

Technologically Situated - The Tacit Rules of Platform Participation

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Abstract

The ways in which young people use digital platforms develop with experience, and are guided by changing understandings of what they should – and should not – be doing online. As such, young people continually develop tacit rules and understandings that guide their platform participation. While based on social interactions with peers and other online contacts these rules are also technologically situated through the architecture of the platform. Based on recently completed research with Australian teenagers, this paper explores the ways in which Facebook shapes the communicative practices of young people, and how these were experienced and interpreted by them. Analysis of the data demonstrates that some aspects of the platform architecture were particularly significant in structuring socialities, particularly: establishing habitual digital practices through norms and notifications; focusing on images to (re)present identity; and the use of metrics (i.e. 'likes' and 'friends') to negotiate identities and relationships. Each of the participants initiated a range of strategies and rules to negotiate the ways in which the technological and the social were modulated through the platform. In doing so, the paper also explores the influence of offline contexts (safety discourses, adults, peer pressure) on how young people develop their strategies for participation.

Introduction

Due to ongoing technological development and innovation, digital communication and sociality are constantly in flux. Van Dijck (2013a) argues that 'sociality is not simply "rendered technological" by moving to an online space; rather coded structures are profoundly altering the nature of our connections, creations and interactions' (p.20). As such, digital media platforms no longer exist in a separate sphere, but have instead become intertwined with the fabric of everyday life. This is particularly the case with young people – the so-called 'digital natives' – who have come to accept social media platforms as the given conditions for social interactions. Indeed, both popular and academic discourse continue to characterise young people's lives as entwined with, immersed in or permeated by the digital, highlighting a dependence on digital mediation in day-to-day activities. Ito *et al.* (2010), for example, argue that digital media such as social networking sites, online games and video-sharing sites are now 'fixtures' of youth culture that 'pervade' their daily lives. While Davies and Eynon (2013) describe technology as a 'layer interwoven and bound up' (p.9) with the experience of being a young person. The way this particular group establish a paradigm for their participation on Facebook can therefore give insight into the socially constructed nature of platform participation.

In this paper, I explore the experience and implications of Facebook on young people's everyday socialities. Participation on digital platforms is an area receiving interest from various fields in the social sciences, such as media and communication (Bucher, 2012; van Dijck, 2013a; van Dijck, 2013b); youth studies and sociology of youth (Bennett & Robards, 2013; Hodkinson, 2015) and digital sociology (Beneito-Montagut, 2015). In particular, I foreground the politics of platforms to analyse how the architecture of Facebook interface with the contemporary social dynamics of friendship and family. In doing so, I build on a growing body of research that traces the influence of digital platforms on the communication practices and socialities of young people, who are both shaping – and shaped by – the media they use. This is achieved by presenting findings from an in-depth, qualitative study with 13 young people from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds to ascertain the tacit rules they create and negotiate in order to participate on mainstream 'connective media' platforms (van Dijck, 2013a). I begin with an overview of the current scholarship on social media practices and the politics of platforms, before detailing the study design and presenting analysis of participants' digital practices and the tacit rules of their participation. The paper concludes by considering the dominant values and social relations implicated through these platforms – and how

they most often reproduce the dominant offline values and power relations. In this sense it is argued this platform reifies particular social practices, while weakening others, leading to communicative practices that are strongly situated by technology.

Platform participation – technologically and socially situated

Digital media platforms generate multiple ways to participate and communicate in contemporary society. Platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Skype and Steam have become essential tools for communication and entertainment for people of all ages. These platforms are particularly powerful for many young people, who have grown up connected to the internet through ubiquitous mobile technologies (boyd, 2014; Ito *et al.*, 2010). The possibilities for communication, interaction and entertainment are therefore continually shifting, with the associated increase in availability, and often affordability, of mobile digital technologies having a significant influence over how young people interact with one another, both online and offline (Marlowe, Bartley & Collins, 2016). Similarly, identity practices are now also mediated through digital platforms, with every piece of digital information a person provides – from photos, nicknames, email addresses and comments – used to make inferences about an individual's identity (Marwick, 2013). Digital platforms not only open up the possibilities for self-representation and social interactions, but also steer these in particular ways through the architecture of the site. In this paper the 'architecture' of the platform is taken to mean the 'system's overall structure and function', including the interface specifications, as well as the algorithms and processes that 'govern relationships among components and allow them to interoperate' (Baldwin & Woodard, 2008, p.7).

