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Logged in or Locked in? Young Adults' Negotiations of Social Media Platforms and their Features

Abstract

Drawing on empirical data from qualitative interviews, this article explores young adults' everyday experiences of 'logging in' and their accounts of their engagement with social media platforms, in particular Facebook. By doing so, it shows how 'logging in' can turn into feelings of being 'locked in' - both in relation to personal data-mining and expectations of participation. The paper highlights the complex ways in which young adults responded to these feelings and negotiated connection and disconnection on social media platforms by deploying tactics of limitation and suspension. For example, in order to regain control of their time and negotiate their relationships, young adults tactically used Facebook Messenger's previews to bypass read receipts and temporarily suspend connection. Using de Certeau's distinction between 'strategy' and 'tactics', the article argues that although young adults managed social media platforms on an individual level (by deploying 'tactics'), their understandings and negotiations of the platforms were significantly shaped by the platforms' designs and features, by the strategies of the corporations owning and operating them as well as embedded within the asymmetrical relations of power of platform capitalism.

Introduction

Social media platforms have become pervasive in the everyday lives of young people in the UK. In 2018, 4.5 million of 18- to 24-year-olds were anticipated to regularly use Facebook, 400,000 fewer than in 2017 (Sweney, 2018). While Facebook is still dominant, UK Internet users aged 16-24 (96%) are increasingly likely to use other platforms such as Instagram (61%), Snapchat (59%), YouTube (46%), Twitter (39%) and Tumblr (11%) (Ofcom, 2017). Furthermore, 16-24 users (67%) are less likely than other users (80%) to nominate Facebook as their main profile (ibid). These figures shed light on the diversification of young people's uses of social media platforms and on young people's (relative) disaffection of Facebook and shifts to other services like Instagram (owned by Facebook) or Snapchat (Sweney, 2018). Similar trends have been reported in the US where Americans aged 18-24 are significantly more likely to use Snapchat and Instagram than Facebook (Pew Research Center, 2018). While 18- to 24-year-olds in the UK and US are less likely to regularly use Facebook or to use solely the platform, this does not mean that young people are disengaging from the platform altogether.

Facebook still has a role (albeit a changing one) as part of the range of different platforms that young people use (Lincoln and Robards, 2017).

In the last two decades, a large body of research has explored and demonstrated the significant role that social media platforms play in young people's identity construction and relationships, as well as their complex negotiations of the platforms and their affordances (Livingstone, 2008; Marwick and boyd, 2011; Ellison and boyd, 2013; boyd, 2011, 2014; Bennett and Robards, 2014; Lincoln and Robards, 2014, 2017). While providing invaluable insights into young people's engagement with social media in the different contexts of their lives, this body of work has tended to overlook the economic structures and power relations (i.e. corporate interests, strategies and discursive work) in which uses and understandings of the platforms are inscribed (Andrejevic, 2011). Drawing on critical theory and/or theories which understand technologies and practices as mutually shaping, scholars in media studies have engaged with and analysed the broader technological, social and economic environments in which specific ideas of (dis)connectivity have emerged and continue to thrive (Andrejevic, 2011; Fuchs, 2012, 2014; van Dijck, 2013; Bucher and Helmond, 2018). Drawing on this last body of work, the article argues that young people's uses and understandings of social media platforms – and those of users more generally – cannot be fully appreciated in isolation and need to be understood in relation to the interests and ideologies of social media corporations as well as the broader context of platform capitalism (van Dijck, 2013; Srnicek, 2016; Bucher and Helmond, 2018). The recent Cambridge Analytica scandal (Osborne, 2018) has demonstrated, yet again, the urgency to examine users' engagement with social media platforms in relation to corporations' ideologies, discursive work and commercial strategies of data-mining and exploitation.

Furthermore, young people's understandings of social media platforms sit in a wider context of changes in education and in the labour market in Western countries characterised by the rise of non-standard and precarious forms of employment as well as by the exacerbation of neoliberal policies and subjectivities (Kelly and Kamp, 2015; France, 2016; Furlong et al. 2017). Woodman (2012) has shown that these changes impacted on the temporal structuring of young people's everyday lives which has become increasingly 'out of sync'. This in turn affects young people's relationships by making it more difficult for them to synchronise their timetable with their significant others (Woodman, 2012). In this context, mobile technologies and social media platforms have been viewed as potential and even necessary 'coordinating devices' by allowing young people to manage the everyday, spontaneously arrange meetings, and maintain connections (Woodman and Wyn, 2014:132). However, evidence has shown that these same

technologies also favour the blurring of work and non-work time and rely on neoliberal discourses encouraging people to develop entrepreneurial and management skills and to be always on (Gregg, 2011). This context is important to understand young people's experiences of logging in but also social expectations with regards to participation.

