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Discourses of social media amongst youth: An ethnographic perspective☆

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ABSTRACT

Recent large-scale surveys of social media have repeatedly shown that Facebook and Twitter are losing popularity amongst teenagers, with newer 'image-first' apps such as Snapchat and Instagram becoming preferred amongst this demographic. Whilst there is a wealth of research which has examined more general reasons for this shift, it is unclear to what extent these explanations can account for more local level user practices. This article interrogates these issues by taking an ethnographic approach to examine prevalent discourses of social media amongst young people in an East London youth group. Specifically, I explore the ways in which social media apps and platforms are discursively represented by the young people with reference to their everyday lives. This leads me to argue that whilst some of their practices can be accounted for by broader trends of social media use, issues that reflect the lived realities of the young people (e.g., crime, social networks) equally influence their engagements with different platforms.

1. Introduction

Recent (quantitative) accounts of social media trends have consistently reported that Facebook and Twitter are losing popularity amongst teenagers, with many turning to image-based apps such as Instagram, Snapchat, and more recently, TikTok. For instance, in a 2012 survey of social media trends, 42% of US teenagers reported that they most frequently used Facebook. By 2020, this figure was just 2%. This compares with Instagram and Snapchat, which were the most preferred platforms for 25% and 34% of US teens in the same year (Statista, 2021).

Although some research has attempted to explain these trends, most of this research uses large-scale surveys to infer more general use motivations for the shift. A common explanation for the shift includes the claim that Facebook has lost its status as a 'cool' social media site (Bajarin, 2011; Greenfield, 2012; Kingsmith, 2013; Nicholls, 2016). Other research has instead pointed to technological developments, such as the 'appification' of social media (e.g., Alhabash & Ma, 2017; Smith & Anderson, 2018; Anderson & Jiang, 2018) as a key driver of the change. However, though these explanations may account for general patterns of social media use, it is unclear to what extent they explain more local level practices. Indeed, whilst some research has argued that teens use platforms in similar ways regardless of socio-demographic differences (e.g., Anderson and Jiang, 2018), other work has demonstrated that contextual factors, such as the individuals' social network or identity, can influence and constrain their digital practices (see *inter alia* Gershon, 2010; boyd 2014; Miller 2016; Marwick and Fontaine, 2017; Venkatraman, 2017; Marlowe, Bartley, & Collins, 2017; Costa, 2018; Seargeant & Tagg, 2019; Lane, 2019).

Nevertheless, ethnographic research on digital trends is limited and there is a paucity of research which employs a sociolinguistic lens to examine how these platforms are discursively constructed and how these discourses explain individuals' practices. Subsequently, whilst it is possible to make more general claims about the decline of Facebook and other social media from behavioural and attitudinal surveys (e.g., Alhabash & Ma, 2017), it is unclear to what extent they apply to specific social contexts of use. Thus, though existing approaches can identify *what* platforms people are using, they "cannot adequately answer questions as to *why* people are using a particular site [and] how their practices emerge from and complement their offline lives" (Tagg and Seargeant 2016: 351, emphasis original).

In this paper I take this issue as a point of departure to examine trends of social media amongst adolescents with reference to the broader social contexts in which those platforms are used. To do this, I draw on a sociolinguistic ethnography of an East London youth group to analyse the discursive representation of different platforms by young people. Through an analysis of interviews and social media data, I argue that issues in the immediate and local community (e.g., crime, friendship networks) are discursively conceptualised as constraints on the young

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people's social media practices. Concluding, I argue that the shift towards photo-sharing apps (e.g., Snapchat, Instagram) can be attributed both to the multifunctionality of these apps and their 'image-first' affordances, which is linked to an appreciation of 'the image' as an authentic representation of the everyday.

I first provide an overview of research on social media trends, before describing the research context and ethnographic approach of this study. I then go onto analyse the prevalent discourses of social media with reference to the lived realities of the young people. Finally, I reflect on how these discourses feed into a broader conceptualisation of social and digital media as a 'blended reality' (Jurgenson, 2012), in which digital spaces facilitate an extension of offline interactional contexts for youth today.

2. Background: Changing social media trends[1]

Over the last ten years, researchers in the US and the UK have reported a sustained trend in social media use. Across both regions, there has been a steady decrease in teenage users of Facebook and Twitter, with this demographic favouring newer app-based platforms where content is largely image based (what I refer to as 'image-first'). This includes Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok (Anderson and Jiang, 2018; Statista, 2021). To understand these developments, researchers have examined the use motivations for different platforms. For instance, in a large-scale survey of 396 US college students, Alhabash & Ma (2017) find that 'passive' motivations, such as entertainment and convenience facilitated by apps such as Snapchat and Instagram are favoured over those platforms that principally enable interpersonal interaction, such as Twitter and Facebook.

Other researchers have instead linked these developments to recent technological innovations. For instance, Anderson and Jiang (2018) associate the decline of adolescent Facebook users to the high usage of smartphone technologies amongst this demographic. Specifically, they cite that 95% of US teens own or have access to a smartphone with 45% claiming to be online on a near-constant basis. It is possible, then, that the rise of teen users of Instagram and Snapchat could be indicative both of a shift towards platforms that utilise the affordances of contemporary smartphones (e.g., the integrated camera), and the 'always-on' (boyd, 2012) nature of young people's networked interactions.