Recent research into the politics of digital platforms helps to unpack the competing tensions that young people must negotiate as part of their participation. The experience of network culture has changed in recent years and this is largely due to the proliferation of 'platforms', which funnel operations on the internet. As Hands (2013) explains, the internet is 'vanishing'. No longer do we have a single internet, but instead a 'multiplicity of distinct platforms' (p.1), which are often accessed more directly through apps. Indeed, the 'platform' has become the 'dominant infrastructural and economic model of the social web' (Helmond, 2015, p.5), enabling social media companies to position themselves both in the market and to users. With the proliferation of social buttons across the internet, such as Facebook's 'like' button and Facebook Connect, these platforms also work to 'colonise' the wider internet. As Gerlitz and Helmond (2013) write, the presence of social buttons and plugins 'reveal an alternative fabric of the web...that is based on data flows enabled by and to third party devices' (p.1361). For this reason the interface privileges particular forms of information and communication, which enable it to be channeled in specific ways. Seeing Facebook as simply a neutral tool to facilitate participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006) is therefore problematic. In fact, due to their commodification connective media platforms work in normative ways, reshaping communication practices. As such, the 'politics' of digital platforms not only refers to the architecture of platforms, like the interface specification and algorithms, but also how the platform is discursively constructed in the 'cultural imaginary' to ensure their services 'make sense' to their users (Wyatt, 2004).

To tease out its sociocultural effects, Gillespie (2013) identifies four different definitions of the word 'platform' - architectural, functional, figurative and political - which are each drawn upon to develop its discursive resonance in the digital context. As Gillespie explains, through their use of the word 'platform' technology companies have moved the definition well beyond the computational:

This more conceptual use of the 'platform' leans on all of the term's connotations: computational, something to build upon and innovate from; political, a place from which to speak and be heard; figurative, in that the opportunity is an abstract promise as much as a practical one; and architectural, in that [it] is designed as an open-armed, egalitarian facilitation of expression, not an elitist gatekeeper with normative and technical restrictions. (p.352)

The adoption of the term 'platform' is therefore strategic as it has connotations with openness,

functionality, empowerment and neutrality. This elides the work of the platform architecture and algorithms, which in many instances work to prioritise (and deprioritise) particular posts, photos and information, as well as the connections between users (see Bucher, 2012). Indeed, digital platforms have to serve a number of different audiences, users, shareholders, third parties and advertisers, to name but a few. Part of the challenge Gillespie (2013) argues is that they must manage the expectations of each and smooth out any contradictions between them in order to serve the financial interests of the company. For example, the computational definition of the word 'platform' appeals to developers, while the connotations of empowerment, neutrality and openness, appeal to users, advertisers and other third parties. Ultimately these connotations imply many things about what the platform will offer, but in reality, platforms like Facebook and YouTube, rely on user generated content.

Viewed in these terms the operation and effectiveness of many digital platforms depend on users adopting a particular faith or belief in the role that it will play in their everyday life. Indeed, the popular discourse associated with these platforms has successfully established the notion that digital platforms, particularly Facebook, are the place to connect with others (Couldry, 2015). Many digital platforms reinforce this idea by marketing themselves as fundamental to facilitating social interaction and self-representation. For example, Facebook's tagline is: 'Facebook helps you to connect and share with the people in your life'. Similarly, the prompts to write 'What's on your mind?', 'Share', 'Like' and '+Add Friend' normalise new social practices through the interface. Indeed, the discourse that helps to construct these platforms reaches beyond the boundaries of the technology to establish a kind 'social media logic' in users (van Dijck & Poell, 2013), which is actually the 'norms, strategies, mechanisms, and economies underpinning' (p.2) the dynamics of the platform. This logic is often tacit, shaping the practices associated with the site in unconscious ways. As such, the politics of platforms are constituted through the beliefs and assumptions that are bound up with the sites, as well as the architecture that present and channel information. These issues present new challenges to communication practices.

Using digital platforms, then, raises critical questions about how to exploit the possibilities of the interface while balancing the dynamics and demands of social relations. While the principles and processes of platforms have been identified and theorised, how these complexities map onto users' social experiences is more difficult to gauge. Against this backdrop this paper seeks to address the following questions:

- In what ways, do the architecture, algorithms and discourse of Facebook shape the communicative practices of young people?
- In what ways do young people experience or interpret the technologically situated nature of platform participation?
- What influence do offline contexts (i.e. safety discourses, adults, peer pressure) have on how young people negotiate the rule-making process?

As this is an exploratory paper, I cannot claim to provide conclusive answers to these questions, however, it does provide some empirical foundations that extend understandings of how the politics of the Facebook platform are negotiated by users, and the strategies they develop and rely on to do this.