The article first briefly engages with research which has analysed social media practices in relation to the platforms' affordances and designs, the ideologies and interests of social media corporations as well as the broader context of capitalism in which social media platforms have thrived. It then discusses studies which have critically engaged with ideas and practices of connectivity as well as disconnection to make sense of social media practices. Drawing on these bodies of work and empirical data collected during my doctoral research (see methodology section), the article outlines participants' experiences of 'logging in', particularly on Facebook. It then examines young people's experiences of being 'locked in' in relation to data-mining and to social expectations of participation. Finally, drawing on de Certeau's (1984) work, the article analyses the complex ways in which participants negotiated social media platforms and the tactics they deployed to limit and bypass connection. Using the example of read receipts on Facebook, the article demonstrates how young people's negotiations of the platform were affected by its features and design as well as by social expectations which in turn reshaped rules of engagement with the platform. The article argues that, although connection and disconnection are managed on an individual level (by deploying 'tactics'), young adults' negotiations of social media platforms were significantly shaped by the platforms' designs, by social media corporations and more broadly embedded within the asymmetrical relations of power of platform capitalism.

Social media (dis)connectivity: discourses, design and practices

Research on social media, often influenced by the Actor-Network Theory and/or the Social Shaping of Technology analytical frameworks, has outlined the role of the platforms' designs and technological affordances in shaping user engagement (boyd, 2011; Kaun and Stiernstedt, 2014; Bucher and Helmond, 2018). Furthermore, scholars have demonstrated that the ways in which social media platforms are perceived and imagined also affect users' expectations, uses and understandings of the platforms (Beer, 2017; Bucher, 2017). Another significant body of work has analysed social media platforms in relation to the ideology of the market and capitalism in which these platforms thrive (Fuchs, 2012, 2014; van Dijck, 2013). In her work, van Dijck (2013:12) demonstrated how private corporations using terms such as

‘connectedness’, ‘participation’ and ‘sharing’ have promoted and spread the idea of a ‘social’ Web while pursuing economic vested interests and turning users’ data into a source of profit. The term ‘platform’ itself has been deployed by social media corporations as a form of discursive work to make ‘strategic claims for what they do and do not do’ (Gillespie, 2010: 347). This terminology often conceals how all personal data is collected by private corporations through platforms’ designs, features and policies, curated, turned into commodities and sold to third-party advertising companies to make profit (Fuchs, 2012, 2014). Social media platforms are part of a wider move towards what has been described as the ‘platformisation’ of the Web (Helmond, 2015) and ‘platform capitalism’ (Srnicsek, 2016). This move has advanced an architectural and economic structure in which the platform model has become dominant (Helmond, 2015) and personal data have become commodified and exchanged for participation (Andrejevic, 2011; Fuchs, 2012, 2014).

Research has shown that young people tend to be aware of and willing to submit to the conditions set by social media platforms including data-mining (Pybus et al, 2015). However, research also evidences that young people’s awareness about data-mining tends to remain abstract with no precise understanding of the different actors who are using their personal information, and of how and for what purposes this is used (Pybus et al, 2015; Lupton and Michael, 2017). Combined together, this engenders a sense of powerless and forms of acceptance and resignation with regard to collecting, mining and sharing personal data, that often coexists with a desire to have control over’s one privacy and data (Pybus et al, 2015; Sarikakis and Winter, 2017). In addition, social media corporations’ monopolistic positions are made possible due to what Srnicsek described as ‘network effects’; ‘the more numerous the users who use the platform, the more valuable that platform becomes for everyone else’ (2016: 45). These network effects prevent users to leave or opt-out from the platforms for fear of missing out.

