dependent and emergent” and they refer to the observation made by Bonhiem that “created creates creator”(1935, as cited in Berthon et al., 2010).

“We are very reliant [on technology] but our lifestyles are shaped around that...We’ve become so reliant on it that it’s just accepted.” [Jude]

Co-dependency is described by Wegscheider-Cruse (1985, as cited in Morgan Jr., 1991, p. 724) as being “a specific condition that is characterised by preoccupation and extreme dependency (emotionally, socially and sometimes physically) on a person or object”. The respondents’ experience of relating to their cellphones suggests that these relationships are

co-dependent because they seem to be preoccupied and dependent on this device. In response to the question about how their relationship with their cellphone before their detox compared to their relationship after their detox, the respondents provided the following feedback.

“My relationship with my phone before the detox was somewhat co-dependent because I needed the phone to stay connected and the phone needed me to plug it in... but now [after the detox] I’ve been on Facebook once this morning... and I’m like [to myself]: ‘I’m not going to die if I do not check it!’ [Max]

“[During the detox] I started noticing stuff that I could give up, quite easily, [more] than other things... like I just found out how much of a crutch it is and how much it isn’t...” [Josh]

One of the respondents described how the detox made her realise that her dependency on her cellphone felt similar to being addicted to cigarettes:

“Before the detox I loved my phone. But now, I’m a bit – okay resentful is a strong word – but then something along those lines because <um> okay I’ve always told people that the reason why I do not smoke is because I do not want to be dependent on something. I do not want to be told... I do not want the cigarettes to control me... But now I actually realised like how the smokers [ask] ‘Do you have a smoke?’ and [are] desperate and everything, I’ve turned out to be that person when it comes to my phone. Like, now I’m actually feeling like I shouldn’t value my phone that much ...this experience just made me realise that <Ah!> something has to change <giggles>” [Thuli]

Another respondent described how inseparable she and her cellphone had been before the detox:

“[Before the detox] let’s say my cellphone is a real-life being – let’s call her Sally – Sally would be everywhere I go. She would be hooked onto my arm. I’d be constantly asking her questions: ‘What’s happening today?’ She’d be with me at lunch, supper and next to me in bed. But after the [detox] experience, we started hanging out less and I didn’t need her as much anymore. I didn’t need to link arms with her... I didn’t feel the need to talk to people through her but rather directly to the other people...” [Lucy]

It seems that it was through the participants’ involvement in this research study and their detox experience that they began to recognise the nature of their relationship with their cellphone and began to question whether this relationship was beneficial to them.

“I actually realise that I was actually relying more on my social media. So maybe that was actually the reason why I couldn’t make friends – like meaningful friends. So now without my phone [during the detox] I actually realise that there are people around me who can actually be those meaningful friends...” [Thuli]

The respondents below describe social media as being a “safety net” and “cushion” which highlights the level of protection they felt that it gave them. It is possible that before the detox

they had not been aware of how their social media use had dominated over other forms of social participation available to them.

“...okay before the detox.. I thought you could survive without having to approach people [face-to-face] because I had the cushion of social media. But then now without social media, I actually realised that it's something that's actually vital...” [Thuli]

“...When I'm on – um – BBM or Facebook it kind of creates like this safety net around me so that people do not bug me. And so [during the detox] it...kind of made me feel uncomfortable and nervous but like I realise like how much I do not actually need it because I realise how much I depend on reading news that means nothing to me.” [Lucy]

On the one hand, it seems that for some of the respondents the detox experience had been useful in making each of them aware of their co-dependency on their cellphone. This, in turn seemed to have motivated them to shift this dynamic in a way that empowered them. On the other hand, the experience of the detox for one of the respondents served as confirmation that he was not in a position to shift this dynamic. He compares his relationship with his cellphone to a dysfunctional marriage:

“...My experience with my phone before the detox was – I do not know if this will make sense – sort of unconscious. And my experience with my phone after the detox is very much more conscious <hmm> in the sense that <pause> now I'm aware of sort of the unfounded value that I place on my phone that I wasn't aware of before. Like I knew there was like value I placed on my phone, as in I knew it was a very important thing... I'd always say it's sort of an extension of myself. But I didn't know [until after the detox] I put that much value on it that... It's actually a really serious relationship and maybe I could say my experience with my phone after the detox was a marriage that I thought was good happy marriage. And then the detox showed me like, my wife is cheating after the detox now I'm aware <laughs>. Hmm...” [Thabo]

Despite his now knowing about the so-called 'infidelity' that exists, the respondent is not motivated to and/or feels incapable of altering this dynamic and described his intentions to “stay in the marriage” despite acknowledging that this ‘is not necessarily good’.

“...but that’s what makes me angry <pause> some more even. Because even in my consciousness, in my consciousness I’m still sort of <pause> staying in marriage and I know all the things that are happening and I know the guy she’s cheating with, but I’m not gonna confront her about it. I’m just gonna stay in the marriage because I feel like it’s good for me and when I can find something better I do not know <hmmm>. ...Which is not necessarily good because knowledge is supposed to bring some sort of shift... The more you know there more you’re supposed to be conscious of the things you’re doing and the more you’re supposed to chop and change things and so that they are better for your inner self. But the thing is I know I can’t, in fact the detox showed me that I really can’t and to be honest, as conscious as I am, I do not want to stop. And <pause>... I could lie and say: ‘Oh after the detox... I do not use my phone too much now...’, but I do not want [to do that]...” [Thabo]

It seems that the respondents in this study were unaware of the nature of their co-dependency on their cellphones before the detox. This brings into question whether young people are aware of how the nature of their relationship with their cellphones influences their decision-making and subsequent behaviour with regards to how they socialise – both online and offline.

5.1.3. Self-control vs. cell control

In the previous chapter, I discussed how the respondents described that their cellphones enabled them to take control in social interactions and seemed to transcend their function as digital communication devices. In this way their capacity to socialise was directly associated with the use of their cellphones. In response to these findings from the first interviews, I asked the respondents to comment on their experience of ‘control’ during the detox. The question was intentionally vague so as to not to make assumptions about whether the respondents experienced being more in control or more out of control during the detox. Rather, the aim was to find out how each respondent would interpret the question for themselves.

The participants’ experience of ‘control’ during the detox suggests that some of them experienced feeling more in control while others experienced feeling more out of control. Furthermore, their experiences relate to theories on self-control which were discussed previously in the literature and overlap with discussions on agency and the respondents’ capacity to self-regulate their social behaviour (e.g., Audrain-McGovern, Rodriguez, Tercyak, Neuner, & Moss, 2006; Posner & Rothbart, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

In response to this question, some of the respondents described how the detox had shown them how controlling social media was in their lives. Through their experience of the detox, these respondents described how they had claimed a sense of control over themselves. This experience seems to have left them feeling more capable and their sense of agency is evident in their descriptions below.

“[After the detox] I know I’m in control where I do not need to have Facebook open. I do not have to have the Twitter open. I can hide them and be perfectly content with going about my day...” [Max]

“[During the detox] I felt more in control. Because I think sometimes our phones can control us and not having it [meant] I was in control of my time management; my phone wasn’t a distraction...” [Natalie]

Another respondent described what it was like for her to reconnect with her own sense of self-control. She felt relief and that a burden had been lifted off her to know that her phone was not actually controlling her life.

