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Virtual potentialities: Teenagers' stories about social media

by

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Declaration

I declare that the contents of this thesis are my own work, and that no material within has been submitted for a degree at any other university.

Some of the findings and analysis within this thesis were incorporated into the following conference presentation:

Handyside, Sarah (2019) *'It feels like when my phone dies, I die with it': Smartphones, social media and teen embodiment*. Presented at: 'Gender and Education 2019', University of Portsmouth.

Abstract

Social media – and particularly social media as accessed through smartphones – transform certain aspects of spatio-temporality. Features such as continually editable ‘stories’, content which is initially ephemeral but *may* be screenshotted and saved, and dynamic, shifting, global networks of users all contribute to an arena in which multiple *possibilities* for what may happen are always present.

This thesis conceptualises this spatio-temporality as ‘virtual potentialities’, and uses that as a conceptual framework to explore how forty-seven UK teenagers navigate gender in social media, focusing specifically on Snapchat and Instagram.

It draws on data collected from interviews and observations across four UK youth clubs, mapping the stories teenagers told about their social media practices, and how these are gendered, and gendering. These stories are analysed thematically across chapters focusing on: bodies and self-representation; intimacy and relationships; and risk management practices.

In doing so, this thesis argues that social media must be understood as environments of ambivalence and contradiction, where teen users’ agency and vulnerability exist in tension with each other. Whilst factors such as the power and motivations of social media companies, or the nefarious intentions of social media strangers, may act as minor disciplining forces on teen social media users, by far the most powerful such forces are *other* social media users.

Beginnings

We are the generation that's like – we started out with social media.

Mo, 18

Add to your story.

Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, etc

Stories started with ‘once upon a time’ when I was a child. Now, they begin with scrolls through camera rolls, the selection of the perfect picture, the crafting of a pithy caption. Social media applications evolve quickly, like so many facets of digital culture, but at the time of writing in late 2020, the explicit invitation to create and curate a *story* about oneself has remained a consistent feature of Snapchat since 2013, Instagram since 2016, Facebook since 2017. A few months ago, Twitter introduced a feature called ‘fleets’ which works in much the same way.

These stories are a succinct illustration of some of the transformative elements of social media compared with offline environments. Social media enable the creation of digital records of users’ lives – but, crucially, records which are unstable, continually editable, subject to being revisited, amended or deleted altogether. Social media also generate the ability to *share* those records – to tell those stories to far larger, faster-moving and more complex audiences than most individuals have access to in the offline world. Indeed, many members of those audiences may never have physically met. In other words, social media transform (some) experiences of spatiality and temporality. They connect individuals across the globe; they make the past viscerally present and yet ephemeral.

Mo is one of nearly 50 teenagers whom I interviewed over the course of this project, and his words offer a compelling articulation of one of the core differences I felt between myself and those interviewees. Facebook, I explained to them, was only launched in the UK during my final year of high school. I did not own a smartphone until my twenties. Today’s UK teenagers have, by contrast, ‘started out’ with social media and, more than that, social media as primarily accessed via mobile devices.

Social media are places where teenagers, in the UK and elsewhere, are continually negotiating relationships and interacting with others; they are platforms through which teenagers continually photograph and manipulate their bodies. Social media enable teenagers to experiment with embodied self-representation and embodied emotion. Social media are places where teenagers continually make and remake themselves; they are environments where teenagers continually tell and retell stories. And all of that vast storytelling potential – exciting and frightening, liberating and restrictive, joyful and upsetting – is now carried around in most UK teenagers’ pockets, on devices which fit in their hands.

There is much to find exciting in this potential, particularly from a feminist perspective. Storytelling processes are processes of creativity, identity construction and negotiation; they foreground individual experience, subjectivity and therefore ‘*situated knowledges*’ (Haraway 1988: 581, emphasis in original). By generating new platforms for storytelling and new audiences for those stories, the internet in general and social media in particular might be seen to offer new ways of illuminating inequalities, new routes to liberation from patriarchal domination. And yet there is also much to find troubling in this potential – again, particularly from a feminist perspective. Vast audiences and convenient content creation are exploited by those who wish to insult and attack; online violence and abuse against women and girls are rife (Amnesty International 20 November 2017; 2018; Bartlett et al May 2014; Brudvig et al 2020; Richard and Couchot-Schiex 2020). The so-called ‘digital divide’ – that is, differing levels of internet access and digital literacy between different groups – can mean that internet environments are prone to amplifying existing offline inequalities, including those which are gender-based (Hernandez and Robert 2018). And whilst certain elements of social media undoubtedly do offer celebrations of gender non-conformity, others perpetuate sexist stereotypes with great ferocity, through everything from memes and video games, to influencer culture, beauty standards and dating (see, for example, Drakett et al 2018; Felmlee et al 2020; Phillips 2020; Thompson 2018). For those with strong stomachs, simply typing ‘feminist’ into the Twitter search bar should reveal a statement of violence within a few lines.

Exploring, then, the new and continuing ways in which social media are both gendered, and gendering, can help to illuminate these dynamics of oppression and

liberation, the complex shapes of sexism online and, potentially, new paths to gender justice. Exploring how these gendered and gendering processes are experienced, performed, told and retold specifically by the generation which has ‘started out with social media’ can help to pinpoint the ways in which those processes are embedded in everyday lives – lives which, for UK teenagers, increasingly play out online. And undertaking that exploration through *stories about social media* can help to foreground the processes of creativity and curatorship, individual subjectivity and interpretation which are integral to social media themselves, but which also bleed into the offline world.

Research questions

These, then, are the motivations and the foundations of my thesis, which is structured around one overarching research question: ***What gendered, and gendering, stories do teenagers tell about social media?*** In the chapters that follow, I relate and analyse stories about social media use collected through observation and semi-structured interviews with forty-seven UK teenagers, aged from thirteen to nineteen. I undertook this research in four UK youth clubs during the spring and summer of 2018. By foregrounding those teenagers’ own interpretations of social media activities and experiences, I hope to foreground their voices, their subjectivities and their storytelling. I hope, also, to foreground the processes of creativity and curatorship which characterise not just social media, but also interpretations *of* social media. Throughout, I seek to highlight above all the gendered and gendering dynamics of those stories – the ways in which these teenagers produced, reproduced and sometimes resisted gendered hierarchies.

Three sub-questions help me to tease out different elements of those hierarchies, and to better articulate the ways in which social media themselves are both transformative and reflective of the offline world. The first of these asks ***How do teenagers experience, and narrate, the time and space of life on social media?*** This question helps me to articulate how social media are experienced both as tools or technologies which teenagers *utilise*, but also as environments which they *carry* and *enter*, as bodies of content which they *create, share, view* and *interrogate*, and

as networks in which they *participate*. I tackle this question in part by developing a conceptual framework for thinking about time and space in social media, articulating their oscillations between permanence and ephemerality, private and public, one-to-one connectivity and worldwide networks, which I term ‘virtual potentialities’. I also tackle this question by weaving a spatio-temporal focus throughout my analytical chapters, highlighting the ways in which the teenagers’ stories are told and retold through time and space.

My second sub-question asks ***How do teenagers narrate their embodied relationships with social media, and how are those stories gendered?*** I understand gender as a process of power dynamics and hierarchy which flows from embodiment. As such, unpacking and understanding the *embodied* relationships teenagers have with social media is crucial to understanding the ways in which social media are gendered, and gendering. Chapter 4, the first of my analytical chapters, focuses primarily on this topic.

My final sub-question asks ***How are teenagers’ stories about interpersonal and intimate relationships within social media gendered, and gendering?*** The very name tells us that social media are inherently social – they are places for interaction and engagement, forming connections and building relationships. Through an analytical focus on these relationships and how teenagers narrate them, I consider how gender is produced, reproduced and resisted through group dynamics. This sub-question is the main focus of Chapter 5.

Ultimately, I contend that the (partially) transformed spatio-temporality of social media means that teenagers’ stories about social media are stories of continuous negotiation between different possibilities. Teenage users of social media are continuously aware of how their content *might* be misinterpreted or shared beyond its original audience, continuously aware of how social media *might* connect them to someone new. These possibilities are sharply gendered, and gendering, making different demands and placing different pressures on teen girls and boys. If in so many contexts social media seem to amplify, rather than lessen, sexism and gender injustice, there is an urgent need to better comprehend the ways in which today’s teenagers use and understand these transformative digital

applications. For if, as Mo put it, they ‘started out’ with social media, they could also be the generation to reshape social media for the better.

Structure and chapter outline

Chapter 1 of my thesis: ***What does it mean to ‘become a wo/man’? What does it mean to be at home online? Teenagers, gender, social media: mapping the terrain*** is my literature review. Here, I unpack what I mean when I discuss ‘gender’ and ‘teenagers’, and sketch some of scholarly landscape of which my thesis is part. I trace some of the literature on young people and ‘new media’, exploring how topics related to gender and sexuality – and, often, associated moral panics – have been examined through young people’s interactions with such media. I consider research on selfies and so-called ‘sexting’, and locate this within scholarly work on sexualisation and the postfeminist media landscape. This literature review grounds social media as places where teenagers *live*, as places where their everyday lives take place – and also as places of creative storytelling.

Chapter 2, ***Sharing, creating, networking, imagining: Building a conceptual framework of ‘virtual potentialities’*** turns to the spatio-temporality of social media. Here, I draw on a range of theorists to develop my conceptual framework of ‘virtual potentialities’. I argue that social media spatiality may be understood through ‘networked publics’ and negotiations between private and public, and that social media temporality may be understood through (persistent) ephemerality and virtual multiplicities. I consider the significant role of smartphones as the devices that teenagers most frequently use for accessing social media, generating highly embodied sensations of mobility and omnipresence. I combine these insights by thinking about social media users as continually negotiating between different future spatio-temporal possibilities – networks that might get bigger or smaller, stories which might prove ‘sticky’ or forgettable.

Chapter 3, ***Finding storytellers, collecting stories: My methodological approach*** discusses how and why I undertook my fieldwork as I did. I explain how and why I sought to encourage teenagers to tell me *stories* about social media – specifically, Snapchat and Instagram – and set out my process of combining

ethnographic observations with semi-structured interviews. I describe how I analysed my data, drawing out a series of themes from which I was able to tell my own research story. I also discuss the limitations and problems with my methodological approach, the errors I made and the gaps that, with hindsight, I wish I had addressed better.

Chapter 4, ***Bodies becoming, bodies (un)bounded: Stories about embodiment in teen social media*** opens the empirical section of my thesis, with an exploration of *embodiment* in teen social media. I unpack further the relationship between smartphones and social media, and the embodied sensations of pressure and anxiety that those devices can generate. I examine the unwritten rules of self-representation within social media, and the gendered ways in which teenagers are expected to – and expect each other – to look ‘decent’. I discuss the ways in which teenagers produce, reproduce and resist these rules, by manipulating and curating their social media self-representation. And I explore how this self-representation can misalign with how those teenagers appear in the physical world, and the complex dynamics of authenticity and honesty that this generates.

Chapter 5, ***Uncertain aspirations, unexpected exposure: Stories about intimacy in teen social media*** focuses on *intimacy* in teen social media. I investigate how teen social media relationships are formed, navigated and discussed by others. I consider intimacy as related to aspiration – a desire for connection – and how social media offer new mechanisms for these connections to be formed. I relate and analyse stories the teenagers told about making contact with others through social media – or having others make contact with them – and the ways in which these can be enjoyable, exciting and challenging. I also unpack the gendered judgements applied to these activities, where teen girls in particular must navigate a delicate – and familiar – path between attractiveness and availability, between *enough* exposure and *over*-exposure.

Chapter 6, ***Peer policing, sinister surveillance: Stories about risk in teen social media*** explores this concept of exposure in more detail. I examine *risk* within social media and the strategies teenagers employ to manage those risks. Such risks include the idea of using social media to excess, of social media companies utilising teenagers’ data – but, above all, of too much or the wrong kind of exposure through

space and time. I analyse the stories teenagers told about gossip, bullying and accidental or deliberate sharing of social media content beyond its originally intended audience, and how they navigated these possibilities. I underline, however, that these risks are also bound up in precisely what makes social media so appealing – the possibility of reaching the right people, with the right content, in the right way.

The conclusion of my thesis draws together these ideas and traces lines of continuity as well as rupture with teenage negotiations of gender in the offline world. There is much that is transformative about social media – but there is also much that is familiar. The framework of virtual potentialities, I contend, offers ways of thinking about social media which can offer endurance even as the functionality and sophistication of social media evolve. I use social media very differently now to how I did as a teenager; I very rarely post new content, or interact with my social media ‘friends’; I ignore the invitations to add to ‘My Story’. Yet I continually go back, revisit and reread the story I began all those years ago, reflecting on how much has changed – and how much has stayed the same.

Chapter 1: What does it mean to ‘become a wo/man’? What does it mean to be at home online? Gender, teenagers, social media: mapping the terrain

I initially expected to find it relatively straightforward to undertake a survey of literature on gender, gender as it relates to teenagers, and the broader landscape of social media scholarship. After all, my interests in the academic fields of which my thesis is part – gender, sex and sexuality, feminist theory and politics, ‘new media’ – have evolved gradually from my undergraduate degree through interdisciplinary postgraduate studies in Gender, Society and Representation and most recently this PhD.

Instead, I found myself confounded multiple times in my attempt to begin this chapter. Gender studies is clearly an enormous and interdisciplinary field, and even focusing specifically on children, teenagers or youth culture seemed to open up vast bodies of research even as it closed off others. I agonised over the realisation that I would be leaving out far more than I included; panicked about whether I was sufficiently demonstrating my engagement with my field; worried about a grim-faced professor in my viva demanding to know why I hadn’t mentioned study X or scholar Y.

Returning to the feminism which has inspired me throughout, I remembered Linda Alcoff’s and Elizabeth Potter’s explanation of feminist epistemologies as concerned with ‘the politics of knowledge and the impact of the social status as well as the sexed body of the knower upon the production of knowledge’ (Alcoff and Potter 1993: 2). I remembered Donna Haraway’s ‘*situated knowledges*’ (Haraway 1988: 581). And I remembered that particularly famous twentieth-century feminist quote: ‘One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman’ (Beauvoir 1997 [1949]: 295). Alcoff and Potter’s words seemed a neat articulation of the anxiety I felt: what was bewildering me if not the politics of knowledge; the understanding that I was undertaking knowledge production; the desire to position myself as somehow ‘worthy’ of doing so, or doing so in the ‘right’ way; imposter syndrome influenced heavily by the socialisation experienced by my (female) body? Haraway’s words

reminded me of the importance of owning the specifics of my own (and later, my research participants') situations and their relations to the knowledge I produce. And Beauvoir's words brought me back to that situation; to a narrative I could tell about how I arrived here, the work which has inspired and challenged me, and where I hope my own might fit.