However, though these accounts have identified broad-level patterns in the use of social media, some research has demonstrated that there are more fine-grained social reasons for the shift. A case in point is Sujon and colleagues' (2018) longitudinal analysis of Facebook use among young adults in the UK. In that analysis, they observe a change in how participants frame Facebook: Away from what they describe as a 'compulsive connection' to a 'personal service platform'. They observe that although in 2013 participants reported using the platform for social interactional purposes, just four years later few claimed to use Facebook to send messages or interact with friends. Instead, participants reported that Facebook was reserved for mundane social tasks, such as keeping up to date with friends' birthdays. The authors argue that this development reflects the 'domestication' of the platform, where Facebook has become "less about the sharing of personal information, and more about personal information management" (2018: 9).

However, though these explanations are likely to account for the role and perceptions of Facebook in the homogenous sample of young adults that they study(i.e., mainly middle-class undergraduate women), they may not account for the practices of other populations. Since social media is embedded within everyday contexts of use (Hine, 2015), it seems necessary to take stock of the ways in which users' practices are influenced and shaped by social factors beyond the online environments in which those interactions take place. Indeed, ethnographic research on social media use has increasingly demonstrated that users' practices cannot be easily disentangled from the offline contexts in which platforms are used. For instance, in a media ethnography of teenagers' social media use in an English village, Miller (2016) explores how parental concerns, cultural expectations, and peer pressures influence and constrain the individuals' choice of social media platforms. Specifically, Miller cites the recent membership surge in Generation X (i.e., those born between 1960 and 1980′s) as an explanatory factor in the decline of younger Facebook users. He observes that, with much of the older generation now on Facebook, many participants claimed that the platform was no longer perceived to be a 'private' space where they could socialise with friends (cf. boyd, 2014), but rather a place where their parents or family members were likely to pry on their activities and interactions. Thus, younger generations may avoid using Facebook entirely to mitigate the (potential) context collapse (Marwick & boyd, 2010) of their social networks.

Other media research has also emphasised the role of social networks and identity in constraining social media use amongst adolescents. In a now seminal ethnography of youth culture and social media, boyd (2014) demonstrates that the individuals' choice of platform is motivated by social concerns, including self-presentation and offline sociocultural distinctions. For instance, boyd observes how Myspace and Facebook became differentiated as "distinct cultural spaces [associated] with different people" (2014: 170). These distinctions mirrored existing (offline) cultural and ethnic distinctions, with Black and Latino youth embracing different technologies and platforms than their White and Asian peers.

Nevertheless, and as can be deduced from this discussion, the overwhelming bulk of research on social media trends takes an approach rooted in media studies, with most of the research inferring general social and technological motivations for the shift from large-scale surveys, as opposed to interrogating the ways in which social media platforms are discursively framed by young people and how these discourses shape their practices. Subsequently, in what follows, I harness the methodological precepts of sociolinguistic ethnography to examine discourses of social media amongst young people in East London, focussing on how social media is embedded within their everyday communicative practices.

3. Methods

The data that I analyse here is from a two-year sociolinguistic ethnography (October 2016–2018) of an East London youth-group (referred to as 'Lakeside'). This project can be described as a "blended" ethnographic project insofar that it combines offline/online data to explore how individuals' digital practices are embedded in their everyday lives. This approach contrasts with digital ethnographies which are principally concerned with "life *on* the internet" (Androutsopoulos, 2008:1 emphasis original; Bolander & Locher, 2020). In my role as participant observer and youth worker, I conducted research that explored the young people's practices across both 'offline' (e.g., at the youth group, in the park) and 'online' space (e.g., social media) (see also Hine, 2015; Tagg et al., 2017). I observed individuals in a range of naturalistic settings, such as 'hanging out' with friends, using computers in the media room, and while engaged in activities organised by the club (e.g., football, table tennis, craft sessions). A subset of the young people (N = 11) were also followed on a dedicated research account on Snapchat. Samples of their public Snapchat stories were randomly extracted, amounting to over 500 posts. A Snapchat story is a post uploaded to the users' public channel that remains active for 24 h and is visible to friends. I focus solely on Stories since it was not possible to extract Direct Messages (DM) as Snapchat messages automatically disappear once opened. I also gathered samples of Instagram accounts, stories, and memes, and immersed myself in the digital cultures that the young people were seen to engage with.

[1] Due to constraints of space, it is not possible to provide a definition of each platform. The reader is instead directed to Alhabash & Ma (2017) or Miller (2016).

Fig. 1. The Inner East London borough of Hackney (shaded) within the wider conurbation of Greater London (GLA 2021, Contains Ordnance Survey data © Crown copyright and database rights.).

In addition to social media data, I obtained naturalistic recordings of 25 of the young people in informal 'interviews' and self-recordings, amounting to over 40 h of conversations. The recorded data that I focus on in this paper comprises semi-structured interviews conducted with 11 adolescents aged between 11 and 17 (4 girls, 7 boys[2]). Consent was obtained from the youth group and the young person's parent/guardian, and assent from the participant. The interviews were informal and conversation-like, with questions covering a range of general topics, including their background, interests, social networks, and engagements with digital culture(s). To protect the identities of my participants, all identifying information is anonymised and participants are assigned pseudonyms.

The interviews were first transcribed in ELAN. I then identified relevant discussions by performing key-word searches on the data using labels of social media platforms (e.g., 'Facebook') and derivatives of the string 'social media'. The social media content were thematically coded in NVIVO (see Ilbury, 2019 for more detail). Throughout, I contextualise my analysis with reference to the broader ethnographic project and extensive fieldwork in the local community.

The youth-centre is based in Hackney, an inner-city neighbourhood in East London (see Fig. 1). The area is extremely culturally, linguistically, and ethnically diverse. Today, Hackney is home to significant African-Caribbean, Turkish, and Vietnamese communities. Although many areas of East London have been radically transformed through gentrification, the estate where the youth group is based continues to experience higher levels of deprivation than the rest of the borough (see Ilbury, 2021). The neighbourhood also sees higher than average levels of crime and historically, Hackney has been associated with organised crime and gang violence.

