

# Tactical agency? Young people's (dis)engagement with WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger

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## Abstract

Drawing on empirical data, this article examines the ways in which young people negotiated messaging apps such as Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp in their everyday lives, focusing in particular on the read-receipt feature embedded in the applications. While it is important to continue exposing and critically examining the power structures and socio-technological relations in which young people's everyday engagement with social media platforms and messaging applications are entangled, the article argues that it is also crucial not to overlook the possibilities and forms of agency that can exist in this complex environment. Combining insights from Foucault and de Certeau, the article seeks to shed new light on the ways in which tactical agency can be enacted and cultivated by young people. This article contributes to current debates about agency, resistance and power in contemporary digital society as well as makes recommendations to foster more responsive digital literacies.

## Keywords

Agency, digital platforms, messaging applications, resistance, tactics, young people

## Introduction

Researchers have long shown that young people understand and engage with social media platforms in social ways and manage their impression online in relation to different audiences (Beriman and Thomson, 2015; Boyd, 2014; Lincoln and Robards, 2017). Importantly in the context of this article, scholars have also demonstrated that mobile and instant communication reinforce and reshape in complex ways mutual expectations of availability, reciprocity and relationship

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maintenance (Chambers, 2013; Chayko, 2017; Hall and Baym, 2012; Ling, 2016). This in turn impacts on relationships as well as can become a source of anxiety and feelings of being overwhelmed (Baym, 2010; Chambers, 2013; Chayko, 2017; Fox and Moreland, 2015; Hall and Baym, 2012). Another strand of work has demonstrated that the infrastructures of social media platforms as well as Big Tech companies' ideology and commercial strategies set to systematically extract and commodify personal data, play a significant role in shaping user's engagement with and understandings of the platforms (Gangneux, 2019; Bucher and Helmond, 2018; Fuchs, 2014; Hintz et al., 2018; Pangrazio, 2019; van Dijck, 2013). These strands of research have been critical in exposing and examining the power structures and socio-technological relations that users – among whom young people – have to continuously navigate. In the past decade, however, the complex ways in which users are able to enact forms of agency and how they negotiate different social media platforms have tended to be overlooked in media research (Chambers, 2017; Klinger and Svensson, 2018). While it is crucial to continue challenging the real asymmetries of power between users and corporations, the coerced forms of participation characterizing surveillance capitalism and the corporate cultivation of 'digital resignation' as a strategy to neutralize critical, collective or political action (Barassi, 2019; Hintz et al, 2018; Zuboff, 2019), it is also important not to reduce users' engagement with social media platforms as passive. In this light, Chambers argues that future research needs to synthesize political economic perspectives and cultural studies to better understand how forms of agency are enacted in specific contexts (2017: 27). Addressing this gap, this article explores the ways in which young people negotiate the messaging applications Messenger and WhatsApp in their everyday communication and in doing so considers the tactical forms of agency that they deploy to manage the features embedded in the applications and the social expectations attached to them.

The messaging applications Messenger and WhatsApp are owned by the private corporation Facebook. Messenger was first developed in 2008 as an integral component of the platform which allowed direct messaging between users before being released as a stand-alone application in 2011. WhatsApp was launched in 2009 and acquired by Facebook in 2014. Both applications enable users to send text and voice messages, make audio and video calls, create group chats and share different types of media. In 2012, Facebook introduced read receipts,<sup>1</sup> a feature that shows when the recipient of a message has 'seen' it, both in individual and group chats. WhatsApp rolled out its own read-receipt feature in 2014.<sup>2</sup> However, while WhatsApp offers the option to disable the feature entirely, this is currently not the case on Messenger.

Drawing on original interview data from 32 in-depth interviews with young people, this article examines the ways in which they negotiated Messenger and WhatsApp in their everyday lives, focusing in particular on the read-receipt feature described above. The article argues that the specific and temporal tactics that young people deployed to manage the applications, their features and the expectations attached to them shed light on situated forms of agency that they were able to enact and cultivate. These forms of agency need to be understood as tactical as they were inscribed in specific and continuously changing socio-technological assemblages in which young people had – in de Certeau's words – limited room for 'manoeuvre'.