I realised that the task of this chapter was less to demonstrate the length of my reading list, and more to tell that story – which, like all stories, is not linear but continually loops back, builds on itself and is part of something bigger. As such, the goal of my literature review is not to provide a comprehensive overview of the sociology of gender, or research in youth studies. Rather, it is to explain how I have come to think of gender – and in particular gender as it relates to teenagers and social media – as I have. In doing so, I hope to acknowledge some of the significant insights and individuals within the field – whilst also acknowledging that far more have *not* been referenced. A common metaphor for a story is a collection of narrative threads, and this suggests different metaphors again: weaving together; tapestries. Here, then, I hope to weave together some of the literature on which my position, and hence my thesis, is built.

I begin with a focus on my research participants, underlining how the concept of 'teenager' is both historically contingent and temporally fascinating, speaking to a tension between childhood and adulthood, a sense of *potential*. Next, I argue that this idea of potential is also compelling as a means of thinking about gender – particularly gender as experienced and negotiated by teenagers.

I then move into a discussion of how researchers have sought to differentiate young people and their experiences of digital culture from the new media which came before, drawing on the metaphor of digital natives and immigrants to consider social media as *spatial and temporal imaginaries*. I situate such research within a wider body of work on young people and new media, tracing some of its recent history and discussing how much of the current research is concerned with issues of gender, sexuality and sexualisation. The next section focuses specifically on this literature, discussing research on so-called 'selfies' and 'sexting'. I explore, too, the racialised and classed dimensions of the concept of sexualisation, and how researchers have tackled these, drawing both empirical and methodological

conclusions which I need to consider for my own study. Finally, I consider how the sexualisation of culture has been located by some researchers within a wider postfeminist and neoliberal landscape.

The invention of teenagers

What is a teenager? It is a deceptively simple question. The term might initially seem straightforward, referring simply to individuals aged between thirteen and nineteen – and certainly this applies to my own work. But it is also a term which benefits from further exploration, because its historic specificity tells us much about the dynamics of social and cultural production which, just as with gender, shape and reshape the idea of ‘teenager’ itself. The word ‘teen-ager’ seems first to have come into use in the English language in the first decades of the twentieth century, particularly in connection with churches (*OED Online* June 2018). In the 1950s and 1960s its usage exploded, reflecting a broader proliferation of Western and especially Anglophone youth culture made sharply visible through pop music, fashion and film – as well as changing social mores. As a result, a specific body of sociological research began to emerge focusing on said youth culture.

At a similar time, in 1962, Philippe Ariès published what has been described as the most famous work in the historiography of childhood, one which, in the words of Hugh Cunningham, successfully convinced many readers that ‘childhood had a *history*: that, over time and in different cultures, both ideas about childhood and the experience of being a child had changed’ (Cunningham 1998: 1197, emphasis in original). Ariès’ *Centuries of Childhood* asserts that the modern Western understanding of childhood, in which a child is a distinctly different thing from an adult – a person, crucially, in a process of transition or becoming – only emerged around the seventeenth century. Prior to this, past infanthood, around the age of about seven, children were viewed as little more than miniature adults. The emergence of the child figure was tied, Ariès argues, to broader societal changes such as declining infant mortality and educational transformation. In this sense, then, the Western child is an invention of modernity.

Ariès has been criticised robustly by scholars who understand him to be arguing that pre-seventeenth century families held no concept of a child as different from an adult. As Cunningham underlines, these criticisms owe much to a mistranslation of Ariès' use of the French 'sentiment'. Translated to the English 'idea', Ariès means that medieval and earlier families lacked the intellectual or conceptual capacity to interpret childhood as they do today. If 'sentiment' is more accurately translated to encapsulate two meanings at once – a kind of *feeling* as well as an idea – then Ariès' model of childhood becomes understood as an emotional or affective concept as well as a theoretical or intellectual one (Cunningham 1998: 27). And this, in turn, is something that can be traced through a great deal of the research on youth culture. Whilst 'teenager' and 'child' are clearly not exact synonyms, the concept of a temporally specific, youthful figure, different from an adult, to which particular social and cultural ideals are attached, runs through both. Teenagers are not merely people within a particular age bracket, but people with whom certain emotions and ideals are associated.

Many of those emotions and ideals are to do with gender and sexuality, for which Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1998 [1978]) offers an early – and hugely influential – analytical framework. He argues, rather like Ariès, for a historically contingent understanding of what he tends to term 'children's sex', arguing that a 'pedagogisation of children's sex' has been one of the great mechanics of knowledge and power in the Western world since the beginning of the eighteenth century. This pedagogisation is described as:

[A] double assertion that practically all children indulge or are prone to indulge in sexual activity; and that, being unwarranted, at the same time 'natural' and 'contrary to nature', this sexual activity posed physical and moral, individual and collective dangers; children were defined as 'preliminary' sexual beings, on this side of sex, yet within it, astride a dangerous dividing line. Parents, families, educators, doctors, and eventually psychologists would have to take charge, in a continuous way, of this previous and perilous, dangerous

and endangered sexual potential (Foucault 1998 [1978]: 104).

The term 'potential' is particularly striking here, emphasising the positioning of 'children' as *not-yet* sexual, *possibly* sexual – and therefore, presumably imagined to be approaching a transition from one state of being to the other. Yet, as Foucault emphasises, 'children' are simultaneously understood as *absolutely* sexual, 'within it, astride a dangerous dividing line'. Children's sexualities are therefore understood not only as contradictory, but also as rife with dangers and risks, and subsequently subjected to myriad disciplining and regulating practices. The term 'individual and collective dangers' is a striking allusion to the public concerns and moral panics which have long been associated with youth sexuality – and which continue to resonate in relation to digital culture and social media, as I will show presently. Foucault, then, offers ways of thinking about teenage sexuality in terms of both ever-shifting *potential* and ever-anxious *discipline and regulation*, both of which are particularly pertinent for a study of teenagers and social media.

To speak of sexuality is to speak of gender, and it is worth taking a moment here to underline why, and how. Judith Butler draws heavily on Foucault – as well as Adrienne Rich's (1980) model of compulsory heterosexuality and Monique Wittig's (1992) concept of the heterosexual contract – to develop the 'heterosexual matrix' (Butler 1990). Butler argues that gender and heterosexuality are utterly, inextricably entangled and mutually constitutive, each reliant upon the other. Because normative sexuality *is* heterosexuality, and heterosexuality requires a stable 'man' and 'woman' to enact it, so gender mutually constitutes a 'compulsory and naturalised heterosexuality' (Butler 1990: 22). Butler later reformulated the matrix as 'heterosexual hegemony', in a phrase which I also find more useful (Butler 1993). Considered through this theoretical lens, the disciplining and regulation of young people's sexualities, then, is also a disciplining and regulation of their genders. But what exactly do I mean when I discuss gender?

Unpacking gender: biology, bodies, society, stories

Perhaps the core proposition of gender studies is that gender itself – the attributes, qualities or behaviours which are variously coded and valued in relation to categories of femininity or masculinity – is a social and cultural phenomenon, as opposed to an essential destiny arising irrevocably out of sex. Gender, in other words, is not a matter of internal and essentialising identity, but external *processes* of power and hierarchy.

Victoria Robinson and Diane Richardson's *Introducing Gender and Women's Studies*, first published in 1993 and on its fourth edition at the time of writing (with the fifth soon to follow) offers a compelling narrative of the development of the field in Western, and particularly Anglophone, contexts. In her chapter 'Conceptualising Gender', Richardson traces the revolutionary feminist interventions of the 1960s and 1970s, which distinguished biological sex from cultural or societal gender, through more recent scholarship which has sought to explore ways in which sex, too, might be partially socially constructed. Richardson's contemporary description of Ann Oakley, in 1972, as taking 'sex for granted in assuming that we all "have a sex", that sex is not something we acquire, it is a constant, part of being human' (Richardson 2015: 6) is a particularly illustrative statement in mapping that journey. Richardson implicitly suggests that, nearly fifty years on from Oakley's writing, it is now understood that we do not all "have a sex" – indeed, that debate has moved to a more sophisticated place where we understand that sex might be acquired over time, might not be constant, might even not be part of being human at all.

Implicit suggestions should not be read as explicit statements, but they do have a substantial effect on narrative and meaning-making. On rereading this passage of Richardson's, I was struck by the realisation that I found more resonance with Oakley than Richardson seemed to. Clearly, medical and biological understandings of sex have changed since Oakley's writing (and continue to change). As Richardson goes on to trace, biological sex is now understood to encompass more complexity and, on occasion, ambivalence than the male/female binary presupposes. Nevertheless, I knew that for me it was vital to retain a focus on the corporeality and tangibility of bodies, as the sites where those processes of gender are navigated and resisted. I knew that I wanted to focus, further, on how those bodies physically

change over time – indeed, this seemed particularly important in light of the senses of transition and potential so central to an understanding of ‘teenager’. I knew that I conceptualised gender not as some essential, internalised part of identity, but as something external, constituted by and on those pre-existing (though diverse and changing) bodies. I find Elizabeth Grosz’s (1994) metaphor of the Möbius Strip particularly compelling here – a twisted surface which is simultaneously inside and outside – as a means of refiguring mind/body relations. I am interested in gender as ongoing processes which happen to bodies, but also *because* of bodies.

Let me return, then, to that statement of Beauvoir’s which did so much to influence this differentiation throughout the twentieth century – because I believe she has something extremely useful to offer a study of teenagers and gender in particular. ‘One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman’ opens Book Two of *The Second Sex*, called ‘Woman’s Life Today’. It also opens Part IV of the overall volume, called ‘The Formative Years’. And it opens a specific chapter called ‘Childhood’. It is, therefore, associated from the outset with childhood, adolescence, and ‘growing up’ – it is associated with the teenage years on which my research focuses.

Fierce debate has ensued around Beauvoir’s understandings of – and readings of – biology (Caze 1994), as well as the degree to which she forms – or does not form – a sex/gender distinction (Gatens 2003; Moi 1985; Sandford 1999; Walsh 2004). Gatens in particular underlines that throughout *The Second Sex*, ‘a certain relation between the female body and womanhood will always remain’ (Gatens 2003: 27), and it is on this that I wish to focus. A visceral physicality is apparent through the chapters of *The Second Sex* which follow Beauvoir’s famous statement, and it is a physicality absolutely focused on growing, changing female bodies as they move through adolescent and young adult years. Whilst there is much to trouble a twenty-first century reader in, say, Beauvoir’s readings of pain and even violation in girls’ first sexual experiences, there remains, I think, a hugely powerful thread focusing on the physical changes girls experience through prepubescence, adolescence and beyond. Descriptions like ‘[her] eroticism changes and invades all her flesh’ (Beauvoir 1997 [1949]: 345) and ‘at this time of unrest [...] the child’s body is becoming the body of a woman and is being made flesh’ (Beauvoir 1997 [1949]: 331), underline ferocious senses of both materiality and transition – which I feel

satisfyingly mirror those senses of transition, of both-and-neither propounded by Ariès and Foucault.

‘Becoming’ a woman, here, is as much about powerful physical, fleshly transformations as it is on cultural norms, pressures and expectations (which Beauvoir, of course, also unpacks in great detail). Perhaps most striking of all, for me, is Beauvoir’s claim that, in the prepubescent girl, ‘the future not only approaches: it takes residence in her body’ (Beauvoir 1997 [1949]: 351). This beautiful phrase not only underlines how the girl is temporally between the states of childhood and adulthood – the conception of young people which I have already described – but also locates at least some of that approaching adulthood physically, within the girl’s body. The multiple and dynamic changes undergone by the girl’s body are figured as not just physical flux and transition, and not just as changing cultural or societal ideals, but also as a cognitive or emotional awareness of something – perhaps many things – impending – that is, of *potential*. Embodied potential, then, is a hugely useful concept for thinking about teenagers – not just girls – in ways which foreground both their changing physicality and the futures which seem to rush to meet them.

Gender, then, is a complex and shifting social and cultural phenomenon, a set of power dynamics which are shaped and reshaped as we move through life. It does not exist in a vacuum; it intersects and interacts with bodies, and bodies as they grow and age – and particularly the remarkably visceral, visible growing and aging which take place during the teenage years. Much of the literature on young people and gender underlines the strange contradictions, pushes and pulls in teenage gender and sexuality, where teenagers are seen as simultaneously *becoming* sexual and yet also as *always* sexual. I wish to examine in particular these pushes and pulls, these *negotiations* in teenagers’ stories about social media.

However, in order to locate those stories, I need to consider the rich, diverse and rapidly growing body of social research has explored teenagers’ experiences of and engagements with social media. It is to mapping some of that literature that this chapter turns next.

At home online? Natives, immigrants, residents, visitors

Teenagers at the time of writing are members of 'Generation Z'. All were born in the twenty-first century, after the dotcom bubble and the millennium bug. Many share birthdays with some of the world's most prominent social networking sites (SNSs) and iconic digital products – the iPod was first launched in 2001, Facebook in 2004. Thanks to their immersion in such technologies from an early age, in many cases from birth, these teenagers have sometimes been characterised as 'digital natives', a term first coined by education writer and speaker Marc Prensky (2001). He argues that such young people live in notable contrast to older generations, who experienced a clear, tangible transition from a pre-digital society, workplace and leisure life, and whom he therefore terms 'digital immigrants'.¹ Because of these sharply distinct experiences, he claims that digital natives think, work, speak and interact fundamentally differently to their older peers – and that education and employment practices must adapt or die.

The evidence base for Prensky's conclusions is limited; he writes in general terms, without direct source material, and is more concerned with suggesting new modes of pedagogy than with interrogating the direct experiences of these so-called digital natives. This results in bold but somewhat unsupported claims such as '[t]hey like to parallel process and multi-task. They prefer their graphics before their text rather than the opposite' (Prensky 2001: 3). Indeed, the notion of an unbridgeable schism between two generations in terms of their digital skills has been heavily critiqued, characterised explicitly as a form of academic 'moral panic' with a lack of sound empirical evidence or theoretical grounding (Bennett et al 2008); as a metaphor which reinforces unequal power dynamics (Stoerger 2009); and as better explored through factors like education levels and gender rather than age (Hesper and Eynon 2009). Siân Bayne and Jen Ross (2011) offer a particularly comprehensive

¹ I want to highlight here the racialised and colonial overtones which can be read into native/immigrant language. This is not an explicit critique which has been made of the terms 'digital native' and 'digital immigrant', perhaps in part because they are used in such technical ways. However, discussions on multiculturalism, for example, can illuminate new ways of thinking about these terms, particularly in relation to the unique knowledge and perspectives that immigrants may hold over environments and cultures that they move to. In other words, 'natives' may take for granted certain aspects of their surroundings that are rendered more visible to 'immigrants'. In the social media context, this may mean that researchers of my own generation understand certain aspects of digital culture in a less automatic or reflexive way than teenage research participants.

critique of the effects of such a binary formation. It is worth underlining, also, that the term 'moral panic' has particularly interesting resonances for a study of young people and social media, as I will explore presently. Prensky himself revisited and updated the model in later writings (2010; 2012).