The club was attended by around 40 young people each night. Attendees were mainly from the immediate estate, and many would join nightly sessions to play football, table tennis, or simply hangout in the club. Although the club was ethnically diverse, most attendees were second generation African-Caribbean, representing the largest ethnic group in the local area.

In what follows, I explore the role of social media in the young people's networked lives. Specifically, I analyse prevalent discourses of social media platforms in reference to the social realities of the young people and their lived experiences growing up in an inner-city neighbourhood in East London.

4. Results

4.1. The relevance of social and digital media at Lakeside

As noted, large-scale surveys have consistently reported that western teenagers are deeply immersed in social media, with many using digital technologies extensively in their everyday interactions (e.g., Anderson and Jiang, 2018; Ofcom, 2019). Media reports have often interpreted these patterns as evidence that young people are 'obsessed' with technology, leading many to claim that teens are 'addicted' to smartphones and social media (e.g., Telford, 2015).

Though I can now appreciate these narratives to be oversimplified, many of my expectations about what the teenagers at Lakeside *should* be doing before I entered the field were influenced by these discourses and my own practices. As a researcher who is heavily immersed in digital culture, my expectations of my participants' social media engagements was largely influenced by my own habits. Although academic research on the topic has critically questioned discourses of 'social media obsession' amongst youth (e.g., boyd, 2014; Bell, Bishop & Przybylski 2015), researchers are not immune to these narratives. Rather, in all ethnographic work, we bring with us a degree of autobiographical bias (LeCompte, 1987). Thus, it seems as if though my personal biases as an academic who is heavily engaged in digital culture had largely influenced my preconceived ideas of what young people *should be doing*

[2] The individuals' gender identity was inferred through interviews and long-term observations of their participation in 'gendered' activities (e.g., boys vs. girls football).

before entering the field.

Nevertheless, ethnographic research requires the researcher to adopt a self-critical, reflexive approach to critically assess the impact of these biases (Tedlock, 1991). Thus, I quickly saw that it was necessary to reject these assumptions when it became very apparent that the young people were not as invested in digital culture and social media as I had anticipated. Rather, in the context of Lakeside, technology and digital culture took a more peripheral role. Conversations recorded in interviews and self-recordings seldom referenced the 'funniest memes' or the 'latest iPhone', but rather, social media was discussed only in passing, as one 'mode' of interaction amongst friends. In fact, social media was most often framed by the young people as a convenient, efficient, and unspectacular medium of sociality that is used to interact with friends (see excerpt 1, for instance):

(1)		
1	Christian	do you use social media?
2	Harinder	yeah everyone uses social media it's just like innit. Contact
3		your friends and stuff, you can call people for free

The differences between my perception and reality meant that I had to adapt aspects of my methodological approach (see also Tagg, Lyons, Hu, & Rock, 2017). I had initially devised an interview schedule that focussed heavily on social and digital media topics. This included questions on – what I perceived to be – popular digital issues, such as Kim Kardashian's recent Instagram post or the latest filters on Snapchat. However, when I introduced these topics, participants responded to them with little interest. When they did engage in lengthy discussions about social media content, participants tended to focus on extreme and isolated incidents that contradicted social norms. For instance, several individuals that I interviewed had an extensive knowledge of crime in the local community because they followed locally run 'urban entertainment channels' on Instagram and Snapchat, while others would give descriptions of a London-based sex worker who scouted for business on Snapchat. Many of these conversations would focus on issues that pertain to the immediate neighbourhood or, more broadly, London.

One potential explanation for the lack of engagement with topics of digital culture is that social media is a relatively unremarkable fact of life for young people. Having grown up in an era where social media is the norm, digital technologies have become largely embedded in their everyday communicative repertoires. Consequently, they may see no reason to comment on, what is perceived to be, a mundane form of interaction. Indeed, whilst for previous generations, the internet and social media were perceived to be novel (e.g., Turkle, 1984), for many young people social media is largely 'domesticated' (Miller, 2016; Sujon et al., 2018). This line of reasoning seems to be supported by Harinder's comments in excerpt 1 when he claims that "*everyone* uses social media" (line 2, emphasis added), and also in a brief conversation with 16-year-old Christina, she asked why I was so interested in social media, before quipping that it wasn't anything 'special' – it was, according to her "just life, innit".

On the other hand, their lack of engagement may reflect more micro-level social concerns. One particularly relevant issue here is the degree to which socio-economic factors influence and constrain an individuals' engagement with digital culture. Lakeside is located on a social housing estate and most (if not all) of the young people could be defined as 'working-class'. Although data plans and smartphones are now widely available, many of the young people did not have the economic means – as economically dependent on their parents' income – to purchase the latest iPhones and/or register for data plans. Instead, several of the young people used phones that were handed down from their parents and few had access to data. This is likely to have restricted the types of content and platforms they were seen to engage with (see also North et al., 2008; Madianou & Miller, 2012). Thus, it is possible that their general disinterest in discussing topics of digital culture could be indicative of a difficulty of accessing online content and a more general avoidance with culture that is perceived to be a 'middle-class concern' (see also boyd, 2014: 3; Lane, 2019).