Importantly, Light and Cassidy (2014) argue that social media research has tended to understand the platforms, their ways of functioning and the broader logics in which they are embedded through the sole lens of connectivity (ibid:1170). While acknowledging the insights of such research, they contend that using a ‘spectrum of connection/disconnection’ instead would allow researchers to better understand the complexity of social media practices (ibid.). Indeed, practices of media suspension or disconnection often do not follow a simple dichotomy of use/no-use but instead are situated within a complex continuum of connection and disconnection and within different power relations (Light, 2014; Light and Cassidy, 2014;

Neves et al, 2015). For example, practices of disconnection can make connection more manageable and satisfactory (Light, 2014; Light and Cassidy, 2014). Adopting such nuanced framework allows to examine practices of disconnection and limitation as an integral part of social media engagement and not outside this engagement. In their work, Light and Cassidy (2014) highlight an array of what they called ‘strategies of disconnection and suspension’. These practices range from removing contacts, temporarily ceasing engagement with specific platforms, putting friend requests on hold, hiding or untagging content, to deactivating or permanently deleting accounts. They make a distinction in their analysis between practices of ‘suspending’ connection, such as having a break from one social media platform, and strategies deployed to prevent connection, often involving not doing something, such as not liking or friending (ibid.).

Practices of disconnection or suspension of connection from social media platforms can engender, or been seen to come, at great social losses. Indeed, young people use social media platforms to organise their everyday activities, synchronise with their friends and develop and maintain relationships (Awan and Gauntlett, 2013; Bennett and Robards, 2014). There is therefore an important degree of peer-pressure to have a profile on social media platforms (boyd, 2014; Neves et al, 2015) as well as fears of missing out on events and social activities if not connected. The costs of disconnecting also increase over time, as prolonged engagement with the platforms often means that they become ‘an archival repository’ collecting and providing access to one’s contacts and memories (Kaun and Stiernstedt, 2014). While this can enhance experiences of connection, such functions may restrict possibilities for disconnecting, which correspond to corporate social media strategies (van Dijck, 2013; Fuchs, 2014; Light and Cassidy, 2014). Furthermore, ‘soft’ strategies of disconnection and suspension (such as logging out or account deactivation, as opposed to account termination) are an integral part of social media corporations’ enactment of their power (Light and Cassidy, 2014). By allowing controlled possibilities for disconnection, corporations ensure that users (and more importantly their data) remain on the platforms.

In this paper, I refer to practices of ‘soft’ disconnection as ‘tactics’ using de Certeau’s (1984) distinction between tactics and strategies. De Certeau defines tactics as calculated actions which arise ‘blow by blow’, taking advantage of ‘opportunities’ and depending on them (1984: 36-37). Tactics are negotiated in the ‘space of the other’ (1984: ibid) and thus within the power structures which characterise this space. By contrast, a strategy has a space of its own and is characterised by power (1984: 38). Drawing on de Certeau’s distinction, I argue that

participants' negotiations of social media platforms need to be understood as tactical. Indeed, participants' engagement with the platforms and the complex ways in which they negotiated tensions between 'logging in' and feelings of being 'locked in' were not only dependent on social media corporations' ideologies and opportunities - or lack thereof – these corporations provided but also on the design, features and affordances of the platforms themselves. Participants' negotiations of social media platforms were embedded within the 'space' and 'strategies' of corporations and shaped by the asymmetrical relations of power characterising them.

Methodology

This article draws on data collected during 32 in depth semi-structured interviews with young adults aged 20–25 (n= 19 women and 13 men) collected from October 2014 to October 2015. The key question addressed in the original study was: how do young adults account for their practices of using social media platforms in their everyday lives and what meanings do they ascribe to the platforms? In other words, the aim of the research was to move beyond solely describing young adults' uses of social media platforms to explore how they made sense of these platforms in relation to the different contexts of their everyday lives. Within this, I was particularly interested to explore young adults' practices of peer monitoring and profile-checking through social media platforms. The study focused on young adults aged 20-25 as this population was more likely to have greater experiences of using social media platforms over time and in the context of transitions from school to university, training or work. These experiences were important to the original research and contributed to ground social media platforms uses in the context of youth transitions.

Participants were recruited through gatekeepers, snowballing techniques and via leaflets and posters in university campuses and youth venues in Glasgow. Participants were predominantly from the United Kingdom (n= 20) with a minority from originally from the E.U. (n= 8) and from countries outside the E.U (n= 4). The majority of participants (n= 28) were undertaking or had completed an undergraduate course. Among participants, 12 were studying at the time of the interview, 10 were combining study and work, eight were working, one was unemployed and one was in training. The sample was in large part composed by young urban middle-class people (see Gangneux, 2018 for a detailed overview of the sample). All participants used Facebook and a majority also reported using Instagram (n=21), Twitter (n=20) and/or Snapchat (n=14).

