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Author/s:
Fu, J;Cook, J

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Everyday Social Media Use of Young Australian Adults

Abstract

Current research on young people's social media use tends to revolve around notable and spectacular forms of usage, and usage by specific identity-based groups on specific sites. The everyday social media use of 'ordinary' young people and its theoretical significance for youth sociology is less often considered. This paper presents findings derived from longitudinal data collected from 446 young Australians about their social media use. Using Couldry's (2012) media-related practices as a dual methodological and conceptual lens, we examine how their social media practices are embedded in the broader social practices of Australian young people. In so doing, we seek to understand how media are used by young people as a tool or resource to navigate their everyday lives in changing social contexts, and suggest that this process is directly contributing to their active creation of a new experience of adulthood. We ultimately contend that the media-related practices that we identify demonstrate how young people experience and negotiate the power of social media in shaping their everyday practices, which affords an opportunity to account for media's role in constituting the shifting social ontology experienced by young people.

Keywords: social media use, young adult, Australia, everyday life

Introduction

Although young people's use of digital media has become a major point of focus in youth studies, research about this topic has not attended equally to the full spectrum of young people's online activities. Current research tends to focus on risky and spectacular forms of usage (Wang & Edwards 2016), and usage by specific identity-based groups and on specific platforms (Robards & Lincoln 2020; Selfridge & Mitchell 2020; Storrod & Densley 2017). Comparatively less is known about the everyday social media use of young people across platforms and outside specific behaviours and identities. This area of comparative silence in the literature notably maps broadly onto the notion of a 'missing middle' that has been identified in youth sociology (Roberts 2011). Although initially developed to highlight the dichotomous focus of much youth research on either successful or troubled transitions to adulthood, a missing middle is reflected in studies of social media use as well, reflecting the gap in the literature to which this article seeks to respond.

In this article we address young adults' everyday use of social media at two points in time: the age of 24-25, and the age of 29-30. Our conceptual and methodological framework builds upon Nick Couldry's (2012) work on media-related practices, which allows us to take everyday practices rather than, for instance, the subjective meaning or reception of media as our starting point. Using this approach we examine participants' reports of and reflections on their everyday use of social media, with the aim of building upon the link that Couldry suggests between media and changes in social ontology. By focusing on the continuity and change of participants' media-related practices over two points in time, we contend that their uses and understandings of social media, which are embedded in the broader social practices, provide a new entry point from which understandings of a new adulthood created by young people in a changing social ontology can be developed.

Young people's media-related practices

Media use has traditionally been examined through the 'uses and gratifications' approach in the context of media effects research (McQuail 1994). This approach focuses on individual uses of media, and tends to treat media as bounded objects (for instance, a newspaper or television) which can be analysed as texts or independent influential institutions. This approach thus analyses media and its use as 'a closed circuit of production–distribution–reception' (Couldry 2012: 13). In a new media environment in which social media have saturated multiple spheres of our lives, researchers have largely moved from analysing media use through the lens of production-distribution-reception to focus instead on the role of media in mediating interactive and networked forms of communication (Couldry & Hepp 2013). In this new media context, power has been transited from political institutions to cultural codes and is exercised through and within networks (Castells 2000). As a result, the uses and gratifications approach is incapable of investigating the associated protocols (Jenkins 2006) of people's use of media from which media-related social and cultural practices are generated, posing a dual methodological and conceptual challenge for contemporary media studies.

The media-related practices approach addresses the methodological difficulty inherent in contemporary efforts to study the media's social impact by directing focus to 'what people are doing in relation to media in the contexts in which they act' (Couldry 2012: 35). In contrast to the individualised scope of uses and gratification theory, this approach has a social and cultural emphasis. It investigates people's media-related practices as regular social actions 'whose possibility is conditioned by the existence, presence or functioning of media' (Couldry 2012: 35). These actions are, hence, created *in response* to media and the general social order rather than as an outcome of them. In this way media-related practice aids us in identifying the focal point of our study – the media-related practices that are enacted within individuals' everyday lives

– while also providing a means for contextualising such practices within the wider power of media in large societies without falling into the trap of technological or user determinism. A focus on media-related practices thus provides a conceptual lens for our study by aiding us in conceptualising our participants' practices 'in line with the wider bundles of habits from which our daily practice is made up' (Couldry 2012: 19). In this sense, media-related practices can inform sensitive accounts of multiple media-related activities within the wider bundle of social practices through which young people navigate their 'basic needs for coordination, interaction, community, trust and freedom' (Couldry 2012: 34), enabling us to understand the social processes enacted through these practices and account for media's role in shaping the social ontology experienced by young people. The concept of media-related practices thus works both as a methodological genesis and a conceptual framing for our research; it helps us to identify the empirical focus of our study (young people's media-related practices) while also aiding us in conceptualising the role and significance of these practices in our participants' lives.