In making these arguments, however, I do not mean to downplay the significance of digital culture in teenagers' networked lives. Although the individuals at Lakeside may have not exhibited the strong orientation towards digital culture as I had originally anticipated, it is clear for this generation, digital technology and social media is deeply embedded in their lives. A great deal of communication, both inside and outside of the youth group itself, took place online and debates about someone's Snapchat story or their latest Instagram post – or 'recents' – were common topics of conversation amongst the young people. Finally, when scheduled activities were not being run by the club, the young people would often congregate in the media room where they would spend hours engaging with social media content, listening to music via streaming services, or watching videos on streaming sites such as YouTube and Daily Motion. My point is rather that their use of social media was not exceptional nor indicative of a 'tech-obsessed' generation (cf. Telford, 2015).

4.2. Discourses of social media

4.2.1. Social media repertoires

Although topics on aspects of digital culture generated little discussion in interviews, when I asked *why* they used certain platforms, participants gave highly emotive descriptions of the social media apps they used and the specific types of interactions that were deemed 'suitable' for particular platforms. However, far from the complex social media repertoires observed in other communities, the young people I engaged with at Lakeside were seen to use a much more restricted selection of platforms (cf. Boczkowski, Matassi & Mitchelstein, 2018). Nevertheless, their platform choices largely reflected the trends identified in large-scale surveys (e.g., Statista, 2021). Indeed, I rarely observed individuals using Facebook and no individual was seen to use or reported using Twitter. Instead, participants claimed only to use a selection of apps, as in excerpt 2:

(2)		
1	Christian	what do you use in terms of social media? Do people use Snapchat?
2	Sam	Snap, Insta, WhatsApp, Houseparty
3	Talisha	I don't use that, Michelle does
4	Sam	I don't use it

In extract 2, Sam initially cites four platforms that people use (Snapchat, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Houseparty), before Talisha interjects that she doesn't use "that" (i.e., Houseparty: a short lived video chat platform) – a comment Sam concurs with. Across interviews and in ethnographic observations, I noted that the young people's online interactions were mainly restricted to these apps, with all reporting or seen to use Snapchat, WhatsApp, and Instagram. Only a few of the young people were observed using Houseparty and this platform was rarely used or discussed towards the end of my fieldwork. Given that all of these platforms are accessed primarily through a mobile app and also utilise the capabilities of contemporary smartphones (e.g., the integrated camera function), their popularity is perhaps predicted by the high use of mobile devices amongst this demographic (Anderson and Jiang, 2018).

However, though these apps are principally 'image-based' (i.e., content is primarily visual), young people at Lakeside also used these apps for a variety of other purposes, including direct messaging. The multifunctionality of these apps is alluded to in an unrecorded conversation with 14-year-old Rochelle in which I asked why she only used two apps: Snapchat and Instagram. Responding, she emphasised the variety of functions that these two apps afford. Both platforms enabled her to take photos, send messages, call individuals, and watch her friends'

stories. In her words, she saw "no point" of using other platforms when these two apps integrated the affordances of other apps (e.g., WhatsApp) which are principally text-based. These comments may explain why many of the young people used a much more limited range of social media platforms than others (cf. Boczkowski et al., 2018). In other words, although other generations have experienced the domestication of platforms over time (e.g., Sujon et al., 2018), for this demographic, having always been immersed in social media, they are able to select from a range of available platforms based on the efficiency and convenience of interaction (see also Alhabash & Ma, 2017).

I now turn to an analysis of the discursive representation of the major platforms to consider how these discourses influence and shape their social media habits.

4.2.2. Facebook and Twitter

The claim that Facebook is no longer perceived to be a 'cool' social media site was a common theme in interviews. Few participants reported that they were active users of Facebook, with many concluding that the platform had become outdated. For instance, consider extract (3), taken from a conversation with 12-year-old Josiah and 14-year-old Marcus on 'what social media do you use?':

(3)		
1	Christian	you don't use Facebook?
2	Josiah	I do but I don't use it. It's kinda dead. The only thing I'll use it
3		for is to watch videos
4	Marcus	Facebook is so late. Facebook was in year seven, no one
5		no one goes on Facebook

In this excerpt, having just listed the social networks that he uses (Instagram, Snapchat, sometimes WhatsApp), I explicitly ask Josiah whether he uses Facebook (line 1). Although he acknowledges that he has an account, he does not cite Facebook as a platform he actively uses, conceding that it is "kinda dead" (i.e., not interesting, line 2). He then goes on to acknowledge that he only uses the platform "to watch videos" (line 3). It is important here to note that Josiah does not equate 'watching videos' with '*using* Facebook'. One possible explanation of this framing is that he recognises that his self-reported behaviour is somewhat removed from the principal function of Facebook: Social interaction. Although Facebook enables users to complete a variety of social functions (e.g., send messages, upload photos and statuses, connect with friends), the only purpose that Josiah reports using the platform for is the non-social activity of watching videos. Thus, his use of Facebook appears to be more alike to video-sharing sites, such as YouTube, which do not principally encourage social-interaction.

However, although Josiah's comments may appear somewhat contradictory, I observed similar uses of Facebook amongst others. Although some were seen to log into Facebook, when I viewed their account, their profiles were often blank, with little to no personal information. None of them actively uploaded photos, statuses, or made other updates to their profiles, and few had profile pictures. Rather, individuals who did use the platform, reported using or used Facebook in similar ways to Josiah: To watch videos or to access a public group or entertainment channel. Thus, though some of the participants may have had accounts, they did not appear to be using Facebook for social interactional purposes (cf. Boczkowski et al., 2018).