## **Limited by the possibilities of the moment: Agency, resistance and tactics**

The concept of agency has remained ambiguous in sociological research. It has often been reduced to normative dualisms between conformity versus resistance to power structures or one-sided

dimensions emphasizing notions of choice, intentionality and deliberation (Coffey and Farrugia, 2014; Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). As a result, scholars have tended to overlook the temporally variable social manifestations of agency (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). By contrast, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) define agency as ‘a temporally embedded process of social engagement’ (p. 962) and argue that ‘the agentic dimension of social action can only be captured in its full complexity if it is analytically situated within the flow of time’ (p. 963). Temporality is crucial to better understand how agency can be exercised in continuously and rapidly changing digital environments as well as the possibilities of resistance to the power structures characterizing these environments. Using Emirbayer and Mische’s conceptualization of agency as time bounded as a starting point, the article draws on Foucault’s work on power and resistance and de Certeau’s concept of tactics to examine the intersections between everyday engagement with messaging applications, power structures, agency and resistance.

In his work, Foucault argues that ‘the subject constitutes himself in an active fashion by practices of the self’ (1997: 291). However, he adds, these practices are themselves ‘patterns [that] are proposed, suggested and imposed on him by his culture, his society and his social group’ (Foucault, 1997: 291). This is not to say that social agents are deprived of any agency but instead that individuals actively appropriate, negotiate and interact with social norms and forms of subjectivation. Furthermore, Foucault contends that resistance is not contradictory to the exercise of power and is in fact ‘never in a position of exteriority’ in relation to it (1990: 95). According to him, resistance while inscribed in existing power relations should nevertheless not be understood solely as a ‘reaction or rebound’ to these, nor as ‘an underside that is in the end always passive, doomed to perpetual defeat’ (Foucault, 1990: 96).

In his seminal work on *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau (1984) draws on Foucault’s work on power and resistance. Approaching these from a practice viewpoint, de Certeau argues that it is urgent to explore the ‘popular procedures’ and ‘ways of operating’ that manipulate the grid of discipline and forms of government exposed by Foucault (de Certeau, 1984: xiv–xv). In this way, de Certeau urges scholars to examine the everyday in-between spaces where users reappropriate, negotiate and/or resist the sociocultural order as well as when these moments arise. Such approach simultaneously joins and departs from Foucault’s work in that:

[...] the goal is to perceive and analyse the microbe-like operations proliferating within technocratic structures and deflecting their functioning by means of a multitude of “tactics” articulated in the details of everyday life; contrary, in that the goal is not to make clearer how the violence of order is transmuted into a disciplinary technology, but rather to bring to light the clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical, and make-shift creativity of groups or individuals already caught in the nets of “discipline.” (1984: xiv–xv)

de Certeau defines tactics as calculated but isolated actions arising ‘blow by blow’. Tactics are negotiated in the space of the other, ‘taking advantage of “opportunities” and depending on them’ (1984: 36–37). Crucially, they are time-bounded, that is, limited by ‘the chance offerings of the moment’ (de Certeau, 1984: 36–37). It is least known that Foucault also theorizes resistance in terms of temporality (Lilja, 2018). Resistance, in his later work, is defined as irregular, mobile and transitory points or knots that spread across space and time:

They [resistances] are distributed in irregular fashion: the points, knots, or focuses of resistance are spread over time and space at varying densities, at times mobilizing groups or individuals in a definitive way, inflaming certain points of the body, certain moments in life, certain types of behaviour.

Are there no great radical ruptures, massive binary divisions, then? Occasionally, yes. But more often one is dealing with mobile and transitory points of resistance. (Foucault 1990: 96)

de Certeau and Foucault's understandings of power and how it expresses itself in existing structures meet at the intersections between the concept of tactics and the idea of transitional points or knots of 'resistance'. Both are limited by the possibilities of the moment and are characterized by mobility and disparity. Drawing on de Certeau and Foucault's work, this article examines young people's everyday negotiations of Messenger and WhatsApp as tactics that reveal mobile and transitory points of resistance and enacted forms of agency. These are situated simultaneously within the mundane as well as in power structures and socio-technological assemblages encouraging connectivity (van Dijck, 2013; Zuboff, 2019) and enforcing expectations of constant availability (Chayko, 2017; Ling, 2016).