“I feel relieved actually because now [after the detox] it’s like a burden has been lifted off me because now I’m thinking if I manage to cut down on the usage and everything. It means that I get some control back. Because yah – here I was thinking that I thought I was like powerless, like my phone is the one that decides what I’m doing in that moment. But then I feel if I cut down the amount of time I spend on social media then I’ll be able to take some power back and I can actually be independent. ‘Cause it’s funny how, I’m thinking to myself that I’m independent but then, the phone is actually controlling me. Like social media is controlling me – [instructing me] when I should login and everything else.” [Thuli]

Another respondent realised that she had unknowingly given her cellphone permission to control her life before the detox:

“I can do whatever I want to do because... my WhatsApp is not really controlling me. I am actually the one who is giving it permission to control me, in a way. So now I know that I can actually take control over it.” [Gugu]

The respondents seemed to express an element of surprise when they realised that they were more capable of encountering social situations without their cellphones. This is possibly because they had not anticipated that – before starting the detox – they would cope with socialising without their cellphones to the degree that they did manage to during the detox. It is possible that they had not considered socialising without their cellphone before participating in this research.

“[During the detox] I felt socially exhausted because people were talking to me, but I also felt quite good because I was sticking to something and I felt quite independent because I was not dependent on my cellphone.” [Lucy]

However, not all of the respondents related to the experience of being more ‘in control’ during social interactions. One of the respondents commented that the detox experience had confirmed in his mind that he was not in control.

“...<laughs> I’m not in control of myself, hey. Because my mind is saying something else but my body is doing another. <Hmm> or the other way around, I’m not sure which one’s which. But [one of them] either my body or my mind...was saying ...‘Do well in the detox’ ...‘and just do not go on your BBM.’ But the rest of me did not respond. Hmm, <pause> and that’s what <eish!> it makes me angry to know that I’m not in full control... I’m a whole person but there’s an inconsistency sort of within myself. I do not know... I do not like that <hmm>...it will just be so much better for you in the long run, but you still just sort of choose to ignore that very same thing. I do not know, I think it’s just very weird.” [Thabo]

Another respondent compared his experience of ‘control’ during the detox to the eating disorder, anorexia. Polivy and Herman (2002, p. 187) discuss the causes of eating disorders like anorexia and suggest that they may “represent a way of coping with problems of identity and personal control”. In this way, the respondent’s reference to his experience of control was not linked to feeling more liberated or more self-empowered but rather suggests that this response to the detox was in itself pathological.

“I just feel like we lack control over our own lives. We always feel we are working for someone else; we’re working to pay someone else. I think it is important in any little ways we can get control over our lives... I’ve often spoken to friends like who suffer from anorexia, and they said they did it as a control mechanism because they felt so out of control. And I guess like giving up something like social networking [during the detox]... it gave me a lot of control because it was like this was one thing in my life that I can actually say: ‘No, I’m not going to do this, even though it’s a societal expectation!’ ...Like a civil virtue almost...” [Josh]

During the detox, some of the respondents reported feeling more in control, whilst others felt less in control. Future research could investigate this further to establish whether the experience of feeling more or less in control of social situations is linked to a young person’s capacity to recognise their agency.

5.1.4. Offline Social Ability

The interviews with the participants in the second interviews revealed interesting insights into how the respondents' experiences of socialising offline compares with their experience of socialising online. In particular their responses to questions about 'social ability' suggest that the detox provided the respondents with the opportunity to recognise that they did "have the abilities to socialise without [my cellphone]".

"...having gone without a phone for the last week [during the detox], it's sort of shown that actually I have the abilities to socialise without it." [Natalie]

"I think I had [social ability] before [the detox] but then it was one of those [abilities], you know you have it, but you do not do much about it. It's almost - let's say maybe an athlete who knows that they can have some speed but they do not take part in any race. But [the detox] gave me the chance to actually use that skill... I've always [thought] I can approach people. But then now with the detox it was making me realise that I can actually really do it. And actually be able to approach people and not just know that I do not mind approaching people but then now that I can actually do it." [Thuli]

It is possible that the respondents had neglected their ability to socialise offline prior to the detox because they were too preoccupied with socialising on their cellphones to focus on interacting with each other face-to-face. The respondent below described how she did not give herself "a chance to actually explore things that I had in me" before the detox because she was "too much in my phone".

"...the ability for me to actually – be in the presence whereby people just share their experiences with me <um> experiences that are just so close to their hearts. It means that I've always just had that ability – but because I was just too zoned in [to my cellphone] I didn't give it a chance. I didn't give myself a chance to actually explore things that I had in me. People trust me that much [for them] to actually tell me those things. So, I'm actually able to – and to listen to people. But then because I was too much in my phone, that ability was not visible." [Gugu]

Another respondent experienced that she had 'blossomed' during the detox:

"I think I have evolved for the better [during the detox] because initially I was – People would tell me that I'm a friendly person and I make friends easily, but then there was no depth to that. It was just 'hi and bye'. I'd just ask a few questions... I was just being civil... With the detox now I actually realise that I've really changed. I've blossomed per se (giggles). I'm now connecting better with people, so yah." [Thuli]

In contrast to the respondents above who describe how the detox allowed them to recognise the abilities that they had to socialise in offline situations, another respondent described how

disappointed he felt in himself when he realised he could not stay away from BBM despite his intentions to do so:

“I’m actually so disappointed in myself because I saw [the detox] as a challenge and I thought it was a challenge I could conquer, but like I’m feeling, like a bit of a failure because I can’t stay away from BBM, <wow!> <pause> <shooo!>” [Thabo]

The same respondent described his frustration at feeling compelled to use social networks to ‘see’ what is going on in other people’s lives which seems to override his motivation to “make things happen” in his own life:

“[During the detox] I had to see what was going on, I do not know <laughs> I had to see what was going on in other people’s lives [on social media platforms]. And that sounds horrible because I have my own life too, [so] why aren’t I trying to make things happen in mine? <hmm>” [Thabo]

These perceptions around social ability coincide with the idea of self-efficacy. Perceived self-efficacy “corresponds to the individual’s conviction of being able to master specific activities, situations, or aspects of his or her own psychological and social functioning” (Bandura, 1997 as cited in Bacchini & Magliulo, 2003, p. 339). These authors discuss how Bandura (1997) has demonstrated that “convictions of efficacy, together with personal aspirations and standards, are among the principal determiners of human action” (Bacchini & Magliulo, 2003, p. 339). These authors point out that no individual would be prepared to make an effort if they were not convinced that they were able to have an effect on the outcome of events (Bacchini & Magliulo, 2003).

5.2. Mind the Gap

It seems that the detox exposed or created several gaps in the respondents’ social lives. I’ve called this section ‘Mind the Gap’ to describe this experience which emerged from data collected from the second interviews.

“I knew that I depend on like WhatsApp mostly, too much, because I could actually like feel when I was walking down to lectures and stuff that I’m actually missing something. Something’s actually missing...” [Gugu]

“I realised that I actually felt that something was missing... something really was missing because now I had lost contact with people whom I usually spoke to... it made me realise that I do rely on social media a lot” [Thuli]

“I just needed to [check Facebook], it was like something was missing from my life...”
[Josh]

During their social media detox, many of the respondents described how they felt that something was missing from their lives. This section explores how the respondents reacted and responded to these gaps in their social lives.

5.2.1. Offline social alternatives

One of the gaps exposed by the detox was the gap between offline and online social contexts. In the first interviews, the respondents reported using social media platforms out of habit and their experience of using it seemed to be unconscious. The detox imposed limitations on their cellphone and social media use and the respondents described how they had to find alternative ways of socialising during this period.