While Couldry (2012) has made remarkable effort to account for the impact that media may have on social ontology – a concept referring to the nature and properties of the social world and the groups within it – he admits that this area is still under-addressed, as its scope exceeds his own work. This topic has been addressed in relation to older forms of media. For instance, Castells (2000) attended to the increasing significance of networks as a new infrastructure in both a physical and social sense. Although it is not possible to address how social media is shaping individuals' social ontology in a broad sense in the present article, we seek to begin part of this ambitious project by considering how social media has reshaped the social ontology of our participants by considering what their media-related practices can tell us about the architecture of their social worlds.

Current research about young people's social media use tends to focus in two main areas: young people's use of social media in political movements and everyday politics (Author 2019; Banaji & Buckingham 2013; Harris, Wyn, & Younes 2010) and use of social media for social interaction, self-expression, and identity formation. In the latter area, research tends to either focus on specific identity-based youth groups, such as street involved youth (Selfridge & Mitchell 2020; Storrod & Densley 2017), Muslim youth (Johns 2014), and international students (Martin & Rizvi 2014), or on spectacular or risky use of social media (Van Ouytsel, Van Gool, Walrave, Ponnet, & Peeters 2017; Wang & Edwards 2016). Due to their specific points of focus, these studies leave a 'missing middle' in the study of young people's social media use as we contended earlier. Couldry (2012: 19) argues that young people's *everyday* media-related practices speak to 'the basic necessities of "holding things together"',

suggesting the utility of research addressing the mundane and holistic ways in which young people engage with social media in their everyday lives. As such, without detracting from the ethical urgency of research on marginalised and under-represented groups, current research about young people's social media use nevertheless suggests space for research on the everyday social media use of 'ordinary' young adults – those who are part of the intermediate group between 'achievers and troublemakers' (Nairn, Sligo, & Freeman 2006: 248).

To clarify, in our estimation 'ordinary' young adults may include members of the communities discussed above. Rather than using the term 'ordinary' as, for instance, a proxy for a particular experience of ethnicity (whiteness) or sexuality (heterosexuality) and thus reinforcing the process of othering that much research on marginalised communities critiques, we instead locate ordinariness in the nature of the participants' engagement with social media. We focus on holistic use (via media-related practices) rather than engagement with a specific, identity-based group. Put simply, rather than recruiting our participants from or observing them in an online space organised around a specific identity or affiliation, or otherwise on a single social media platform, we instead draw on data taken from an existing longitudinal study. In so doing, we focus on a relatively broad (although not representative) group, and on their holistic social media use (rather than engagement on a specific site).

Mobility, temporality and young adulthood

Now that we have established the methodological and conceptual approach that we adopt in this article, as well as the empirical field of existing research, we move on to consider the broad social context that our participants occupy. Contemporary research on young adulthood has illustrated a new adulthood which captures the changing conditions in which young people navigate their lives (Wyn 2020; Wyn, Smith, Stokes, Tyler, & Woodman, 2008). In the Australian context youth researchers have highlighted the collapse of the youth labour market in the 1990s (amid a deep national recession) and the emergence of post-secondary education as a mass experience directly resulted from policies implemented in that era (Andres & Wyn 2010). Such developments have generally equated to young adults remaining in education for longer than previous generations, and have consequently marked the late 20s as a pivotal time in young adults' lives for the consolidation of their position within the labour market, as well as increasingly the time at which they are most likely to enter the property market, get married, and begin childbearing (Bessant, Watts & Farthing 2017). Alongside the myriad pressures associated with this segment of the life course for many young adults are demands related to mobility (ranging from commuting to relocation) and to temporal pressures resulting from increasingly variable and

individualised schedules. In many ways these developments result from and equate to an erosion of traditional social structures, and thus of the life-course expectations held by members of previous generations (Leccardi & Ruspini 2006). Such developments have been interpreted as resulting in pressure for young people to construct their 'own portfolios for living', and in so doing to draw upon individual resources (Dwyer et al 2005: 36). Wyn et al. (2008) have argued that this creates an imperative to be flexible and reflexive, to keep one's options open, and to maintain a balance between differing life commitments.