Yet there remains value in the immigrant/native metaphor, as David White and Alison Le Cornu (2011) underline in their article suggesting digital 'visitors' and 'residents' as a suitable evolution. Prensky, they argue, offered a useful framework and opened an important conversation about differing education needs, but the visitor/resident model is a more appropriate means of thinking about 'tools, places and spaces [as] the three key metaphors that most aptly describe the experience of computer users in a world where social media are becoming more and more prevalent' (White and Le Cornu 2011: III.1). In other words, they think about online environments through a mixture of functional and, crucially, *spatial* aspects. Meanwhile, Akwugo Emejulu and Callum McGregor propose a concept of 'radical digital *citizenship*' (Emejulu and McGregor 2011: 131, my emphasis) for understanding and developing digital education. The concept of citizenship clearly relates to Prensky's ideas of native and immigrant, but Emejulu and McGregor emphasise far further the importance of senses of belonging, of political and economic analysis, and of *activism* in developing technological practices.

Collectively, these ideas of native and immigrant, resident and visitor, and radical citizenship point, I think, to some particularly useful ways of thinking about generations of Western teenagers who have never known a world without a powerful digital economy and ubiquitous internet access (although this economy and access clearly vary considerably between different strata of society). These scholars characterise the plethora of online spaces, tools, platforms and processes available to young people, in conjunction with the hardware they use to access them, as kinds of habitats or territories – as *homes*. And 'home' is both an evocative and an ambiguous idea. Irrespective of whether it is applied to a physical building, an intellectual stronghold or merely a psychological sensation, it remains a spatial concept, what Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling have described as 'a *place*, a site in which we live...[a] *spatial imaginary*: a set of intersecting and variable ideas and feelings' (Blunt and Dowling 2006: 2, emphases in original). The online world, I would

argue, is a spatial imaginary too, a composite and intersecting thing that we cannot touch and hold, but which nevertheless is imagined in terms of space, an area to be explored, and an arena in which to interact. After all, it is sometimes explicitly called 'cyberspace'. I would suggest, also, that home is not just a spatial imaginary, but can also be a *temporal* one, particularly when considered in relation to the digital/native or resident/visitor tropes. To feel at home is in part about *remembering* home.

Digital technologies and applications, then, should not be examined merely as *tools* with which teenagers experience and negotiate their lives, but rather as collective places of community – places where those teenagers *live*. And in line with this thinking, research on young people and digital culture – including social media – has dramatically evolved and extended over recent years, extending from primarily quantitative approaches, often located within healthcare and psychology-related disciplines, to encompass a rich array of qualitative studies and innovative digital research methods. danah boyd's *It's Complicated* (2014), one of the early books in this latter vein, argues that the online world is to today's teenagers what the mall and the diner (in the US context) used to be – a place where youth self-expression and peer-to-peer interactions can unfold in relative, or at least perceived, privacy. Researchers have increasingly invited young people to 'walk us through' their social media content and activity, foregrounding teenagers' own interpretations and negotiations of their social media practices (Ringrose and Harvey 2015). Myriad digital ethnography research methods are evolving, exploring everything from the location-tracking functionality built into many social media tools and platforms (Møller and Robards 2019) to new ways of identifying and studying 'digital traces' or records of online activity (Hine 2015).

Perceptions, if not always realities, of a schism in digital experience between today's teenagers and adults may still fuel concern and even panic, as I will discuss presently. But from the perspective of the sociological researcher, there remains something valuable to grasp in those terms 'native', 'immigrant', 'resident' and 'visitor'. Social media were never merely tools which teenagers engage with periodically, use and discard. Social media and digital culture operate as *places*, senses of home, spatial imaginaries. And particularly as the means of accessing them increasingly shifts from cumbersome desktop and laptop computers to tablets and

smartphones, they are spatial imaginaries carried with bodies, experienced in some ways as extensions *of* bodies.

2008 has been characterised as ‘the year the smartphone took off in the UK’ (Ofcom 2 August 2018), though it was a time when most people and certainly most UK teenagers were still using non-smart mobile phones. The same year, Gitte Stald examined youth relations to their mobile phones, emphasising that ‘the meaning of the mobile goes beyond its practical function’ (Stald 2008: 143), and thus underlining how mobile phones have a social meaning as well as a communicative one for young people. Indeed, she links this with the ‘mobility’ of adolescent identity itself. ‘[T]he mobile seems to be part of the user’s body’ (Stald 2008: 144) she writes, in a particularly striking illustration of embodied interrelations between user and device which I will return to in my data analysis. Over the following years, smartphone usage in the UK increased dramatically, and in 2017 Ofcom reported that ‘for most people, mobile devices are their most important device for accessing the internet [...] including nearly two-thirds of 16-34 year olds’ (Ofcom 3 August 2017: 164). The same report underlines that ‘[s]martphone ownership is highest among younger adults; more than nine in ten 16-24s and 25-34s (both (96%) own one’ (Ofcom 3 August 2017: 164), and shows social media usage as being highest amongst younger age groups, suggesting an overlap between youth, smartphones and social media. Also in 2017, the House of Lords Select Committee on Communications published ‘Growing up with the internet’. This report states that ‘it is not an exaggeration to say that to take away a young person’s phone feels to them like removing a limb’ (House of Lords Select Committee on Communications 21 March 2017: 11), in a neat echo of Stald’s observation nearly a decade previously. In other words, smartphones today contribute to a hybrid or cyborg understanding of human bodies, whereby human bodies are virtually extended into pieces of hardware which simultaneously provide a virtual extension into the networked publics of social media.

This raises new issues in relation to established scholarship on new media, because early – and even recently published – studies in the field were still primarily dealing with humans sitting at desktop or laptop computers, making what can seem to be relatively deliberate and conscious decisions to log on and enter a digital realm. There can be something far more rapid, repetitive and even compulsive about using

a mobile device to access social media, as I will explore in Chapter 4. Furthermore, smartphones' integrated cameras – which are becoming more powerful and more sophisticated with each new model – are increasingly central to social media applications' functionality. The two social media applications which stood out throughout my fieldwork in terms of teenage popularity were Snapchat and Instagram, both originally developed as mobile apps with a strong emphasis on photography using said mobiles' inbuilt cameras. By the time I reached the end of my doctoral research, a new app – TikTok – looked likely to steal their crown. TikTok could be said to mark a clear evolution from Instagram, from still photos to short-form videos – reflecting both the increasing power of smartphone cameras, and the increasing speed and bandwidth of mobile cellular networks. This is something which at the time of writing is yet to be explored in much of the qualitative sociological literature.

There are, then, some specific challenges in relation to this rapid pace of change for qualitative research in social media, and particularly social media and young people, as I will explore further in my methodological chapter. Researchers must grapple with a landscape changing at far greater speed than, say, the typical academic publishing cycle, and find ways of tracing lines of continuity as well as change.

New media, continuing concerns

Research on social media and young people is more broadly located within a body of work which might be identified as concerned with 'new media'. However, this is necessarily a shifting and amorphous term, since technological evolution dictates that media formats initially considered ground-breaking gradually become more pervasive – indeed, *old*. As such, the foundations of research in new media can be traced back to work exploring now well-established media formats, especially television (see, for example, Dorr 1986; Hodge and Tripp 1986; Palmer 1986; Buckingham 1993). Consequently, whilst a useful current understanding of new media is 'digital forms of media and communication, which use computer technology' (Harmon 2020), this definition should be positioned within an ever-

evolving media landscape, and be predicted to ultimately be usurped. 'New' is a relative term, and the novel is constructed against the established. This, I think, is an important point to consider when researching so-called new media; they should be understood as evolving out of and therefore closely related to previous formats. New media, as I shall show, are prone to generating concern and even panic, but these affective conditions too should be understood as part of an evolution, as the latest iterations of something that has occurred before.

As the 1990s progressed and personal computers became more readily available, with more young people accessing them at home as well as in school, so too the focus of research on young people and new media shifted towards examining computers and IT. Simply because of consumer availability, the earlier sociological work in this vein tended to be more concerned with video games and home PCs than with the internet (Howard 1998, Kinder 1999).

Sonia Livingstone was one of the major early researchers of young people and new media. In 1999, working with Moira Bovill, she published a major research project entitled 'Young People, New Media', which was structured as an update to Himmelweit et al's (1958) *Television and the Child*. Part of Livingstone and Bovill's conceptual framework emphasises that in spite of the perceived dramatic cultural changes engendered by new technologies, 'in many respects children's lives are as they were ten or even forty years ago. [...] When significant changes are discernible, these are often only indirectly connected with new media technologies (Thompson, 1994). Instead, they concern the transformation of time, space and social relations' (Livingstone and Bovill 1999: Ch. 1 P. 3). I want to highlight three separate points here. First, in contrast with the previously discussed ideas of childhood as both a shifting concept and a state of change in itself, Livingstone and Bovill emphasise a sense of consistency and continuity in youth lives over recent decades. This is not to say that I need to choose between change and continuity when conceptualising childhood – rather, that I need to find ways of combining the two.

Second, Livingstone and Bovill emphasise that evolving media technology has dramatically altered individuals' – and groups' – understandings and experiences of space. Like notions of digital immigrants, natives, residents and visitors, which helps me to conceptualise an online homeland, Livingstone and Bovill underline that new

consumer technologies have a close – and transformative – relationship with how humans *experience* space. A significant focus of their research is on *where* children physically access new media. For example, young people spending more time playing computer games or watching TV, by necessity (at the time of this research) spent more time indoors. Of course, since the publication of Livingstone and Bovill's text, yet more radical transformation has occurred in terms of space and new media; the internet is now arguably more significant for young people than TV or perhaps computer games, and furthermore, that internet is now highly accessible on mobile devices. In turn, this means that young people can enter the strangely spatial online world while 'on the move' and outside the home. This demands a rethinking, yet again, of the spatial implications of young people's relationship to new media, both in terms of how those media are experienced in themselves, and in terms of where young people access those media.

Finally, Livingstone and Bovill align time and social relations, alongside space, as experiences which new media have transformed. Temporality, spatiality and social relations, then, are foregrounded as subject to transformation by new media – and this in a report where 'new media' still refers primarily to television, as well as computer games, music, reading and others. Indeed, as part of their project, Livingstone and Bovill also specifically ask young people aged six to seventeen to discuss what they see as 'old media' and 'new media', discovering that 'perhaps unsurprisingly, the adult distinction between old and new technologies is not particularly salient to children and young people' (Livingstone and Bovill 1999: Ch. 2 P. 1). The importance of child-centred categorisations of technology and media is apparent.

Drawing directly on the 'Young People, New Media' data, Livingstone (2002) went on to underline that, in the early years of the new millennium, new media were both playing an increasing role in young people's everyday experiences, and extending their influence 'throughout children's lives so that children's leisure can no longer be clearly separated from their education' (Livingstone 2002: 3). The timing of this writing is significant; just three years on from the original research project, she acknowledges that the role of new media is even more prominent in young people's lives, yet she is also writing before the launch of both the earliest major

social networking sites, such as MySpace in 2003, and widespread adoption of smartphone technology in the late 2000s. Her statement underlines how important it is for research in this area to find ways of achieving longevity amidst a dramatically dynamic technology landscape. When it successfully achieves such longevity, it is precisely because it seems so prescient. New media are arguably already playing a far more influential role in young people's lives than a pre-social network society might have imagined.

Once again, I want to highlight three aspects of Livingstone's theoretical framework as particularly useful. First, she draws on Joshua Meyrowitz's three core metaphors for understanding the media – 'medium-as-vessel/conduit, medium-as-language, medium-as-environment' (Meyrowitz 1999: 44, emphases in original), and chooses to foreground the concept of new media as an *environment*. This is helpful because it emphasises the spatial aspects of the online world previously mentioned, and because it underlines that young people's online activities are 'made meaningful by their mutual relations with all others' (Livingstone 2002: 10). That is, young people do not engage with technology and new media in a vacuum separate from their other behaviours and relationships. Livingstone's example is that a child engaging with a particular form of new media because they have no other options has a different experience from one who has a choice of devices available to them or 'friends knocking on the door'; I would argue, too, that in a new media environment now dominated by social media, it is important to consider how the relationships that are negotiated online are simultaneously negotiated offline. Teenagers may well engage with virtual strangers through online tools, but social media sites and applications are, as I will show, predominantly used for communicating with those they also interact with offline.

The second useful aspect of Livingstone's theoretical framework is that she calls for a 'dual focus' on both young people and the media they engage with; foregrounding one over the other leads to reductive stories of either 'it depends on the context' (when media is the main focus) or 'look how important the media are' (when children are the main focus). By contrast, the dynamism and global nature of late modernity can be a means of understanding the ways in which children and new media influence and contextualise each other (Livingstone 2002: 11-17). I want to

draw particular attention to Livingstone's focus on dynamism, and argue that this is even more important today. New media and the devices used to access them are evolving and proliferating far faster now than, say, television access did throughout the twentieth century. Therefore, sociological research on technology and new media must, as I have already suggested, find ways of both conceptualising sometimes rapid change, yet of drawing conclusions or making recommendations that can withstand such change.

The combination of child-centred and media-centred approaches endorsed by Livingstone can also be understood as a 'third way' between two broad perspectives on the relationship between people and technology, which emerged in sociological research throughout the 1990s and early 2000s: technological determinism and social constructivism. Gustavo Mesch (2009) provides a retrospective overview of these strands with specific reference to young people, explaining that technological determinism focuses on exploring new media as productive, influential and formative forces on young people. Prensky's model of digital immigrants, for example, can be understood in technologically deterministic terms. By contrast, the social constructivist approach reminds us '[t]echnology is an inherent part of society; it is created by human actors' (Mesch 2009: 53). It understands that different social groups have different relationships with technology, and that alongside their social impact, technologies are 'social products that embody power relationships and social goals and structures' (Mesch 2009: 53). Such an approach, Mesch argues, can choose to regard the internet as culture, which risks separating online life from offline life. Instead, he recommends regarding the internet as a 'cultural artefact' and '[c]onceiving of the new digital space as socially embedded', which in turn 'allows us to understand that adolescents use the internet for the creation of unique social spaces' (Mesch 2009: 55). References to *space*, then, emerge again here. Not only is the internet understood as a space in itself, but it is also described as a platform in which users can carve out and negotiate their own personal *understandings* of space. Like Livingstone, Mesch underlines the importance of understanding new media and particularly the internet as *environments* – specifically, environments that users have great freedom to manipulate. Also like Livingstone, Mesch endorses an approach to research on young

people's engagements with technology and digital culture which pays attention to the symbiotic *relationships* between people and technology.