Methodology

While previous studies on how young people use the internet and digital media (e.g. Ito *et al.*, 2010; Davies & Eynon, 2013; Boyd, 2014) have tended to rely on self-reports of behavior and/or observations of use, the present research used a series of art-based 'provocations' to generate understandings and insights into the patterns and histories of their online practices (Pangrazio, 2016). In particular, the research was based on a series of workshops that supported participants (aged 14-19 years) in model-making, painting, mapping and digital design. These activities were used to

encourage the young people to reflect upon issues relating to their use of digital platforms that would have been overlooked or remained hidden through more conventional research approaches. Representing their digital histories and practices through such creative techniques encouraged participants to critically consider their engagement with digital platforms and the understandings and strategies they generated as a result of this. The paper therefore uses visual and textual data generated through the production of these artifacts to explore the tacit rules that underpinned these young people's platform participation. Visual and textual data was complemented by group discussions, one-on-one interviews and online observations.

Findings

While the tacit rules and strategies participants use on Facebook were socially constructed, analysis of the data demonstrates that they were also shaped by the politics of the platform. As such, these young people's communicative practices tended to follow distinct patterns that were established through the architecture of the platform. Simply using Facebook, for example, encouraged particular forms of communication, like projecting a 'best' self, in what might be thought of as a kind of contemporary form of 'show and tell'. In this way, the participants' communication practices and socialities reinforce and reflect the particular 'social media logic' (van Dijck & Poell, 2013) propagated by the Facebook platform.

The findings also point to the socially embedded nature of these interactions. Participants were accomplished at initiating digital connections to reflect and reinforce varying levels of friendship, however, the platform played an important role in steering how these relationships were experienced. Indeed, digital platforms opened up new methods of communicating with others but these were often in quite particular and sometimes constrained ways. This was a source of reticence and anxiety for some. Presenting the self via the News Feed for example, made several participants feel vulnerable, mainly because of the fear of being judged negatively or simply rebuffed. Despite this, due to social exclusion, participants felt compelled to engage in the ritualised practices promoted through Facebook. The discussion is divided into three main sections that focus on the different ways socialities are shaped by the platform, including: establishment of habitual digital practices through norms and notifications; the focus on photographs in the (re)presenting identity; and using metrics (i.e. 'likes' and 'friends') to negotiate identities and relationships.

i) Establishing habitual digital practices through norms and notifications

The most popular connective media platform used by participants was Facebook. 11 of the 13 young people in the study were on Facebook, and for many this was the first social media site they signed up to. Indeed, Facebook appeared to be an initial, formative step in the social media 'ladder' for most young people in the study, with other platforms 'added on' later. Moreover, the majority of participants also reported that they were users of Facebook before email. Sean, the oldest of the participants at 19, explains that by the time he was ready to start communicating online, Facebook had superseded email, as it was easy to access and more immediate: 'I feel like it [email] was slightly earlier than most of the internet use that I did, so I never kind of caught on because we had Facebook as an alternative, because it's instant'. Indeed, convenience clearly helped to increase use of the platform, as Sean explains email has a more convoluted login process: 'I need to go on the internet I need to Google "Gmail" and then I have to login... whereas I click a tab and I've got Facebook straightaway and it'll tell me if I've got notifications or messages'.

The simplicity of 'checking' Facebook made it easy for the participants to form habitual digital practices, which several participants explained can become hard to break. When Heidi started her senior years of high school she thought about deactivating her Facebook account in order to concentrate on her studies, but as she explained 'it's not worth it' because she felt the 'need to know stuff'. This was not a surprising response given that part of the business model of companies like Facebook is to instigate habitual practices that return the user to the site (Greenwald, 2015). Indeed, notifications sent directly to the user and social buttons spread throughout the network act as a web of

signifiers that keep the Facebook platform in the forefront of the users' mind. Moreover, the type of information the platform encourages people to share is intimate and personal, so that users start, in Mark 's words, 'tracking real life friends'. As Heidi explained, the information that is typically shared gives a sense of omniscience and control in that users know what everyone else is doing, which can become addictive:

Well you become more sociable and you know more about lots of people because you're constantly seeing it – it's being fed to you all the time. You're in everybody's little business, which isn't always great, but you always know what's happening over there, happening over there, happening over there. Like in a school you'll have certain groups and you know what's happening in that group even though you've probably never spoken to them.

Using platforms like Facebook create an atmosphere in which individuals are comfortable watching and being watched by others. In fact, for many participants Facebook was key to being socially visible offline, as it was used to distribute invitations to parties and events. As Penny explained: 'I also find that people that don't have Facebook, not that this is a life ruiner, but you wouldn't get invited to as many things and you don't see friends as much because the conversations you have with your friends they start and then you're like "I'm bored, let's do something"'.