### **Agency, tactics and literacies in everyday social media engagement**

Agency has been reshaped in relation to everyday datafication and the digital economy (Chambers, 2017; Couldry, 2014; Kennedy et al., 2015). In this context, Couldry has been provisionally defined agency as 'the longer processes of action based on reflection, making sense of the world so as to act within it' (2014: 891). In other words, agency is enacted through people's capacity to evaluate and reflect upon data processes which in turn enables them to act in data-driven environments. In Couldry's conceptualization, 'brute acts' such as clicking buttons or liking posts – that is, more mundane and taken for granted forms of engagement – do not express agency. However, these small acts of engagement, often characterized by lesser effort and intentionality, have become the most prevalent form of engagement (Kleut et al., 2018). As pointed out by Kleut et al., this 'lower threshold' of engagement can be productive and turned into forces of disruption in media content flows, a dynamic which has been overlooked. Agency here can be understood as a continuous process that develops as 'we confront emergent situations that have an impact on us. [...] [It] is situational, embedded in the handling of the contingencies of the present' (Klinger and Svensson, 2018: 4661). Research has started to explore in more nuanced ways the tensions between datafication processes, the possibility of resistance and 'the spaces in between' (Kennedy et al, 2015: 3) where intentionally resistant but also mundane forms of users agency can arise (Kennedy et al., 2015; Selwyn and Pangrazio, 2018). Recent research has shown that users develop coping practices with intrusive digital media to suit their personal needs and by doing so resist certain features, functions or expectations attached to the platforms that they use (Mollen and Dhaenens, 2018). This includes well-researched online impression management strategies and technology management strategies (see Best and Tozer, 2012). However, further research on the degree of agency that ordinary users can practically enact within digital infrastructures and sociocultural relations is needed. In this context, it is therefore important to explore tactical and small forms of engagement with social media platforms and how these while not necessarily signalling active forms of resistance can shed light on agency and how it is practically exercised in digital environments.

Emerging research has started to examine strategies that users deploy to negotiate the socio-technological relations in which different social media platforms are embedded. For example, in his ethnographic work, Miller has looked at the ways in which a local English community used different social media platforms in their everyday communication. He found that individuals often had different WhatsApp groups created for particular purposes such as single-sex groups (e.g. football or gossip-focused) and mixed groups (e.g. organization of Saturday night-outs) while

Facebook became a place ‘where one could park some relationships and move others elsewhere’ (2016: 96). Light and Cassidy (2014) explored some of the strategies of disconnection and suspension deployed by social media users on different platforms, ranging from temporarily disengaging with specific platforms, putting friend requests on hold, removing contact, hiding or untagging content, to deactivating or deleting accounts. In a different context, Pangrazio (2019) showed how young people in Australia negotiated and appropriated digital platforms to suit their interests and communication needs by deploying strategies such as using Facebook to be ‘visible’ to friends, to organize night-outs and events or to maintain relationships by liking friends’ posts. In their recent work, Pangrazio and Selwyn have outlined tactics that young people deploy to negotiate their personal data including using a VPN or deliberately using false information such as erroneous birthday (2019: 430). The latter is an example of what Brunton and Nissenbaum (2011) have identified as ‘obfuscation’ which is understood as contextual and vernacular forms of resistance. However, further research is needed to examine the practical ways in which users negotiate and appropriate digital platforms. This in turn can feed into broadening understandings of digital literacies and how these are acquired and learned over time and through situated practices.