Thirdly, Livingstone argues that young people's engagements with new media are particularly distinctive 'because of the perennial social anxieties concerning children, childhood and youth [...] [T]he combination of children, new media and social change commonly arouses particularly strong views' (Livingstone 2002: 5). She points out that these anxieties seem to follow a pattern, with computer games having been their focus prior to the internet, and VCRs before that. There is a clear parallel here with the 'moral panic' concept originally coined by Stanley Cohen (2011 [1972]), in response to the conflict between mods and rockers, two youth subcultures in Britain at the time. He characterises a period of moral panic as 'a condition, episode, person or group of persons that emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests' (Cohen 2011 [1972]: 1). It is interesting to note, from the outset, the association of the concept with young people and a sense of their alienation or disassociation from adult culture. Subsequent moral panics around young people's experiences online – for example, the fear of sexual predation in online chatrooms – may be more concerned with protecting youth from adults rather than vice versa, but young people still remain the locus of concern. Cohen argues, also, that moral panics tend to be particularly pronounced when young people, women, or people of colour are involved; questions around how teenagers, particularly teenage girls, create and share images of themselves, and the subsequent impacts on body image, certainly seem to bear this out, as I will show.

Following Livingstone's 2002 publication, we can trace the wholesale emergence of social media and, as she predicted, associated anxieties and even moral panics. Weber and Dixon's (2009) edited collection *Growing Up Online* is an interesting example focusing specifically on girls and young women – and with a title which references the temporal transition and transformation which is so critical to understandings of childhood and youth studies. Of particular interest here is the collection's penultimate chapter, where Leslie Regan Shade (2009) draws attention to an aspect of research on young people and digital culture that has developed particularly sharply in the decade since: the tensions between the online world being viewed as a space of opportunity and creativity for young people, and panics around

issues such as personal safety, bullying, and sexualisation. Indeed, sexual cultures and sexualisation have become a particular locus for speculation and panic regarding young people and new media – and the research on, and related to, so-called ‘selfies’ and ‘sexting’ offers some particularly useful means of exploring these concerns and their effects. I am drawing attention to this research less to explore quantitative issues such as the prevalence of these practices, and more because I think they offer very useful models for thinking about gendered social media more broadly. As I will show in the next section, selfies and sexting are both highly gendered processes, illustrating many of the double standards, judgements and appraisals which teenage girls and boys experience, but they are also processes of creativity and curation. They are, in effect, processes of (gendered) storytelling.

Gendered and sexualised social media: sexy selfies and ‘sexting’

Gendered and sexualised dimensions of young people’s engagements with social media have received substantial – and growing – scholarly attention throughout the 2000s and 2010s. This literature in part reflects broader societal concerns as to precisely what young people are doing in these new digital places – places marked, as I have shown, by imagined schisms between younger and older generations – and also *resists* those concerns, exploring young people’s own agency with regard to online behaviours. Two particularly rich (and interlinked) areas of research in Anglophone literature are: self-representation and so-called ‘selfies’; and intimate communications and so-called ‘sexting’.²

The very earliest social media sites to gain mass popularity, such as MySpace, encouraged users to upload profile pictures and therefore experiment with self-representation. As social media have evolved – in line, as I have shown, with the evolution of smartphones incorporating inbuilt cameras – so such self-representation has diversified and intensified. In 2013, ‘selfie’ was named Oxford Dictionaries’ Word of the Year, and the same year a Pew Research study found that

² My repetition of ‘so-called’ here seeks to underline that whilst both ‘selfies’ and ‘sexting’ are commonly-used terms in academic and journalistic literature, they are less frequently used by young people, particularly ‘sexting’. They serve as useful terms to specify particular areas of study, but they should not be taken as precisely reflective of youth culture.

91% of teens posted photos of themselves on social media (Madden et al 2013). Two years later, the *Journal of International Communication* produced a special section focusing on selfies, underlining a growing scholarly interest in selfies and their political and sociological implications. In the introduction, Theresa Senft and Nancy Baym conceptualise selfies as simultaneously objects produced by subjects, and practices engaged in by these subjects, 'created, displayed, distributed, tracked and monetised through an *assemblage* of nonhuman agents' (Senft and Baym 2015: 1589).

This double definition of the selfie as both object and practice is useful, drawing attention to both the creativity and productivity involved in creating the image, and a type of splitting or extending of bodies which occurs when those bodies are photographed, reproduced and shared – a splitting or extending which relates to the smartphone as an extension of the physical body referenced earlier. The same year, Amanda Fields and Melanie Carter published a 'keyword essay' on selfies, underlining how they 'can take up – and might attempt to dismantle – a variety of social hierarchies' (Fields and Carter 2015: 104). In other words, selfies are inextricably entangled with the various axes of identity of both their producers and their audiences, forming and reforming hierarchies of gender, race, class, sexuality and so on.

As smartphones and smartphone cameras have grown more powerful, so have the array of editing and filtering functions embedded in social media for manipulating this self-representation. Snapchat's playful filters, which frame users' faces with flower crowns or animal ears, have become part of pop culture, and users are also encouraged to create a cartoon avatar to associate with their username. Social media filters have also given rise to makeup ranges (*Independent* 11 September 2017) and a wide range of public concerns in relation to body image and dysmorphia, many of which come with a healthy dose of gendered judgement and concern. The term 'Instagram face' was coined in 2017 to describe the singular acceptable aesthetic being promoted across such applications (*Refinery29* 27 March 2017), and more recently there have even been reports of individuals 'getting surgery to look like their Snapchat selfies' (*BBC News Online* 19 April 2018). Such reports are

notable here less for the truth (or otherwise) of their claims, and more for the atmosphere of anxiety which they signify.

Many of these editing and filtering functions serve to create very similar effects on images of faces or bodies; skin is rendered flawless, faces are contoured, and eyes and lips are enlarged, in line with normative white Western standards of beauty. As such, various writers have argued that such filters are implicitly racist. As Shandukani Mulaudzi writes in the *Huffington Post*, '[w]hen applied, a user's face morphs into a brighter, often light-skinned, blemish-free and slimmed down version of the original, sparkly-eyed and with a small nose. You may even end up with thinner, different coloured lips and blushed cheeks. Put simply, facial features are tweaked to suit Western standards of beauty' (*Huffington Post* 25 January 2017). *Racked* has published on how 'when Instagram filters brighten skin tones, those changes have both racial and cultural implications' (Jerkins 7 July 2015). Social media functions and practices have a direct influence – and are influenced by – broader cultural ideals of attractiveness and 'sexiness', and there are clear gendered and racialised dimensions to these phenomena.

Such notions of attractiveness or 'sexiness' underline that selfies are not merely artefacts or processes created by and for the self – in spite of their name. Rather, they are created with an intended audience in mind – and therefore a desire for those audiences to 'read' the creator in certain ways. 'Sexiness' in particular points to an array of (hetero)sexualised dynamics underpinning selfie creation and sharing, which have been explored by myriad researchers, often from a feminist perspective. Amy Shields Dobson (2011; 2015), for example, explores different types of sexy femininity which circulate through young people's social media self-representation, and in particular the performance of an 'objectified' self. Jessica Ringrose (2010; 2011) explores the pressure on teen girls to perform as 'sexy' within social media, and writes with Laura Harvey (2015) to unpack the ways in which individual body parts take on gendered and racialised sexual value when shared through social media. Kath Albury (2015) considers how sexy self-representation travels between different forms of private and public social media content. Psychologists Elizabeth Daniels and Eileen Zurbriggen (2016) have explored 'the price of sexy', finding that girls who post 'sexualised' photos are considered less attractive

and less 'competent' than their peers. Evans and Riley (2014) have developed a theoretical framework of 'technologies of sexiness' for exploring how teen girls navigate and perform 'sexy femininity' through consumer culture and practices. Collectively, such studies reveal the complex processes of negotiation and sexual double standards which teenage girls in particular are subject to, walking a tightrope between 'not sexy' and 'just sexy enough'.

Discussions around selfies and social media self-representation therefore overlap with and bleed into discussions of how such content is shared with others through social media, particularly when that content is created as self-consciously 'sexy'. And this points towards so-called 'sexting', a portmanteau of 'sex' and 'texting', which can be defined as 'the action or practice of sending or exchanging sexually explicit or suggestive messages or images electronically, esp. using a mobile phone' (*OED Online* March 2017). The term is an invention of the media; that same OED entry claims that the first published use of 'sexting' was in a 2005 newspaper article about the cricketer Shayne Warne, claiming that 'a telling aspect of his sexual farragos is the use of his mobile for sexting' (*OED Online* March 2017). The interesting point here is that from the outset it seems that sexting was in Anglophone media both a titillating and an ambiguous concept, associated with question marks over how other people might – or might not – be conducting their intimate relationships. These question marks have remained even as sexting discussions have proliferated both in the media and in academic literature, where it has both been firmly figured as a 'postfeminist moral panic' (Ringrose 2013), and heavily associated with teen social media practices – even if it tends not to be a term teens use themselves.

Early academic literature on sexting and young people was often quantitative in approach (see, for example, Klettke et al 2014; Livingstone and Görzig 2012; Mitchell et al 2012), and, as such, was explicitly concerned with tasks like categorising different types of sexting and establishing the ages of those who participate in sexting. This trend has continued, with a significant proportion of the literature addressing quantitative issues from healthcare and legal disciplines. Such articles have value in terms of exploring the scale and scope of sexting, but have clear limitations in terms of ascertaining how the phenomenon actually occurs on an individual level, why young people make the decisions they do, and what the impacts

of those decisions may be. It is also important to note that the statistics produced by quantitative research have varied wildly, throwing doubt on their reliability. This might be in part because different studies have defined sexting in different ways. Does sexting have to incorporate images, or can it be text only? Is a teenager who only receives suggestive or explicit content, rather than creating or sharing it, participating in sexting? And indeed, what are the characteristics and qualities that dictate whether something is sexually suggestive or explicit?

Ringrose et al (2012), for example, state that '[q]uantitative research on sexting has found rates as wide as 15% to 40% among young people, depending on age and the way what is understood as sexting is measured' (Ringrose et al 2012: 6). Similarly, Lounsbury et al (2011) examine five empirical studies of youth sexting in the US and UK which took place between 2008 and 2009, underlining the 'inconsistent terminology' between the different articles, which in turn makes it difficult to 'compare findings and draw clear conclusions' (Lounsbury et al 2011: 1). Drouin et al (2013) argue that inconsistencies in the existing literature have been apparent across three major areas; the content of sexting messages, the medium used to transmit them, and the relationship contexts in which sexting occurs (Drouin et al 2013: 25). Perhaps Madigan et al's (2018) systematic review is most useful at this stage; summarising studies which have in total involved more than 110,000 young people, they conclude that sexting actually gets more prevalent as young people get older – and become sexually active – underlining yet another generational schism in terms of perceptions of teenage behaviour.

Amanda Lenhart's (2009) article for the Pew Research Institute marked an early attempt to take such quantitative data on young people's suggestive or sexualised mobile phone behaviour in a more qualitative direction. A series of focus groups and private paper surveys sought to explore tangible examples and explanations of the behaviours that were identified in an initial telephone survey. There are limitations with the analysis of her data – for example, quotations from the interviews are provided with very little in the way of narrative commentary – but the move towards listening to young people's direct experiences and therefore foregrounding their own autonomy and even sexuality is an important one. Soon, further sexting studies expanded on Lenhart's shift towards the qualitative. Some

collected interview data and used it to shed light on educational materials such as government videos produced to warn young people about the potential risks and dangers of sexting (see, for example Albury and Crawford 2012; Crawford and Goggin 2011). By questioning how effectively such educational materials reflect and engage with young people's actual online behaviours, these studies draw attention to some of the disconnect between adult educators and the young people they are ostensibly attempting to protect. Other studies have explored sexting in relation to ethics and the law (Albury et al 2013; Salter et al 2013) and researched sexting as more of an ecosystem, collecting opinions from parents and educators as well as young people themselves (Harris et al 2013). Researchers working from feminist perspectives in particular have sought to interrogate further the phenomena of moral panics already raised, questioning why these specific online behaviours – or perceived behaviours – engender such concern (Ringrose and Harvey 2015).

Indeed, public concerns and policy discussions regarding sexting have spanned a broad range of topics, as emphasised by Ringrose et al (2012). One very obvious problem is that certain images created or transmitted via sexting practices contravene pornography legislation in many countries (Arcabascio 2010; Sacco et al 2010; Wolak and Finkelhor 2011), which in turn fuels particularly noisy public panics. Some of these concerns relate to young people being exposed to pornography, while others are more concerned with what young people might be creating and sharing. Depending on the ages of the teenagers involved, certain parties may technically be guilty of creating or distributing child pornography, even if the reality is the consensual creation and sharing of images privately within an intimate relationship. It is very difficult to reconcile rigid, age-based legislation, young people's romantic and sexual autonomy, and the socially constructed aspects of age. More recently, however, legal papers have emerged which are beginning to foreground young people's own sexual agency and subjectivity amidst the wider sexting debate, and new legal models are being proposed accordingly (see, for example, Arthur 2019; Bayliss 2020). Cyberbullying and sexual harassment are other key areas of public concern in relation to sexting, which have again received increasing critical attention (Mitchell et al 2012; Patchin and Hinduja 2010).