“... [During the detox] I had to find more things to keep myself busy... I had to go for a run or go for a walk or do something constructive. So it was quite motivating in a weird way. I had to get up and do things.” [Jude]

“[During the detox] I just felt incomplete per se – I know it's weird but then – I just felt like something had to cover up for that gap – that the phone had – like without my phone there was like a space. So now I had to find some things to fill those spaces. So that's why, I've resorted to visiting people and writing poems because that space needed filling.” [Thuli]

Later in the interview she added:

“I actually wrote a poem <giggles> Like, I had to resort to things that I had given up to try and find entertainment. And then, the other time I had to leave my phone in my room and went to my friend's room and I was like 'Let's talk'. And she was so shocked. She [asked] 'Why are you in my room?' [I responded] 'No, we just need to talk you know' and then yah - because I also didn't tell her about this thing [the detox]. So then yah, we just talked for a while and then yah, later on I went back to my room and I just went to sleep afterwards.” [Thuli]

The participant's arrival in her friend's room was met with what she described as shock. This reaction implies that the respondent's friend was not familiar with receiving a visit from her because it is possible that they interacted with each other mostly online. Again, a measure of surprise was also experienced by another participant. She described that – for her – being able to use her phone whenever she wanted to was her “comfort zone” because she “felt protected”. In contrast to her experience before the detox, the same respondent described how during the detox she had to find an alternative way to connect with people. This experience of

“just walking around campus” as an alternative means to interact with her peers seemed to help the respondent overcome her shyness too.

“...after the detox I’ve actually realised other things.... my phone was like my comfort zone. I just felt protected; like you know when you walking around and just look at people, sometimes they give you like the eye contact and you do not really understand why they’re kind of looking at you, and it becomes a bit awkward, but um, now after, um the detox, now I can just walk around campus and if you, you look at me, then I’m going to look at you as well... I can say I was a bit shy at first, but now I’m not anymore. Like I’m not really shy because I’ve seen that people also just do their own thing, so why can’t I be my own person and just do whatever I want to, without being on my phone all the time” [Gugu]

However, not all of the respondents reported having an experience of having found a rewarding off-screen alternative to socialising on their cellphones. One of the respondents (see below) described how he dealt with not being able to use his cellphone by writing down the tweets he would share once his detox was over. In this way he created an alternative platform of expressing himself online in an offline setting.

“I ... started journaling [on paper] the statuses [on social media] I was going to make when I was done with [the detox]...” [Josh]

Another respondent seemed to shift his focus from his cellphone screen to the laptop screen during the detox:

“I downloaded the whole series of Friends – all ten seasons – in the last three days because I was so bored... I was like [to myself] ‘Let me just see what I can binge download off DC [Rhodes University’s online Direct Connect programme].’” [Max]

It seems that simply reducing and/or restricting their social media use resulted in the respondents pursuing offline social activities. Future research could explore this connection further.

5.2.2. Offline Outsider

It is widely understood that “peer relationships and the social contexts in which they are experienced become central to the identity formation process during adolescence” (Davis, 2012a, p. 1528). With this in mind, it was not surprising that the respondents felt disconnected from their peers during the detox. The respondents described experiencing a gap between themselves and their peers who were not involved in this research study.

“...I felt like, *ugh*, I was just in another world, because... I used to be one of those people [on their phones], now that I’m not, I just feel like people are just ignoring me... Because everybody is just busy with their phones and I’m not. So I just feel again like I’m just missing out on things, which is frustrating... I need know why are you are so [much] on your phone, what are you doing on your phone? Why can’t you say hi to me? ... But because you’re busy on your phone, you’re not even... tak[ing] notice of me there [with you]...” [Gugu]

The respondents reported feeling outside of their social groups and excluded by their peers who were preoccupied with their cellphones instead of engaging with them face-to-face.

“I was walking with a group of friends. We were going [back to residence] and everyone was on their phone and I was like: 'Wow! I would want to be on my phone right now!' and I tried to like start up [face-to-face] conversations to try stop the other people from using their phones. I'm like... 'So how was your day?' ... I'm trying to strike up conversations and people are still on their phones and like [they responded] 'Yah, it was nice'. But I [was] just thinking [to myself]: 'You're on your phone, you're not even listening to what I'm saying'... I snapped [verbally] at one of my friends <*ehyeh!*> and he was so shocked and he was like: 'Where is that coming from?'...” [Thuli]

Despite feeling excluded by her peers during the detox, one of the respondents was able to recognise that if she had not been participating in this research study, that she would have been doing the same thing as her peers.

“I was very, I was very aware of other people on phones, because I didn’t have one, and then I sort of thought they were being anti-social (chuckle), and then I was like hang on, I would do the same thing.” [Natalie]

Each individual respondent seemed to contextualise their own individual social experience in context to their peer groups. In the previous chapter, I discussed ‘Online Social Validation’ and the findings from the first interviews suggest that it has an influential role in mediating young people’s social experience online. Online social validation was identified again in the second interviews in which the respondents described how they felt in the absence of this affirmation. One of the respondents described how receiving ‘mentions’ on Facebook are a part of his morning routine:

“...it wasn’t nice at all, because [receiving] mentions [on social media] are part of the morning routine, you want someone to have said something to you. <Hmm><pause> it wasn’t nice, it didn’t feel, I do not know, that’s why it’s just frustrating me this whole thing because it just made me realise my dependence on <pause> I do not know. And it’s not, it’s not like an affirmation thing, but it’s along those lines, I do not know if that <pause> there’s some sort of affirmation you get from sort of knowing people [want] to speak to you... and when you do not get that and you’re so used to it, it becomes very hard to adjust <hmm>.” [Thabo]

It is possible that the respondent quoted above does not want to acknowledge his desire for affirmation and so he declares the opposite when it is seemingly obvious that he wants peer affirmation. Social interactions with peers serve an important function in the psychosocial development of young people (Cooley, 1992; Erikson, 1968; Hay, Payne, & Chadwick, 2004). It seems that the detox offered the respondents an opportunity to reflect on their own social behaviour in relation to their peers. In addition, they also had to confront and deal with peer pressure.

“... because my friends are so...used to me being on WhatsApp they can’t actually understand when I tell [them]...I wanted to challenge myself, obviously... and I thought they would be more supportive, and stop chatting [to me on WhatsApp], but I guess they [are] also like in the same ride [same boat] as I am, they’re just so into it they can’t even stop themselves. So when they [send me WhatsApp messages], I couldn’t stop myself from actually answering them because I knew that I wanted to. It was not about them, it was about me, and I couldn’t control myself. I was just like ok I actually, I’m challenging myself but I can’t do, I just want to do it because I can’t go concentrate on other things with this hanging.” [Gugu]

In response to being asked what it was like to not use her cellphone as much as everyone around her, one of the respondents described how empowered she felt once she was able to overcome her initial fears of feeling she was not using her cellphone like her peers were during the detox. Here, her description that “it always feels nice to just go with the flow” captures the ease with which people absorb social norms and behave accordingly.

“At first it was very scary and very daunting because it always feels nice to just go with the flow and not disrupt the cycle or anything but then in the end I felt more empowered really because I’m thinking, I’m actually doing the smart thing. Yah, I’m actually doing something that’s more fulfilling but then it’s just everyone else doesn’t realise it yet.” [Thuli]

The experience of the abovementioned respondent highlights the challenge faced by the participants. On the one hand, using a cellphone feels comfortable and is like “going with the flow”. On the other hand, not using a cellphone allowed this respondent to feel more fulfilled because she described this as doing “the smart thing”.

5.2.3. Levels of self-awareness: before and after the detox

In addition to creating uncomfortable gaps in their social lives, the detox also seems to have created a shift between the respondent's level of self-awareness before and after the detox. It is possible that the gaps created by the detox and the experience of 'missing' something from their lives, prompted the respondents to evaluate their social behaviour in a new light.