In recent years, emerging studies have advocated for reconceptualizing what we think of ‘digital literacy’ to include critical thinking and evaluation – in particular with regards to the technological and power structures that characterize digital environments – but also to recognize the various bottom-up and *actual* uses of technologies (Pangrazio, 2019; Pötzsch 2019). In this line, Pangrazio argues that ‘in order to advance the abstract, academic debate surrounding critical digital literacy, we might first begin by taking stock of the needs and practices of the individual’ (2016: 168). Addressing this gap, Pangrazio and Selwyn (2019) coined the concept of ‘personal data literacies’ which includes ‘data tactics’. Tactics, in their framework, fall either within the category of resistance and obfuscation or are understood as creative applications which entail the repurposing of data for personal and social reasons (Pangrazio and Selwyn, 2019: 429). While the personal data literacies framework is very useful to rethink and broaden the concept of literacies in data-driven environments, it tends to overlook the mundane and situated ‘ways of operating’ of these tactics. In other words, ways of operating that are neither resistance to digital platforms in a broad sense nor necessarily creative. Researchers need to pay more attention to the mundane character of tactics as better understanding it as the potential to feed back into the educational agenda and foster forms of digital literacy that are responsive to current contexts and continuously changing digital practices (Pangrazio, 2016, 2019; Pangrazio and Selwyn, 2019; Pötzsch, 2019). For example, Gui and Gerosa point out that educational interventions on digital skills should focus on everyday management of smartphones and ‘include information, suggestions and experiences about how to strategically filter calls and notifications, silence or shut-down the phone’ (2018: 18). Managing read receipts embedded in instant messaging applications would fall into this agenda. Such educational interventions, however, need to be careful not to individualize the responsibility of developing digital skills and tactics and instead encourage collective ways of passing on this knowledge. As de Certeau points out, the examination and articulation of tactics do ‘not imply a return to individuality’ (1984: xi).

Although specific tactics are bound to change according to different contexts and be reinvented with new technological affordances and the take-up of different platforms (e.g. TikTok), it is important to gain more insights in the ways in which young people deploy them and more broadly adopt tactical attitudes (i.e. gaming the different systems and their features) towards digital platforms and mobile technologies. Addressing this gap, this article examines the tactical forms of

agency that young people enacted through their negotiations of the expectations attached to Messenger and WhatsApp and of socio-technological assemblages mediated through them.

## Methodology

The article draws on 32 semi-structured qualitative interviews with young people aged 20–25 collected as part of my doctoral research which examined young people's social media practices, the meanings they ascribed to these practices and how they negotiated the opportunities and anxieties generated by the platforms in their relationships and everyday lives. The research focused in particular on exploring young adults' practices of peer monitoring and profile-checking through social media platforms and was conducted between 2014 and 2015. This article uses only part of the data collected to shed light on the ways in which young people negotiated instant messaging applications.

Thirty-two young people took part in the study among whom 19 women and 13 men. Participants were recruited via posters and leaflets in university campuses and youth venues in Glasgow and using snowballing techniques. Among them, 12 were studying, 10 were combining study and work, 8 were working, 1 was unemployed and 1 was in training. Most participants were completing or had completed an undergraduate degree and while their subjects of study and field of work covered a range of areas, it is important to note that at the time of the interviews nine were aspiring or were working freelance in the creative industries. Participants were predominantly from an urban middle-class background which limits the generalizability of the findings of the study to this population. All participants were using Facebook (albeit more or less actively) and a large number were also active on Instagram ( $n = 21$ ), Twitter ( $n = 20$ ) and Snapchat ( $n = 14$ ). Most participants reported using instant messaging applications such as WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger on a daily basis to communicate with their friends. Interviews lasted between 50 min and 90 min and were transcribed verbatim, systematically coded and analysed using an inductive and thematic analysis framework.

Drawing on empirical insights from participants, the next section discusses the ways in which young people used and perceived WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger as well as the expectations and at times anxieties attached to the applications and their daily use in the context of relationships. The following section examines the different tactics that they deployed to negotiate tensions arising from social expectations and technological features embedded in the applications, focusing in particular on the use of messages previews to bypass read receipts. Finally, the article concludes by highlighting how de Certeau and Foucault's conceptualizations of power and resistance can help us to shed light on the possibilities and expression of agency in complex digital environments as well as makes recommendations for fostering grounded in practice and responsive digital literacies.

## WhatsApp and Facebook messenger: Convenience, coordination and being always on

In line with existing research, young people in the study discussed the multiple ways in which social media platforms allowed them to connect with a range of different audiences, socialize with friends as well as arrange meetings with peers, friends and family (Boyd, 2014; Chambers, 2013; Lincoln and Robards, 2017). In this context, WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger were predominantly described as 'useful tools'. Like Chloe, the large majority of young people reported using Messenger and WhatsApp on a daily basis to communicate privately with friends.