In line with the seeming imperative to be flexible and reflexive, mobility has often been framed as a resource that enables new opportunities in young lives (Cairns 2014; Cuzzocrea & Mandich 2016). This way of framing mobility as relatively unambiguously positive has, however, been critiqued in recent work (see Author 2018). Cohen and Gossling (2015) have sought to reveal the 'darker side' of hypermobility, highlighting the drawbacks that accompany it. Of particular relevance are the social costs. While Cohen and Gossling focused predominantly on frequent but temporary forms of mobility such as travel for business, many of these points are also relevant to more protracted forms of mobility such as internal migration. The experience of internal migration – referring to migration within one's country of origin – is particularly relevant for young people. For instance, Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data show that 85 percent of households with a reference person (generally referring to the individual, or one of the individuals, who owns or leases the dwelling) aged 15-34 had moved within the previous five years (ABS 2015). While 48 percent of moves within the previous five years were within the same suburb or locality, a further 46 percent accounted for movement further afield, which could be considered internal migration (with the remaining 6 percent accounting for international migration).

This high rate of mobility poses a significant challenge for young people's social lives and has deep implications for their wellbeing. In their recent study Hendriks, Ludwigs and Veenhoven (2016) sought to understand the finding that internal migrants consistently report lower levels of happiness than locals (termed the migrant-local happiness gap), a finding that has been reported consistently over a range of national contexts, and persists even after socio-economic factors are controlled for. Notably, they focused specifically on young adults, a cohort who are disproportionately represented among internal migrants. By asking their participants to reflect on their happiness via a mobile phone app as they undertook daily activities, rather than at a single point in time, the authors found that the 'happiness gap' could be accounted for by both a different distribution of time and a different experience of activities by migrants and locals. Specifically, migrants allocated less time to active leisure and to activities outside of home, work and transit, and reported lower levels of happiness when they did engage in social activities. As such, the happiness gap appeared to be

accounted for by social factors, as the migrants had smaller social networks and less strong social ties than the locals. Notably, the only time at which migrants were somewhat happier than locals was when they were spending time on the computer, a finding that Hendriks, Ludwigs and Veenhoven attributed to their use of social media as a tool to communicate with friends and family who did not live nearby.

However, relocation is not the only challenge for young people's social lives and wellbeing. Young adults' lives are often shaped by multiple institutional timetables and competing demands. In a study of a group of young Australians aged 19-21 Woodman (2012) found that his participants were commonly subject to variable and unpredictable timetables shaped by new temporal expectations in relation to both work and study. Significantly, these unpredictable timetables made it increasingly difficult for many of them to schedule shared time with friends and family. In response to this challenge, studies of young adults contending with issues of both time and space while seeking to maintain the health of their relationships have identified social media as a central tool for doing so. In Woodman's (2012) study, mobile phones and social media were used by young people to maintain their relationships in the face of incompatible schedules. However, Woodman also found that while social media was deemed to be a useful support for maintaining friendships, his participants did not view it as a viable and sustainable alternative to physical co-presence. Experiences of time pressure and of incompatible schedules are not unique to participants in very early adulthood. Such issues have also been associated with those in their mid-20s to early 30s (see Pocock et el. 2012), with authors in many cases focusing on the intersecting demands of employment and caring responsibilities (see Gregg 2011).

While many studies of young adults contending with issues of both space and time have identified social media as a central tool for maintaining the health of their relationships with friends and family, more research is needed to explore the specific ways in which young people navigate their social life using social media, and the role of social media in (re)constituting social ontology. We pursue this line of inquiry by exploring how social media is used by young Australians and how its power in shaping young people's social practices is experienced and negotiated in their everyday lives.

Methodology

The data presented in this article were collected from survey questionnaires completed by a cohort of young Australians in 2013 and 2018. These surveys were part of a longitudinal research program examining the relationship between education,

work and wellbeing for Australian young adults. The participants were recruited into the study in 2005 from secondary schools in the Australian states of Victoria, New South Wales, Tasmania and The Australian Capital Territory at the age of 16-17, and have participated in annual surveys since then. Questions about the frequency of the respondents' social media use were asked in both the 2013 and 2018 surveys when they were aged 24-25 and 29-30 respectively, as well as an open-text question stating, 'Please comment on what you use social media for and how important it is in your life'. In 2013, 627 participants finished the survey, with 524 of them responding to the open-text question about social media use. In 2018, 483 participants finished the survey and 317 responded to the open-text question. After merging the two survey datasets 446 participants who completed both surveys (in 2013 and 2018) were identified as the sample for further analysis (hereafter the sample).