Crucially, all of these discourses of concern and anxiety around sexting have been identified as constructing, reproducing and amplifying existing heteronormative standards around 'girls' sexuality as a particular problem to be surveilled and regulated' (Ringrose et al 2013: 307). This dovetails with a broader theme of social media having been analysed as both displaying and producing contrasting moral standards and judgements for teen girls and boys, with a sexual double standard most often applied to girls (see, for example, Hird and Jackson 2001; Jackson and Cram 2003; Lenhart 2009; Lippman and Campbell 2014; Livingstone and Helsper 2010; Renold and Ringrose 2011; Ringrose and Eriksson Barakjas 2011; Ringrose et al 2012; Salter et al 2013; Tolman 2002; Tolman 2012). In an interestingly titled study, Michael Salter writes about 'Privates in the online public', arguing that 'the public feminine body is conflated with pornography in contrast to the range of meanings that can append to the public masculine body' (Salter 2016: 2723). He underlines, then, the contrasting gendered dynamics as to how teenage girls' and boys' self-representations are interpreted when publicised and shared through social media. Salter draws attention, also, to the importance of considering the complex dynamics of public and private which play out through social media, and which I will explore further in the next section. More recently still, Roberts and Ravn (2020) have sought to centre young *men's* experiences of sexting, conceptualising sexting as an everyday practice and suggesting that earlier literature has tended to focus on either the risk or the normalcy of sexting.

Ultimately, then, we can trace a gradual proliferation of literature which has sought to foreground young peoples' agency and subjectivity, which complicates simplistic views of sexting as harmful or risky, and which draws on feminist theory to look at sexual double standards and gendered or gendering processes through the creation and sharing of 'sexy' social media content. I wish to follow this strand of thinking: like boyd (2014), to resist straightforward narratives of anxiety and concern and be open to the possibility that 'the kids are alright'; and, like Hasinoff, to develop 'more research and theory addressing how sexual pleasure exists *alongside* danger and risk' (Hasinoff, 2013: 458, my emphasis). Binary conceptions of teenage sexualised social media activity too easily fail to consider agency and pleasure, or fail to consider risk and discipline – by thinking about such dynamics as existing in

negotiation with each other, researchers can build a more sophisticated picture of the teen social media landscape. Indeed, I find it useful to reflect on Niels van Doorn's (2011) call for gender and technology to be understood as mutually constitutive, working interactively together to produce new understandings of both. Selfies and sexting are both integral parts of the interactive, productive, creative and of course – *social* – dimensions of social media. They are both gendered and gendering processes, and they do not exist without audiences. Selfies and sexting, then, are *storytelling* processes, and by understanding them as such, we are better-placed to think about social media activities as processes of (gendered) creation and curation, interpretation and reinterpretation. Selfies and sexting always take place with an imagined audience in mind – an audience which is always *potentially* bigger and more complicated than initially intended.

Sexualisation, intersectional approaches and balancing acts

Research on selfies, sexy self-representation and sexting can in itself be located within a wider body of work concerned with sexualisation (for some useful overviews, see Egan 2013a; Egan 2013b; Egan and Hawkes 2013; McRobbie 2009; Moore and Reynolds 2018; Renold, Ringrose and Egan 2015; Tsaliki 2016). Sexualisation is a slippery and much-debated concept, but seems to me to have two broad (and interlinked) dimensions. First, there is the subject of teenagers' own sexual agency and activity – which can be framed, following Foucault's (1998 [1978]) influential theories on the history of sexuality already discussed, as a complex set of pushes and pulls between what is seen to be 'natural' and known to be happening, and the desire to restrict, control and discipline. In this sense, the question of teen sexualisation is always associated with questions of the 'right' time for sexual activity to occur, and therefore with the risk of 'premature' sexualisation (see, for example, Egan 2013a). These questions are racialised as well as gendered; as Renold writes, 'it is the hyper-sexualisation of little (usually white) girls and thus the eroticisation of (feminised) sexual innocence that stirs up societal anxieties' (Renold 2006: 490).

Second, there is the sexualisation of culture, theorised particularly helpfully by Feona Attwood (2009). She points to the vastly increased visibility of sexually

explicit imagery in Western cultures, due in no small part to the internet, and argues that 'sex and technology are now stitched together' (Attwood 2009: xiv). The resonance here for a study of teenagers, gender and social media is particularly apparent. Sexualisation, therefore, cannot be isolated from – is, indeed, utterly entangled with – popular and media culture (McRobbie 2004; Tsaliki 2016). Societal anxieties with regard to young people's latent or developing sexuality are both complicated and concretised by popular culture.

Returning more specifically to sexualisation as it relates to teenagers, in 2010, psychologist Linda Papadopoulos was invited by the UK Home Office to conduct an independent review on the sexualisation of young people – which she tellingly, if not, perhaps deliberately, frames as examining 'how hyper-sexualisation and objectification of girls on the one hand, and hyper-masculinisation of boys on the other, perpetuate and reinforce each other' (Papadopoulos 2010: 3). There is a suggestion, here, of girls being positioned as victims and objects, boys as predators and active agents. Whilst sexual objectification clearly does not have to entirely remove girls' agency, and hyper-masculinisation can clearly objectify and victimise boys, this nuance seems lacking across the rest of the report. Indeed, Clarissa Smith's (2010) blistering review draws particular attention to the ways in which the report offers no agency to young people themselves, instead figuring young people – particularly girls – as the passive victims of a dangerous sexualised culture. Later, Smith extended her argument with Feona Attwood (2011). Such reinforcement of a damaging, heterosexualised binary 'where girls' sexuality is always risky/at risk' has been identified as a much broader effect of sexualisation discourses (Renold and Ringrose 2011: 391).

Another criticism which has been levelled at the empirical literature on teenagers' experiences of sexualisation has been a lack of attention paid to dimensions of race and ethnicity, and in particular the experiences of racially marginalised teenage girls (see, for example, Butler 2013). Some notable exceptions are Debbie Weekes (2002), who offered an early study of 'how black girls sexualise identity'; Victoria Showunmi (2017), who has explored black girls' struggles with racialised embodiment both in school and in public spaces; and Ringrose, Tolman and Ragonese (2019), whose focus groups on media representations of racialised

'sexiness' operated across a range of elite fee-paying and performing arts schools, as well as economically marginalised comprehensive schools in London and New York. Such studies respond to the ways in which ideal 'sexiness' is continually shifting and a simplistic binary of white as sexy and non-white as *unsexy* is reductive and inaccurate, unsettled in part by the growing online visibility and even reification of racially ambiguous figures such as Kim Kardashian (Deliovsky 2008; Sastre 2014).

Sexualisation, then, is an enormously raced – and simultaneously classed – concept; it 'operates as a white middle-class panic over the desire for and loss of a raced and classed sexual innocence, and thus reproduces the othering of working-class/racialised cultures as evidence of hyper-sexuality' (Renold and Ringrose 2013: 249). Many studies have explored how the sexualities of working-class teenagers are more likely to be perceived as problematic and promiscuous, whereas those of middle-class teenagers are not (see, for example Lawler 2005; Walkerdine 1997; Walkerdine and Ringrose 2008). This underlines the importance of an attention to intersectionality in studies of young people and cultures of sexualisation, following Kimberlé Crenshaw's powerful case for a new kind of analytical framework (Crenshaw 1989; 1991). Crenshaw calls for analysis of the productive interactions and interplays of race and gender, rather than treating them as 'mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis' (Crenshaw 1989: 139), as well as the importance of paying attention to intragroup difference. This is picked up by Heidi Mirza (1992) in *Young, Female and Black*, in which she shows how 'black girls' are not only all too easily homogenised as a group perceived as self-confident, noisy and overly sexual, but also how these qualities are then said to mark those girls as working-class. Class and race work productively together; the homogenous othering which comes to both identify and define particular raced or classed groups operates *across* those groups also.

A more recent analysis of relations between gender, class and race amongst young people is offered by Suki Ali (2003). Her ethnography of girls in a London school initially intended to focus on mixed-race identity, but, as she explains, 'it soon became clear that the issue of class was of key importance' (Ali 2003: 270). Her paper is not only a fascinating study of young people and identity; it is also a delicate articulation of theory in practice, as throughout the research and the writing she

grapples with the feminist problem of ‘understanding multiply held identifications’ (Ali 2003: 270). Ali unpacks the desire of myriad feminist scholars to ‘hold’ race, ethnicity, gender and class in their research – and the difficulties of this in application, as well as the risk of ‘the racial, ethnic and national identities [...] becoming collapsed into interchangeable floating signifiers, for example, when ‘Black ‘ is added as a descriptor to a woman’s identity’ (Ali 2003: 273). Ali argues that meticulous ‘separation and clarity of terms is crucial to the new theorisations of class’ (Ali 2003: 274), and explores this in practice through one particular research participant, Miranda. In doing so, Ali characterises herself ‘as a feminist “walking a tightrope between theory and application” (Archer *et al.*, 2001, p. 42) in the study of mixedness’ (Ali 2003: 270). Her article is useful for my project both empirically and methodologically: empirically, her data highlight the ‘mixedness’ of class, race and gender amongst London schoolgirls; methodologically, she tackles this mixedness through a careful separation of terms.

Several different studies of class and gender are explored in Ali’s article, as she traces the feminist interventions which have sought to ‘fill the gaps left by traditional “gender-neutral” studies of class’ (Ali 2003: 271). One of the most influential of these in the UK context is Beverley Skeggs’ *Formations of Class & Gender* (1997), which draws on Pierre Bourdieu’s classical theories of capital movements in social space to frame a longitudinal ethnography examining the experiences of white working-class women through a ‘caring’ course at a local college and beyond. Skeggs explores and articulates these women’s negotiation of class, always with a sharp awareness of ‘how they are socially positioned and of the attempts to represent them’ (Skeggs 1997: 3-4), and often with a desire to disidentify from such positioning. There are echoes again, here, of bodies as located in space and intra-acting with *other* bodies. The book’s subtitle – *Becoming Respectable* – also took on a new resonance for me as I was exploring the concept of becoming within this chapter, reminding me yet again of the idea of *embodied* potential. Some of the first participant quotes in the book pertain to clothing, and participants’ considerations of how that clothing will be read by others. This struck me as a compelling articulation of how embodied change – in this instance, changes to how

bodies are clothed and 'displayed' – can be part of processes of becoming, changing how those bodies are read and judged by others.

Skeggs also argues that '[r]espectability is usually the concern of those who are seen not to have it' (Skeggs 1997: 1), and that it 'has always been a marker and burden of class' (Skeggs 1997: 3). Respectability, then, is figured not only as something which working-class women are continually striving to gain or demonstrate (and this requires complex, continuous processes of negotiation) but also as a mechanism through which the concept of class itself is understood. Skeggs helps to develop a model of class as always in transition, of future potential – a model, then, which echoes the Beauvoir-inflected model of gender I explored in the previous section.

Another particularly significant figure in studying class and gender in the UK productively together was Valerie Walkerdine. In 2001, working with Helen Lucey and June Melody, she published *Growing Up Girl: Psychological Explorations of Gender and Class*. Once again, the title alone offers interesting resonances for my study, highlighting transition, transformation, growth and *potential*. The book explores 'the remaking of girls and women as the modern neoliberal subject: a subject of self-invention and *transformation* who is capable of surviving within the new social, economic and political system' (Walkerdine et al 2001: 3, emphasis my own). In other words, Walkerdine et al explore not only how class and gender work together to form teen girl subjectivities; they locate this within a Western neoliberal context. In turn, this foregrounds themes of self-determination and individualism as well as market dynamics, which again seem particularly resonant when exploring teenagers and social media. The companies which ultimately frame teens' social media lives – the Facebooks, the Snapchats – are amongst the most dramatic and high-profile corporate success stories of recent decades. And this success is built on advertising – on encouraging users to make and influence commercial choices. Social media are utterly saturated in market dynamics.

Neoliberalism and the postfeminist media landscape

Within those social media landscapes an entirely new form of corporate figure combined with celebrity – so-called social media ‘influencers’ – has emerged. Such celebrities span myriad sectors and interests, from fashion and beauty to toys and gaming, and many are notable for building their entire brands and businesses *through* social media (as opposed to using social media to showcase a pre-existing career). Academic research examining social media influencers initially largely focused on quantitative issues such as the effectiveness of different forms of advertising, or the effects of said influencers disclosing when content is sponsored (see, for example, Boerman 2020; Stubb et al 2019). However, studies are emerging which take a more qualitative approach, exploring, for example, the thorny negotiations of authenticity within influencer culture (Hurley 2019). Whilst my research does not explicitly focus on the relations between teens and social media influencers, or influencer culture, it is important, I think, to retain an awareness of this substantial body of celebrity and commerce within social media platforms and applications, and to consider individual influencers as offering a hugely visible model of transformative potential *within* social media. Instagram in particular showcases how individuals – many of them teenagers themselves – can build fame (and fortune) through the same core mechanisms available to teenagers like those I interviewed – through careful curation of an online profile. It is perhaps no surprise that the language used to describe how social media users create and curate their visible presences often overlaps dramatically with that of business and branding (see, for example, Senft 2013).

This draws me towards a final dimension of the literature on young people and new media which I want to highlight – the sexualisation of culture as located within a wider postfeminist landscape in many Western countries. Postfeminism is a much-discussed and shifting term. Angela McRobbie (2004) explores postfeminism ‘as a ‘gender regime’ characterised by a ‘double entanglement’ between ‘neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life [and] processes of liberalisation in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations’ (McRobbie 2004: 255-256). This seems particularly pertinent here, foregrounding a sense of negotiation and tension which has emerged in myriad ways

throughout the literature I have explored. Meanwhile, in a highly influential exploration of what she calls 'postfeminist media culture', Rosalind Gill (2007) identifies sexualisation of culture as one of its four key features, with the other three being a focus on femininity as bodily property; a repositioning of women from sex object to desiring sexual subject; and a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment. All four features which Gill highlights can be seen to play out across the studies of 'selfies' and 'sexting' outlined above, where sexy images are shared like property between mobile devices and teenage girls in particular navigate between making empowered choices to present as 'sexy' and yet always risking the judgement of having gone too far.

More recently, Gill has both emphasised just how deeply postfeminism is 'enmeshed with neoliberalism' (Gill 2016: 613). She has, also, undertaken a review of the sensibility ten years on from her original article, in which she highlights the 'endless work on the self' (Gill 2017: 609) required for good neoliberal subjectivity. These, too, seem particularly important points for studies of teenagers and social media, underlining the demands social media both place on teenagers – and enable them to place on themselves, and others – in order to perform, display and enact the subjectivity required by neoliberal culture. Taken together, Gill's and McRobbie's explorations of postfeminism offer ways of looking at teenagers and social media which foreground complex tensions between empowerment and judgement, between freedom and restriction and between sexualised double standards, particularly for teenage girls – all themes which I will explore within my analytical chapters.

