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# **Digital belongings: The intersections of social cohesion, connectivity and digital media**

The rapid proliferation and on-going transformation of digital technologies and social media platforms have had a substantial influence on the participatory cultures of young people and their associated social connections. This social/digital nexus raises important questions of social cohesion, with digital technologies at once augmenting social interaction whilst simultaneously creating an uneven landscape of access for participation. To address this interface of the digital and the social, this paper presents a qualitative study of 24 tertiary students from ethnic minority backgrounds living in Auckland, New Zealand, who use social media. Incorporating a pre-screening questionnaire, a one-week social media diary and semi-structured interviews, this study presents the ways in which digital belongings influence participants' practices of friendship and family. The ways that connective media influence, and even constrain interaction alongside the politics of belongings, are theorised to further examine the meanings and experiences behind participants' social media usage and social contact. By integrating these ideas, this paper presents the ways in which young university students use social media and the extent to which digital interaction and networking influences social participation and social cohesion.

Keywords: Belonging, digital, social media, social cohesion, ethnicity, participation

## **Introduction**

Rather than existing in a separate 'virtual' sphere, technological developments including the internet, mobile phones, and social media are integrated with the everyday 'real world' through their 'hard' infrastructural supports, capacity to link people and places, and through the mediation of social spaces by digital information. The city of Auckland in New Zealand, characterised by rich ethnic diversity and high degrees of connectivity, is well placed for an examination of the digital/social nexus to better understand the ways in which digital communications articulate with social cohesion and impact peoples' relationships and networks. This paper presents a study of tertiary students in Auckland from five migrant or ethnic minority groupings to ascertain the role of social media in their social interactions. For young people of migrant or ethnic minority backgrounds, these technologies represent particularly important influences on everyday life – mediating familial and friendship networks, offering new opportunities for community engagement, and influencing a sense of belonging within increasingly diverse societies.

We explore the experience and implications of the social/digital nexus through recent theorisations of 'belonging', a term that has recently received renewed interest across various fields in the social sciences (Antonsich, 2010; Fozdar and Hartley, 2013; Yuval-Davis, 2011). In particular, we situate belonging as a personal experience that simultaneously occurs within socio-spatial forms of inclusion and exclusion – an approach that draws attention to the 'multi-scalarity' of belonging (Antonsich, 2010). Belonging, in this respect, is also 'multi-layered' (Yuval-Davis, 2011) and its examination requires an analysis of the intersectionality of people's identities alongside the socio-political context in order to critically conceptualise its possibilities. While these more open conceptualisations of belonging have become more common, there remain only limited explorations of the role of virtual environments on the experience of belonging (both locally and transnationally). Further, we argue that the

influence of these digital spaces on people's sense of belonging remains relatively under-theorised, particularly as another element that contributes to an intersectional analysis.

In this paper, we foreground the concept of digital belongings to analyse the dynamic of social participation and social cohesion as it interfaces with contemporary practices of family and friendship. In doing so, we build upon a nascent (but growing) body of research that traces the use of social media by members of ethnic minority communities who are at once both 'connected/mobile and emplaced/embodied' (Alinejad, 2013: 95). This is achieved by presenting findings from a study with 24 young tertiary students from ethnic minority backgrounds in Auckland to ascertain the ways that they use social media and how this impacts on their local and transnational interactions and associated practices of family and friendship. We begin with an overview of current scholarship on social media and the politics of belonging before detailing the study design and presenting analysis of participants' engagement with family and friends through digital technologies. The conclusion suggests that digital technologies can serve to enhance belonging but, in the process, also generate new expectations and obligations that can draw young people into constrained online social networks. We end by signalling areas for future research to advance understandings of belonging in an era of increasing digitalisation.

### ***Social media, the politics of belonging and a culture of connectivity***

Social media generate multiple ways to communicate with friends and family living overseas through messages, pictures, audio and video-based content that can be maintained in both synchronous and asynchronous contexts (Siddiquee and Kagan, 2006; Wilding, 2012). The different forms of communication and connection that are assembled through social media arguably constitute key components of what Madianou and Miller (2013) describe as 'polymedia', a multiplex of co-constituted and interconnected media spaces. Platforms such as Facebook, Skype, Twitter, YouTube, Snapchat and Viber have become critical technologies of connection and belonging for a wide range of individuals and communities. These technologies are particularly powerful tools for members of migrant communities whose lives are often characterised by multi-scalar relations and attachments across multiple forms of identity. These shifting possibilities for social media communication are also associated with increased availability and often, affordability, of digital and mobile interfaces that influence the ways in which people interact with one another through social media and other communicative platforms.