“[My friends and I] were actually talking about this detox, and then they were actually talking about how I'm sometimes rude to them... [laughs]... because when they actually try and talk to me I'm always on my phone so I come across as being bored when they actually wanted to talk to me... I actually understood how they felt about it. So now I have to think [that] the detox was actually good for me because now I know that people actually [react] rudely when I actually do that, so I think now I will just minimise my time on my phone.” [Gugu]

“[During the detox] it was like a constant reminder ... I see how engaged [other people] are with their cell phones and I'm like 'Am I really like that?' So – I – It's almost like I analyse them – silently of course – but it's just like, I was only like: 'Do I come off like that?' – I do not want to come off as rude...” [Lucy]

It seems that the detox made some of the respondents more aware of their social behaviour and how it affected their relationships with others. Similarly, some of the other respondents described how they became more aware of the nature of their relationships and conversations on social media and the value that they attach to their phone. Some of the respondents described becoming more aware of the fact that they used their cellphone to “kill time” and how using it also wasted their time.

“I do not believe <laughs> I put so much value on my phone, on like BBM. I put so much value on just having candy floss conversations. <Hmm> ok not always candy floss [but] most of the time and that's the negative part of it. Because <pause><hmm> your phone is a time waster <hmm>... so if your time is getting wasted...you're putting [too much] value on your phone...” [Thabo]

“...to just kill time when you're bored, you scroll through your phone – like just see what so-and-so is doing or stuff like that” [Max]

Other respondents seemed to gain a new perspective on human interactions and the ones that happen on social media. If you consider that digital natives have been born in the age of cellphone technology, it is quite possible that they have had limited opportunity to reflect on the nature of their online and offline social interactions with others.

“...People always talk about how robots are going to take over one day if we do make robots but then I'm thinking: 'We do not even need robots because social media has already done that!' Because now people are just - They just have to follow what's going on around social media. So in the end, it really has taken over. It is really; really sad, but social media really has taken over.” [Thuli]

“[Doing the detox] makes you wonder about things and the way people change and the interactions that we have with people and the importance of ACTUAL* human contact with one another” [Jude] [*Capital letters show word was spoken with emphasis]

These findings suggest that the respondents experienced an increase in self-awareness during the detox which prompted them to question their online behaviour and evaluate the role that their cellphone has in their social lives. It seems that this process led them to think about what they experience as being ‘more fulfilling’ and ‘less fulfilling’ forms of social participation. It seems that this process also enabled the respondents to recognise when their cellphone use is purposeful and when it is “to just kill time when you’re bored”.

“I do not give the people around me a chance because of social media then I'm actually doing myself a disservice. So if I can cut down on social media then I'll be able to have like a more active social life <Yah> at Rhodes.” [Thuli]

The increase in self-awareness appears to have provided the respondents with more insight into their own cellphone consumption habits. One of the respondents described how the detox gave him more self-awareness of his cellphone use and explains how it felt like he was acquiring the recipe to make a cake:

“[Having more self-awareness]... it's kind of like, if you had cake ingredients and you made cakes, and then you had icing made [but] none of them were together before, but you kind of ate them all [separately], and they all tasted good in their own right, but now [the detox] kind of like, sort of a made cake, now everything's sort of put together.” [Josh]

Later in the interview he says:

“...now I understand things. Maybe I have the recipe now for how to make cake. Whereas before [the detox] I just had cake [ingredients]” [Josh]

5.3. Social me sans social media

5.3.1. "On your toes" online

The 'couch-potato' argument has been frequently used in the past to polarise the experience of off-screen and on-screen social contexts. Within this view, the television is a sedentary activity that encourages passive participation and it is often blamed for being the root cause of inactivity among children (Biddle, Gorely, Marshall, Murdey, & Cameron, 2004). In contrast, digital technologies have been described as a social phenomenon because of its potential to facilitate engagement and connections between people (Kline & Dyer-Witthoford, 2003). The findings from this study suggest that the participants do not regard their interactions with their cellphones as sedentary or passive. Instead, their experience of socialising online is that it requires their active non-stop engagement. One of the respondents described having to always be on the look-out for something exceptional so that you can record this on social media.

“[During the detox] I didn't feel the need to always be on the look-out for something exceptional to talk about later [on social media]... [Before the detox] I chose to see and what I chose to hear or actually highlight ... [in order] to stay relevant on the social networks you have to be on your toes. You have to say something that's out of the ordinary or something that other people can relate to... [On social media] you can't say 'I'm in the library' But then now without [social media] I felt like I could just walk [around] without having to see and find things that I could post about later on.” [Thuli]

It seems that it was through their detox experience that the respondents became aware of how demanding their involvement in social media platforms is. One of the respondents described the contrast from social media as being able to sit under a tree and just observe people.

“[During the detox] I gave myself a coffee and just [sat] outside under the tree, just like looking at everybody and because I love looking at people just in general, I love of looking at the details of everything, I was looking at the trees... I wasn't being sucked into [my cellphone]... there wasn't anything that was on my mind at [that] moment, it was just nothing, it was just plain [and] it was just [taking in] the birds singing, the leaves falling and people talking...” [Lucy]

The respondent above described being “sucked into” her phone which suggests that before the detox she was prone to feeling consumed and overwhelmed by the pull towards her cellphone. Another respondent described feeling “relaxed” during the detox because it provided her with a reason for why she did not to have to be on her phone all the time.

“... I'm relaxed now, because [before the detox] when I'm on my phone... I'm chatting [on social media]... then I have to go to the dining hall [so] then I leave my phone in my room. That means when I'm in the dining hall I just aim to just finish the food and go back [to my phone in my room]. So now I just relax, I just talk to [other people]... we can have as much time as you want and we're just talking, unlike me saying that I have to go, just to go and chat [on my phone]” [Gugu]

“I enjoyed [not checking my cellphone] – it's such a hack [hassle] having to check it...” [Max]

The detox seemed to provide the respondents with an awareness of what it had felt like to use their phones. Interestingly, it was only through not using their cellphones that the respondents were able to reflect on what their experience of using them had been.

5.3.2. Socially unfit = socially awkward

The levels of awkward aversion experienced by the respondents – as expressed in their first interviews – raises the question of whether this response to face-to-face social situations is due to their individual personalities or whether it might be due to something else.

The concept of social fitness is outlined in the Social Fitness Model developed by Henderson and Zimbardo (2005). According to them, the social fitness model incorporates social fitness training which sees “people move from social dysfunction, withdrawal, passivity, and negative self-preoccupation to adaptive functioning, increased social participation, a proactive orientation, and empathy and responsiveness to others, that taken together is referred to as ‘social fitness’” (Henderson & Zimbardo, 2005). This model approaches “social fitness” in a similar way that one would approach physical fitness, thus there is an understanding that people are capable of developing their social fitness in order to move from being socially unfit towards being socially fit.

This is speculative at this stage because no literature was found on the topic that relates directly to social fitness in the context of socialising in online and offline contexts. It seems that the available literature addresses social fitness training in the context of military training (Cacioppo, Reis, & Zautra, 2011) or personality disorders (Scott, 2006). However, it is possible that the “Social Fitness Model” might be useful in understanding the participants’ resistance to socialise in offline contexts in this study. In this way, their fears of experiencing awkwardness might be exacerbated by being “socially unfit”. Perhaps it is a vicious cycle: Fears of experiencing awkwardness encourage young people to use their cellphones as a

prop, which results in them having less opportunity for social practice or information that would disconfirm the fear. Consequently, the fear of awkwardness is maintained or even strengthened. In this way, it might be useful to evaluate a young person's ability to socialise online and offline in terms of social fitness. In the previous chapter, I discussed the respondents' awkward-averse social behaviour and how it is largely associated with offline or face-to-face communication. During the detox, the respondents described what it was like to encounter social situations in which they had to confront their feelings of awkwardness instead of avoiding or escaping it by using their cellphones.