Privately I am always using Messenger to chat with people and stuff, like all the time I am on Messenger. I don't really do anything else so probably publicly I don't look that active but then privately with my friends I am active. (Chloe, 22)

The messaging applications were seen as an easy way to communicate with friends, in particular as they offer the possibility of creating private individual and group chats as Dylan explains:

It is easy to talk to people [on WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger] . . . I've got my top groups there, so I can set groups together with my friends, so I have six of my uni friends in a group together so we can all talk together in a big group or I just have like individual people like . . . basically all my friends. (Dylan, 23)

While using Facebook Messenger, Dylan would not necessarily interact with his newsfeed. The disassociation of Facebook's messaging app Messenger from the platform was commonly reported by young people. According to Nathan (22), Facebook has increasingly become a 'messaging tool' rather than 'a social feed', explaining that a large number of his friends interacted only via Messenger or used WhatsApp. In this way, participants used the messaging applications to manage their time, arrange meetings and synchronize their schedules with close friends and peers via private messages. Nancy (22), for example, described how WhatsApp was 'useful' to contact people and let them know where she was and/or arrange 'last minute meetings'. Eva (25) put a similar emphasis on the convenience of Messenger and its group chat function which allowed her to plan shared time with her friends without getting caught by the tedious 'texting back and forth'. The messaging applications were repeatedly described through the lens of convenience and time management:

It is really useful, I really like that part of Facebook like you can create events or make group chats, it is really easy to like manage people and stuff so that is a really good thing. (Hugo, 25)

While participants emphasized the positive impacts that Messenger and WhatsApp had on their everyday lives and relationships, they also reported anxieties and stress generated by the applications ranging from pressure to be always on, expectations to answer quickly and fears of missing out as Amy's account illustrates:

The only one I really use is Facebook [Messenger] 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 [ . . . ] 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)

Anxieties and stress were often related to expectations of being always on and the need for everyday coordination which at time felt very overwhelming for participants. Nancy, for instance, described how being always connected and experiencing pressure to answer made her anxious and wanting to 'disappear' while Emma (22) described that being available to people has become something of an 'obligation'. Obligations of being available and of reciprocity in relationships were embedded within the power dynamics of young people's existing relationships. Research has long shown that friendships are shaped by gender, class, age, sexuality and kinship (Jamieson,

1998; Thomson, 2011) and that these factors play a significant role in relation to digital media (Baym, 2010; Chambers, 2013; Harvey et al, 2013; Handyside and Ringrose, 2017). Messaging applications and their features were acting as exacerbators of these dynamics and often generated extra layers of accountability and scrutiny (Chambers, 2013; Trottier, 2012). For example, Benjamin explained how he struggled to negotiate new expectations:

I am using WhatsApp as well as Facebook 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 . . . I don't want to answer you know, it is just my choice but people really, they get really angry sometimes which I think it is a bit weird. Come on if I text you in an hour it is fine. (Benjamin, 25)

Benjamin here expresses his frustration towards the socially enforced expectations of being always available and maintaining relationships via private messaging which he openly contests ('if I text you in an hour it is fine'). This gives a glimpse of the reinforcement of broader gendered roles connected to care and reciprocity in relationships (Jamieson, 1998; Thomson, 2011). However, the data collected do not allow to draw significant conclusion in terms of the gendered dimensions of the negotiations of messaging application. More research is needed to examine it more specifically, in particular given that research has long shown that young people's friendships and how they are expressed across online and offline are highly gendered (Harvey et al., 2013; Handyside and Ringrose, 2017).