Using Facebook was a way of being socially present, however, this did not necessarily mean active participation on the platform. Four participants rarely actively engaged in creating and uploading content or communicating with others. For example, one of the provocations encouraged participants to think critically about the function of commonly used Facebook icons and then re-design it to reflect what it represents within their social group. Heidi chose to represent a Facebook friend as a link in a chain because as she explains "friends' are 'more like a communication link or a link to someone else':

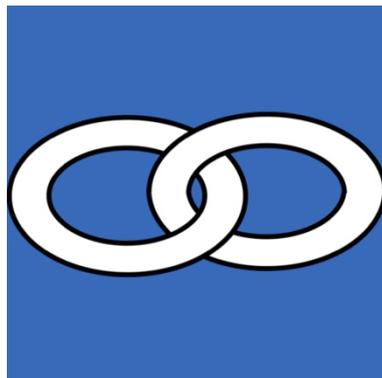


Figure 1: Heidi's re-designed 'friend' icon

She went on to explain that often when you add a friend on Facebook, 'you never communicate, you never chat with them'. In this sense, friends were not viewed as interlocutors or people to share a discourse with. Implicit in this statement is the idea that information simply passes through individuals often with little opportunity or inclination to respond, engage or amend it. However, these social links and connections have other significance. As Crawford (2009) explains there is a form of agency enacted through listening as it both 'receptive and reciprocal' (p.527), and this carries over into offline spaces, not only through invitations to events, but also through developing a discourse *across* contexts. For example, at the time of data collection, Mark had only recently had the internet connected at home. Prior to this he felt 'out of the loop', but now he explained he can 'actually start a conversation about something on the internet and be able to be involved in that process'. Similarly, disagreements, fights and bullying that took place offline typically crossed online to Facebook, and vice versa.

While some motivations for platform participation were clearly social, the participants' practices also reflected elements of the cybersafety discourse. All participants recalled cybersafety classes from upper primary school onwards and, for many, such classes were still an annual event in the school curriculum. In interviews and group discussion participants drew on these cybersafety discourse to explain and justify their digital practices. Despite this, the cybersafety message was often contrary or opposed to the values that were associated with or encouraged by the platform. For example, one of the significant messages of this discourse was 'knowing' someone face-to-face before becoming friends with them online. One participant, Penny, explained that this 'rule' about 'friending' came from a policeman who visited her school to talk about these issues. While all participants considered themselves 'cybersafe', describing social media practices such as strict privacy settings, carefully chosen photographs and a list of 'known' social media 'friends', the social and technological demands of Facebook were often privileged. For example, two participants willfully re-interpreted the cybersafety message of 'knowing' someone as simply sharing many mutual friends or 'mutuals' on social media. While many adult Facebook users do not literally 'know' their 'friends', due to the cybersafety message, the question of knowing a friend face to face was an important principle for these young people to follow. Even though this message was often disregarded, it introduced the idea that there was a morally 'right' way to use Facebook, which was often at odds with the social and technological values promoted by the platform.

ii) The importance of photos in (re)presenting identity

All participants said that the main reason they were on Facebook was to stay informed about what was happening in the lives of their friends and family. As this was seen as a primary purpose of Facebook, participants shaped their posts to suit the expectations of their audience. Heidi's posts on Facebook, for example, were designed to 'let people know what you're *actually* up to'. In a similar way, Dylan said he used Facebook to 'communicate events and stuff...it's much easier to show stuff I guess'. Due to the prominence of the image in the News Feed, most often posts were based on photographs. Indeed, in their tips for best posting practices Facebook recommends using photographs and images to help 'keep your posts interesting'¹, as these attract attention and, therefore, 'likes', comments and shares. For participants this was typically a representation of their 'best' self – doing something exciting with family and friends:

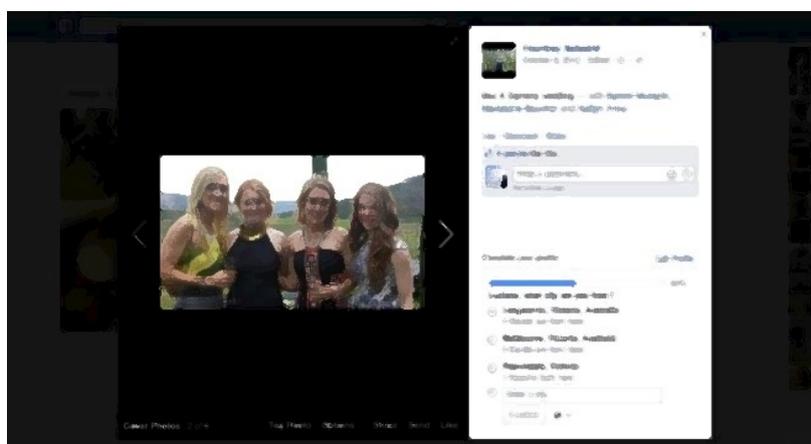


Figure 2: Maddy at the wedding, Facebook post November 2014

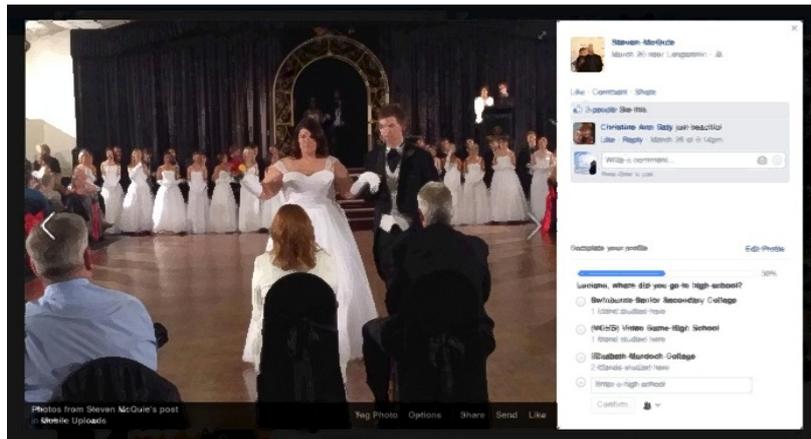


Figure 3: Stacey at the debutante ball, Facebook post October 2014

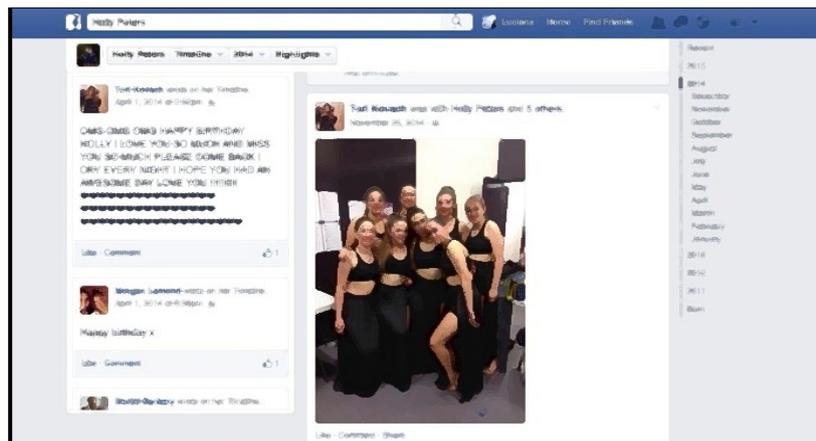


Figure 4: Grace at the dance competition, Facebook post July 2014

Projecting the self was also about seeking the affirmation of others. While this could be a positive process, it also involved peer judgment, which five participants felt nervous about. Three of the five participants posted very little on social media and reported that they did not do much apart from looking and liking others' posts. As Grace explained: 'I don't post that much. I don't know, I just like looking through what other people post, that sounds kind of weird...there's just not a lot to write about'. In a similar way, Penny put up very few posts, so that her use of Facebook often involved projecting herself via photos and commenting and liking other people's photos, as she said, 'I don't write that many posts or statuses'.

However, photographs were also used for expanding a network of friends and increasing social interactions. Telling someone they 'looked good' was a typical comment Penny made on friends' Facebook photos. It not only made someone more socially visible, but it encouraged Penny to initiate conversation if she hadn't seen them in a while: 'Like some of my friends that I have on there [Facebook] I haven't seen in ages, but when I scroll through and I'm like "They're looking good lately, I should go see them, I haven't seen them in ages"'. It is not surprising that this made choosing a photo as a profile picture quite a complex process, as Grace explains:

There's a lot of stuff with having a new profile picture, like how many 'likes' you get on it and stuff like that. So it's kind of like it would have to be a *really* good photo if I was to change it, because now it's a lot more important. So it's probably a reason why I haven't changed it because there hasn't been a photo that I thought that this is a good picture.

Despite the pressures that surround the use of photos, uploading and commenting on them was described as the most common activity for the majority of girls in the study.

Selecting photos that could both attract attention, yet still be socially appropriate was a significant tension that several participants spoke of. This tension was not only due to fear of judgment, but also the idea that once content is posted the author loses 'control' over it. Indeed, many participants believed control only exists *before* content goes online; after that it was thought of as available and, in a sense free, for anyone to use. Five participants expressed this idea, often in an unprovoked or unrelated context. As Maddy said: 'I don't really put anything up that's not, I wouldn't care if they used it, it wouldn't be a big deal'. While Sean explained, 'I don't really put anything up that I wouldn't want to happen', meaning that a pre-requisite for deciding what to put online was whether he would be happy for *anything* to happen to that content (i.e. spread widely or manipulated). Grace simply said: 'Don't post things that you don't want *everyone* to see'. Participants approached their personal digital content as though it acquired a life of its own once online. It was therefore the responsibility of individuals to think carefully about what they posted. This translated into a conservative disposition in which participants like Grace claimed they didn't 'post much stuff on the internet'.