“The awkward thing that just always happens is when a stranger actually just looks, he looks at you in the eye and you just do not know what to do, and at that moment you do not, you do not have your phone with you. Unlike when you have your phone with you then someone looks at you then you look away and you pretend like you're doing something on your phone. So now you're just walking around and somebody just looks at you, it's very awkward... you do not even know what to do; should you greet them, should you just look at the side? So that was just the awkward part of it.” [Gugu]

One of the respondents equates her experience of having someone approach her to make conversation as involving the same level of intimacy as someone asking to hold her hand.

“...[when someone comes up to me and starts talking to me] it's like someone who's never met you before in your life allowing to ask to hold your hand... because for me talking to someone is quite personal... I just feel like that comfort goes away.” [Lucy]

This description shows that for the participant, the experience of having someone approach her to make conversation is such an unfamiliar event that she compares this experience to that of a stranger who wants to hold her hand. It is possible that digital natives are growing up so accustomed to communicating through their cellphones that other forms of communication are neglected – and possibly even threatening – to them as a result (recall Joinson (2003)).

Another respondent described how she avoided social situations in which she might experience being awkward.

“...I was thinking if I actually do approach someone and I attempt to actually have a meaningful conversation, what are we going to talk about? Now I do not have my phone with me. So now I do not have anything that I can distract myself with... [During the detox] I was really, really always conscious that I didn't go out and try make new friends. Because I was really, really conscious of those awkward moments... I tried to avoid awkward moments.” [Thuli]

One of the respondents described how her experience of the detox made her feel less awkward because she realised she could initiate conversations:

“[After the detox] now I know that I’m able to just walk in a room and just talk to anyone and make a conversation with anyone. I do not actually need to be awkward around people. People are just there. They’re not going to do anything to me. I just have to take the time to talk to them.” [Gugu]

Another respondent described how it was for her to observe her friend’s awkward behaviour during the detox:

“A friend and I were just chilling... I realised that once the situation got a bit awkward or the conversation stopped for a little she whipped out her phone and she sat on her phone...whereas I kept the conversation going” [Jude]

One of the respondents seemed to realise that social participation off-screen is “about just being yourself” but that it also involves “taking yourself out of your comfort zone”. The experience of detaching from one’s comfort zone is almost certainly associated with feelings of awkwardness.

“...off-screen where it actually is about just being yourself, you do not need to add anything on to it. <Hmm> but obviously [it’s] taking yourself out of your comfort zone...” [Thabo]

In both the first and second interviews it is clear that awkwardness is a potential feature and/or deterrent of the respondents’ offline social experience. Future studies could explore further how young people’s ability to overcome awkwardness impacts on their involvement in offline and online social activities.

5.3.3. Face-to-face is actually fulfilling

In the previous chapter I discussed the theme ‘REALationships’ in detail. The insights from the second interviews suggest that many of the respondents were able to experience more social fulfilment than they had expected during the detox.

“[The detox] was very nice because... I like to talk but this time... You’re not even pretentious; it’s just like... you’re not pretending you’re just talking... it’s just a conversation and it is so nice to actually find...different people... talking about different things, different insights. Unlike on WhatsApp, you are not even sure if that person actually believes what they are saying. But when you’re actually face-to-face, you can even see when they talk that they actually believe what they’re talking about.” [Gugu]

The two excerpts below describe what one of the respondent called “full-on social interaction” and another who says “I was able to go all in” during her conversations with

others. It seems that the opportunity to engage with other people off-screen added more depth to their experience of connecting with others.

“[During the detox] I was with my friends a lot more... So for me [not being able to use my phone] was quite cool because I could actually have that full-on social interaction with people.” [Jude]

“I think after the detox I'm now more appreciative of the whole dynamic of [being socially active] because now it's more meaningful and there's more value attached to it.... It's more meaningful when [I] do not have social media to distract me. So now that I [didn't] have the distraction of social media [during the detox], I was able to go all in, in these conversations and these outings.” [Thuli]

One study argues that Facebook “provides a platform for people to manage others’ impressions of them” and in turn affects people’s perceptions of others (Chou & Edge, 2012, p. 117). As a result, the study suggests that “frequent Facebook users tend to perceive that others are happier” (Chou & Edge, 2012, p. 119). In contrast, the more off-line interactions people have with their friends, the less they thought that other people have better lives and are happier than them because “knowing more stories about others’ lives, both positive and negative, they are less persuaded that others are happier than themselves” (Chou & Edge, 2012, p. 119). With this in mind, it is possible that by participating in the detox, the respondents received more insight into other people’s lives and felt more appreciative of their own lives as a result. One of the participants described how social media is “something that tries to replace real interaction” by making it more convenient. However, the same respondent seemed to experience a dilemma over his social media use because he also appreciates the convenience that these digital applications offer him in his life.

“... I think social media is something that tries to replace <pause> real interaction because it’s trying to make it more convenient. But the more convenient it [is], [it] takes away the feeling, like the actual like, light in the tummy because you do not get that on social media. And <pause> and I love, I love this side, I love the real side, I love the genuine side. But at the same time there’s an appreciation I have for convenience and that’s what sort of this side, the social media side gives me. And then there’s sort of this battle back between two, the one that you, I do not know social media tends to win because it’s <pause> it’s easier, it’s just convenient and you’re always sort of willing to do <hmm> the easier thing, I do not know. I’m actually like, during this interview, you know I was talking about consciousness; I’m getting even more conscious <hmm>” [Thabo]

In the excerpt below, one of the respondents described feeling more ‘normal’ during the detox because it allowed her to ‘show people who I am’. It is possible that the experience of

engaging in face-to-face interactions allowed the respondents to connect with others without the barrier or mask of the screen interface.

“...when you actually do not have your phone around, you’re just looking around, you’re walking normally, then you can actually greet people, you know, they can actually see that you’re a nice person... because sometimes with my phone they’ll think that I’m self-centred or just like, too much into myself or whatever, or I do not like people, which is not who I am. But now I can actually show them more of me, because my phone took a lot of time. So now I can just walk around greeting people and just taking time to just stand with them and just chatting a bit and then, you know, just be as a normal kid.”
[Gugu]

In response to being questioned about why she felt like a “normal kid” during the detox (see above), the respondent says:

“Because –um – more normal for me, was, like me showing people who I am; me being me, you know, just getting out there, doing what I like doing most... talking to people [face-to-face], laughing with them, exchanging you know, things that happened during the day, some things like... when you’re walking around... and you meet someone, then you can actually walk together and talk, unlike walking together but you're still on your phone and that person thinks maybe they’re not interesting enough for you, or something like that.” [Gugu]

The excerpt above alludes to a possible distinction between ‘social norms’ and the experience of ‘feeling normal’. It is possible that social norms ‘normalise’ the experience of connecting through cellphones at a peer-group level, which makes people feel more connected to their peers. In contrast, it seems that engaging face-to-face made the respondent feel more connected to herself as “just a normal kid”.

“[During the detox] I was able to TALK* to people – it sounds a bit crazy because everyone can talk to people. But I was actually able to like to talk to them – to converse with them. I was able to HOLD* a conversation. Unlike me [being] like that one person that says just one word and then just zones in my phone. I was able to control my WhatsApp. I was able to actually able to communicate with people...whereby they actually tell me their personal lives and stuff like that” [Gugu]
[*Capital letters show word was spoken with emphasis]

“...I'm someone who likes just sharing with friends so I usually share with my online friends. But [during the detox] I had to find new outlets. So I realised I actually got closer... come to think of it...I actually realised that I got closer to [my friends at Rhodes]. We actually went for coffee <giggles> and it was actually a nice experience... I actually didn't realise that you could actually like hang out with people in Grahamstown... and actually enjoy yourself... I think it was... a really positive thing - for not having my social networks [on my cellphone] with me.” [Thuli]

The respondents above seemed to have surprised themselves that they were able to engage in meaningful face-to-face interaction. Perhaps they had imagined that achieving this was much more difficult than they had realised. Another respondent shared his surprise at realising that his friends would still “put in the effort to see me” when they were not able to reach him easily – by contacting him on his cellphone – during the detox.