A possible explanation for these trends can be inferred from extract 3, where Marcus refers to the platform as 'late' (i.e., lame; line 4). Expanding on this assessment, Marcus acknowledges that while Facebook was popular in year seven of school (age = 11/12), at the time of the interview (age = 15), it had become outdated. In what follows, Marcus goes on to justify his assessment, stating that 'no-one' uses Facebook anymore (line 5). Of course, his comment that 'no one goes on Facebook' is not literally true: Facebook is still the most popular social media platform in terms of total monthly active users (Ofcom, 2019). However, the 'no-one' to which Marcus refers is intended to describe 'anyone who is anyone', i.e., his peers. Here, their comments appear support the claims that Facebook is no longer a 'cool' social media site and there has been a diachronic shift away from the platform (cf. Bajarin, 2011; Greenfield, 2012; Kingsmith, 2013).

Twitter fares slightly differently. Unlike Facebook, Twitter has always struggled to attract younger users (Statista, 2021). This trend was echoed at Lakeside. Although most participants acknowledged that they had used Facebook at some point, only one individual (Christina) reported ever owning a Twitter account. Her experience with the platform was brief, admitting that she "didn't know how to use it", before deleting the account after a week. Thus, with little or no experience of using the platform, the discourses of Twitter that the individuals engaged in tended to reference stereotypes of the 'imagined user', as in (4):

(4)		
1	Christian	what about like Twitter?
2	Marcus	no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, that's even worse, that's even worse
3	Christian	why don't you use Twitter?
4	Josiah	cos Twitter is dead
5	Marcus	absolutely disgraceful to any social media
6	Josiah	no one uses it I say it's the worst social media that's ever been
7		invented
8	Marcus	I'm not even tryna violate but it's like it's like for like very posh,
9		posh, posh, posh, posh people
10	Josiah	David Cameron

The excerpt opens when I ask about Twitter (line 1), to which Marcus' responds using an emphatic and repeated "no" (line 2). In what follows, Marcus defines Twitter as "even worse" (line 2) than Facebook which he had previously referred to as "late" (extract 3). Elaborating, Marcus labels the platform "disgraceful" (line 5), before Josiah adds that it is "the worst social media that's ever been invented" (lines 6–7).

As in the case of Facebook in extract 3, Josiah suggests that "no-one" uses Twitter. Again, the comment that 'no-one uses Twitter' is not intended to be taken at face value. Clearly *some* people do use Twitter (Statista, 2021). Rather, his comment suggests that Twitter is irrelevant to him and his peers. In fact, Marcus claims that Twitter is a platform for upper to middle-class people, as signalled by his emphatic and repeated use of the word "posh" (lines 8 and 9). This assessment is confirmed by Josiah who cites an archetype of a Twitter user and 'posh person'– former British Prime Minister, David Cameron. By associating Twitter with a specific type of social figure (i.e., adult, upper- to middle-class), they not only emphasise their lack of interest in the platform, but they also indirectly claim an antithetical identity of that they believe to be the archetypal user. In other words, for Josiah, Twitter is ideologically associated – or 'enregistered' (Agha, 2003) – with a particular type of person, where the use or non-use of Twitter determined as a type of 'social distinction' (Bourdieu, 1979) based on social class. Thus, the existing (offline) hierarchies of social class and age become reimagined and applied as constraints to the platforms available to the young people (see also boyd, 2014).

Though I have focussed on only a handful of extracts here, it is important to note that the discourses and perceptions of Twitter and Facebook discussed by these individuals are reflective of broader trends. For instance, in other interviews, participants often used similar descriptors such as 'stupid', 'deep' (i.e., offensive), 'old', and 'dead' to refer to Twitter and Facebook. I now turn to a discussion of Snapchat and Instagram.

4.2.3. Snapchat & Instagram

Given the rise in newer multimodal social media apps, it is perhaps unsurprising that, unlike Facebook and Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat are evaluated much more positively by participants. Whereas few (if

any) of the individuals actively used Facebook and/or Twitter as *social* media, all reported using Snapchat and Instagram or were directly observed using these platforms for social interactional purposes. This included commenting on friends' posts, uploading images to semi-public stories, and 'DM'ing' (direct messaging) each other.

However, with these platforms already largely embedded in the individuals' digital repertoires, like other topics concerning aspects of digital culture, questions about Snapchat and Instagram were responded to with less enthusiasm. Though questions about Facebook and Twitter elicited some dramatic responses (cf., extracts 3 and 4), this was not the case for Snapchat or Instagram. Rather, when these platforms were discussed, they were generally described in terms of the community of networked users that use these apps and for facilitating an extension of the offline social networks, practices, and interactions that individuals participated in.

For most of the young people, content posted to these platforms enabled them to keep up with the latest events and issues in the local area and connect with likeminded individuals who engaged with similar music, fashion, and youth subcultures. For instance, many reported following public entertainment channels on Instagram (e.g., Link Up TV) to listen to new music releases, while others reported following local gang accounts who operated in the area so they could participate in discussions about their uploads at school. At other times, several of the young people would collectively watch stories of individuals who did not attend the youth group but were known to those at the club or those that attended different schools in the area. Thus, in many ways, Snapchat and Instagram were seen to facilitate interactions beyond the offline parameters of school and the youth group, creating a hyper-connected network of local users. Consider extract 5:

(5)		
1	Christian	so you talk to anyone on Snapchat or Instagram that you don't know
2		in real life?
3	Michael	no, I only talk to people that I know
4	Christian	you only what like people in the club?
5	Michael	no also people from my school

In (5), 15-year-old Michael describes how he only uses Snapchat and Instagram to interact with people he knows in other offline contexts, such as school and youth group. Although he mentions earlier in the interview that he uses social media to keep up to date with sports fixtures, he does not claim to connect with users he doesn't know in 'real life'. Indeed, Michael was regularly seen Snapchatting absent members of the club, and his stories most frequently centred on documenting aspects of his everyday life (e.g., school, the estate, playing basketball in the park).