Of the sample that were identified for further analysis (n=446), 378 participants responded to the open-text question in 2013, and 290 participants did so in 2018. We conducted a thematic analysis of these comments in Nvivo 11 in order to identify patterns in participants' responses about their use of and experience with social media. This analysis was informed by the concept of media-related practices. Specifically, we focused on the participants' reflections on the social media-related practices (Couldry 2012) that they engaged in, as well as the ways in which these practices were embedded in and interacted with aspects of their everyday lives and concerns. The themes that emerged from the coding form the basis of the findings presented in the subsequent section.

Although the social media section of the 2018 survey replicated that of the 2013 survey in order to allow for comparison, the 2018 survey also included an additional compound question about the nature of the participants' social media use (see appendix 1). The participants were asked to rate their attitude towards a series of statements on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The responses to these statements are presented in the subsequent section.

The broader survey collected demographic information from the participants, which allows us to contextualise the findings that we present. Seventy percent of the sample were female, reflecting a skew towards female respondents in the wider sample of this study. The study that these data are drawn from follows the same individuals over time and does not top up its sample. For this reason, the sample is shaped by patterns of attrition that are common within longitudinal research (specifically, high rates of attrition among men, and among individuals with low levels of educational attainment, see Chesters et al. 2019). In 2018 more than 85 percent of the sample were living in a capital or regional city. Additionally, 33 percent were married, 37 percent were in a relationship and 28 percent were single. A majority of them (77 percent) held a university degree or above, and the full time employment rate was 72 percent. As the

participants were aged 24-25 and 29-30 at the two points of data collection they fit within the older range of what can be considered 'young adulthood'. We categorise them as such largely due to the expanding scope of young adulthood, attributable to life course changes meaning that young adults are, on average, meeting traditional milestones of adulthood later than members of previous generations.

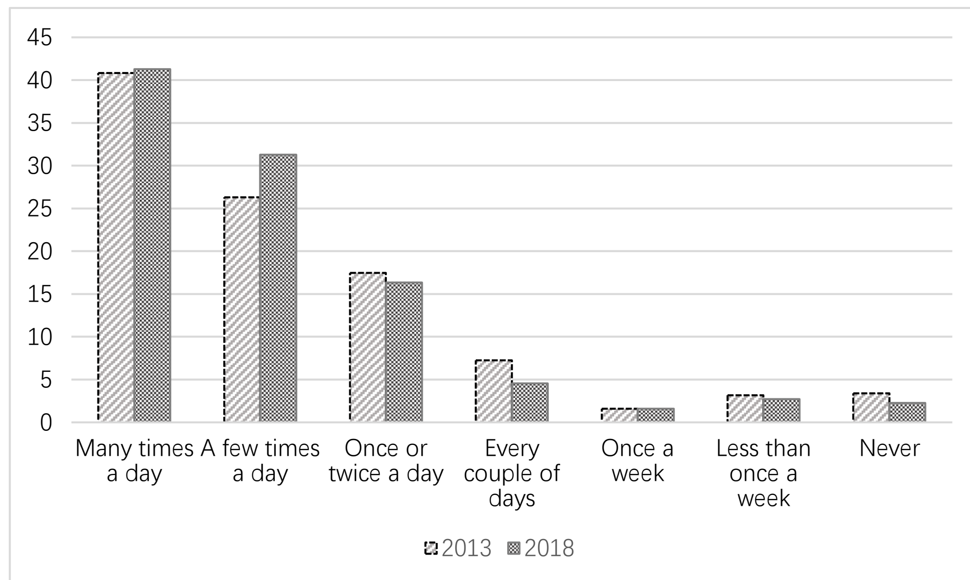
As already noted, this study differs from much recent research on young adults and social media because it does not collect data from these sites. Our data are self-reported, rather than based on online observation or interaction, raising the possibility that the participants' reporting on their perceptions and use of social media may differ from their actual use. This dilemma is common to survey research. However, it does not challenge the utility of our data for two key reasons. Firstly, our focus is on the participants' perceptions of their social media practices. We are interested in examining the participants' perceptions of and reflections on their use of social media in relation to their broader lives rather than addressing, for instance, the relationship between their time spent on social media and subjective wellbeing. Secondly, our study seeks to sit alongside, rather than supersede, research based on online observation (some of which we have discussed above); its limitations in providing insight into participants' actual uses of social media can be supplemented with myriad studies using such data.