Another aspect of such tensions and negotiations are the ways in which social media and online platforms are harnessed by users – including teenagers – to participate in and re/shape feminist activism, genders and sexualities, and growing numbers of feminist researchers have sought to explore these (see, for example Banet-Weiser 2018; Keller and Ryan 2018; Locke et al 2018; Mendes et al 2019; Naezer 2020). Such research underlines a feminist turn towards examining, in particular, teenage girls' agency in resisting and re/shaping sexist online cultures, though as Rosalind Gill argues, the postfeminist analytic lens is still enormously relevant in analysing these dynamics in the UK, in order 'to capture a distinctive

contradictory-but-patterned sensibility intimately connected to neoliberalism' (Gill, 2016: 610). Nevertheless, there is still something hugely positive to grasp at here. In the words of Hester Baer, '[d]igital platforms offer great potential for broadly disseminating feminist ideas, shaping new modes of discourse about gender and sexism, connecting to different constituencies, and allowing creative modes of protest to emerge' (Baer, 2016: 18). This seems a hopeful point on which to conclude; a positive reading of the transformative spatiality and temporality of social media, in which new networks and audiences are being created which enable education, activism and social change.

Locating my work, asking further questions

The literature I have examined here both enables me to situate my own work more clearly – and opens up new questions. It lays out a map, but does not necessarily offer a clear path of navigation. It shows teenage genders and sexualities – as explored, performed and negotiated within social media – to be complex and dynamic. They are subject to and related to an array of societal concerns and even panics; they are surveilled and disciplined; they are situated within what might be termed a broader postfeminist media landscape; they are frequently examined in relation to selfies and self-presentation, and sexy content sharing or 'sexting'. And these dynamics, in turn, invite further questions in relation to the spatial and temporal dimensions of social media. If social media are the landscapes in which I am exploring teen negotiations of gender and sexuality, and if social media have been analysed as transforming certain experiences of spatiality and temporality, then I need to spend some time unpacking those transformations and determining some ways of conceptualising them. This, then, is the theme of the next chapter.

Chapter 2: Sharing, creating, networking, imagining: Building a conceptual framework of ‘virtual potentialities’

A review of the existing literature on young people and new media underlines, then, how the spatialities and temporalities of social media are in some ways radically different and in others very similar to those experienced offline. Social media – and in particular, social media as accessed through smartphones – involve spatial imaginaries and temporal stickiness (and ephemerality). A research project examining teenage gender and sexuality as negotiated through social media must therefore find ways of conceptualising spatio-temporality within social media, and of understanding these modes of transformation – as well as continuity.

In this section I undertake that conceptualisation, building a conceptual framework for thinking about how teenagers use and experience social media – and in particular the temporalities and spatialities of social media. I term that conceptual framework *virtual potentialities*. To get there, I layer up a number of different theoretical approaches. I begin with the feminism which has influenced every stage of my academic (and personal) journey, emphasising my preoccupation with gendered power dynamics and hierarchies, and feminist epistemologies. Next, I turn to the human/technology relationships at the heart of any study of how people use and engage with social media, exploring how theories of new materialism and circulating affect help me to think about social media as embodied, affective and blurrily overlapping and entangling with their human users. From there, I examine ways of theorising social media spatialities and temporalities, tracing how social media offer both radical transformations *and* lines of continuity in terms of how space and time are experienced. Finally, I draw this thinking together and explain what I mean by virtual potentialities.

Feminist framing

Feminist epistemologies, as I outlined in my discussion on gender and teenagers, are concerned with ‘the politics of knowledge and the impact of the social status as well as the sexed body of the knower upon the production of knowledge

(Alcoff and Potter 1993: 2). Two key features can be unpacked here. First, feminist epistemological frameworks generate knowledge whose political positions and influences are actively acknowledged and engaged with, rather than flattened. Second, the social, political and material contexts of the knowers involved – including and often focusing particularly upon their sexed bodies – are acknowledged and engaged with also. The relationships between those contexts and the knowledge produced are paramount. Donna Haraway provides a concise summary of this model, stating that '[f]eminist objectivity means quite simply *situated knowledges*' (Haraway 1988: 581, emphasis in original).

A feminist approach to knowledge production carries multiple advantages. The contexts of knowledge production have sometimes been neglected in social science research; by re-inserting them in research and analysis processes, more multi-layered and richer knowledge can be produced. Feminist research projects, in both acknowledging that the world is a place of subjective bias and incorporating that subjective bias into their work, can be seen to produce more rounded and reflexive conclusions; they do not seek to obscure the contingent nature of their own knowledge production. Feminist epistemologies also work hard to bridge the gap between theory and practice; that is, 'living' the feminist political project through academic research and therefore, in Lorraine Code's words, generating knowledge which 'matters to people in real situations' (Code 2014: 148). Similarly, Dorothy Smith writes that 'women's standpoint returns us to the actualities of our lives as we live them in the local particularities of the everyday/everynight worlds in which our bodily being anchors us' (Smith 1997: 393). Whilst her statement focuses on both women's experiences and feminist standpoint theory, neither of which are central to my project, her focus on the body as anchor and the actualities of lived experience are hugely relevant.

Feminist epistemologies, then, by definition incorporate and produce multiple perspectives and subjectivities. One of the great challenges of feminist research is to acknowledge these multiplicities whilst managing their potential for uncertainty and fragmentation. How can the knowledge generated by a multiplicity of perspectives be fairly translated into generalising conclusions or interventions? How can feminist epistemologists argue on the one hand for a multiplicity of

contextualised voices and on the other for unified states of oppression shared by all those voices? Feminist epistemologies can undermine the process of making knowledge claims even as they *make* knowledge claims.

As such, it becomes necessary to find ways of visualising the dynamic tensions that such epistemologies work with. I want to draw on Donna Haraway and Bat-Ami Bar On in particular. Haraway searches for a feminist version of objectivity, one that can take account of embodied knowledge without '[losing] track of its mediations' (Haraway 1988: 579) and suggests the idea of infinite interchangeability. She uses the metaphor of vision, which is utterly embodied – dogs see the world differently to people by virtue of the biology of their eyes, for example – but this does not mean that either the human's or the dog's observations of their environments are inaccurate. We do not query which vision of the world is the 'correct' one, rather, we seek to better understand the biological diversity of eyes and brains that afford these multiple visions.

A second way of visualising these tensions is through the notion of *entanglements*, as articulated by Bat-Ami Bar On. She writes that '[b]ecause feminists are entangled in both the Enlightenment project and the neo-Romantic project, the feminist situation seems contradictory – a situation in which contradictory forces push and pull feminist sociopolitical theorising' (Bar On, 1993: 96). That is, feminist epistemologies are caught in a struggle of negotiating subjectivity and epistemic privilege between ideas of both the rational, individualised Enlightenment subject and the emotional, irrational neo-Romantic one. Here, the metaphor of entanglement seems to point towards multiple different threads of theory and argument knotting and unknotting, something dynamic and simultaneously characterised by conflict, tension, and closeness. By acknowledging these different subjects simultaneously, I hope to trace a path which listens to my research participants as both individuals and social groups, whose experiences can be both deeply emotional *and* rational. My theoretical framing, then, seeks to take account of *multiplicity* – both of the situated knowledge of my research participants, and of the multiplicity of activities and interpretations which take place within social media. It seeks, also, to take account of *negotiation* – of pushes and pulls between different possibilities.

Theorising human/digital relations: new materialisms, circulating affect

Social media are accessed via *devices* – typically smartphones or tablets, complete with internet connectivity and a screen for viewing or sharing content. Accessing said applications requires an action of some sort: a click on an icon; the typing of a username or password; the scanning of a thumbprint. As such, it can be tempting to conceptualise the devices in question as forming clear boundaries between human users and digital social media, as *interfaces* between two discrete and distinct realms – one physical, one digital – where ‘interface’ simultaneously refers to the dividing line and the method of interaction between two parts. Indeed, the term ‘interface’ is commonly used in computing contexts to denote either a hardware device or a software application which enables a user to communicate with a computer.

There are two core problems with this model. First, it positions those realms as discrete and separate, with no acknowledgement of the productive interactions between them, or how they might bleed into each other. Second, and precisely because of this discrete separation, it dissociates social media from physical, material reality. This is demonstrated by the all too common refrain ‘in real life’ to describe relationships or events that take place in the physical world as opposed to online – a refrain that is surely problematic. After all, if social media activity is not ‘real’ or part of ‘life’, then what exactly is it? Yet the phrase’s prevalence – it emerged repeatedly throughout my fieldwork – underlines precisely how easy and common it is to fall into this cognitively troubling gap.

There have, therefore, been frequent calls for a more productive and interactive understanding of the interface, and this demands that both human subjects – or bodies – and the digital applications and platforms they engage with online – are no longer seen as discrete and ‘unambiguously bounded’ (Hayles 1999: 290). Rather, various new media researchers have worked to show how the virtual landscapes of social media and other digital applications can be understood as both connected to and entangled with the user’s physical context, activity and even body (see, for example, Bakardjieva 2005; Liestøl et al 2004). Renold and Ringrose

reference a 'blurry ontological divide between human (flesh) and machine (digital)' (Renold and Ringrose 2017b: 1066), describing the cyborg-subject generated by a world in which technological and digital mediations of everyday life are increasingly commonplace, sophisticated and significant. Deleuzo-Guattarian theories of assemblage and affect are similarly useful in exploring how emotions circulate through social media, shifting the concept of desire from being focused on a specific object (as in psychoanalytic theory) to it being a *productive* force which forges connections between the social and the technological. Desire 'flows through and between (human and nonhuman) machines/assemblages/bodies in complex ways' (Ringrose 2011: 600).

Such approaches can be understood within broader fields of new materialism and posthumanism, seeking to disrupt dualistic binaries between human actors and 'nonhuman actants' (Sanzo 25 April 2018), and to foreground 'dynamic intra-activity' between different bodies (Barad 2003). Indeed, Barad's model of dynamic intra-activity has been deployed in several studies of young people, gender and social media to think through the ways in which teenagers' physical bodies and social media bodies of *content* interact productively with each other (see, for example Evers and Germon 2017; Renold and Ringrose 2017a; Ringrose and Rawlings 2015; Ringrose and Renold 2016). Ultimately, new materialisms are interested in exploring the ways in which the material and the discursive co-constitute reality, a concern which seems particularly relevant when researching teenagers' engagements with social media. Such engagements are both material (they are embodied activities, and they take place through smartphones, carried everywhere) and discursive (they involve the creation, curation, sharing and appraisal of content – textual, verbal and visual). By paying attention to the interactions and entanglements between the material and discursive, we can build a richer and more dynamic understanding of the relationships between the human and the digital, between social media users and social media themselves.

As Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman set out in the introduction to their edited collection on material feminisms, these theoretical approaches are also critical for re-emphasising the materiality of bodies within contemporary feminist debates (Alaimo and Hekman 2008: 1-19, see also Coleman et al 15 May 2019). There seems,

then, a clear relationship for me to draw on between new materialisms and the emphasis on 'becoming' bodies that I want to foreground in my conceptualisation of gender. Through new materialist feminist approaches, bodies can be seen as productively interacting with different facets of digital culture and technology – producing, reproducing and resisting gendered power dynamics as they do so. This opens up possibilities for online activities and behaviours to be themselves understood as embodied, in myriad ways. For example, human bodies may feel as though they are *travelling* when they engage with social media – entering and moving through spatial imaginaries as they engage with peers who may be geographically very different. Bodies may be displayed, represented, reproduced and shared through mechanisms like avatars and profile photos. And embodied emotional and affective reactions take place both within and outside social media, further blurring any clear dividing line between the physical and the digital.

Indeed, questions of how emotions circulate through social media have been increasingly important to many researchers in digital disciplines. Sara Ahmed's conceptualisation of objects becoming 'sticky, or saturated with affect, as sites of personal and social tension' (Ahmed 2004: 11) is particularly compelling, opening up ways of conceiving of social media objects – both the physical devices used to access social media, and the content produced *within* social media – as accumulating layers of emotional significance. In the same chapter, Ahmed's argument that '[e]motions in their very intensity involve miscommunication, such that even when we feel we have the same feeling, we don't necessarily have the same relationship to the feeling' (Ahmed 2004: 10) is especially persuasive, underlining senses of instability and individual subjectivity in relation to emotions. Social media enable layer upon layer of communication as content is created, shared, discussed and amended; the meanings and emotional significances of that content shift and change through time.

Ultimately, then, I want to consider teenagers' relations to and engagements with social media as processes of messy, affective interactivity between bodies, between the physical and the digital. The digital realm of social media is not separate and distinct from the physical realm of social media users, because it is created by those users, curated by those users, spatially imagined and traversed by those users.

Theorising social media spatiality: networked publics, ephemeral mobility

Spatial metaphors have long been central to how researchers, scholars and writers have attempted to conceptualise media in general, and social media in particular (see for example Markham 1998; Meyrowitz 1998; 1999). Three interlinking ideas that I want to foreground are: negotiations between public and private; networked publics; and mobility.

The idea of a binary opposition between ‘public’ and ‘private’ and the association of contrasting behaviours, interactions and societal roles with each has been, in the words of Jeff Weintraub, ‘a central and characteristic preoccupation of Western thought since classical antiquity’ (Weintraub 1997: 1). The global reach of the internet, the development of sophisticated surveillance technologies and the proliferation of social media have all fuelled discussions of how this apparent binary is being complicated, blurred, broken down and taken into ‘murky conceptual waters’ (Marx 2001). The internet has been suggested as holding ‘the promise of reviving the public sphere’ (Papacharissi 2002: 9), thanks to its facilitation of new forms of communication and political expression (see, for example, Bowen 1996; Breslow 2002); Papacharassi 2014). Whilst an in-depth study of theories of public and private is not something I have a great deal of space to devote to here, I do want to draw attention to what seems a particularly pertinent quote from a major philosopher on the subject – Hannah Arendt:

The term ‘public’ [...] means, first, that everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity. For us, appearance – something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves – constitutes reality. Compared with the reality which comes from being seen and heard, even the greatest forces of intimate life – the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses – lead an uncertain shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatised and deindividualised, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance. The most current of such transformations occurs in storytelling and generally in

artistic transposition of individual experiences.

(Arendt 1998 [1958]: 50).

Arendt was writing in the mid twentieth century and yet so much of this passage seems enormously salient for a study of social media. Here, one meaning of ‘public’ means *sharing a story* – taking what is intimate and personal and *artistically transposing* it. It is a process of transformation, of content creation and narrative meaning-making, and of sharing with an audience – all of which speak powerfully to the core processes which social media applications are designed to enable. The creation of an Instagram account or a Snapchat profile; the editing and filtering of a picture; the posting of what, across multiple social media platforms is explicitly called *My Story* – these are all processes of ‘artistic transposition of individual experiences’. Whilst it is important to understand that the audiences with whom social media content is shared can be manipulated and limited – social media users can restrict who can see their content, in other words – that core mechanism of transformation remains.