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Following a grounded theory approach (Corbin and Strauss, 1990), first emerging themes were identified from the interview data. These included ‘changes of uses’, ‘pressure and anxieties’, ‘time’, ‘self-presentation and editing’, ‘checking practices’, ‘friendship’, ‘audience management’, ‘convenience’, ‘discussing politics’ and ‘mix work and leisure’. Using a thematic analysis, initial themes were compared and clustered into categories which were used for the data analysis. In addition, entries from fieldwork diaries were incorporated to the data set in order to situate and analyse the data collected in the context in which it was produced (see Gangneux, 2018 for more detail on data analysis).

Logging in: young adults’ engagement with social media platforms

Throughout the interviews, social media platforms, and Facebook in particular, were repeatedly described by participants as ‘useful’ and ‘convenient tools’ which allowed them to easily manage different aspects of their everyday lives and relationships. Natalie’s account, for example, demonstrates how Facebook has become deeply embedded in the everyday planning of her activities and relationships:

Yesterday, I was on Facebook just using Messenger to organise different trips with people or organise events that I was going to. I used Facebook Messenger with a few friends because we are going to do a barbecue tomorrow so we were talking about that on it and then I got invited to a couple of events on Facebook as well from a group that I am in so I was like responding to those and checking the details of those as well. [...] I do like Facebook, like seeing what friends are up to, photos and things, and like on Facebook Messenger, just like chatting with your friends, like if you can't be with them at that time you are still in contact with them having a laugh. (Natalie, 20)

As well as studying medicine, Natalie was working casual shifts in the hospitality industry and volunteering for a charity organisation. Her work and volunteering shifts were organised through Facebook, which she experienced both positively and negatively: making it ‘easier’ for her to get last-minute shifts but also allowing her boss to cancel a shift or put additional pressure on her to take one. The difficulties encountered by Natalie in finding time to see her friends and managing her schedule shed light on a broader context of temporal desynchronisation of everyday life, in which flexible and asocial patterns of work and study have impacted young people’s abilities to maintain relationships and synchronise their schedules with significant others (Woodman, 2012). Mobile technologies and social media platforms were used to an extent as ‘coordinating devices’ (Woodman and Wyn, 2014: 132) to

spontaneously arrange meetings with friends and maintain social connections. Natalie's engagement with social media platforms reflects fairly the recurrent themes that emerged during interviews. For most participants, the advantages of social media platforms resided in their speed, convenience and ease of use, which allowed them to easily and quickly organise meetings with friends, create chat groups, find out the details of work shifts, get information about places and times for events or share resources about course work, corroborating existing research (Awan and Gauntlett, 2013, boyd, 2014).

Although most participants used social media, engagement with the platforms varied between participants. For example, some participants would use Facebook to discuss group work and keep in touch with people on their university courses while using Snapchat or WhatsApp to communicate with closer friends. A minority liked to engage with and/or start political discussions on social media platforms (using Facebook and/or Twitter). However, this was not the case of the majority of participants. Some, such as Eleanor (22), deemed themselves as lacking the personal interest and skills to do so, while others like David (24) perceived this sort of activity as too serious and pretentious. In contrast, David described his engagement with Instagram and Twitter as 'messaging around' and talked of using the platforms in 'ironic' ways. These different types of engagement and how they were presented were inscribed in wider processes of distinction and self-positioning (Bourdieu, 1984). For example, David clearly described his uses as being 'against the mainstream'. In addition, some participants with ambitions of working in the media and creative industries used social media platforms in more strategic ways. They used them as tools for networking, promoting their work and undertaking creative activities, in turn blurring the lines between leisure and work (Gregg, 2011). Similarly, while most participants were aware of, and actively negotiated their online presentation and the information that they disclosed on the platforms, the level of management varied among participants. Some participants also emphasised the entertaining and fun aspect of social media platforms. Lucy (24), for example, described Facebook primarily as 'fun', and very good to 'unwind' or cope with boredom. However, most participants described their engagement with social media platforms, and with Facebook in particular, in terms of convenience and management. These common and more specific experiences of 'logging in' were often associated by young adults with 'costs', namely trading-off personal data and managing social expectations of participation.