Increased accountability and scrutiny were also apparent in the context of the blurring of work and leisure through the platforms (Gregg, 2011). For example, Natalie who was working on a casual contract in the hospitality industry explained how her work shifts were organized through Facebook which she described both positively and negatively. While it made it 'easier' for her to get last-minute shifts, the messaging application built in the platform also allowed her manager to cancel a shift last minute or put additional pressure on her to take one. Similarly, Nancy who described WhatsApp and Messenger as 'useful' to navigate everyday situations in a flexible way, experienced increased forms of accountability and scrutiny when her colleagues and her manager started to communicate with her via the applications:

If they [her colleagues] are asking like . . . 'you have to do a report of what you've done during this month', I think you have to tell me this via emails and not on WhatsApp or Facebook. Also, because I cannot answer at every moment and they see it [read receipt] and say like 'Ow you were connected and you didn't answer me'. (Nancy, 22)

As the accounts above show, participants had ambivalent feelings towards and experiences of messaging applications in their everyday lives and relationships. They often used them for convenience as the applications enabled them to easily chat with friends, organize spontaneous meetings and arrange work shifts while at the same time resented them for these same aspects as these could bring important degrees of disruption in the conduct of their everyday lives and relationships. As Nancy's account shows, some of the features embedded in the applications such as the read receipts and the last time of connection were often experienced as sticking points in their everyday communication. Instant messaging applications can be understood as 'coordinating devices' which can be useful in a context in which everyday life has been desynchronized and schedules individualized. However, these technologies also encourage the blurring of work and non-work time in turn contributing to further desynchronization (Woodman and Wyn, 2014). While this was the case and more broadly that the power dynamics embedded in participants'



relationships, the social expectations attached to messaging applications and the features embedded in them shaped significantly the ways in which young people managed and negotiated the applications, they were also able to enact forms of agency through the deployment of everyday tactics.

## Everyday ways of operating: Tactical (dis)engagement with messaging applications

Young people in the study deployed tactics to manage and temporally disconnect with messaging applications. These were, as conceptualized by de Certeau (1984), everyday ways of negotiating the applications which were deployed in the space of the other (i.e. the messaging applications owned by private corporations) and were taking advantage of opportunities arising (e.g. messages previews). Often participants described these tactics as means to regain control of their time as well as to negotiate their relationships and the expectations attached to connectivity and being always available. Tactics included not installing Messenger on their phones to avoid constantly checking and receiving notifications, placing their phones face down when meeting other people to avoid seeing the light informing them that they had a new message/notification and bypassing read receipts using messages previews. This section focuses on this latter tactic which consists of unfolding messages' previews which are available on push notifications to bypass the read receipts embedded in WhatsApp and Messenger. Although praised by some participants for its convenience and ability to keep conversations flowing, the read receipt feature was mostly accounted as significant sources of tension in everyday communication and relationships. This feature was perceived by young people as enforcing connectivity and exacerbating stress by nudging them to answer messages quickly to avoid offending friends and peers by being 'seen' as ignoring them. In this context, participants described how they would temporarily suspend connection by unfolding the message preview on their phone or laptop which allowed them to partly see its content without clicking on it and marking it as 'seen'. Emma, for example, reported bypassing read receipts on WhatsApp to give herself the time she needed to answer and negotiate expectations of being always available:

Sometimes I don't click on the message, I just . . . like when it pops up, I can see it but I don't go and click so that it doesn't display to them that I have seen it. This is usually my strategy to give me some time. Otherwise it does seem a bit rude, it might not necessarily be because you don't have time to reply to them or you can't be bothered, but because sometimes something else might have come up and I don't want them to think that I am taking too much time or something, so yeah I just click on it when I am ready to reply. (Emma, 22)

Amy (22) also described how she would 'purposely' avoid clicking on messages on Messenger and WhatsApp and use the preview so messages would not be marked as read. While she did not consider this practice as very nice, she deemed it necessary as in her own words 'the *second* you click on the message they know that you have seen it and then you have to reply'. Similarly, Natalie usually unfolded the preview to suspend connection and regain control over her own time and negotiate mutual expectations of availability, reciprocity and relationship maintenance:

If you see something from someone and you can see 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 have time, but it also means that if you read something you are going to reply. I'll try not to read

something until I know what I am going to reply because I know that if they've seen it [read receipt], they are waiting . . . (Natalie, 20)

Acknowledging how she bypassed the read-receipt feature to manage these expectations, Natalie then goes on to describe her own ambivalent feelings towards the feature:

It kind of works both sides, it is nice . . . like it is nice because you can actually keep a conversation going because you can know when they've seen it but if they ignore it then it hurts, it hurts if you are being ignored (laughs). (Natalie, 20)

Using previews to bypass read receipts was perceived by some participants as somewhat temporarily deceiving their friends by pretending that they had not seen/read their messages. The tactic was sometimes described as 'cheeky' or 'not very nice' as it appeared to go against imperatives of spontaneity and reciprocity associated with friendships. However, it was seen as necessary to manage tensions and negotiate relationships.