People from ethnic minority and migrant backgrounds have unprecedented opportunities to use digital technologies as a way to maintain numerous transnational ties and maintain connections to family and friends overseas (Collins, 2009; Craig and Williams, 2011; Holmes and Janson, 2008; Maya-Jariego et al., 2009). While digital technologies and social media are widely represented in relation to increased connection, particularly across transnational and diasporic spaces, the proliferation of these communicative forms also raises serious questions about the ways in which migrants become involved in more localised social formations and the prospects for 'social cohesion'. Social cohesion as a concept has gained renewed currency across a range of fields, including public health, social policy, urban and ethnic studies and

economics (Chen-Edinboro et al., 2015; Ministry of Social Development, 2010; Novy et al., 2012; Wietzke, 2015). It is used almost invariably as a normative term to describe a positive state of social relations within a given locality or society to be strived for, although there are widely differing views of what it is, what it looks like and how it can be measured (Bartley, 2014; Green and Janmaat, 2011). It can include consideration of: belonging to communities or society or in feelings of attachment and identification with place; inclusion, in terms of opportunities to access labour markets, income support, community resources, education, health and housing; participation in social activities, public space, community groups and, more broadly, civic life; recognition of different identities and the valuing of diversity; and the extent of legitimacy generated through confidence in public institutions (Bartley, 2014). While certainly diffuse and wide-ranging, these different expressions of social cohesion point to the importance and value of building connections between and across the diverse individuals, communities and institutions that now characterise many societies.

Digital technologies and social media platforms offer both great potential to enhance and extend social cohesion, as well as to complicate the formation of social linkages in places in relation to those across greater distances. For instance, these tools can serve as a platform for overcoming social isolation experienced through migration both by maintaining connections with family and friends abroad but also through strengthening connections within local communities (Craig and Williams, 2011; Gifford and Wilding, 2013). Whilst digital technologies and ‘connective media’ platforms (Van Dijck, 2013) can help facilitate and strengthen connections within locally based communities, numerous authors note that these connections tend to be based around a shared ethnicity (Benitez, 2006; Lievrouw, 2001; Maya-Jariego et al., 2009; Wilding, 2012). In this respect, while clearly important tools for social participation, it remains unclear whether digital technologies can also help to bridge social interactions across difference (whether defined by ethnicity, religion, class, sexuality or age) and generate social formations that can be both diverse and socially cohesive.

Whilst digital communication technologies can strengthen existing social ties both locally (often within ethnic communities) and globally (through transnational/diasporic communities), there may also be negative impacts for other forms of social cohesion. Digital technologies and social media, for instance, can reproduce existing social inequalities for those whose online access is limited, thereby creating an uneven landscape of access which can be influenced by economic status, literacy and education levels, language barriers, and age (Kennan et al., 2011). And for those who do have access, time invested in engaging with virtual communities can potentially come at a cost to ‘real life’ proximate relationships as time, identity and emotional investment online arguably reduce prospects for developing and maintaining locally based interaction (Dekker and Engbersen, 2013; Guo et al., 2005; Lievrouw, 2001; Panagakos and Horst, 2006).

In her history of social media, Van Dijck (2013) argues that the use of social media has been transformed from ‘participatory cultures’ to what is now a ‘culture of connectivity’. This thesis highlights the increasing omnipresence of digital platforms through the use of numerous social media applications (which Van Dijck refers to as ‘connective media’) and mobile technologies. The associated increasing prevalence, affordability and literacy amongst

digital forms of communication has produced a shift so that many societies are now characterised by a culture of connectivity, where being connected to digital media is interwoven in the everyday fabric of sociality. Younger people – sometimes referred to as ‘digital natives’ – have come to accept online platforms as natural and given conditions for social interaction (Van Dijck, 2013). The result of this shift, she argues, is that it has fundamentally altered the nature of our social connections, creations and interactions – not least because it has enabled corporate platform developers to ‘commoditize’ the interactions and relationships of human connectedness (Van Dijck, 2013: 16). A second aspect of this culture of connectivity is that it derives continuous and increasing pressure, from our social networks and the digital technologies themselves, to gain and expand power/influence. The outcome of such developments is that there has been a resetting and unsettling of boundaries (cultural, social, political and personal) between private, corporate and public domains. These resettled and unsettled boundaries also have the potential to influence the ways in which individuals from migrant backgrounds practise friendship and family within both local and transnational contexts – potentially impacting, both positively and negatively, on their belonging.