Findings and discussion

We begin this section by presenting findings about the frequency of the participants' social media use in 2013 and 2018. We then turn to the data from attitudinal questions and open-text responses, which are presented according to the key themes that arose in data analysis. They are as follows: (1) staying connected and organising social life; (2) 'negative' experiences of social media use; and (3) conscious and diversified uses of social media. The quotes presented were chosen because they exemplified these themes, thus representing wider tendencies in the data.

The frequency of the participants' reported social media use increased slightly over the five-year period, with the proportion who used social media 'many times a day' and 'a few times a day' increasing from 67 percent in 2013 to 73 percent in 2018. The proportion of low-frequency users and non-users (once or twice a day or less) remained largely the same except for a small increase in those who use social media every couple of days (see Fig 1). Participants' frequency of using social media were specified on a seven-category scale ranging from 'Never' to 'Many times a day'. A similar scale was used by Xenos, Vromen, and Loader (2014) to measure young people's frequency of use of nine popular social media platforms nominated in the study. The frequency of the participants' reported social media use is important because it demonstrates that our aim of investigating the everyday media-related practices that young adults engage in is supported by the everyday engagement of the majority of the sample.

Figure 1. Frequency of social media use in 2013 and 2018



To maximise the response of participants to the open-ended question about social media, we left social media as an open concept for the participants to infer. According to their responses, social media was understood mainly as a combination of several typical platforms including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, WhatsApp, Messenger, and Snapchat, with only a few of them mentioned Reddit, LinkedIn, Pinterest and Blog.

Staying connected and organising social life

Our analysis of the participants' comments found that the most common use of social media in both 2013 and 2018 was to stay connected with their families and friends. Typical comments included, 'I have a lot of interstate and overseas friends and I think for the most part I use it as my only connection to them' (Female midwife, 2018), and 'It's important at this stage to help me feel connected as I often don't have enough time to catch up with people face to face' (Female, social worker, 2018). In their response to the compound question in the 2018 survey, almost half of the participants (46 percent) either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that 'I feel connected to others when I use social media'. Indeed, some participants identified that social media served as a substitute or temporary proxy for the physical co-presence with which a sense of connection is typically experienced:

> I mostly use social media to stay connected to friends that are overseas, or I don't have a chance to see often as work commitments often get in the way of having the social life I wish I was able to have. Social media serves as a secondary outlet to remain somehow present in friends' lives. (Electrician, male, 2018)

However, alongside facilitating the positive experience of connectedness, social media also appeared to aid the participants in avoiding negative experiences associated with ‘missing out’:

> [it helps me to] feel connected with friends and family. I often miss out on things due to work, so this way I don’t miss out. (Female nurse, 2018)

> I use social media to keep up to date with what friends are doing, it’s a good platform to use so people don’t forget about you! Life is busy. It’s a reminder that you are still alive. (Male manager, 2018)

Social media helped these participants to overcome FOMO (fear of missing out), which is a state of anxiousness when people think that others in their social spheres are leading more socially desirable lives than they are (Przybylski, Murayama, DeHaan, & Gladwell 2013). Moreover, the connectedness afforded by the participants’ use of social media became a resource for addressing feelings of ontological insecurity and loneliness.

In addition to staying connected, the participants also used social media to organise and structure their social lives; in 2018, 51 percent of them either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that ‘social media helps me to organise my social life’. Due to the high penetration of social media into the participants’ everyday lives through their routine engagement in media-related practices, as well as its efficiency in allowing them to liaise with family and friends across geographical distance and busy schedules, we interpret social media as a key infrastructure for organising social life, and for facilitating social interaction. Indeed, this usage of social media was reflected in comments in both 2013 and 2018:

> Without Facebook I probably wouldn’t see most of my friends on the weekend or I’d miss important birthdays and events. (Male teacher, 2013)

> I largely use social media to organise events with friends and to chat (via messenger). Messaging with messenger groups of my friends is my main method of organising my social life. (Female researcher, 2018)

> At home with 3 small children it enables me to stay in touch with friends and other parents, and easily arrange to meet or find out about and attend playgroups. (Female nurse, 2018)

These uses of social media are all related to the practice of presencing, a term coined by Couldry (2012) to describe media-enhanced ways in which individuals manage and circulate representations of themselves in order to have a ‘continuous presence-to-others across space’ (p. 49). It is not a practice about media, but a project of

the *self* (often enacted *through* social media) oriented to sustaining a public presence. Enhanced by young people's use of social media and mobile devices, the practice of having online presence has become almost an invisible normality. This suggests a change in social ontology through which episodic co-presence is supplemented with a more continuous form of mediated presence.