“There are people who I actually doubted I would hear from at all [during the detox] because I [wondered] maybe I only am friends with them because I contact them constantly through social networking. But they put the effort in to see me... so from that point of view it was a bit of an affirmation [to myself]: 'Oh you have real friends', like they're not just people you... kind of badger for conversation [on social media platforms]” [Josh]

Similarly, another respondent described what it felt like for him to receive a spontaneous visit from a friend even though the friend had not been able to reach him on his cellphone prior to the visit.

“I feel really good now, like I'm actually realising [what] the detox did... it was really nice to just sort of... bumping into each other is such a nice feeling because you know on BBM we tell each other where we're going so I know if I'm going to see you or not. But you know even just seeing [my friend], 'cause I was standing on the balcony, just seeing her walk up the stairs... it was just like so much of a better feeling... I'm trying to describe the feeling now but it's difficult to describe. It was just like a light in your tummy...” [Thabo]

These findings suggest that the respondents received more social fulfilment from their face-to-face interactions than they had expected.

5.3.4. "Quality" levels with "quantity"

In the previous chapter – which discussed the findings from the first interviews – the perception among the respondents was that the value they derived from social interactions was based on quantity not quality. For example, the respondents seemed to regard connecting with more than fifty people on social media as being more worthwhile than having a face-to-

face conversation with only a single individual. However, in the second interviews there appears to be a shift in perception whereby quality interactions received more value than they had previously.

“...I think there has been a shift. Because now when it's offline [during the detox] numbers become - well they are no longer as important. Unlike on Facebook whereby you're saying [to yourself]: 'I have a target of 500 friends' ... now social media is more just about quantity to say that 'I have all these people' - but when it comes to offline now, it's - like I'm more motivated to having like quality friends - like people I can actually rely on. So I think that's where the shift has come from.” [Thuli]

The respondents (see below) described how they were able to connect with their friends on a deeper level during face-to-face interactions instead of socialising with them on a cellphone.

“...a friend of mine; when we are talking on WhatsApp... we talk about just general things like: 'How was your day?' ...whatever, whatever. But then [during the detox] it's her birthday, and she wasn't like happy about it...so while we were chatting face-to-face -um - the fact that her mom is unemployed came out, the fact that her brother is not a nice person, whatever, came out... A lot of emotion actually came out of it, so I learned more about that person than when were on WhatsApp.” [Gugu]

“...before [the detox] it was just more of acquaintances where you just greet each other where you're being civil and you ask the odd questions like 'How has been your day?' But now with more levels we actually got to talk about family and everything else... I also didn't know that she actually has a crush on that guy that I actually talked to... it's like I actually got to know the person better. So now it's like we actually, like clicking as friends. It's now more than just 'hi' and 'bye'...” [Thuli]

The experience of face-to-face conversations seemed to facilitate a connection that resulted in a deeper understanding of each other. One of the respondents concluded that a “good conversation” is when “you do not feel like you've wasted time”. In his second interview, this same respondent recalled what he had said in his first interview. He seems to realise that his reluctance to make the effort to meet his friends face-to-face – as described in his first interview – prevented him from experiencing “something of value” and “a real conversation”.

“...when you come out of a good conversation you do not feel like you’ve wasted time [because] there’s something that you’ve received in that time. [But] sometimes you will sacrifice the opportunity for...a good conversation for the sake of...to stay in your bed [and] tweeting. Do you remember [in my first interview] how we were talking about... the effort just to go and see someone [and how] you’d rather... stay in bed and talk to them on BBM. But now to sort of change that... to go receive something of value, a real conversation, you would rather be like ‘Oh no I’m sick I’m in bed’ and tweet... but I feel like the one would be more important than the other...” [Thabo]

In the previous chapter, the respondents described how easy it was to communicate by using their cellphone because it enabled them to reach out to people effortlessly through social media. The comment made by the respondent above described how his detox experience had shifted his perspective and he now regards staying in bed and tweeting as a sacrifice he is making. Interestingly, despite that fact that he refers to changing his behaviour his preference is still that he would rather tweet others and stay in bed.

5.4 Summary

This chapter presents a detailed discussion of each of the three overlapping superordinate themes that emerged from the second interviews after the social media detox. The findings from this chapter suggest that the social media detox provided the respondents with the opportunity to reflect on their social media and cellphone use and become more aware of their online and offline social behaviour as a result.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1. Introduction to chapter

This chapter draws together the important findings from this research study, identifies the project limitations and offers suggestions for future research.

6.2. What this project uncovered

The pervasive presence of cellphones and social media platforms in the lives of young people has been clearly established in the literature. The quest to understand how cellphone use is impacting on young people's lives and influencing their psychosocial development has led to wide-spread inquiry into this issue. Unlike most of the available research which involves American, European or Asian populations, this study presents a unique South African youth perspective. The findings from this study suggest that more attention should be given to understanding the role of cellphones in the lives of young South Africans.

This study looks at how students' relationships with their cellphones inform their experience of social participation among their peers. Central to this research is understanding their experience of using social media networks that they access on their cellphones. One of the strengths of this study is that it explores the respondents' experiences of socialising on multiple social media platforms. This approach is unlike many other research studies which focus exclusively on a single social media platform. Studies on a single social media platform are problematic if most people are using multiple platforms for different reasons and audiences, because the benefits and harms of using one platform such as Facebook might be offset or exacerbated by using other platforms. By looking at multiple social media platforms, this study provides a more accurate reflection of how young people use their cellphones in real life. Furthermore, since the field of digital technology is dynamic and constantly being innovated, the relevance of research studies that focus on a single social media platform is dependent on the longevity of that particular platform in the market (Subrahmanyam & Smahel, 2010). Thus, it is possible that this research will hold more value into the future.

After going on a social media detox, the respondents in this study seemed to gain new insights and perspective on their own cellphone and social media behaviour. One of the strengths of this study is that it involved pre- and post-detox interviews which added more depth to the data collection process and subsequent analysis. During their first interviews,

before their participation in the detox, some of the participants in this study reported feeling that their cellphone was a “part of me”. Many of them seemed to be unaware of how much they used this device. The findings from this study suggest that the detox experience provided the participants with the opportunity to reflect on their cellphone and social media use and become more aware of the nature of their relationships with their cellphones. Furthermore, the findings from this study reveal insights into how the respondents compare their on-screen and off-screen social experience. This approach also gave the young people the opportunity to reflect on their decision-making process around their social lives. The findings from this study suggest that the detox allowed the respondents to become more aware of their agency in social situations because they had chosen to restrict their use of social media during this period. This raises important questions about how young people can be empowered to utilise their agency in terms of effecting behaviour change.

As discussed in the literature review in Chapter 1, most of the available research on this topic is polarised around the central debate over whether cellphone and/or social media use has a positive or negative influence on young people’s overall psychosocial development. However, the results of this study suggest that cellphone usage is potentially both useful and not useful to young people. Cellphone and social media use seems to be useful to young people for communicating efficiently, coordinating social arrangements, maintaining contact with friends and family who are not in close proximity and for providing them with a platform through which to broaden their network of friends. However, it is possible that cellphone and social media use is also not useful to them because it allows young people to avoid face-to-face interactions and side-step important developmental challenges as result. Thus, this study raises questions about how young people navigate and/or mediate between cellphone behaviour that is useful and not useful to them.