Viewed in these terms, social media clearly have significant implications for the ways in which belonging is both experienced and expressed in everyday life. ‘Belonging’, as Yuval-Davis (2011: 10) notes, often relates to conceptions of ‘home’, not home as a fixed entity but rather ‘feeling at home’, what might be understood as an ongoing project of establishing familiarity, security and connectedness. Critically, she argues that the belonging becomes political when a person’s sense of belonging becomes threatened in some way. Social media, in this sense, can be read as both a generative and disruptive force in relation to belonging. The above-mentioned re/unsettled boundaries, alongside the very real costs of ‘opting out’ of social networks articulated through digital platforms, highlights that there is a growing need to consider the ways in which belonging can be inculcated and also threatened through engagement with social media. As Van Dijck (2013: 173) notes, ‘[f]or many of the plugged in, opting out is not an option: it would mean opting out of sociality altogether, since online activities are completely intertwined with offline social life’.

Access to digital spaces, then, raises critical questions about the potential for social participation and belonging. Moreover, the unevenness of access that people have to forms of digital interaction needs to be recognised as both materially and socially generated. The concept of the ‘digital divide’ within the culture of connectivity raises the problem of inequality of access in a society where digital communication technologies are being increasingly incorporated (though unevenly) into everyday lives. Access to digital interaction clearly cuts across a number of factors: age, socio-economic status, gender, geographic location, education levels, religion, ethnicity, digital literacy and language can all act as barriers to accessing digital communication (Alampay, 2006; Charmarkeh, 2013; Dekker and Engbersen, 2013). At the same time, examining the social/digital nexus also demands that we recognise the uneven ways in which sociality unfolds in digital spaces – the practices of inclusion and exclusion that pervade online practices, and ways in which questions of identity, culture, and community influence with whom, when and how we interact online.

In the New Zealand context, successive governments have explicitly linked digital inclusion and social cohesion since the early 2000s, and the 2010 Social Report from the Ministry of Social Development (MSD) included home access to the internet as one indicator of social connectedness (MSD, 2010). The *level* of access, however, is far from uniform. Discussions of the digital divide tend to address access as a binary in terms of access/no access (Selwyn, 2004). Those without internet access at home are still able to connect online, of course. Mobile technologies, smartphones, laptops and other handheld devices all offer mobile access – though mobile internet access remains expensive in New Zealand (Williams, 2014). Other opportunities to participate via social media are offered by access to free Wi-Fi, found sporadically in some shops, cafes and fast-food restaurants around the city, and – most consistently – in institutional settings such as public libraries and educational environments. People reliant on these sorts of connections are likely to have a more limited and spatially honed engagement with digital technologies than a person who may have access at home, at the work place and on a mobile phone in between these places (Selwyn, 2004). For those households without access to the internet and with school-aged children, the disadvantages can be steeply accumulative, as the speed with which technological innovations are introduced means that ‘late adopters are forever behind, while the early adopters surge ahead, apparently increasing their lead’ (Williams, 2014: 81).

The impacts of such a culture of connectivity highlight important considerations as to how social media and transnational networks might impact tertiary students from ethnic minority backgrounds and those with whom they interact. For these, often digitally connected, young people there is a need to examine how digital belongings interface with ethnicity, migration, transnational networks and social participation. We focus in particular in this paper on the role of digital media in social cohesion. Does the increased use of digital technologies enhance social cohesion by providing a greater sense of connection and belonging that encourages people to interact in meaningful ways across difference? Or does it threaten these opportunities by providing avenues for social interactions within communities or across transnational spaces at the *expense of* participation and engagement with diverse local settings and activities? Or does it perform a combination of both? While we cannot claim to provide a conclusive answer to these larger questions within this exploratory study, our paper does provide an important empirical and theoretical foundation to extend these debates by exploring how young, tertiary students from ethnic minority and migrant backgrounds are using social media and what that means for their sense of belonging and how they socially engage and (re)connect with their networks, both proximate and distant.