Aside from school-based cybersafety lessons peers, parents and other relatives only played a minor role in helping young people develop their understandings and strategies for platform participation. While they regularly discussed the content, topics and trends that featured on digital platforms, there was little conversation around the social dynamics that contextualised and directed the flow of such content. Aside from offering comfort on the trials and tribulations of social media, few participants spoke to their parents or teachers about their digital experiences. More typically, participants reported that the main role played by parents was to reinforce and maintain their safety and security in digital spaces. In this way, parents were more like gatekeepers than guides when it came to cultivating effective strategies for platform participation. This finding is in accordance with those of Shin and Lwin (2016), who found that parents and teachers are more inclined to make instructive remarks about teenagers' use of the internet, and that this diminishes over time. The findings of this research suggest there is little support for these young people to deal with the more complex nature of the technologically situated interactions taking place through the Facebook platform. Indeed, the enthusiasm and willingness of participants to partake in the reflective and critical discussions instigated by this research project might be due to the fact that there was a general lack of these conversations in the participant's lives.

iii) Using 'likes' and 'friends' to negotiate identities and relationships

An important part of the social interactions that take place on Facebook were the like, share and friend buttons which played a significant role in shaping communicative acts. Not only do these buttons provide a method of expression, but they also gather information about the individual that can then be used in product recommendations and data analytics. To the participants, however, 'likes', photographs and 'friends' were a network of signifiers central to understanding someone's social standing and identity. They were therefore seen as the key to popularity and social success. As Rachel said: 'You can tell someone who's popular if they have heaps of 'likes' on their photos and stuff because then they'll have heaps of friends on Facebook'.

Adapting to the architecture of the Facebook platform therefore requires the inculcation of particular practices and self-representations that can attract the feedback of their 'friends'. All of the participants on social media were aware of the significance of gaining attention and popularity associated with social media use, which accords with Goldhaber's (1997) notion of the 'attention economy'. The participants demonstrated an understanding of the dynamics of this economy as digital practices were often read and designed in terms of seeking and acquiring attention. This also meant having some tacit understanding of how to be recognisable to the algorithm (Gillespie, 2016). In this way the platform demands certain kinds of presentations of self in order to establish and maintain relationship networks which, for some participants led to feelings of self-consciousness. One participant in particular, Rachel, was candid about the influence of her Facebook practices on her sense of self:

Rachel: Yeah I start to get notifications on Facebook, I'm like people *actually like* me and then when I get nothing, I'm like *ok*.

Luci: *So it's good when you're popular but then when you're not?*

Rachel: Yeah it's kind of silly but that what's it's like...I feel like because you know I'm a teenager and just sometimes I want attention and I think it's bad to say that, but I'm being really honest now.

The 'need' to receive validation through 'likes' and comments is no doubt a fairly common feeling for social media users, particularly those in their teenage years. Indeed, this 'need' results in the adoption of particular practices and encouraged Rachel to add friends indiscriminately. However, for Rachel this was not a practice or an online identity that she felt comfortable with. She eventually changed these practices, as she explained: 'Like in 2013 and 12, I just added [friends] you know, I knew them but I didn't know them, I just added them because I knew that I needed to have them. I started getting a lot of friends and then I'm like "Wait! I don't need this"'. At this point, she realised she did not need 'all those friends' on Facebook to feel 'loved'. However, her solution was not to review her list of Facebook friends and practices and pay less attention to notifications, but instead to start a new Facebook account under a different name. Rachel's new Facebook account had just 327 friends compared to the first one that had over a thousand. However, to safeguard against any negative feedback, Rachel continued with the first account as a 'lite version of her life on Facebook' (Marwick & Boyd, 2014, p.10), but posted more regularly to the second one. What made Rachel uncomfortable was the contradiction she felt between how she represented herself on Facebook, and who she felt she was.

While likes were important, whether clicking the 'like' button actually meant someone *liked* the content was another matter. When re-designing the Facebook 'like' for the research provocation that asked participants to think critically about the function of icons, Grace drew a pair of eyes as one of her sketches for the 'like' button. As she explained: 'I think the "like" button is mainly just to say you've seen it sort of, other people's photos and stuff'. In the end she designed a two-thumbed hand, because liking is more an acknowledgement that you have seen the content and not that you actually like it.