Similar practices were reported by other young people at the club. For instance, 13-year-old Harinder claimed that he only really socialised with people from school on Snapchat and similarly, Christina reported following people in the local area she knew to keep up with the latest gossip, as in extract 6.

(6)		
1	Christian	so why, why do you think people are using Snapchat?
2	Christina	cos you can see beef on it sometimes you can see a lot of stuff
3		on it
4	Christian	like what?
5	Christina	fights
6	Christian	fights?
7	Christina	yeah. Like I could show you a fight right now
8	Feliks	oh my God
9	Christian	who records fights?
10	Feliks	show Talisha's
11	Christina	there's a lot of people who record fights [Shows Christian story]

In extract 6, Christina suggests that people are using Snapchat more because the story function enables the user to see a lot of 'beef' (i.e., fights/ arguments, line 2). As she elaborates, Feliks suggests showing me Talisha's story which is a video recording of a fight at a neighbouring secondary school in the area. For Christina, then, using Snapchat permits her to keep up on issues and youth relations in the local neighbourhood – knowledge which she uses to participate in conversations about these issues in offline contexts (e.g., school, youth club). This framing is reminiscent of Lane's (2019) account of the 'digital street' (i.e., the digitisation of street culture), in which he observes that online fight videos become the forum in which "neighbourhood reputations get decided" (2019: ix). Thus, at Lakeside, it is the 'networked public' (boyd, 2010) of the ephemeral Snapchat story that local youth relations are displayed and (re-)negotiated.

Importantly, the 'image-first' affordances of Snapchat appear to be central to Christina's use of Snapchat. In the extract, Christina explicitly suggests that the principal reason as to why she and her peers use Snapchat (and by extension, Instagram) is that content is primarily visual, noting that you '*see* a lot of stuff on it' (lines 2–3, emphasis added). In fact, the image based affordances Snapchat and Instagram, were regularly cited as popular qualities of the apps. When I asked young people to explain *why* they used these platforms, many referenced the image-first capacity of these apps as offering a more authentic, more trustworthy experience. An example of this type of framing is found in extract 7, where Michael distinguishes the multimodal affordances of Snapchat from the text-based interface of Facebook as a means of being able to verify the users' identity:

(7)		
2	Michael	Snapchat and that's it I don't use Facebook anymore cos that's
3		just stupid like people can ask to meet up with you yeah?
4		and then that's actually not the real person and then you end up
5		getting shanked or something like that

In this discussion, Michael reports that he does not use Facebook because it is 'stupid', alluding its outdated status, before elaborating that a potential issue with Facebook is that users could assume alternate and bogus identities. He claims this to be concerning because the fictional online personas could be used to mislead others or, in his words, lead to him getting 'shanked' (i.e., stabbed). Not only is this account incredibly telling of the social context of Lakeside, indirectly referencing the above-average levels of crime in the area, but his response references the 'image' as an authentic representation of reality. Specifically, he appears to suggest that, on Facebook, a platform where interactions are largely text-based, text can function as a 'mask' (Danet, 1998). Later, in the interview, Michael goes on to link these discourses to his use of Snapchat where he claims that a particular benefit of using Snapchat is that he can verify the authenticity of an account by asking that individual to instantly record and send a video or photograph of themselves. As such, for Michael at least, Snapchat, through its 'image-first' affordances, offers a more secure or authentic social media experience. Thus, the text-based messaging affordances of Twitter or Facebook, are apparently rejected in favour of Snapchat which promotes capturing the transience and authenticity of the 'moment' (see also Page, 2018; Boczkowski et al, 2018).

Similar explanations were given when participants described their motivations for using Instagram. In my ethnographic observations, when the young people showed me examples of their Instagram accounts, their profiles were not composed of hundreds of historic posts. Rather, they had a small number of posts from the last few months. When I asked why this was, many of the young people gave similar answers. They couldn't understand why it was necessary to 'keep' photos of themselves from years ago when they no longer 'looked like that'. By deleting outdated posts, they were able to cultivate an accurate and authentic representation of themselves in the 'here and now'. Thus, through the multimodal capabilities of 'image-first' apps, such as