## **Study design**

Our paper draws on research exploring the use and implications of social media in the lives of tertiary students in Auckland. We recruited 24 tertiary students to participate in three discrete activities to ascertain how they were using social media in their daily lives. Participants were recruited via online postings in courses at the University of Auckland. Participant selection criteria were that they needed to use social media most days, were aged 18–25 and had New Zealand permanent residency or citizenship. We specified the latter as a requirement to avoid recruiting international students who would be less likely to have direct connections and

social relationships to a local New Zealand context (Collins, 2010). All participants had to identify from at least one of the following minority ethnic groupings: Chinese ( $n=9$ ), Indian ( $n=6$ ), Samoan ( $n=4$ ), Korean ( $n=3$ ), or Afghan ( $n=2$ ).

Once participants were recruited, they first completed an online questionnaire that ascertained their *perceived* use of social media and who their social networks comprised. They then completed a one-week social media diary, filled out online, which captured how they were *actually* using social media and who they were engaging with. For these diaries, participants reported daily on who they were interacting with (friends, family), which online platforms they were using (Facebook, Viber, Snapchat, etc) and for how long and for what purposes (lurking, direct communication, uploading content, etc). We did not ask participants in the social media diaries to note the ethnicity of those with whom they were interacting though we did follow up on this question in the semi-structured interviews. We then collated this information and conducted the semi-structured interviews within three weeks of their completing these online diaries to ascertain the deeper meanings and perspectives behind each participant's activities and those with whom they were interacting. The interviews were analysed through a process of initial and focussed coding and the focussed codes were used in NVivo to examine the main themes that emerged from the data (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013).

Whilst this study included participants from five different ethnic groupings, there was not enough of a distinction between them to establish different ways of using social media as defined through ethnicity, religion or gender. The main ethnic specific observations that arose were that Samoans spoke of financial constraints more than others. This group may also be a very different migrant population than the Chinese, Indian and Korean participants who, because of New Zealand's immigration policy settings, were more likely to have come from households with levels of education higher than the national average, and possibly more human and financial capital resources. There were also ethnic specific applications, where Koreans used Kakao Chat and Chinese participants used Weibo which are dominant platforms from their ancestral countries of origin. While they usefully draw attention to the different infrastructures of connecting across distance and through transnational networks, they did not, in themselves, reveal differences in the practice of family and friendship, perhaps because of the growing technical similarities between these different national-specific social media platforms. The participants presented below are young people navigating complex social worlds. Whilst we are limited in being able to make claims on the impact of digital belongings on forms of identification such as ethnicity, we are careful to also assert that an overemphasis on cultural/ethnic difference may not reflect the complexities of their own identities and belonging(s). The data from our study suggests this latter point but again we acknowledge the limitations of this exploratory study with a small and diverse group of tertiary students and signal future research that could better address such intersections.

### ***Participants' practices of friendship and family***

The material we discuss below relates to two key dimensions of how social media is influencing the ways in which participants practised family and friendship. The first relates to the different forms of ‘intimacies’ that particular digital platforms provide and how this impacts on the ways that participants practise family and friendship. The second theme returns to the culture of connectivity thesis to examine the ways that engaging with the digital environment for their social interactions can be viewed both as a choice and a constraint.

### *Digital intimacies and social networks*

This study found that digital technologies/platforms are shifting the ways in which migrant tertiary students practise family and friendship. In numerous instances, participants emphasised that the digital environment augmented their physical relationships with people and made possible relationships that were constrained by geographical distance.

I use social media like it’s my life [laughs]. I use it to text, I use it to call, I use it to video message. I use it to send photos and videos. I pretty much use it for everything. [...] If I didn’t have Viber I wouldn’t keep in contact with them [overseas family and friends].... I think our relationship is purely based on whether or not you’re online.  
(P3, Female, Samoan/Indian)

As this participant explains, digital technologies like Viber serve as an active infrastructure for maintaining family and friendship relationships across distances. Indeed, the claim that relationships are ‘purely based’ on online interactions reminds us of the potential power of digital technologies to generate sociality and arguably also belonging within transnational communities. Other participants went further, suggesting that the digital environment was preferable even when face-to-face interactions were possible:

When I’m talking to people in person, usually the topics are like less... deep I think. But when you’re talking on line it’s more whatever you want to talk about and you just talk about it. So I think the more meaningful conversations I’ve had, most of them have been on line. (P2, Male, Chinese)

Articulations of this kind, which were not universal amongst our participants, do point to the ways in which digital technologies have become normalised within everyday life, particularly for some young people. Participants such as this not only find utility in online interaction but indeed enhanced feelings of meaning and attachment and, strikingly, the capacity to be and act in ways that are more reflective of individual desires. For young people inhabiting societal positions as ethnic, cultural and linguistic minorities, these affective capacities of digital interaction are perhaps unsurprising given the ways in which the terms of one’s social interactions can be self-selected in ways that are not always possible beyond digital spaces.