This Arendt-inspired framing sheds, I think, new light on one of the most frequently-cited spatial metaphors used for visualising social media – *networked publics*. The emergence of the term can be traced back to social media’s roots as websites designed to be accessed via desktop computers simply by virtue of the technology available. When MySpace launched in 2003, smartphones were in their infancy and mobile internet access was out of reach for the vast majority of consumers – particularly teenagers. Consequently, early academic research on what we might now more broadly define as social media was preoccupied with ‘social networking sites’ or SNSs. As outlined in the introduction, boyd and Ellison’s (2008) useful 2008 overview of scholarship on SNSs defined these sites as ‘web-based service[s]’ through which users could create personal profiles, collate lists of friends and view both their own connections and those *of* their friends (boyd and Ellison 2008: 211). Several spatial elements are at play in this definition. SNSs are defined as systems within systems – each user creates their own personal space within a wider *bounded* entity. Link-building between those personal spaces is possible, and users are able to see, while not actually participate in, the links that their own connections

have made, further out in the bounded space of the site. As such, space within SNSs might be said to be experienced by its users on two levels – first, via the immediate, one-to-one links they maintain with connections, which support direct communication, and second, via the onward links that their connections maintain, which can be observed but not participated in. One level of SNS public space is lived in; the other is observed, felt, known. A network, ultimately, is a way of conceiving social media space which foregrounds the connections between different parties – they are geographically separate and yet together. Individually curated spaces are present throughout social media, and yet each exists for – *because of* – the other individuals they touch and communicate with.

Tablets and particularly smartphones have now overtaken desktops as the major means for accessing the internet globally (*Guardian* 2 November 2016). In parallel, many of the original SNSs have developed increasingly popular mobile apps, whilst the more recent social media success stories, such as Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok all operate primarily or even entirely as mobile apps. boyd and Ellison's original definition is still applicable, however; these applications can be 'spatially imagined' in similar ways. Indeed, boyd's own 2014 book takes up her work with Ellison, and puts forward the central premise that social media enable teenagers to 'participate in and help create [...] *networked publics*' (boyd 2014: 5, original emphasis). She goes on to define networked publics as 'publics that are restructured by networked technologies [...] simultaneously (1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined community that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice' (boyd 2014: 8). Social media space, then, is characterised as both the *actual* (though virtual rather than physical) space constructed by the particular technology, website or application in question, and the *imagined* space constructed by the interacting users within it.

The increasing prominence of smartphones and tablets as devices for accessing social media points towards the third key element of social media space that I want to examine – mobility. Møller and Robards (2019) trace a 'spatial turn' in media studies throughout the 1990s and beyond, arguing that 'we have come to understand digital media as spaces that support, deny or are subject to different mobilities' (Møller and Robards 2019: 95). Not only are mobile devices now the

primary means for many individuals to access social media, carried through space and interacted with in numerous different locations, but they also incorporate location-tracking functionality which can make that location visible to *other* users. Mobility, then, for teenage social media users, means that their networked publics can be carried with them constantly – but also means there is a continuous potential for their own position in space to be accessed by others. As I discuss in the analytic chapter looking at risk, potentially sinister sensations can be associated with this.

Ultimately, then, social media spatiality can be characterised as a multiplicity of constantly shifting networks, partially private, partially public, and always dependent on other users. Social media space overlaps with and blurs into physical space, because it is carried *through* space via mobile devices, and because it tracks where users are geographically positioned. It can also make this geolocation visible to *other* users. The scale and dynamism of these networks – the way in which they, theoretically at least, can connect social media users to millions of others, all over the world – is truly new and transformative, and yet many of the interpersonal dynamics within those networks, and the negotiations between private and public, represent a direct line of continuity from the offline world.

Theorising social media temporality: (persistent) ephemerality and virtual multiplicities

Turning, then, to temporality within social media, and here there are two key concepts I want to explore: (persistent) ephemerality and virtual multiplicities. A particularly useful social media function for accessing these concepts is ‘My Story’, which appears across Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat, inviting users to curate an ongoing autobiographical narrative – but, crucially, one that they can go back and edit, amend or delete at any time. As such, there is an inherent instability to temporality within social media, because the ‘digital traces’ (Møller and Robards 2019) that social media users create are always only *potentially* permanent. Other social media functions are even more explicitly ephemeral, perhaps none more so than Snapchat ‘snaps’, which ostensibly self-destruct after a few seconds, yet can always *potentially* be screenshotted and saved.

As Jette Kofoed (2017) explains, both Snapchat and Instagram (the core social media platforms within my project) have in recent years experimented with new functions enabling both ephemeral storytelling and the saving and archiving of social media memories. In other words, social media providers are continually developing new ways for users to create and curate their personal narratives, to shape and reshape their digital histories. Kofoed's title, 'Temporal ephemerality, persistent affectivity' points, also, to the ways in which emotions circulate through and beyond social media, often with remarkable persistence – a model reflecting Ahmed's 'sticky' affects already mentioned (see also Ringrose and Kofoed 2012).

Another way of thinking through the circulation and persistence of affect within social media can be found through Brian Massumi's (2010) explorations of affect and temporality in relation to threat. He unpacks the ways in which an imagined future threat feels utterly real and affective in the present, inhabiting a strange and continuous temporality. Future threat or 'menace potential', he argues, contains 'so much more, potentially, than anything that has already happened' (Massumi 2010: 53), an elegant underlining of the vast scale of imagined future threats (and the emotional weight they can then imbue). Although Massumi's article does not focus specifically on social media and digital culture, there seems an echo here of some of the ideas I have pointed to in social media spatiality – the potential for the networked publics of social media to always be bigger. Likewise, Massumi's claim that threat 'passes through linear time, but does not belong to it. It belongs to the nonlinear circuit of the always will have been' (Massumi 2010: 54) seems to echo some of those ideas about social media temporality as continually (potentially) re-figurable.

Thinking about temporality as nonlinear and continually reconditioned also echoes Henri Bergson's theories of temporality – which have, in turn, heavily influenced Gilles Deleuze and more recent researchers of social media and digital technology in turn (see, for example, van Doorn 2011; Handyside and Ringrose 2017). It has been argued that Deleuze understood that 'what unites the whole of Bergson's thinking [...] is the idea of a virtual multiplicity' (Ansell-Pearson 2002: 2) and this, I think, is a particularly useful framework for examining temporality as experienced through social media. Beginning with the 'virtual' side of the phrase, there is a clear

harmony here between Bergson's own understanding of the term, borrowing from Proust to describe that which is 'real without being actual' (Shields 2003: 2), and contemporary understandings of the 'virtual' as tied to computing and internet-related contexts. Niels van Doorn points out that 'virtual' has 'generally evoked associations with "virtual reality", "cyberspace" and other informational environments', whilst the related 'virtuality' 'has often been used to signify either the opposite or a lack of 'reality': a state of unreality or absence' (van Doorn 2011: 532-533). Van Doorn's particular call is for a broader and richer understanding of the virtual, drawing on Bergson amongst others to figure the virtual as an 'immanent and immaterial form of agency of *potential*' (van Doorn 2011: 533, my emphasis). I want to take this further and re-centre the smartphone itself, which van Doorn does not dwell on so much (in part because his article is from 2011, when smartphones were not nearly so ubiquitous, particularly for social media). I want, then, to think about how the smartphone is sometimes imagined as *part* of the body, even as it is known not to be, and how the smartphone is used as the mechanism for 'artistically transposing' social media users *into* social media.

The 'multiplicity' element of Bergson's 'virtual multiplicity' points to an understanding of temporality as a collection of myriad parts and possibilities – which, crucially, are continually changing *through* time. Bergson argues that 'no two moments are identical in a conscious being' (Bergson 2007 [1946]: 137), because even as moments are recalled, they are changed, reconditioned by events and consciousness that have unfolded since. Memory is therefore a *productive* force, ensuring that the past is never experienced as it was but as *difference*. Crucially, this difference is both individual and subjective.

This productive alteration of the past by the unfolding present (and vice versa) is at the heart of Bergson's theory of duration, an understanding of time experience that is individual, subjective, and above all, intuitive. That is, duration can never be entirely represented either in metaphor or language (which is, after all, just another metaphor), because such attempts imbue it with fixity and spatiality that it does not possess. Metaphor cannot fully illustrate something that is both continually growing and continually reconditioning itself. Rather, individuals must intuitively sense towards their own shifting, changing 'psychic states' (Bergson 2001 [1913]).

Bergson does, however, draw some incomplete metaphors with which to illustrate facets of duration, including the image of a piece of elastic being stretched out from a single point (Bergson 2007 [1946]: 138). He urges us to focus not on the physical elastic (which we must imagine is indivisible and continuous, hence the metaphor's incompleteness), but on the path it traces. Like an individual's transition through time, the elastic can never be stopped or divided, even momentarily, and its 'tension or extension' means that movement, or change, is continual along its entirety, not merely the end reaching outward. A Bergsonian analysis of social media, then, demands that change is centred, and that the relationships of individual events or activities to an ever-growing 'whole' of social media are considered.

Social media both illustrate and disrupt duration's continual reconditioning of the past. Sometimes social media retain visual reminders of what has happened, in screenshots and activity scores, and sometimes social media ensure that those reminders dissolve, left only to be talked about, and therefore embellished, altered and edited without a physical reference point. Social media activity is, as I shall show, frequently discussed by young people after it has taken place, but these discussions shift and change what originally happened, as well as the emotional responses of those subjects. As such, I would argue that social media offer another (incomplete) metaphorical representation of duration.

Collectively, these theories of temporality enable social media temporality to be conceptualised as unstable and unfixed, constantly changing, continuously 'becoming' as it encapsulates myriad future possibilities. In other words, social media temporality can be conceptualised, like gender and like teenage bodies, through processes of potential.

Building my conceptual framework: what do I mean by virtual potentialities?

I wish to propose, then, the term *virtual potentialities* for characterising these transformed senses of temporality and spatiality, and the imaginative labour involved in navigating them.

By 'virtual', I draw a distinction between the physical world and the digital, whilst underlining that the digital world is no less 'real', no less integral to experience

than the physical. I underline, too, the imaginative work required to navigate that digital world, the constant cognitive labour entailed in conceptualising, visualising and considering, say, the networks of peers accessed through social media.

By ‘potentialities’, I emphasise the multitude of maybes and the continuous sense of possibility encapsulated in social media. Social media demand that users maintain a cognitive awareness of the different people who may see their content, how that content might be interpreted and judged, how it may be talked about, spread, amended. And that awareness can only ever be a multiplicity, because social media content and conversations can always be spread beyond the initial recipient *or* kept private, fixed in time *or* forgotten, interpreted as originally intended *or* reimagined. ‘Potentialities’ emphasises, also, the dynamic and multiple possibilities encapsulated in my conceptions of both gender and teenagerhood. I underline how both can be framed as processes of *becoming*, dynamic and ever-shifting, and shaped in part *by* technological landscapes like that of social media. If social media offer spaces and temporalities of multiple possibilities, then they offer, in part, places in which gender and teenagerhood can be negotiated.

The concept of virtual potentialities provides, therefore, the conceptual scaffolding on which my analytical chapters are hung. The first chapter, examining bodies and self-representation, is dominated by questions of how teenagers appear in their social media content – but also how they *might* appear to others, and where the lines might lie between authenticity and falsity. The second, examining intimacy, uses virtual potentialities to think about how teenagers decide whom to share things with through social media, and the constant question of how intimate social media activity *might* be blown open and exposed. And the third, examining risk, uses virtual potentialities to frame teenagers’ management of potential negativity through social media, how they *might* be at risk – and even where that risk might be enjoyable.

However, before I get to those analytical discussions I need to explain why I selected those themes, and how I collected the data I explore within them. My methodological approach is the topic of the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Finding storytellers, collecting stories: My methodological approach

A virtual potentialities framework offers a way of foregrounding multiplicity and negotiation between different possibilities. As I formulated that conceptualisation of social media, I found this focus on multiplicity hugely exciting – indeed, full of *potential* – but also confusing, bewildering, even confounding. How could I best use that framework to explore teenagers’ negotiations of gender and sexuality? What kinds of research methods would be most appropriate and most generative – most able to account for and embrace teenagers’ negotiations of myriad potential social media outcomes?

As I read through the various quotes and reflections on research – in particular, feminist research – that I collected through my MA and the beginnings of my PhD, I found myself returning over and over to Seyla Benhabib’s reflections on ‘making sense’. This, she argues, is less a linear progression from beginning to end, and more a continually shifting, developing and altering process:

[Making sense] involves, rather, the psychodynamic capacity to go on, to retell, to re-member, to reconfigure. Retelling, re-membering, and reconfiguring always entail more than one narrative; they occur in a “web of interlocution,” which is also a conversation with the other(s). Others are not just the subject matters of my story; they are also tellers of their own stories which compete with my own, unsettle my self-understanding, and spoil my attempts to mastermind my own narrative.

(Benhabib 1999: 348)

This paragraph seemed to point powerfully towards the ever-shifting virtual multiplicities of social media, in which content is saved, shared, amended, re/interpreted and shared again, in which the past is explicitly always present but also always reshaped and reformed. Making sense both within – and of – social media

involves continuous, dynamic processes of negotiation, and so my research methodology would need to take account of this dynamism too. Benhabib's writing seemed, also, to be an elegant description of collaborative meaning-making through research, where direct processes of data collection with other people, and subsequent analysis *of* that data, both work together to 'make sense'. And by framing this process through *stories* – stories told by multiple different parties – Benhabib helped me to see parallels and interconnections between the stories told by teenagers, and the stories that I am trying to tell here.

In this chapter I set out my development of a research methodology which would foreground, encourage and celebrate such collaborative meaning-making. I begin by explaining how I decided that a combination of observations and interviews, taking place over several sessions in a 'natural' interactive context, would be most useful. I then describe the process of finding such a context, explaining how I settled on carrying out my research within four youth clubs. From there, I discuss the practicalities of that fieldwork process, the time I spent in the clubs and ways in which I interacted with the teenagers there. This leads into a discussion of my ethical considerations and approaches, and then an explanation of how I ultimately organised and analysed the data I collected.