When related to young people's wider social practices, many of the participants reflected that their use of social media for presencing was necessitated by busy and incompatible schedules, and by living away from significant others, an experience that was epitomised in a comment in 2018 survey:

> I spent 6 years becoming a lawyer, to find there were no jobs. I have returned to uni, twice, to complete different degrees in the hope that the next degree will offer me a career where law failed me. I have lived in capital cities, regional towns, and small towns when completing these surveys, and yet I have never felt that I will be living in that same location the next time I need to fill one out (my post is sent to my parent's house, which ensures my post never gets lost between locations). (Female, Lawyer, 2018)

This experience of mobility appears to be somewhat common across the sample. Analysis of survey data shows that by 2014 more than 40 percent of the participants in the sample had relocated away from where they lived in 2005 (the year they left school). This rate rose to 57 percent in 2018. Although the majority relocated relatively short distances (for instance, across the city rather than interstate), the challenge of remaining connected to and finding time to be co-present with one's friends and family has been identified as a challenge by participants throughout the life of the [name of study] that our data are drawn from (Colleague 2012). For many, these challenges have been exacerbated by their movement into full time work, childbearing and other milestones often associated with the mid-late 20s in contemporary times. As a result, participants' practices of presencing via social media appear to be a means of managing these challenges by finding an alternative form of social presence through which the benefits of physical co-presence (caring and being cared for, a sense of social connectedness and security) could still be derived in some form. In this sense, presencing has become not a choice, but a necessity for experiencing social connectedness (Tomlinson 2007). It is rooted in the ways in which the participants negotiated their lives in a changing social context. On the one hand, this practice suggests that the agency that some authors (Cairns 2014; Cuzzocrea & Mandich 2016) have associated with mobility may be enabled in part by social media practices that buffer individuals against the isolating effects of distance to at least some degree. On the other hand, the role of social media in maintaining young people's social connection and organising their social lives demonstrate its role in changing social ontology through shaping new practices. This resonates with

McLuhan’s (2012) famous argument that ‘the medium is the message’, which maintains that in examining the impact of media, we need to look at not only how people use media and the content of these media, but also how social media as a force reshape the way the social is organised.

Negative experiences of social media use

The integration of social media in young people’s social and family life was not without consequences. In 2018, 72 percent of the participants either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that ‘At times, I find myself using social media to procrastinate’, while 42 percent of them agreed or strongly agreed that ‘I lose track of how much time I spend on social media’.

Seemingly negative implications of social media use were also reflected on in the open text data, with the coverage of the references coded at the node ‘negative aspects of social media’ increasing from two percent in the comments in 2013 to nine percent in 2018. Many of the participants reflected on their use of social media as wasting their time, allowing them to procrastinate, causing them to feel negatively about themselves, and raising privacy concerns:

> It (social media) makes me feel inferior and pretty shit about myself and where I want to be. I am always comparing myself!!! (Female events coordinator, 2018)

> I used to be on Facebook many times a day and would feel stressed after outings, as I felt the stress to upload photos straight away. It made me feel depressed and jealous looking at everyone’s lives, even though I knew it was only positive aspects posted. (Female childcare educator, 2018)

> I felt the use of social media was a way of procrastinating and wasting time. I would rather share life experiences in a real-world sense and not try to cater to an online audience which has become increasingly less private. (Male, mechanical fitter, 2018)

Evidently participants’ use of social media had ramifications aside from facilitating a sense of connection and belonging. These ramifications can be explained by the functioning of social media through which participants’ media-related practices are conditioned. Veissière and Stendel (2018) argue that smartphones ‘harness basic human proclivities for social monitoring and associative learning’ (p. 5), and their hyper-connectivity can easily push this process to run on overdrive, leading to overuse and engendering negative effects such as depression, procrastination and social isolation. The authors state that the addictive smartphone functions ‘rests on the fundamentally human proclivity toward prosociality’ (p. 7). This dovetails with social media platforms such as Facebook which are built on an attention-based and algorithm-driven business model which feed users with content they are more likely

to respond to (McNamee 2018). This effect could arguably be intensified by a social context in which physical forms of social activity have become increasingly difficult to manage. However, it is important to note that the seemingly positive use of social media to facilitate and maintain social connections and the negative experiences of social media as encouraging procrastination and other undesirable behaviours were not experienced separately by discreet individuals. Instead, these experiences co-existed, as illustrated in the following comment:

> Social media is both a positive and a negative in my life. It is life-changing for keeping in touch with loved ones abroad. I continue to remain in daily contact with my closest friends and siblings. However, I regularly feel it controls my life. People are less committed to social outings as they can see those attending. I feel we struggle to disconnect from work with social media constantly there. It has further repercussions with bullying and harassment. (Male musician, 2018)

While negative aspects of social media were acknowledged by many of the participants, several also expressed that avoidance of social media was often accompanied by a social cost:

> Being off Facebook I have found I often miss out on important social updates within friends as they seem to use it as [their] main means of communication. (Male physiotherapist, 2018)

> I tend not to use social media as much as my peers. Though my friends are constantly having a go at me for not checking group chats and staying up to date. (Female chiropractor, 2018)

As demonstrated in these comments, social media has become an integral element in structuring people's social connection and part of the norm of people's social lives. It shows the power of this new medium in introducing new patterns, pace and scale into human affairs (McLuhan 2012). This power operates implicitly through shaping diversified practices both on social media and in wider society, and is legitimised and naturalised by people's adoption of these 'consensual practices' in today's networked society (Curran 2002). Social media therefore is no longer just a tool or resource that can be used by young people to navigate challenges they face in a changing society, it also works as a power by which the changing social ontology is constituted for young people.

Conscious and diversified uses of social media

Seemingly in response to increased awareness of, or at least reflections on, the 'negative' experiences of social media use, an increasing number of the participants reflected on the notion of conscious uses of social media. Indeed, the coverage of the references coded at the node 'conscious use of social media' rose from six percent in

2013 to 14 percent in 2018. Specifically, a greater number of participants discussed how social media worked, and how to make conscious use of it.

> I still check social media but have become less active (ie. Not posting anything) in recent months. I just don't see it as important anymore. I still have my account, so I know what my friends are up to and I use messenger as a way of keeping in contact with people, but that's about it. (Female research administrator, 2018)

> I recently overhauled my social media use and changed the way I engage – deleted apps off my phone, deliberately followed specific people on twitter e.g. feminist academics. I aimed to reduce the time I spend on it, use it more consciously, and discover interesting/new ideas. (Female policy officer, 2018)

The participants' 'conscious' uses of social media appeared to overlap with efforts to use it in a more diversified manner, which represented another theme that rose in prominence between 2013 and 2018. Although 'staying connected with friends and family' was the primary usage of social media repeated in the participants' comments in both 2013 and 2018, the coverage of the references coded at this node dropped from 58 percent in 2013 to 29 percent in 2018. In 2018 a growing number of the participants' comments focused on uses such as connecting with like-minded people, getting inspired, finding and accessing information and news, sharing information about hobbies and interests, practical uses (traveling planning, booking trips, etc.), and work-related uses.

> I use sites like Instagram and Facebook for inspiration on hobbies/future goals. (Receptionist, female, 2018)

> I mainly use Reddit for the purpose of generating leads for my business. I also frequently read Reddit to stay informed on current events and gain knowledge (Migration agent, male, 2018)

Although these functions of social media are not new, they were rarely mentioned or commented on in the 2013 survey. The emergence of more diversified uses of social media in 2018 may be a reflection of the participants' growing experience with social media, prompting them to adopt strategies for using it to meet their interests and needs. It may relate to the fact that many of the traditional forms of identity and sources of belonging (such as a stable, life-long career, stable community relations, co-present time with friends and family) have been disrupted or reshaped in recent years (as discussed earlier in the paper), potentially prompting the participants to turn to online forms of culture and expression as alternative forms of identity work and spaces of belonging. It also speaks to young people's life in today's individualised society which entails intensive identity work, such as networking and continuous work on the self as a project, in order to have the capacity to respond flexibly to changing conditions (Woodman & Wyn, 2011). As Rizvi's (2012: 194) noted, young people

these days rely more on 'personal projects of self-making, leisure, popular culture and networked spaces of sociality' than on 'pre-determined cultural script concerning relations of locality, traditions, family, class and community' to forge identities and create citizen-belonging. However, this finding also suggests specific, deliberate practices through which young people are shaping their social worlds by shaping their own engagement with social media in more conscious ways.