It is important to acknowledge that, by contrast, other participants noted a preference for face-to-face interactions as well. Whilst there was not overall agreement about the role of social media for their most meaningful interactions, the different intimacies that specific platforms provided (audio, visual, a/synchronous communication, pictorial) influenced the ways in which participants engaged with family and friends living proximate and distant.

Thus, Skype, Viber, Snapchat and Facebook had different uses for participants' varied social networks. These particular intimacies also suggest that, for many participants, the use of social media is shifting the ways in which migrant tertiary students engage with family, particularly with members who live overseas:

I use it to communicate with family, even family that I haven't met yet, I talk to them, I've seen them, like Skype, but I haven't met them in person. I would find it extremely difficult if I didn't have social media to be living away from my parents. If we didn't have social media and all I had was the telephone and writing letters, I don't think I would live away from them, to be honest and so it's a huge, huge factor. (P12, Female, Indian)

In this account, then, Skype actually serves as the only basis of relationships with some family members but also clearly as a facilitative tool for more 'distanced' family networks and lives. This is particularly the case for synchronous audio-visual technologies like Skype and FaceTime that can generate feelings of proximity despite geographical distance. Indeed, as other participants suggested:

I think it makes it feel more personal and like they're in the room talking with you. (P4, Female, Malaysian Chinese)

I think video call makes it more intimate because you can see their faces and reactions and stuff. (P1, Male, Chinese)

Beyond these particularly vivid accounts, most participants reported using social media as an important (if not necessarily critical) element in the maintenance of transnational family relationships. Many connected more intensively with absent parents or siblings, while their contact with other relatives was less frequent, but often timely and highly meaningful.

I Skype with my relatives once every few months. It's very infrequent but the last time we Skyped I was going on about how [studying] law is so hard, and I probably won't get into [the Law programme] and then my Grandma was just, she just gave me so much encouragement. It just really helped. She was even like 'oh, I can even send over money to fund your studies'. I dunno it just really pushed me, I was like have to do this, if not for me then at least for them [grandparents]. I've only met them in real life twice. So having that 'face to face' is very good. (P23, Female, Chinese)

Such examples demonstrate the ways in which family can be enacted across distances and through less proximate forms of interaction and communication. Migration scholars have long explored these topics through work on transnational families and the emotional and filial ties involved in maintaining relationships through migration (Collins, 2009; Parreñas, 2005). What is critical, as this example demonstrates, is not just access to online technologies but also the active work of 'doing' family in ways that can generate similar affects in relationship networks that can substantiate roles as grandparents, parents, siblings or other relatives.

Participants' use of social media in terms of friendship networks tended to operate in quite different ways: less as a transnational technology and more as a means to augmenting local

lives. When it came to friends, for example, social media was often used as a way of vetting others where other online friends would do ‘detective’ work on a person to see if they could be included within their associated networks. In this sense, the ways in which people presented themselves on social media platforms provided a self-conscious means for others to understand them; digital technologies were viewed as a mechanism for interrogating the Goffmanesque ‘presentation of the self’ in more intricate detail.

I know it sounds really weird but in this day and age how you present yourself on social media says a lot about who you are [...] Facebook profile pictures, Instagram accounts. . . . It’s how you kind of, your profile picture, your description, activities you do, ‘likes’ you do. People can go through it and be like ‘oh, she seems pretty cool, maybe I’ll add her, maybe I’ll like her’. If you are about to meet someone, before you just genuinely meet them and have that interaction, they kind of stalk your page and kind of get to know a bit about you before you meet them so it’s changed a lot on how you socialise. (P12, Female, Indian)

Viewed from this perspective, digital technologies provide both an avenue for connecting with others but then also demand certain kinds of performances of self in order to establish and maintain relationship networks. Within such spaces a careful cultivation of self is demanded, where even the seemingly innocuous ‘likes’ one does on Facebook can be understood as performances that will be judged in varying terms by current or potential future contacts. A number of participants went further to describe a critical awareness that, in their online social networking, they could be engaging with profiles and statuses that were self-consciously created for others’ consumption.