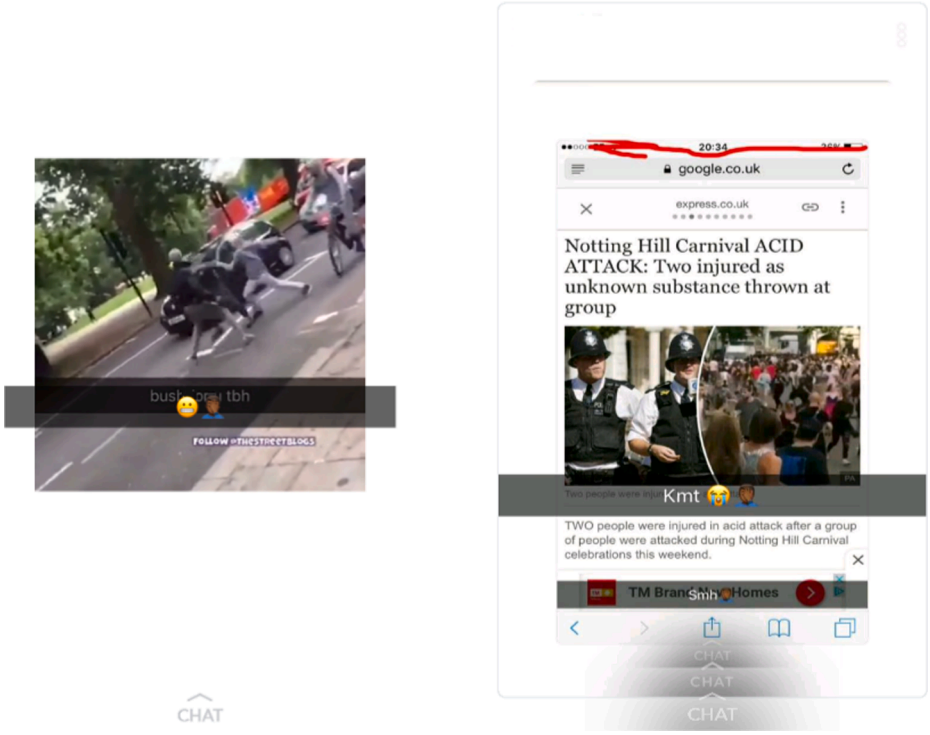

Fig. 2. Screenshots of two different users' Snapchat stories. An altercation in London (L); Notting Hill Carnival acid attack (R).

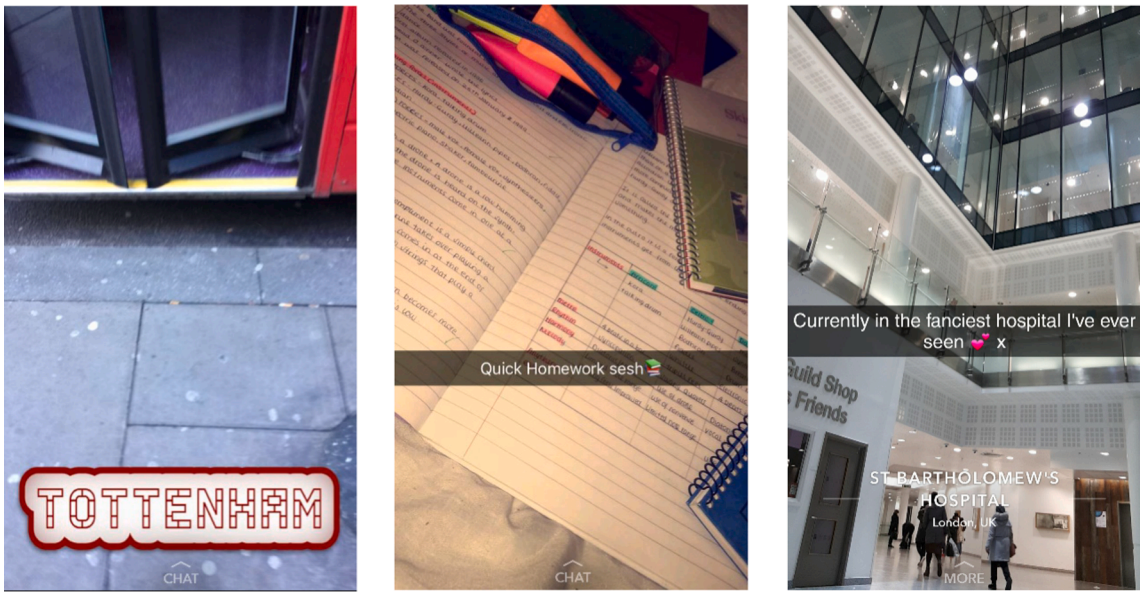

Fig. 3. Screenshots of three different users' Snapchat stories. From left to right: Boarding a bus in Tottenham, a homework session, a hospital visit.

Instagram and Snapchat, that individuals at Lakeside were able to capture elements of their transient lived-experiences and to construct an authentic online persona (cf. 'persistence' boyd, 2014).

4.3. Social media content

So far, I have focussed solely on discourses of social media with reference to the types of platforms that the young people were seen to use. In this section, I trace how these discourses influence and shape the content of their social media posts, focussing on posts extracted from Snapchat.

As I have discussed in the previous section, for many at Lakeside, social media was not used to engage with some non-local digital collective but rather as one way of keeping up to date with happenings in the local neighbourhood and in London more generally (see also Lane, 2019 in Harlem). For instance, consider Fig. 2. The image on the left is a screenshot of Michael's Snapchat story which is a reposted (or remediated) video from the Instagram account 'the Street Blogs', overlaid with an emoji response ('grimacing face' and 'face palm' emojis) which appears to indicate his disproval of the event. At the time of posting, the bio of 'the Street Blogs' claimed to upload videos of "drama in the UK".