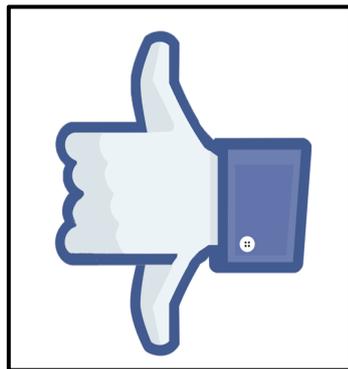


Figure 5: Grace's re-designed 'like' icon

Maddy described opening up her Facebook account and scrolling down clicking indiscriminately on her friends' content - 'like, like, like'. In this way liking something had become almost an unconscious process that was both integral to social media use, but also somewhat meaningless. As Maddy explained, with close friends you are obliged to like their photos: 'If it is one of your close friends, if they put something in their profile photo and it's really ugly and you don't like it, it's like I'm kind of obligated to like it. So I just like it anyway'. In this instance, it is clear that the platform has become integral to maintaining social cohesion, such that its role is now woven into the dynamics of the peer group.

Facebook is designed for socialising and ‘sharing’ with peers, and several participants did say they felt a sense of belonging when using social media, however, three participants felt otherwise. As Stacey explained using Facebook was just like ‘browsing’ not conversing or interacting with others: ‘I don’t join in with many of the conversations people have so it’s like you don’t really feel like you belong on it’. In a similar way, Trent and Ben described Facebook in more negative terms, explaining that they felt more connected to the gaming website Steam. In a group discussion, Trent, Ben, Simon and Stacey described Facebook as a ‘food chain’, with the ‘popular’ people taking the place of the tertiary predators at the top of the chain:

Luci: ...So you’re saying that by putting people down they become popular?

Trent: They go up the food chain

Stacey: Yeah, very much

Ben: Yeah

Simon: If someone’s ahead of you, you make them stand down and you move up

Luci: Right you...

Stacey: It’s like basically a food chain

Ben: So if you’re down here and someone’s up here (gesturing vertically) you have to get through all these people to be this popular.

Luci: And how do you do that?

Trent: Well you know you bully them, put them down

Stacey: You lower the people behind, under you...

Trent: Make them self-conscious

Stacey: You make the one’s under you feel uncomfortable and you befriend the ones, slowly befriend the ones that are going higher.

This discussion was revealing not only because of the hostile behavior described, but because all the participants concurred with the depiction of Facebook as a ‘food chain’. Implicit to this hierarchical description of social relationships is the idea that those at the top of the chain have more power and control. Nilan *et al.* (2015) describe these patterns of behaviour as ‘linked fields of struggle’ (p.6), where social and cultural capital is often expressed through forms of harassment. In this way, online ‘peer teasing’ is a ‘means of building social capital with friends and classmates’ (p.7). However, popularity is linked to ‘likes’ and therefore the number of friends people have, making it quite challenging to be visible and gain attention, but also avoid becoming the target of peer teasing. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that some participants described little sense of belonging or connection to Facebook as they often felt less like a thinking and feeling person and more like an object for appraisal and affirmation.

Discussion and conclusion: Implications of digital platforms on young people's socialities

Returning to Gillespie’s (2010) definition of the platform as both ‘computational’ and ‘conceptual’ helps make sense of the challenges these young people experienced through their use of Facebook. The lure of conviviality and friendship promised through this platform encouraged these young people to see Facebook as the place to connect with others, however, the architecture of the site and the focus on metrics instill practices that did not always sit comfortably. For example, the dominance of the visual image was often interpreted as prioritising appearance. Similarly, the use of metrics such as the ‘likes’ or the number of ‘friends’ one has become a source of anxiety for several participants. While digital media could provide opportunities for becoming experimental or transitory versions of self, for these young people it was more often experienced as a conservative, conformist environment. As a result, each user adopted a tacit set of rules and strategies to manage these pressures. To several participants the strategy was to be present, but not actively post, while others, like Rachel, set up an alternative profile that could be more controlled and intimate. While these strategies were associated with feelings of consternation and confusion, they were largely ‘interiorized by individuals’ (Langlois, McKelvey, Elmer & Werebin, 2009, p.6) as the overriding discourse positioned them to participate.

While the research highlighted the technologically situated nature of platform participation, the peer

group was also a significant factor in establishing a paradigm for engagement. Not only was Facebook a gateway to offline events and engagements, but the functions of the platform were woven into the way relationships were experienced and reinforced. For example, the 'like' button had become an integral way of maintaining social cohesion amongst peers. Similarly, it appeared that sharing a discourse across contexts was an integral part of developing relations with others. Archer (2007) calls this 'contextual continuity', where a 'communality of landmarks together with experiential overlap facilitates the sharing of internal conversations' (p.84). In this way, an essential step in developing intimacy is being on the same social media platforms or present with peers across contexts. This sense of constant connection is encouraged by the architecture of the platform, as continual access through the app made it easier and more direct to communicate with 'friends', as opposed to navigating through the more convoluted login processes of email, for example.