And I think another thing about it, there’s always the talk about how it affects people’s self-confidence and stuff like that because everybody posts the best things about themselves or Photo-shopped images and I think there was a big thing about how people get really depressed when they see everybody is having a great life on Facebook especially, because people don’t really post sad things about themselves on Facebook and they’ll always be like ‘eating out’, ‘hanging out with friends’, ‘going on a road trip’ and it sort of shapes people’s perception of things as well. (P24, Female, Chinese)

Others, however, either directly noted or through an examination of the ways in which they practise family and friendship, showed the emergence and destabilisation of these networks. For example, one participant disclosed experiencing a greater freedom to express their sexuality since coming to Auckland – illegal in their home country. As such, the participant uses various social network sites to maintain overseas relationships with family and old school friends on the one hand, and is also able to pursue new friendships through dating apps and involvement with a gay and lesbian choral group, members of whom are now also Facebook friends. In this context, migration and distance have generated scope for more engaging ways of interacting with others: ‘I guess I’ve been more interactive since I came here... It’s easy to talk to people when you don’t have to think up lies all the time.’ In general, participants emphasised that the digital environment augmented their existing social

relationships, helped to maintain relationships with those geographically distant, and made new relationships possible.

What was also clear was that social media impacted upon the frequency of contact in the sense that it often made transnational overseas interactions more common and meaningful, and for some participants, local practices of friendship and family shifted to online environments. As one participant noted, using social media generated a sense of belonging that allowed them to integrate their less mobile life as a student with a wider array of daily activities and social possibilities:

I think [social media] plays a huge part in my sense of belonging because it allows me to connect to people that I want to connect to and because I'm a student I'm in one spot for the whole day. I'm either at my desk the whole day, whether that be at home or a desk at uni. So for me to be able to chat to my friends whilst I'm in that isolated location, it brings me a lot of happiness and that I'm not alone. (P6, Female, Korean)

What this excerpt demonstrates, as indeed do many of those discussed above, is the ways in which the digital has become a taken-for-granted part of daily life for many young people like those in our study. Digital technologies actively contribute to the scope and quality of everyday life for these participants, playing a part in individuals' 'sense of belonging', generating 'happiness' and feelings of interconnection. Yet, as these accounts also suggest, the digital is not an open platform of connectivity but rather one that works through particular relationships, enhancing feelings of connection with some social networks while also demanding an ongoing performance of self in digital encounters and sometimes the demarcation of reinforcement of social difference. As we address in the next section, these uneven contours of digital socialities also articulate through a nexus of choice and constraint that has been generated by this very normalisation of social media and other digital technologies.

### *Choice and constraint: The normalisation of platformed sociality*

The accounts presented above would seem to be demonstrative of the transition outlined by Van Dijck (2013) and Castells (2010) that many social groups are moving from networked communication to a 'platformed sociality'. As these scholars argue, this transition is marked by new ways of generating inclusion and exclusion and, in particular, where the opportunity to practise the social is dictated largely by engagement with specific digital platforms that are interwoven into people's social interactions. For participants in this research, this was most starkly evident in the relatively widespread recognition that many of their relationships relied on access and the ability to negotiate social media:

Yeah, if I didn't have social media I wouldn't know that many people. I would just be – my friends list would be more narrowed down to just a few people who I know. Once you use they introduce you to different people; you find out about them and sometimes then end up being your social media and so many times your friends are friends with someone through Facebook friends. (P13, Female, Afghan/Indian/Pakistani)

As this individual outlines, social media are not only important for keeping in contact with extant friends and family but also for growing relationships through these networks. To be excluded from these networks then is also to be excluded from their evolution over time and the kinds of sociality that is generated and enacted therein. Perhaps equally striking in this case is the way that the participant has internalised the social media logic of friendship – ‘my friends list’ – into wider articulations of relationship networks.

Many participants spoke of their social media use and that of their networks as an ‘addiction’. Another spoke of the use of multiple social media platforms as something like a ‘religion’. The outcome of completing the pre-screening questionnaire and the weekly diaries was that, whilst most participants demonstrated an awareness of what platforms they were using and who they were communicating with, the largest discrepancy between participants’ perceived and actual use of social media was the time they committed to it. For some participants, they noted that they were ‘available’ on social media 24 hours a day provided they had connectivity, most often defined as access to Wi-Fi.