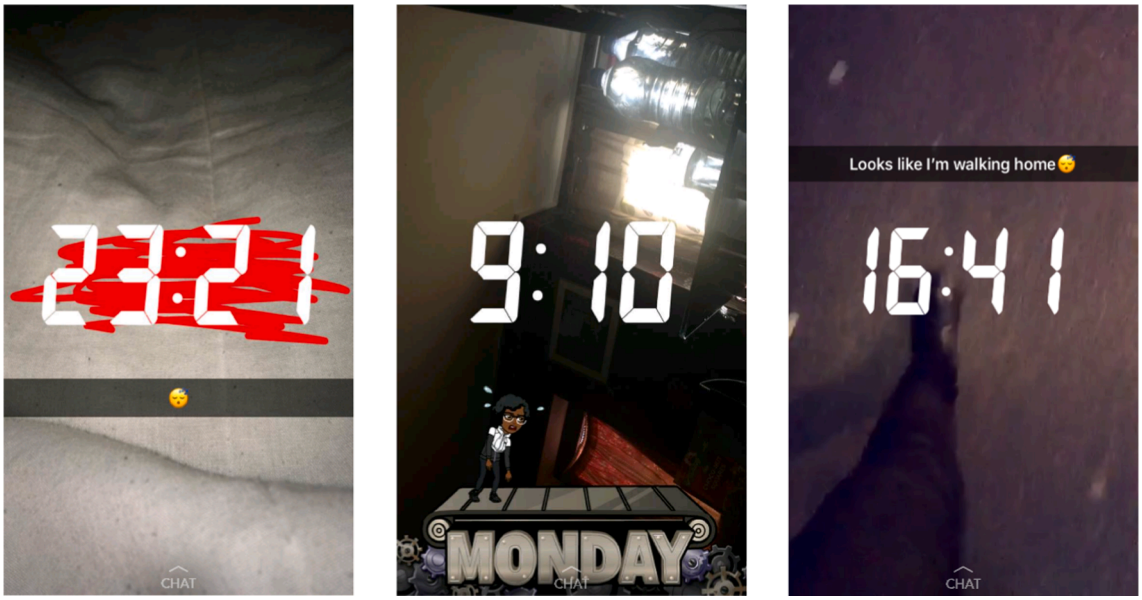

Fig. 4. Screenshots of three different users' Snapchat stories. From left to right: Bedtime, Monday morning, and walking home.

The video depicts some altercation in an undisclosed area of London[3]. Likewise, the image on the right is taken Sam's story which is a cross-posted screenshot of a Daily Express news article that refers to an acid attack at Notting Hill carnival – an annual Caribbean festival held in West London, also overlaid Sam's response: 'Kmt' (kiss my teeth) and two emojis ('loudly crying face' and 'face palm'), again to signal his disproval. These posts – as representative of more general trends in the corpus – reference the 'localness' of social media content at Lakeside. That is to say that users were seen to upload posts that depict their lived experiences of London. These posts are intended to be viewed an 'imagined audience' of peers who share similar concerns and positionings – i.e., their friends (see also Marwick & boyd, 2011).

In a sense then, social media appears to function as a space for the young people to articulate their identities and experiences beyond the remit of the offline. This 'narration' style of social media could also seen in the extent to which many of the Snapchat stories and Instagram posts that I observed the young people posting were not highly performed and immaculate selfies, but rather were images that documented aspects of the users' *perspective* (Georgakopoulou, 2016; Zappavigna and Zhao, 2017). Often these were those quotidian and mundane contexts that the young people found themselves in. For instance, consider Fig. 3, a sample of Snapchat posts from three users. In each of these stories, users have documented their 'everyday activities': Boarding a bus in the North London neighbourhood of Tottenham, undertaking a homework session, and attending an appointment in the hospital.

The content of these three examples is not particularly remarkable but these posts are typical of the types of stories uploaded by those at Lakeside. The mundane, everyday content of the stories appears to allude to my earlier argument that social media is not considered 'spectacular', but is rather deeply embedded in the young people's everyday communicative practices. Indeed, these quotidian forms of self-presentation provide further support for my claim that the young people at Lakeside, far from documenting some alternate or stylised identity, are utilising the intersubjective nature of the story to articulate their perspective and experiences of the world around them for their peers (Zhao and Zappavigna, 2017).

The 'narration' style of social media content can also be seen in the extent to which the stories are explicitly localised with reference some specific time or place. For instance, in Fig. 3, the users add geo-location tags or stickers that root the story within a specific spatial frame ('Tottenham', 'St Bartholew's Hospital'), and in Fig. 4, the temporal dimension of the story is indexed by the addition of a time and/or date stamp ('23:21′, '9:10′, Monday,'16:41′) and emoji responses (in both cases, the 'tired face' emoji). Subsequently, the visual and textual affordances of Snapchat, as well as the transient nature of stories, are exploited to share their experiences of the 'here and now' (see also Georgakopoulou, in press). These are intended to be read as authentic representations of their everyday lives rather than presenting some cultivated alternate persona. Thus, as suggested in the discourses that emerge in the young people's interviews, social media appears to simply facilitate an extension of the social networks, interactions, and engagements that they participate in so-called 'offline' environments, such as the youth club or school.

5. Conclusion

This article has explored discourses of social media amongst young people in an East London youth group, Lakeside. Specifically, I have contextualised the shift from Facebook and Twitter towards 'image-first' apps such as Snapchat and Instagram by analysing the discursive representation of different platforms. I have argued that while some general trends can explain the digital practices of the young people at Lakeside, such as changing evaluations of Facebook as a 'cool' social media site, the socio-demographic characteristics and lived experiences of the users equally contribute to their selection and use of platforms.

Further, by examining the local motivations for this shift, I have argued that the popularity of Snapchat and Instagram can be understood as symptomatic of both the 'image-first' affordances of the apps and their multifunctionality. Specifically, amongst youth at Lakeside, pictorial social media content was attributed a high degree of authenticity, with adolescents valuing the image-based affordances of these apps as a way of narrating an authentic representation of the everyday (see also Zappavigna and Zhao, 2017; Zhao and Zappavigna, 2017). Indeed, for the young people at Lakeside, social media is used not as a way of presenting some alternate identity, but rather as an extension of their offline social networks, subcultures, and practices that the young people participate in– what Jurgenson (2011) refers to as an 'augmented reality'. More generally, these practices could be indicative of shift away

[3] The location of the video can be deduced from the individual who is riding a bike from the Santander bicycle hire scheme that is specific to London.

from platforms that enable the 'persistence' of data (cf. Facebook and Twitter, boyd 2014), towards those that facilitate ephemeral types of communication that are more comparable to offline interactional contexts.

Finally, this paper joins a call for more ethnographically grounded research on social media trends and use. I argue that if we are to fully conceptualise and understand social media in contemporary networked society, it appears necessary for future research to examine how prevalent discourses shape and influence individual user practices.

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