Read receipts could exacerbate expectations of availability and reciprocity but also practically facilitate the 'flow' of conversations. While participants acknowledged and were aware of the effects sparked off by the feature, when on the receiving end they were still caught in the emotional distress caused by the seemingly intentional indifference of the people they sent messages to. Interestingly, none of the participants reported having disabled the feature on WhatsApp (Messenger does not offer this option) which illustrates the ambivalent relation that young people maintained with the feature. One explanation might be that participants did not know that they could turn off the feature and mostly used the application's default setting as research has shown to be the case for privacy settings more broadly on Facebook (Debatin et al., 2009). Another explanation might be that WhatsApp only allows to completely turn off the feature which means that in practice users do not send out read receipts but cannot see whether their messages have been read either, limiting scrutiny and accountability in both directions. Read receipts have become for some participants integral to everyday communication, shaping not only the expectations attached to WhatsApp and Messenger but also the choice of using the applications in the first place. As David explained, he decided to use Messenger *because of* the read receipt feature:

It is always private messages for me, just Messenger. I don't know why though but I never use texts any more . . . I don't know why . . . [ . . . ] Do you know what it is? Because when you text someone you don't know if they've read it or not. On Messenger you are aware like 'ok they've seen that' so I am expecting a reply.

Researcher: How do you feel about that?

Yes it is interesting because when you . . . there is a part of you that is like 'ow they've seen my message, why haven't they replied?', that is because you are expecting it right? But how many times you've done it as well? Like all the time, I am too busy so what you're doing is that you sort of look at it and you don't want to open the message, just leave it there and be like 'okay I don't want them to think that I have seen it and that I don't reply so I won't open it. It is kind of a strange one. (David, 24)

Interestingly, David's account outlines the contradiction between commonly using the tactic to manage one's time ('how many times you've done it as well? Like all the time') and the simultaneously hold expectations of instant replies from friends and uses of the feature to check and hold them accountable in some ways. Previews were also used by some participants to bypass read receipts in the context of work when colleagues or managers were contacting them through

Messenger or WhatsApp, often fostering unwelcome forms of surveillance and accountability as Nancy's experience has shown earlier. Participants had sophisticated understandings of the impacts of the read-receipt feature on their communication, how it was perceived by others and could exacerbate tensions as well as of the ways in which the feature impacted on how they experienced and perceived how others communicated (or lack thereof) with them. They were also expecting other people to use the previews in similar ways and this tended to feed even more speculations about the 'genuineness' of unopened messages as well as to reinforce feelings of being ignored. A few participants even reported using other features such as the 'last active' indicator on Facebook to check whether people had intentionally not opened their messages. These practices and tactics illustrate the social appropriation of technological features and the development and reshaping of social expectations attached to them – in this case, the exacerbation of expectations of being always available, reciprocity as well as peer accountability and monitoring.

Young people's engagement with WhatsApp and Messenger were inscribed in socio-technological assemblages made up of specific social expectations of availability and reciprocity, a broader culture of connectivity enforced by Facebook through the design and features of the applications and their discursive strategy (van Dijck, 2013), as well as mediated by the existing power dynamics of relationships performed via the applications (e.g. close friendships, kinship, work relations, etc.). By focusing on the commonly deployed tactic of bypassing read receipts of Messenger and WhatsApp by using messages' previews, this section has shown that young people's engagement with the applications was grounded in practice and in sophisticated understandings of the applications' features, their modifications by the corporations and their appropriations by their peers as well as the underpinning social expectations attached to them. Nathan (22) explains:

Everyone knows the technique . . . I mean you can bring down your notifications on Facebook, you can see it and they don't know that you've seen it. Everyone knows that and that surely has to be a skill that you develop. (Nathan, 22)

As Nathan points out, bypassing read receipts has become a skill that young people have developed and sometimes shared among themselves through their practical experiences of managing their relationships and communication on messaging applications.