Towards the beginning of this paper we stated the aim of addressing how social media has reshaped the social ontology of our participants by considering what their media-related practices can tell us about the architecture of their social worlds. Now that we have identified how our participants' media-related practices have changed over time, and have suggested that this has resulted in shifts in social ontology we are left with the limitations of Couldry's work. Specifically, in Couldry's account of how media change social ontology, media-related practice tends to be used only as an analytical tool which connects media and social ontology in order to open a new paradigm for media research. The possibility of these practices per se in shaping and constituting the changing social ontology is left unattended. In order to overcome this limitation in Couldry's work we suggest turning to the work of Schatzki (2003). Specifically, Schatzki has contended directly with questions of the relationship between practices and social ontology in a way that has application for understanding the impact of social media on young adults' lives. Schatzki finds a middle ground between individualist views of ontology that understand social phenomena as nothing more than the constructions of individual minds and societist views of ontology as irreducible to individuals, suggesting the concept of site ontologies on the basis that social life is inherently tied to the contexts in which it unfolds. We suggest supplementing Couldry's inattention to the relationship between media-related practices and social ontology with Schatzki's work in order to view social media as a specific site which contains its own internal rules held in place by its institutions and users' practices. For Schatzki (2003: 190), practices 'maintain fields of intelligibility in whose terms they themselves proceed.' We thus follow Schatzki in understanding social media sites as maintained by, but irreducible to, the practices that individuals enact within them, and which, in turn, shape the social ontology experienced within that specific site. We suggest this use of Schatzki's concept of site ontologies as a supplement to an under-developed aspect of Couldry's theory of media-related practices, as well as a response to questions that we encountered in our own work.

Conclusion

Ultimately, while the frequency of our participants' uses of social media was relatively similar in both 2013 and 2018, the specific ways in which they engaged with it have shown patterns of continuity and change. The dominant use of social media to maintain social connection and organise social life remained unchanged, while cognisance of some of the negative aspects of social media use rose significantly over the years between 2013-2018. This appeared to be accompanied by a turn towards more

conscious and diversified uses of social media which reflects the participants' growing literacy about social media. It also signifies a growing engagement with identity and interest-based groups and sites, highlighting a point of connection between our findings and wider research on young adults' social media use which has often taken this focus.

By addressing the everyday social media practices and perceptions of an ordinary group of Australian youth who are in the midst of significant social changes, we illustrate the utility of the approach of media-related practices in youth studies. On the one hand, these practices are generated from young people's navigation of their basic needs for interaction, identity and belonging in changing social and economic processes. They are rooted in and also fit within other practices through which they navigate a changing society. This is showcased to great effect by the fit between their presencing on social media and their highly mobile and fragmented time schedule partly structured by the labour market in Australia, as well as by their diversified uses of social media (such as presencing, engaging with interest groups, and generating business leads) which resonate with the disruption of traditional forms of identity and sources of belonging and the features of individualised Australian society. In this sense, media-related practices, as a manifestation of how young people live *through* media, affords an opportunity to develop in-depth understanding of young people's media practices as well as general social processes.

On the other hand, as part of the bundle of practices through which young people's everyday social interaction and imagination are experienced, their media-related practices can also be seen as the product shaped by media and other sources of power. In other words, media play a role in shaping the social ontology in which young people reside. This power was demonstrated by the infrastructural role of social media in maintaining, organising, and structuring young people's social life, as well as young people's constant struggle in balancing and navigating the benefit and ramifications of social media in their lives. In this sense, media-related practices as an indication of how young people live *with* media afford a useful prism through which the changing social ontology of the new adulthood can be understood. We suggest supplementing this aspect of Couldry's theory of media-related practices with reference to Schatzki's more complete account of the relationship between practices and social ontology, which offers a means of conceptualising changing social ontology that is specific to the sites in which media-related practices occur, as a potential path forward in this area.

The utility of this approach (both Couldry's work and our extension of it) is made possible by its openness to the analysis of the broader media power (manifested in the power of social media in restructuring participants' social lives and constituting their experience of adulthood), as well as to the 'endless plurality of interpretations' of this power (Couldry 2012) (manifest in the diversified media-related practices). By accommodating these two considerations, this meso level approach provides a feasible way in which individual actions can be examined on a collective level within the

condition of broader power relations. It addresses the deficiencies of traditional approaches in media sociology which either focus on the political economics of media or on the individual (as in uses and gratification theory) by reconciling the arguments for the power of media (McLuhan 2012) in changing social ontology and for a more contextualised examination of the 'complex interaction between new needs and new inventions' (Williams 2003: 8).

With this affordance of media-related practices in mind, we advocate for research that looks beyond the utility view of social media use which tends to focus on its role as resources or tools for young people to engage in the creation of the new adulthood. Equal attention should be paid to the parallel process of changing social ontology driven by the advancement and penetration of media, and the way in which it changes the norms, assumptions and resulting practices that shape individuals' lives. Such an approach can ultimately help us to account for the dynamic relations between social media, young people and society.

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