Data-mining: the necessary costs of logging in

During interviews, data-mining and targeted advertising were described by most participants as an unavoidable cost in exchange for participation, or in other words the ability to log in to social media platforms. Although participants did not necessarily agree with the commercial strategies of the platforms they used, all of them perceived data-mining and exploitation as part of how ‘things work’. This illustrates how personal data-mining has become normalised while potential alternatives to such system have been constructed as unrealistic. Matthew, for example, adopted a pragmatic attitude towards corporate data-mining, explaining that in order to use social media platforms you ‘have to sell your information’:

Facebook is very good, but it comes with a baggage, and we accept the terms and conditions ... so that is a service, it is free but you, kind of have to sell your information and your activity as a sort of compromise... which is sad but which I have accepted obviously (laughs). (Matthew, 22)

Matthew described this trade off as necessary but ‘sad’ which sheds light on his feelings of resignation and acceptance towards social media corporations’ practices. Matthew was well aware of data-mining:

M: [...] It is usually things with cookies, analysing activity, like information being valuable because investors who are interested in terms of doing marketing, our activities, what interest them and things like that so I sometimes refrain from liking for that reason. (laughs)

R: so you are aware of that?

M: Yeah because it will come up obviously they are suggesting all these pages to me and that is just really them trying to generate profit, I don't like that. (Matthew, 22)

This excerpt demonstrates that although Matthew saw data-mining as an inescapable cost of using social media platforms, he did not necessarily agree with it. At times he would try to partially counter data collection by not liking pages or posts on Facebook. Importantly, however, the choices he described – accepting the trade-offs of social media while making attempts to circumvent them (only on a case-by-case basis)– were made under corporate monopolies and policies that were outside his control. Even though most participants had a similar attitude to Matthew regarding data-mining, their understandings of it were more abstract. Emma, for example, expressed surprise regarding the targeted advertisement she saw across the Web and did not know ‘exactly’ or to what extent this was connected to her use of Facebook:

I've been amazed sometimes that it might not be exactly Facebook but I would get some ads which are specifically related to what I've been looking for but not in a direct way in a way that you are genuinely surprised that they might suggest this ad for you, you know the amount of ... like software memory of what you've been googled, I found this quite amazing. (Emma,22)

Emma's account demonstrates more of the nuances and sometime confusion in how participants perceived and experienced data-mining. Emma had a broad understanding of data-mining, an imaginary of how it might work (in a similar way that Bucher's (2017) participants had imaginaries about the Facebook algorithm). Like Emma, the majority of participants did not understand exactly how data-mining 'worked' and often discussed in general terms Facebook and Google as they were seen as the emblems of these practices. Interestingly, Emma was surprised but also intrigued by some of the customised ads she received and by the fact that she could trick the system by seeing them for what they were. This kind of fascination and playful approach to data-mining which appeared during a few interviews serves to reinforce unthreatening imaginaries of what data-mining practices *are*, making them appear harmless while also helping to normalise them (see Ellerbrok, 2011 for a similar analysis of the normalisation of Facial Recognition technologies).

'Locked in': the social costs of opting out

Participants' acceptance of the trade-off of data-mining was further supported by the perceived social benefits of engaging with social media platforms (and the costs of not engaging):

Not having Facebook is missing out all these kinds of things that make you keep in touch with people. I think what it's good about Facebook it is just the fact that there is so many people are on it, I mean I know as a company there is a lot of things that I don't like about it like yesterday I've read they don't pay taxes in the UK and things like that which obviously put me off. But just the fact that... why I use it, it is just the fact that all my friends are on it. (James, 22)

James's statement that he valued Facebook because all of his friends were also on the platform clearly illustrates the idea of "network effects" (Srnicsek, 2016): where platforms become more valuable as the number of users increases. Such effects not only make it more convenient to use the platforms but generate fears of missing out. These fears which were often discussed by participants during interviews.

Social media platforms, and especially Facebook, were described by participants in more general terms as a way 'to connect' and 'bring people together', mirroring the terminology

mobilised by social media corporations (Gillespie, 2010; van Dijck, 2013). Annie (21), for example, explained how social media ‘keeps everyone connected’ while Alice (22) described it as ‘a very positive thing’ which brings people together. Charlotte (23) felt that the ‘way how it connects people was really important’ while Alex (24) outlined the positive aspects of social media platforms as ‘sharing, and making people feel more connected’. Hugo (25) even directly referred to the Facebook’s motto (i.e. ‘making the world more open and connected’) to describe the platform. Social media platforms were often portrayed as positive, often in relation to general understandings of connectivity and/or experiences of convenience as discussed above. However, these understandings co-existed with accounts of the platforms as sources of anxiety and stress. A third of participants in the study expressed desires to stop engaging with one or several of the platforms that they used (usually Facebook). Tellingly, however, none of the participants had done so permanently, if they had regularly engaged with them in the past. The platforms were viewed as almost essential to managing one's life and being included in social activities and peer groups. Not having Facebook, for instance, was perceived as highly inconvenient and a cause of missing out socially:

[Facebook] is also good for practical things like birthdays and events. Like someone in our group will organise an event on Facebook [...] and people just say ‘so are you coming?’ and you are like ‘to what?’ and if you don't have Facebook, you are obviously being invited on Facebook so if you don't check your Facebook you don't really know what is going on. (Emily, 22)

I wanted to delete Facebook for a long time, and I've always been why do I still use it? Why am I still on it? But because it is my only way of really staying in contact with certain people, and it is the most convenient for that, that is the reason why I keep it but I don't really enjoy it as a platform. (Sarah, 25)

These accounts highlighting mixed feelings towards social media platforms – and in particular Facebook – are fairly representative of what other participants described during interviews. Only a few participants reported having effectively deactivated their Facebook accounts, all for a limited time. Molly (20), for example, explained how she deactivated her account a couple of times but kept reactivating it because ‘most of her friends’ would only communicate through the platform. These accounts demonstrate how permanent termination or refusal of Facebook were experienced or perceived by participants as being socially costly and therefore not implemented in practice.

Social media platforms were also often used to manage a range of other activities such as study work, volunteering work, or/and casual work shifts, which made it hard for young adults to opt out. This is in correspondence with the idea of these technologies as ‘coordinating devices’

(Woodman and Wyn, 2014) as discussed above. However, this often led to stress and anxieties. Amy (22) described using Facebook to coordinate group work and to get information about daily activities in the context of her studies. Although Facebook allowed her to organise her schedule in a flexible way, using the platform as a coordinating device also generated problems;

The only one I really use is Facebook yeah... And it is terrible how much I use it and I wish I'd use it less but with things like this project at university we did you have to check the page of our group work, so it means like that the first thing in the morning you are like: did anyone post something? Do I have a meeting today? I'd better check it and then it means when you check it, you look at everything else, ow I hate this ... I kind of don't want it any more, I want to go back but again it is mainly for school like the amount of posts our group do for like very impromptu meetings like 'we meet today' or 'can we meet here instead', and I know if I had my other phone, I wouldn't know these things and then I'd be like, I'll turn up at wrong times or something. (Amy, 22)

Amy was deeply stressed by the need to be always connected to Facebook in order to get practical information about her study work and was fearful of missing out. These were recurrent themes throughout the interviews, with a majority of participants reporting stress and anxieties created or exacerbated by social media platforms. Nancy (22) expressed this in particularly strong terms:

You are always connected, that is something that sometimes I don't like, because sometimes you just want to disappear from everybody or not have to answer someone, just disappear... (Nancy, 22)

Despite this, most participants continued to use the platforms and to perceive them as necessary to managing different aspects of their everyday lives and relationships. Furthermore, participants used social media platforms, in particular Facebook, as contact lists and/or storage spaces (e.g. for pictures, posts and comments, links, and albums), reinforcing the 'locked in' effect. These were perceived as spaces in which participants had accumulated contacts and memories which would be impossible or difficult to keep outside the platforms. Social media corporations use this data to generate profit, but also to create a dependency on the services they offer – by providing a “free” storage space, they also discourage users from leaving the platform. While a small number of participants said that they had deactivated their accounts, this was often with the knowledge that they could easily reverse this if they changed their minds. Alex (24), for instance, reported deactivating his account on Facebook several times to limit the time he spent on it, explaining that he 'could always go back to it'. This is in line with Light and Cassidy's description of the 'disconnective levers and release valves' (2014: 1179) that Facebook puts in place (what they call Facebook's disconnective strategies of prevention),

which push users to remain and/or return on the platform.

Temporary Suspensions: Tactics of Limitation and Bypassing

This last section focuses on the array of tactics that participants deployed to regain (relative) control over social media platforms and to engage with the platforms on their own terms and in their own time. In their work, Light and Cassidy (2014) understand such practices as ‘strategies’ of disconnection and suspension. I argue that the term ‘tactics’ coined by de Certeau (1984) better characterises young people’s practices of temporary disconnecting or limiting connection as well as allows to situate these practices within the asymmetrical power relations in which they take place and that shape them. Indeed, young adults’ negotiations of social media platforms and of the tensions between ‘logging in’ and feelings of being ‘locked in’ were tactical in nature. Firstly, these negotiations were dependent on the design, features and affordances of social media platforms as well as on social media corporations’ strategies (i.e. encouraging connectivity to produce more data). Moreover, the tactics that young people deployed often took place on a case-by-case basis and always within the realm of the platforms themselves (as opposed to outside in the case of media refusal or account termination). In this sense, participants’ practices of disconnection were not necessarily pointing to resistance to social media platforms. On the contrary, these practices can be seen as *further* accommodating the features, designs and connectivity enforced by social media corporations.