## Discussion and conclusion

de Certeau and Foucault's conceptualizations of power and resistance point towards an understanding of the technique of bypassing read receipt described in the previous section as a form of tactical engagement and as transitional points or knots of 'resistance' which are inscribed in existing power structures. Indeed, young people's practices of bypassing read receipts were deployed within the realm of Facebook which owns and makes decisions about the designs of the two applications ('the space of the other') and depended on 'opportunities' arising from the design, features and affordances of the applications (e.g. possibility to disable read receipts on WhatsApp), their mobile phones (e.g. messages previews) as well as on social media corporations' strategies (i.e. engineering connectivity, van Dijck, 2013). In this way, participants' practices of temporal suspension of connection do not necessarily mean active resistance to private corporations like Facebook or the subversion of power structures. However, their negotiations illustrate not the possibility of agency in complex digital environments and crucially its expression as *tactical*. It is therefore useful to depart from binary conceptualizations of agency and of resistance as necessarily

outside or antagonistic to power and further explore agency through the lens of temporality and tactics to better understand the ways it can be expressed in environments characterized by surveillance capitalism, technological infrastructures that align with it as well as specific sociocultural practices (Fuchs, 2014; Lupton, 2016; Zuboff, 2019). We also need to keep in mind that corporations will facilitate specific forms of appropriation and personalization if it suits their broader strategy of connectivity. As Light and Cassidy (2014) point out, by providing new tools to manage connections on digital platforms such as the possibility of ‘snooze’ and alerts to limit one’s time on the platforms,<sup>3</sup> social media corporations are attempting to retain users and sustain engagement. This echoes Manovich’s observation that increasingly people’s tactics are ‘turned into strategies now sold to them’ (2009: 324) and that corporations are now also using a tactical approach characterized by adaptability and constant change.

The article discussed how young people in the study bypassed read receipts embedded in WhatsApp and Messenger using messages’ previews. This is one example of the range of tactics that young people can deploy to negotiate messaging applications’ features and more broadly social media platforms as well as the social expectations attached to them. Tactics are of course bound to change, vary in different contexts and be reinvented with new technological affordances and the use of different platforms (e.g. TikTok). Others might be for example the use of airplane mode to bypass read receipts, the creation of fake Instagram – ‘finstas’ – to relieve the pressure of perfection or the use of the ghost mode on Snapchat to avoid friends seeing their location. While illustrating one specific tactics that young people deployed to negotiate messaging applications, the sample of the study which was predominantly composed of urban middle-class young people limits the generalizability of the findings. Further research is therefore needed not only to explore different tactics deployed to negotiate the socio-techno relations in which social media platforms and messaging applications are embedded but also to focus on different populations of users. As researchers, we need to better understand forms of tactical agency cultivated by users in relation to digital platforms and mobile technologies and the ways in which this type of engagement can simultaneously resist specific features or expectations attached to digital technologies while still being inscribed in wider power structures.

Researchers need to continue challenging the stark power unbalance between users and corporations through more regulation and political action. In the meantime, researchers can draw on an agenda focusing on further exploring tactical forms of agency enacted through different digital platforms. This in turn can feed into a much-needed educational and policy agenda aimed at fostering digital literacies by (1) developing understandings of digital literacies that are grounded in practice and responsive to continuously changing digital practices and complex digital environments and (2) putting forward *shared tactics* as part of digital literacies that transfer the burden of responsibility from individuals to the collective and avoid reproducing and worst still reinforcing existing power structures.

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## Notes

1. <https://techcrunch.com/2012/05/04/facebook-messenger-read-receipts/> (accessed on 11 February 2020).
2. <https://gadgets.ndtv.com/apps/news/whatsapp-quietly-rolls-out-read-receipts-voice-calling-icons-spotted-616944> (accessed on 11 February 2020).
3. <https://about.fb.com/news/2018/08/manage-your-time/> (accessed on 11 February 2020).

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