On Facebook it’s really often [going online], every ten minutes. You just scroll down ‘like’, ‘like’. Kakao Talk, I actually go on to look who’s sent me messages and I reply all at once so I don’t have to keep checking but I check anyways ... like I just look at it and then I reply at once, everyone’s thing at once. Things like Snapchat, when it comes I check it straight away. Instagram, I check it every ten minutes [laughs] and go down and like things. (P8, Female, Korean)

For others, participation in a research project exploring their social media use also provided opportunities for reflection on the time they were investing in social media and the potentially negative implications of this for themselves or their contacts. They were surprised, in completing the diary, by the amount of time that they are actively participating on these sites and the practices of ‘lurking’, continuously posting content and responding to others that they became aware of through the research process.

I’m really glad that I participated in this survey because it was a real eye-opener. . . . Yeah, to how much time I waste, how much time I actually use online. . . . There comes a point where you just need to say ‘look, what is actually important, what do I need to focus on, what are my priorities?’ And that’s why I stopped, why I’m not on social media. After doing the online diary. Even when I was doing the online diary I was just like okay, I’m not going to be on Instagram today but I’ll use it tomorrow. Kind of alternating ‘cos I didn’t want to be – even in lectures it’s so bad, I would be in lectures and I wouldn’t get anything my lecturer was saying because I’m just constantly flicking through Instagram, liking pictures or texting my friends on Viber. (P3, Female, Samoan/Indian)

In their responses to a question about their online availability, many participants indicated that they exercised a conscious choice over whether to engage or not, while for some there was rarely a time when they consciously made themselves *unavailable*.

I'm usually connected to the Internet 24/7 so it's quite easy [for people to contact me]and sometimes I panic if I'm not connected to the Internet 'cos they can't tell if I'm online or not through WeChat. (P24, Female, Chinese)

In addition to demonstrating the pervasiveness of these technologies in young people's lives, these excerpts also point to the ways in which participants, regardless of whether they embrace or seek to manage this pervasiveness, feel social pressure to conform. The excerpts above indicate the ways in which social networks can make individuals engage more actively than they feel inclined or able to do. Many participants noted that opting out of social media was difficult or potentially at the expense of being able to *be* 'social'. One participant, who decided to quit social media for three weeks following the completion of the weekly diary, noted the ways in which she was pressured to re-engage and was even ostracised. This pressure began within the first few hours after she disengaged from these platforms. Digital technology, it would seem, has become so intertwined as a platform for sociality that participation, along with the associated rules of playing the game, replicating the self and contributing content, have become a requirement for participation and a sense of belonging within certain social networks.

Overall, the participant quotes highlight that the ways in which participants engage with their friendship and family networks are shifting, sometimes in profound ways, through digitally mediated interaction. As these different social media platforms negotiate distance in ways that provide a number of different 'intimacies', it follows that these forms of social engagement raise new questions about social cohesion and connection to local places.

### **Discussion and conclusion: Implications of digital belongings for social cohesion and place**

Returning to Alinejad's (2013) notion of people who are 'connected/mobile and emplaced/embodyed', it is evident from this study that digital interaction enhances/reinforces both sides of this equation. As described above, most participants used social media connectivity to maintain and augment relationships across geographically dispersed family networks. At the same time, local relationships were created or intensified through using various social media platforms to supplement (and times displace) face-to-face contact. The ways in which social media inform the participants' daily interactions generally align with Van Dijck's (2013) thesis, suggesting a transition from participatory culture to a culture of connectivity, whereby the use of social media has been normalised as an essential means to engage socially. Because these digital platforms have become interwoven into the ways that many participants engage in the practice of the social, only a few participants critically examined their use of social media and what that might mean for their face-to-face interactions. For some, the use of social media reinforced existing networks but relationships may have migrated from face-to-face to an online interaction. As migrants, or the children of migrants, the participants in this study all had experiences of maintaining meaningful transnational relationships, and the range of connective media platforms enabled forms of connectedness that would otherwise be impossible. Engagement with social media has also

brought some of the participants into new networks of belonging, with contacts that they might never engage in face-to-face interchanges.