Two different types of tactics to negotiate connection on social media platforms were described by participants. These were tactics of limitation and tactics of bypassing which will be discussed in turn. Tactics of limitation were commonly adopted by participants and included a variety of practices. Several participants, for example, reported that they had deleted social media applications from their phones to regain control of their time. Participants would either keep Facebook Messenger (Facebook’s private messaging application) and delete the main Facebook application from their phones, or would delete both as Emily’s account shows:

I used to have like Facebook chat [Messenger] and Facebook app on my phone but I decided to delete them because... to try to defend myself from using it so much. It didn't completely work but I've sort of tried [...] It is a constant update of what is going on which is useful and at the same time a bit like ... why? I would like trying to switch it off because I'd like to be able to do it in my own time. (Emily, 22)

Another tactic of limitation used by participants was to restrict the time they spent on social media or to deactivate their accounts for a set period of time. Lucy (24), for example, restricted

her platform use to certain times of the day and would turn off her Wi-Fi one hour before going to bed. Other participants would limit their privacy settings, not allow themselves to be tagged in pictures, or limit the number of contacts they had on the platforms. All participants deployed some tactics of limitation to manage connection on the platforms they used. However, none of them permanently deleted their accounts and all continued to engage with the platforms (in line with social media corporations' strategies). Moreover, tactics of limitation were often portrayed by participants as means to regain control of their time and, more broadly, their personal lives and relationships. In this context, they were often presented as evidence of self-control and responsibility, marking out narratives of growing up (Lincoln and Robards, 2014) as well as echoing broader neoliberal discourses which often coincided with social media corporations' rhetoric (Gangneux, 2018).

Participants also reported tactics of bypassing to negotiate the enforced connectivity of specific platform features and designs. The most common one discussed during interviews was related to read receipts for messages, a feature that shows whether or not the recipient of one's message has 'seen' it. In 2012, Facebook introduced read receipts, a feature that shows whether or not the recipient of one's message has 'seen' it' (a similar feature exists on other social media platforms). Although liked by some participants for their convenience and their abilities to keep conversations flowing, read receipts were mostly accounted as significant sources of tension in participants' relationships. In the excerpt below, Benjamin describes how the read receipt function affected him and his friendships:

Sometimes I just cannot be bothered even if people write me I am like I'll just switch off the [Facebook] chat function. I'd be like no like 'not now' [...] but sometimes it is annoying, especially seen there is this function of like others can see that you have read it. For example, WhatsApp, I am using WhatsApp as well and it is just a bit annoying because sometimes I just don't know what to reply, it is just ... I don't know and I don't want to answer you know, it is just my choice but people really, they get really angry sometimes. (Benjamin, 25)

The feature exacerbated participants' stress and feelings of not controlling their own time by pushing them to answer messages quickly to avoid 'offending' friends and contacts or being seen as 'ignoring' them. This also was complicated by the uses of the platforms in professional contexts (e.g. for arranging work shifts or volunteering), as Nancy's account illustrates:

I also hate when they [her colleagues] ask me to do these things through Facebook.... like if they are asking you like 'you have to do a report of what you've done during this month', I think you have to tell me that on emails and not on WhatsApp or Facebook. And also because I cannot answer at every moment

and they see it and say like ‘Ow you were connected and you didn't answer me’.
(Nancy, 22)

The read receipt feature thus enforced connectivity and exacerbated senses of accountability and practices of monitoring in friendship and work contexts. Interestingly, however, the use of read receipts worked both ways. Although having experienced anxieties connected to read receipts, participants reported routinely checking them in their communication and feeling upset or annoyed when someone had seen a message without responding to it. While disabling read receipts is possible on WhatsApp (two participants reported having done so), Facebook does not provide such an option. In order to negotiate tensions triggered by read receipts, participants reported using the preview function in Facebook Messenger as a tactic to bypass read-receipts while still seeing the sender and the first lines of the message:

If you see something from someone and you can see like the first half of the message, you kind of know what it is about, you can say to yourself ‘I don't have time for this right now’ so you just ignore it until you got time but it also means that if you read something you are going to reply like I'll try not to read something until I know what I am going to reply to it because I know that if they've seen it, they are waiting. (Natalie, 20)

As Natalie's account shows, participants used messages previews as a way of temporarily suspending connection in order to avoid upsetting their friends and contacts. Read receipts were to an extent pushing participants to temporarily deceive their friends by not clicking on messages and pretending that they had not seen/read them. In this light, some participants saw the preview tactic as ‘cheeky’, ‘not nice’ and even ‘horrible’ (i.e. in contradiction to imperatives of spontaneity and connectedness associated with friendships), but ultimately as necessary to negotiate relationships and time on social media platforms. Participants were also aware that other people could adopt a similar tactic when they sent messages themselves. This tended to exacerbate tensions and speculations about the ‘genuineness’ of the unopened message as well as feelings of being ignored.

As the preview tactic became common practice, participants reported using other platform features such as the “last active” indicator to corroborate the time people were last connected on the platform with the time in which they sent the message, as a means to verify whether the person that they had written to was genuinely ‘disconnected’. Many participants used their friends and contacts’ last connection times to crosscheck information and verify accounts, creating mistrust and encouraging the monitoring of friends and contacts. In this way, the design of Facebook and its app Messenger encouraged peer monitoring by providing information regarding user connection but also reshaped social norms and rules of engagement

in relationships. Participants' engagement with social media platforms was inscribed in what Andrejevic has described as the normalisation of interactivity as surveillance, in which the perceived need for verification grows and 'forms of monitoring that might have once been considered borderline stalking have become commonplace and routine' (2007: 228). This normalisation is beneficial to the functioning of social media platforms (and part of media corporations' strategies) and more broadly platform capitalism as it encourages connectivity through surveillance and effectively creates more data that can be turned into profit.

Using the example of participants' negotiations of the read-receipts, this section has demonstrated the complex ways in which tactics and strategies are intertwined in young people's social media practices. Indeed, participants negotiated their engagement with social media platforms and their connection on a case-by-case basis (according to the type of relationship) and depended largely on opportunities offered by the design and features of the platforms (e.g. read-receipts). Young people's practices of limiting and bypassing their engagement with social media platforms remained tactical. Indeed, even if young people actively limited their connection and bypassed specific features, they did so within a continuous and taken for granted engagement with social media platforms, effectively accepting the mining of their data and accommodating social media corporations' enforcement of connectivity.

Conclusion

This article has shown the complexity of the ways in which young adults engage with social media platforms. Participants highlighted the positive aspects of the platforms, often putting an emphasis on convenience and on general ideas of connectivity. However, they also expressed, in particular in relation to Facebook, feelings of being 'locked in'. Firstly, in relation to personal data-mining, which they perceived a necessary and unavoidable cost of 'logging in'. Second, their feelings of being locked in were tied to social expectations of participation and fears around the social costs of opting out. Furthermore, participants' accounts shed light on how the platforms have become powerful intermediaries, deeply embedded in young adults' everyday lives and relationships, in turn creating stress and anxieties. These feelings were tempered by the deployment of an array of tactics of limitation and suspension to bypass connection itself and/or specific features designed to encourage connectivity. In the article, I argued that understanding young adults' negotiations of social media platforms as tactical allows to situate these practices within the asymmetrical power relations that characterise them.

Using the specific example of participants' negotiations of read receipts on Facebook, the article demonstrated that, although connection and disconnection were managed on an individual level (by deploying 'tactics'), young adults' understandings of and engagement with the platforms they used were significantly shaped by corporations and more broadly embedded in platform capitalism (e.g. data-mining). In this way, when limiting and bypassing connection, participants were not necessarily 'resisting' the enforcement of connectivity or of certain features by social media corporations. Instead they were tactically negotiating features and their connection on a case to case basis ('blow by blow') and within the space of corporations. These findings have important implications in light of the Cambridge Analytica scandal. While more transparency seems a necessary step forward, such demands fail to take into account the complex ways in which the platforms are embedded in people's lives and relationships. This entrenchment, which often leads to tactical adjustments to social media platforms, is the major hindrance to a real change in how people use the platforms, and more importantly in the types of compromise that are seen as acceptable. The sample of the study limits the generalisability of its findings. More research is needed to explore how other populations of young people engage with social media platforms as well as the tactics that they deploy to negotiate the power structures embedded with the platforms.

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