Many studies (recall Caplan, (2005); Casale et al. (2013); Pierce, (2009); Walsh, White, Cox, & Young (2011)) document the growing trend among young people to prefer to socialise with their friends online rather than face-to-face. Whilst the findings from this study reflect this global trend, this study also raises questions about the decision-making process involved in determining whether young people choose to socialise online or face-to-face. This study presents a deeper understanding of how young people experience this so-called “preference” for socialising on social networks and how it manifests in their social lives and the way they relate to each other.

Key themes emerging from this study highlight the integral role that young people perceive their cellphones to have in their social lives and how instrumental this device is in assisting them to connect and communicate with others. The perception that their cellphone is an essential part of their social experience is discussed in detail under the superordinate theme: “The power is in my hand”. There seem to be many contributing factors that have enabled this device to become such an essential part of the respondents’ social experience. The superordinate theme: “Behind the Screen: What makes youth text?” uncovers insights into how this device is used and the respondents’ motivations for using it. The perception among the respondents is that the value of this device extends beyond its function as tool through which to communicate and also offers the respondents a form of companionship and means for navigating their social worlds. It seems that using social media platforms and cellphones have become so integrated into young people’s lives that using them has become normalised. The superordinate theme, “Texting feels more natural than talking” reveals how using their cellphones to socialise is perceived to be a natural experience and the preferred way of socialising with each other, unlike the experience of face-to-face interactions which is associated with undesirable feelings of awkwardness and involves more effort. Furthermore, the superordinate theme, “A very peacock system” suggests that social media platforms have provided young people with a new means to receive and seek out social validation from their peers which influences the way in which they present and express themselves online. Whilst the respondents seem to be unaware of their cellphone use, they seem to be very aware of the subtleties and social cues involved in maintaining their profiles online. The superordinate theme “Audience Management” uncovers how young people manage their online social identities and discusses how their experience of social media extends across a variety of different platforms which they use simultaneously. The findings from this study suggest that young people do not always receive the fulfilment they crave from the social relationships that they maintain on social media platforms. The superordinate theme called “REALationships”, discusses how the respondents experience relationships online and the level of satisfaction that these provide.

It seems that young people are not always aware of their cellphone use and often use this device out of habit, rather than making a conscious decision to do so. Chapter Five presents a detailed discussion of the themes that emerged from the findings from the second interviews with the respondents after their social media detox. The superordinate theme, “The power is in me” suggests that the detox provided the respondents with the opportunity to

begin to recognise the degree to which they relied on their cellphone in social situations and enabled them to become more aware of their potential agency to encounter these situations without relying on their cellphones. Since the experience of using a cellphone has become normalised, the participants experienced feelings of being “outside” of their peer group during the detox. Furthermore, the self-imposed restrictions on their cellphone use during the detox made them feel that something was missing from their lives. This was discussed in detail under the superordinate theme of “Mind the gap”. Lastly, the superordinate theme “Social me sans social media” discusses what it was like for the respondents to experience socialising with reduced or restricted cellphone use and how this experience provided them with an increased awareness of their agency and of the value they receive from face-to-face interactions. However, for some of the respondents the desire to side-step or avoid awkward situations was heightened during the social media detox as a result of not being able to use their cellphone as a means to escape from it.

Many discussions on the negative influence that online use can have on people often point towards or refer to this behaviour as a form of behavioural addiction. Furthermore, many studies (e.g., Byun et al., 2009; Hall & Parsons, 2001; Huang & Leung, 2009; Young, 2009) seem to regard “addiction” as providing a useful framework with which to understand what is frequently cited as excessive and compulsive online behaviour. Where internet addiction might be a valid and applicable term to describe a particular type of internet user, the findings from this study raise questions about whether the use of the term “addiction” is relevant or useful to describe and evaluate the type of cellphone behaviour that appears to widespread and normalised within the urban youth population. Shields and Kane (2011) argue that by focusing on the “concept of addiction”, research studies in the past have emphasised the negative side of internet use which has been misleading. Similarly, Baumer (2013, p. 74) agrees that the term addiction is not suitable to describe people’s over-reliance on social media. It is possible that “addiction” frames cellphone and online use as a threat and negates the possibility that internet use can also be a positive experience with benefits. This view is shared by boyd (2014, p. 83) who argues that “instead of prompting a productive conversation, addiction rhetoric positions new technologies as devilish and teenagers as constitutionally incapable of having agency in response to the temptations that surround them”. Furthermore, the findings from this study reveal that cellphone use among the respondents is so pervasive that its presence has been largely normalised within their peer groups. Thus, referring to what youth perceive to be normal behaviour as being an

“addiction” is possibly alienating since it does not accurately reflect what they perceive to be a largely important tool in their lives with positive benefits.

Rather than framing discussions around the negative uses of digital technology in relation to addiction, the findings from this study propose that an alternative explanation might be more useful. This study proposes that “social fitness” might be useful for interpreting how young people engage in offline and online contexts. No information in the available literature could be found to support this proposal which presents an opportunity for future research studies. Assessing how young people use the internet in terms of social fitness might be more useful than contextualising problematic behaviour in terms of behavioural addiction. In this way, social fitness might be a more appropriate term for understanding this behaviour because the emphasis is on one’s capacity to socialise and being able to make informed decisions around one’s social life rather than contextualising the internet itself as being similar to a drug addiction. Furthermore, the term “social fitness” recognises that young people are capable of having agency in response to how they mediate their online and offline social behaviour. With this in mind, it is possible that the use of the term social fitness is more useful to empowering young people rather than the term addiction which is often associated with relinquishing control.

The themes emerging during the second interviews – which took place after the detox – highlight the need for young people to become more self-aware of their cellphone use as a way of empowering themselves to make informed decisions about their social lives. The superordinate theme “The Power is in me” reveals how young people experienced becoming more aware of their cellphone use during the detox and how they seemed to realise that they derived more meaning from face-to-face interactions than they had previously experienced before the detox.

This study raises questions about whether cellphone use undermines or encourages young people to develop agency in social interactions. It seems that a young person’s experience of using their phone is tied up with their perceptions of how much agency they possess in social situations. This research study suggests that the cellphone is not just a device through which the respondents communicate, but that it is actually a “part of them” that gives them more control to manage themselves in social situations. The respondents confronted many social challenges during their social media detox as they became aware of how dependent they had become on this device in their social lives.

6.3. Project limitations

It is possible that the use of the term ‘detox’ framed the study in a particular way by aligning this research with other forms of ‘detoxing’ which may be associated with health behaviour. It is possible that framing it in this way meant that few positive experiences of cellphone usage were reported. However, the researcher intended to contextualise this study in this way because it was possible that referring to this process as an ‘experiment’ would have alienated the participants and reduced their interest in participating in the study.

The small sample size means that the findings in this study cannot be generalised to the larger South African population and some people might consider this to be a limitation. However, as this is an IPA study, the small sample size is not considered a weakness. As discussed in Chapter 3, IPA is concerned with idiography and not generalisability (Smith et al., 2009). In fact, one of the strengths of this study is that it offers a comprehensive analysis drawing on the data from eight in-depth interviews which is a relatively large sample size for an IPA research study. The findings from this study can be used to inform future quantitative research in this field.

As noted in Chapter 3, phenomenology is concerned with the quality of experience rather than with participants’ opinions about issues relating to the thesis topic (Smith et al., 2009; Willig, 2009). During the process of immersing oneself in the transcriptions during analysis it was often difficult for the researcher to distinguish between an opinion and an experience. Since opinion is often formed by experience, the two are not always easy to separate.

6.4. Suggestions for future research

This explorative study has raised many questions that have not yet been answered. There is an opportunity for future researchers in this field to use this study as a reference for guiding their own research.