Returning to Yuval-Davis' (2011) focus on an intersectional analysis to conceptualise belonging, this study shows the ways that understanding identity (beyond traditional markers of ethnicity, nationality, gender) and the wider social context come into play. In particular, digital interactions influence a sense of belonging that create a 'situatedness' that is more meaningful than what is often assumed in virtual social spaces. To a great extent, the university has provided an environment in which the landscape of access has been nearly leveled. Students are generally able to access free Wi-Fi within the university precinct, maintaining near constant contact with their various connective media platforms, and thus extending their online availability. For some participants the expense of purchasing data capacity was an issue that had the potential to limit their online access, and thus free Wi-Fi ensured their inclusion. In this sense, participants were able to overcome a number of considerations of the digital divide mentioned in the literature review, but the fact also highlights that a wider societal examination that extends beyond the university is also needed to address broader questions about social cohesion, participation and digital belongings.

What is also significant in this study is the close articulation between social and technological processes in the digital lives of these young people. Far from the kind of technologically determined social networking that emerges in some literature on social media, the findings discussed here demonstrate the ways in which young people are active 'constituents' of digital technologies and its effects in their lives. Indeed, the points made by participants about the imperative to be online constantly, the difficult work involved in managing disconnection, and the performance of self in social media demonstrate the articulation of social and technological forces. Participants may well prefer face-to-face contacts, and many in this research did make that claim, but they are also affected by the possibilities for, and obligations to participate in, online socialities. For many the choice and constraints that are generated in social media provide a level of digital and social belonging that may not otherwise be available; but it is also clear from this research that this 'belonging' is characterized by the reality and the potential for both inclusion and exclusion, and is also generative of negative affects in some participants' lives. Whilst we are limited in being able to make claims on the impact of digital belonging on other forms of identification such as ethnicity, we are also careful to assert that an overemphasis on cultural/ethnic difference may not necessarily reflect the complexities of belonging(s) in digital spaces. These findings point to the importance of further research on the use of social media, the disciplining of sociality and individual identities, and the implications for wellbeing at individual and societal levels.

While this research has clearly highlighted important findings that advance our understandings of the digital/social nexus and the ways in which it articulates with belonging, we conclude here with some reflections on the need for further research in this area. Whilst this paper suggests that social media is having a significant impact on the ways in which people 'are social', it is necessary to acknowledge that this exploratory study examines only a very specific group and that a broader analysis across particular communities is needed before more definitive claims about the impacts on social cohesion can be made within such a

digital/social nexus. For instance, the international literature clearly shows that different generations of migrants, as well as when and how they migrated, matters in terms of their experiences of belonging, integration and engagement with a host society (Esser, 2004; Faist, 2000). Also, all of the participants have had the experience of pursuing their university studies in a relatively diverse urban environment. As such, it is impossible to distinguish the effects of platformed sociality from the other forms of social interaction, intellectual and creative developments and intercultural experiences afforded by their immediate context. That the digital has shaped the sociality of these participants is unquestionable; however, comparisons would need to be made across a much broader population in order to claim or measure the specific effects of the digital within the social. Included with this analysis is the need for further understandings about the intersections of digital belonging alongside multiple forms of identity that position some groups with more power and influence than others – of which ethnic and hegemonic majorities play an important part.

Equally, it is necessary to acknowledge that, despite significant developments in digital technologies, new technology does not necessarily replace old communication techniques (Harney, 2013; Wilding, 2006). Gifford and Wilding (2013) refer to users engaging in multiple types of digital technologies in order to communicate as ‘layering connections’ where digital interaction is only one of a multitude of innovative digital/non-digital ways that people stay connected, proximate and distant. In this sense, the role of digital technologies needs to be examined alongside other ways of communicating which also include face-to-face interactions, phone calls and other non-digital means.

As this study has demonstrated, the ways in which young tertiary students from ethnic minorities use social media highlight new means of envisaging belonging and associated practices of friendship and family. Whilst these social interactions suggest implications for social cohesion and participation within local geographic places, this analysis also shows that participants are digitally discerning, which includes the decision to strategically engage or not with specific online platforms. These decisions, however, are not necessarily straightforward, intentional or at times, voluntary. The social/digital nexus illustrates that the culture of connectivity shapes ‘our’ lives and those around ‘us’ highlighting that the politics of belonging is dynamic and contested space. This reality signals both opportunities and cautions for social cohesion in societies that are characterised by rich diversity. The further theorisation and application of digital belongings promises to provide a stronger lens to evaluate such rapidly changing spaces.

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