However, participation on Facebook is not just a matter of users communicating with each other; participation is based around the creation and circulation of 'digital objects' (Hui, 2012), such as profiles, videos and photographs. According to Langlois and Elmer (2013) the 'operative site of the commercialized, communicative act' is not the individuals themselves, but instead the 'digital object', which is constituted by links, videos, posts, images and like buttons (p.2). Once 'technologically enabled or encoded' for 'platforming' (Langlois & Elmer, 2013, p.2), digital objects can be circulated and promoted across social media platforms. This explains the lack of control these young people felt once their digital content had been posted - it becomes a digital object with its own ontology and trajectory. While the constitution of the 'digital object' helps to commoditise communicative acts, this elides the emotion and affect that are also bound up in the creation of the object, particularly for the creator. Indeed, reducing communicative acts to digital objects encourages young people to see themselves and others through a similarly objective lens. It is therefore not surprising that participants described social relations hierarchically, using the Facebook 'food chain' as an analogy. In light of this, the prioritising and privileging of particular digital practices by these young people – including the focus on photos, increasing the number of 'friends' and attracting 'likes' – are not necessarily pre-existent social practices, but are instead responses to the ideology operationalised through the architecture and algorithms of the platform.

Self-representations and interactions facilitated through Facebook not only need to 'fit' with the social dynamics of the peer group, but should also be 'algorithmically recognizable' (Gillespie, 2016). This requires particular strategies and practices that are 'learned' through using the platform, most often through observation and trial and error. The Edge Rank algorithm determines what an individual will see in their News Feed based on the relationship they have with the content creator (Bucher, 2012). For this reason, posts of a personal or emotional nature are most likely to appear in the News Feed of those closest to the user, and also attract the attention of others. As several participants explained, knowing personal or intimate information about 'friends' was 'addictive', however, from a platform perspective this was the work of the algorithm, which, in many respects, binds users to each other. In this way, algorithms like Edge Rank exert a 'social power' (Beer, 2016), which shapes decisions, influences behaviors and instigates certain values and ideals (p.9). Rachel, for example, was keenly aware of shaping her practices to attract more 'likes' and 'friends'. Indeed, like several other participants in the study, notifications became a significant part of her self-concept. While the execution of the Edge Rank algorithm is 'full of ambiguity' to ensure that it cannot be strategically manipulated in order to maintain its integrity in engaging users (Birkbak & Carlsen, 2016, n.p.), this also means that it is difficult for users to ever really understand or control how the algorithm works. Despite this, through Edge Rank, particular relations and functions on Facebook are hierarchised, thereby prioritising particular people and posts into users' News Feed. Indeed, to remain 'visible' these young people have little choice but to follow 'a certain platform logic embedded in the architecture of Facebook' (Bucher, 2012, p.1171). In this way, the architecture of the platform is a significant, but often unseen and unpredictable modulator of these young people's social experiences.

However, a significant finding of the study was that the politics of the platform did not always map smoothly onto participants' experience. Presenting the self in a way that suits the architecture of the platform requires the adoption of particular digital practices, and for some participants this prompted

anxiety, particularly as the representations and relationships facilitated on Facebook felt, to some degree, inauthentic. Intensifying this situation is the fact that these representations and expressions are publicly scrutinised and judged through 'likes', 'shares' and comments. From an economic perspective, 'likes' represent 'valuable consumer data', which through digital platforms can 'enter multiple cycles of multiplication and exchange' (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013, p.1349). However, from a personal perspective, (re)presenting and measuring the self through the platform led participants to practices they felt were self-contradicting. Despite this, sociologist Eva Ilouz (2007) argues contradiction is simply part of using connective media platforms:

The technology of the internet thus positions the self in a contradictory way: it makes one take a deep turn inward, that is, it requires that one focus on one's self in order to capture and communicate its unique essence, in the form of tastes, opinions, fantasies and emotional capabilities (p.79).

In this way, the platform becomes the site for the self to be 'assembled' leading to a Goffmanesque type of 'impression management' (Goffman, 1959). However, this also requires a 'deep inward turn', which for many participants was a confronting experience.

What is significant about this study is how the corporate ambitions of the platform mapped onto and shaped the socialities of these young people. In doing so it highlights what has become the prevailing culture and ideology of the digital context, which is most clearly outlined by van Dijck (2013a): 'Platform tactics such as the popularity principle and ranking mechanisms hardly involve contingent technological structures; instead they are firmly rooted in an ideology that values hierarchy, competition, and a winner-takes-all mindset' (p. 21). While many of the participants were well aware of the way Facebook was structuring their experiences, as it is now woven into the fabric of their social lives, and the cultural imaginary more broadly, opting out was not a decision to be made lightly. Further to this, Facebook does offer opportunities for these young people to communicate with new audiences in ways that they had not been able to before. However, the competitive pressures promoted by Facebook reify offline values and power relations that limited the potential for this group to connect and experiment through the platform.

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ⁱ Facebook, Page posting tips and best practices, <https://www.facebook.com/business/a/page-posting-tips>