A central question - which appears in several themes in this study – is over the degree to which a young person’s capacity to recognise their own agency, influences the way they negotiate their online and offline social lives. Implicit in the term “social fitness” is the idea that individuals have the capacity to utilise their agency to improve their social capabilities. Rather than interpreting internet use as only a function of personality where extroverts are

less vulnerable than introverts (recall van der Aa et al., (2009); Kraut et al., (2002)), there is an opportunity to evaluate internet use in terms that relate to an individual's capacity to recognise their agency in social situations regardless of their inherent personality type.

There is an opportunity to explore further the relationship identified between comfort eating and comfort tweeting. Future research could quantify the nature of this relationship to accurately investigate the similarities that exist between the two. Since substantial research already exists into emotional eating, it might be useful to use this research to guide future studies on understanding "comfort tweeting". In addition, there is also a potential opportunity to adapt peer norms interventions that have been used successfully in student alcohol interventions to reduce detrimental cellphone usage.

As a final thought, much of the available research aims to prove whether cellphone use has a negative or positive impact on the psychosocial development of young people. The findings from this study support the view that social media use can have both a negative and/or positive influence on young people's development. However, from what I could find there is currently no available local research on how to empower young people to manage their social media and cellphone habits to their advantage. The findings from this study suggest that social skills play a role in determining how young people socialise online as identified in existing studies (recall Caplan, (2005); Casale et al., (2013)). As it stands, to my knowledge there is no intervention programmes that address the role of cellphone use in the lives of young South Africans and offer support for improving social skills in this area. There is an opportunity for educators, programme developers and researchers to explore this further as means to developing educational and/or health programmes that aim to empower young people to socialise on cellphones and social media networks effectively.

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Appendices

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR FIRST INTERVIEWS

Key focus areas:

- Concept of social participation
- On-screen vs. Off-screen social experience
- Choice vs. habits
- Motivations
- Socially active

At the end ask: "Is there anything else that I haven't thought of, that you'd like to comment on?"

1. What was your experience of being in the focus group?

2. Tell me about what socialising involves for you?

- Tell me about how you socialise **with the cellphone?** (on-screen)
- Are there any ways in which you socialise **without cellphone?** (off-screen)

3. How do you experience people on- vs. off-screen?

- How does the experience of socialising with cellphone compared to socialising without the cellphone?
- Probe: Has your experience of using it changed since you first started using it?

4. How do you experience being SOCIALLY ACTIVE?

- Do you ever experience being socially inactive?
- Can you be socially active without using tech?
- How does being socially active using technology compare to being socially active without tech?

5. What/who MOTIVATES you to pursue a particular social experience?

- How do you experience feeling socially fulfilled?
- How do you experience feeling socially unfulfilled?
- Do you ever feel socially saturated?

6. Do any external factors influence how you experience socialising? (e.g.. airtime)

7. Do any internal factors influence how you experience socialising? (e.g.. mood)

8. Think of socialising broadly:- can you describe this experience each below?

- Describe... your **MOST ENJOYABLE** aspect of your social experience?
- Describe... your **LEAST ENJOYABLE** aspect of your social experience?
- Describe... your **MOST COMFORTABLE** aspect of your social experience?
- Describe... your **MOST UNCOMFORTABLE** aspect of your social experience?

9. How does your experience of PLANNING to socialise compare to the actual act of socialising?

10. According to a local study called Generation Next which polled the opinions of 5,500 youth, 43% of South Africans at varsity check their phones EVERY 5 MINUTES.]

- Could you tell me about your experience of checking your cellphone?
- What is your experience of checking messages?

11. IN THE FOCUS GROUP, It was discussed how each social network SERVES ITS OWN PURPOSE...

- How do your experiences with each different device/platform compare?
- What is your experience of choosing which one to use?

12. IN THE FOCUS GROUP, these comments were made: Do you want to comment?

FOCUS GROUP 1:

- "Growing up with Mxit – we're used to this lifestyle"
- "Facebook is like a competition"
- "Molding how you want to be seen"
- "Phone is a friend if you're uncomfortable"
- Necessary/ appropriate vs. Unnecessary/ inappropriate
- "Seen them but know nothing about them"
- "People not as interesting in person"
- "...I have to be in contact all the time"

FOCUS GROUP 2:

- "BBM gives you the guts to say it in person"
- "It's an extension of me"
- "It's a tool to deal with an awkward situation"
- "If you take my phone you've made a war"
- "We are very much aware of each other on Twitter but we don't greet in public"

13. How do you feel about going on the detox?

APPENDIX B: SOCIAL MEDIA DETOX FORM

what does your detox entail?

YOUR NAME:

Detox details

The duration

The daily structure

How will you record your experience?

Participant signature

Researcher signature

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR SECOND INTERVIEWS

1. What was your experience of doing the social media detox?

- **Probe:** Are there any key moments that you may have recorded during the detox that you'd like to report back on?

2. During the detox, what did socialising involve for you?

3. Did you stick to your detox plan as you intended to?

- **Probe:** How was the experience of cheating/ urge to cheat?

4. Could you describe what your **RELATIONSHIP WITH YOUR PHONE** was **BEFORE** the detox and what your relationship is with your phone **AFTER** the detox?

5. Did you experience any **WITHDRAWAL SYMPTOMS** during the detox? (probe)

- **Probe:** Was this a positive, negative or neutral experience...

6. How did you experience **YOURSELF** during the detox?

7. How did you experience **OTHER PEOPLE** during the detox?

8. When 43% of your peers check their phone every 5 minutes, what was your experience of **NOT BEING ABLE TO CHECK** your phone this frequently?

9. Did you experience being "**SOCIALLY ACTIVE**" during the detox?

- Could you comment on being socially active before vs. after detox

10. Did you experience any **CHANGES** around your social life during the detox?

11. Now that you've done the detox, can you reflect on:

- How you see **yourself** as a social being?
- How you see **other people** as social beings?
- How you feel **other people see you** as a social being?

12. What motivates you socially?

- **Probe:** if not mentioned spontaneously, ask if there has been a shift since doing the detox...

13. Think of your detox experience:— can you describe this experience each below?

- Describe... your **MOST SURPRISING** experience during the detox?
- Describe... your **MOST ENJOYABLE** experience during the detox?
- Describe... your **LEAST ENJOYABLE** experience during the detox?
- Describe... your **MOST COMFORTABLE** experience during the detox?
- Describe... your **MOST UNCOMFORTABLE** experience during the detox?

14. Can you describe your **EXPERIENCE OF "CHOICE"** during the detox?

- **Probe:** Was this a positive, negative or neutral experience...

15. Can you describe your **EXPERIENCE OF "CONTROL"** during the detox?

- **Probe:** Was this a positive, negative or neutral experience...

16. When people discuss sportspeople or business people, they often refer to the person's ability to do the particular sport or their particular job.

- What is your experience of **ABILITY** in the context of your social experience?

17. DURING THE DETOX, How did your experience:

- **PLANNING** to socialise compare to the **ACTUAL ACT** of socialising?
- **SOCIAL FULFILMENT?**
- **SOCIAL SATURATION?**

18. Would you want to **DO A DETOX LIKE THIS AGAIN?**

19. "Is there anything else that I haven't thought of, that you'd like to comment on?"



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RESEARCH PROJECTS AND ETHICS REVIEW COMMITTEE

25 October 2012

Jessica Oosthuizen
Psychology Department
RHODES UNIVERSITY
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Dear Jessica

ETHICAL CLEARANCE OF PROJECT PSY2012/20

This letter confirms your research proposal with tracking number PSY2012/20 and title, 'Understanding how youth experience participation in a highly manufactured society', served at the Research Projects and Ethics Review Committee (RPERC) of the Psychology Department of Rhodes University on 15 October 2012. The project has been given ethics clearance.

Please ensure that the RPERC is notified should any substantive change(s) be made, for whatever reason, during the research process. This includes changes in investigators.

Yours sincerely

CHAIRPERSON OF THE RPERC

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