My first draft stopped there and presented, as my supervisors pointed out, a remarkably smooth and trouble-free impression of my research process. The reality, of course, was very different. From the planning, through the fieldwork itself, and throughout the data analysis and writing up, I travelled down myriad blind alleys, beginning particular approaches only to abandon them and start again. I omitted things that I later wished I had included; I noticed things that I wished I had better planned for. That first draft was, following Benhabib, an attempt to retell and reconfigure my fieldwork with the benefit of hindsight, to 'make it make sense' in a smooth and seamless way. But there is more sense, I hope, to be found in an explanation of my methodology's messiness, in a discussion of the ways in which my privileges, fragilities and limitations contributed to both the data I collected (and did not collect) and the ways in which I interpreted them. The final section acknowledges and examines that messiness.

Collecting social media stories: combining observation and interviews

As discussed throughout my literature review and conceptual framing, I am primarily interested in the *stories* teenagers tell about their social media activity and the ways in which they think such activity is gendered, or gendering. In devising a research methodology, then, I wanted to foreground teenagers' own voices, their processes of meaning-making in relation to social media, and their 'situated knowledge', without losing sight of my own 'situated knowledge' as researcher. I wanted, also, to find ways of accommodating the rapid pace of technological change, and of gathering data and drawing conclusions which could have longevity even when the fashionable apps of the time were superseded. And I wanted, following my virtual potentialities framework, to tease out the ways in which teenagers negotiated between multiple different possibilities, multiple different versions of how they understood their pasts and anticipated their futures.

This had several implications for my research methods. First, I needed to find a way of researching teenagers in a 'natural' context – that is, an environment where they went about everyday activity, engaged with their friends and generally could be expected to behave in similar ways whether or not I was there. Second, I wanted the teenagers to feel comfortable and in control of the research process, choosing, as far as possible, what to share with me and how to frame it. Third, it was more important for me to explore how teenagers, following Benhabib, 'made sense' of their social media activity than it was to interrogate and interpret that activity directly myself. Such processes of making sense would, I hoped, have more longevity than, say, the ways in which the teenagers used specific social media functions, as well as emphasising the ways in which teenagers interpreted and re-interpreted their social media lives. And fourth, I aimed to manage the research process as collaboratively as possible, both between myself and the participants, but also between the participants themselves. In other words, I knew that I wanted to focus on *collective* stories rather than individual ones, and on *interaction*, rather than individual experience.

These goals pointed towards finding such a 'natural' research environment and then recruiting teenagers in open-ended, organic ways, within their peer groups, rather than compelling them to participate as part of, say, a lesson at school. They

also suggested that it would be useful to spend time observing teenagers interacting in those peer groups and going about their everyday activities, as well as more explicitly talking to them about social media. And, crucially, they underlined the importance of the teenagers being able to access social media during the research process just as they would if I were not there – which in practice meant the teenagers having access to their phones, whether for social media purposes or otherwise, throughout. Ultimately, then, I decided that a combination of in-situ observation and qualitative group interviews would be most generative. Whilst I would allow one-to-one interviews if any teenagers were particularly keen – I would rather speak to such teenagers than not collect their stories at all – my focus would be on collaborative storytelling and meaning-making within group contexts.

By in-situ observation, I mean an extended and repeated time period through which I would visit the research contexts, watching the teenagers as they went about their everyday activities and engaged in everyday interaction. This would enable me to gradually build familiarity and trust with the teenagers, and in turn would enable a more organic approach to forming interview groups. It would also enable me to spend some time observing how teenagers used their phones, both individually and in groups. As I have already discussed, smartphones were, at the time of my research, extremely prevalent amongst UK teenagers, and their primary means of accessing social media. I wanted to observe the ways in which teenagers engaged with these mobile, ‘always on’ devices, and I discuss some of the embodiment I observed in Chapter 4.

I did not initially consider this observation phase an ethnographic research method; rather, I approached it as a kind of foundation-building for more effective interviews. However, Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson’s (2019) useful introduction to ethnography unpacks many of the features of such research, and points to ways in which observation could be a truly rich form of data collection in itself. Ethnographic studies, they write, usually involve ‘the researcher participating, overtly or covertly, in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, and/or asking questions through informal and formal interviews, collecting documents and artefacts’ (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019: 3). They emphasise, also, how data collection in ‘natural’ settings

'gives a distinct character to ethnographic work' (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019: 4), through which researchers must negotiate a particular role with participants. Ethnographies tend to be initially exploratory, and evolve over time. All this helped me to think about a period of observation and relationship-building as an active part of my data collection, not merely a means to an end. It helped me, also, to think more carefully about the spaces in which my fieldwork would take place, and myself as highly visible and clearly alien within them. An observation phase could help embed me better in the research space – though never completely.

A more specialised – and rich and varied – body of work on ethnography focuses specifically on *feminist* ethnography (see, for example, Davis and Craven 2016; Delamont 2003; Reinharz 1992; Skeggs 2001). As Skeggs writes, 'feminism and ethnography can suit each other. They both have experience, participants, definitions, meanings and sometimes subjectivity as a focus and they do not lose sight of context' (Skeggs 2001: 426). A period of observation and relationship-building before interviewing teenagers could operate as a means of foregrounding context, of getting to know the spaces and participants in my research. Skeggs also argues that 'feminist ethnography is about understanding *process*, and to do this, it has to occur across both time and space' (2001: 426, my emphasis), a phrase which leapt off the page and appealed to me precisely because of my interest in the spatio-temporality of social media. If, I wondered, my virtual potentialities framework is about conceptualising social media through negotiation between multiple different possibilities, is it also about understanding *process*? I return to this question throughout my analytical chapters, considering how the teenagers I interviewed described social media activities through combinations of reflection and anticipation.

Rachel O'Neill's (2015) ethnography of London's seduction community includes another spatio-temporal phrase which caught my attention. She emphasises that the activities she studies – seduction seminars, training and promotional events and so on – are 'spatially and temporally discontinuous' (O'Neill 2015: 2.5). With this in mind, her ethnographic research method offers a means of creating continuity *across* that discontinuity, of both finding and making a process across disparate times and spaces. Thinking about observation as a kind of feminist ethnography helped me

to see it not merely as a form of preparation for my interviews, but an integral *part* of my interviews.

Turning, then, to those interviews, by *qualitative* and *group* I wanted to foreground a dialogic and iterative approach to interviewing, where the discussion evolves and is driven as much by the participants as possible. Steinar Kvale urges us to consider interviews as ‘a construction site of knowledge [...] literally an *inter view*, an interchange of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest’ (Kvale 1996: 2, emphasis in original). Such a claim clearly foregrounds the interviewer as well as the interviewee and, by extension, the relationships and power dynamics between those individuals. It also emphasises the interview’s creative and productive qualities, underlining that interviews are not merely benign methods of data collection, transferring information from one individual to another; they are in themselves a form of active data *creation*.

Maria do Mar Pereira engages with these dynamics in action in her study on the epistemic status of women’s and gender studies in Portuguese academia. She emphasises the ‘dual status’ of her interviews as both *sources* of historical, institutional and social information, but also *discourses* of epistemic negotiation and performance in themselves (Pereira 2017). In particular, she examines her own position as a researcher situated simultaneously within and outside the community she studies, and the complex and asymmetrical power dynamics this generates, including, frequently, the experiences of being observed, evaluated and challenged by her research participants. Similarly, Lorraine Code’s 2014 review of the evolving state of feminist epistemologies explicitly underlines some of the complications, risks and challenges thus wrought by interview methods, and extends them into considerations of knowledge production itself: ‘[T]estimony is by definition interactive; it brings such complex matters as trust, credibility, responsiveness and responsibility, epistemic character and “situation” into focus in knowledge-making and knowledge-circulating practices.’ (Code 2014: 152). These definitions and observations are not, of course, calls to abandon interviews as research methods for reasons of unreliability. Rather, they demand that attention be paid to both the dialogic and generative aspects of the data (including both verbal and non-verbal communication) generated within interviews, and the unequal and shifting relations

of power between interviewers and interviewees. Group interviews are both sources of facts, and situated performances; as such, they generate multiple different forms of data simultaneously.

Further reflections on the unique nature of group interviews, both mixed and single-sex, and the ways in which they contrast with individual interviews, are offered by Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman in their research on boyhoods and masculinities in London. 'We want to examine boyhoods, by focusing on the interviews not so much as instruments for eliciting information about what it was really like being a boy but as particular *contexts* where boys were performing, displaying and experiencing aspects of boyhood' (Pattman et al 2005: 556, my emphasis), they explain. By comparing and contrasting boys' behaviours, presentations and dialogues in different types of interviews, Pattman et al argue that 'boyhoods may be lived and experienced by our participants in contradictory ways' (Pattman et al 2005: 55). In other words, group interviews may encourage performances and discussions of boyhood and masculinity which differ from those explored one-to-one. The bravado or shyness, enthusiasm or aversion which boys display alongside and in direct response to *other* boys may contrast, sometimes very starkly, with their behaviour outside of that group setting. And this is not to say that one version of boyhood, masculinity or identity is more authentic than the other – rather, that all are context-specific. Group interviews highlight and encourage particularly *social* dimensions of boyhood, masculinity and identity – which, of course, have particular resonance for a study focusing on *social* media.

The writers develop these ideas in more detail in their book *Young Masculinities* (2002), setting out both group and individual interviews as "co-constructions' [...] a kind of collaborative quest' (Frosh et al 2002: 25), but also using individual interviews as sites for participants to reflect upon and in some cases revise the views explored in group sessions. As Renold describes in her review of the book, this has the effect of offering 'a rare and insightful account of the interview process as a 'social space' in which boys enact and reflect upon their emerging masculinities' (Renold 2004: 456). Whilst *Young Masculinities* uses a particularly structured approach to encourage research participants to explore their experiences of being interviewed, it also offers a useful reminder that *all* interviews are themselves sites

of performance and negotiation, through which participants navigate their identity presentation in different ways. Where those interviews are one-to-one, identity presentation takes place largely in relation to the interviewer; where those interviews are in groups, identity presentation also takes place in relation to other interviewees.

Pattman et al's 2005 article also includes some interesting reflections on the dynamics generated between groups of boys being interviewed by Rob Pattman himself, where 'some boys referred to Rob's masculinity as providing the basis of the rapport he established with them, enabling them to talk 'freely' about topics such as porn and to be particularly critical of girls' (Pattman et al 2005: 557). And, like the reflections on group interviews as teasing out specific social and therefore often performative aspects of masculinities, these observations are just as applicable to girl research participants and the negotiation of femininities. As a woman planning to interview teenage girls as well as boys, I found these observations a useful reminder of gendered and gendering dynamics as operating within group interviews themselves – and including me as interviewer. In groups composed entirely of girls I might be viewed more as confidante; in groups composed entirely of boys I might be viewed more as 'other'. In mixed groups perhaps there would be a mixed reaction. Whilst such dynamics would be impossible to pin down in any sort of objective way, I should certainly be prepared for them, and look for gendered ways in which the participants responded and performed to me – and each other.

Following these writers, then, I decided that semi-structured, primarily group interviews, framed around an encouragement to tell stories and build narratives, would offer a particularly generative means of carrying out research with teenagers. They would enable me to foreground the situations and the voices of my research participants. They would enable me, also, to think carefully about the ongoing processes of curation and creativity, omission and amendment which characterise both social media activity, and *interview* activity, particularly group interview activity. I knew that I would need to view my interviews as active processes of meaning-making, not only in themselves as dialogues between myself and the research participants but also extended in two directions; 'forwards' into my interpretation and analysis of those interviews, and 'backwards' into the social media activity

described and discussed. Participants reflecting on their social media practices may reinterpret and reshape particular behaviours – behaviours which, in their original iterations, were also carried out with deliberate interpretations and effects in mind. I am interested, then, in the multiple layers of language, both verbal and visual, which make up social media activity – and the stories told *about* that activity.

I knew, also, that I would need to pay particular attention to group interviews as sites in which particular masculinities and femininities, friendships, relationships and identities were themselves performed, negotiated and even evaded. Following Pattman et al, I would need to pay attention to the ways in which different interview environments might elicit contradictory responses in the participants, and the ways in which my own positionality might encourage particular types of group discussion. Because of my desire to enable the interviews to take place in as ‘natural’ and ‘organic’ a way as possible, group interviews seemed likely to emerge out of pre-existing friendship groups (and indeed, this is broadly what happened in practice, whether via apparently dominant individuals encouraging friends to participate alongside themselves, or a group who were already chatting or playing together in the club agreeing to be interviewed when I approached them). This generally made for the relaxed, open interview environment I wanted – but it also meant that the majority of the data I collected emerged from environments in which teenagers were performing to their peer group, and thinking and talking about gender with peers present.

Still another layer of productive dynamism should, however, be held in mind for a study focusing on social media. If interviews are places and processes of meaning-making in themselves, then they are also interviews *about* other places and processes of meaning-making; that is, social media. In a sense, interviews about social media are processes of storytelling *about* storytelling. As my research progressed, I attempted to retain an awareness of these multiple moving layers of representation, interpretation and narrative. I analysed the ways in which teenagers framed and reframed particular social media experiences, questioning how distance from particular social media events – whether temporal, or because such events related to other teenagers, rather than those who were speaking – affected the stories that they told.

Encouraging and interpreting these data as forms of storytelling is a particular methodological choice, and one which has been explored in various studies of sociological research methods. Storytelling has, for example, been understood as a process of narrative meaning-making or memory work (see, for example, Cavarero 2000; Hendry 2007; Onyx and Small 2001), and as a deeply feminist practice, through which 'women have carried culture across time and space' (McNamara 2009: 161). I find resonance in these studies both from a feminist perspective and in terms of my virtual potentialities framework. If, through virtual potentialities, I think of social media as multiple 'what ifs?' then storytelling offers a means of working through those possibilities, drawing on past experiences and giving them a narrative shape.

Storytelling also has a powerful creative dimension, one that I have grappled with explicitly in trying to turn my fieldwork findings into a coherent whole, or trying to explain the literature review and theoretical thinking which ultimately led me to virtual potentialities. Patrick J. Lewis (2011) draws on Cavavero, Hendry and others to argue for storytelling as deeply profound, even sacred, and existing in an almost symbiotic relationship with humans – and he also creatively demonstrates storytelling in action through the form of his article. It is divided into three sections; a more 'traditional' academic essay bookends a story of his own, in which he appears as 'Mr Lewis', the classroom teacher. I discovered his article not at the beginning of my PhD but at the end, whilst I was refining my analytical chapters, and it inspired me to create a series of vignettes to sit at the beginning of each. These vignettes operate as creative summaries of the themes I am exploring; imaginative introductions to my learnings about teenagers and social media. They are entirely fictionalised amalgamations of some of the stories I was told; they are, to borrow again from Benhabib, another layer of the 'web of interlocution' (1999: 348) that has comprised my doctoral research. Stories create new stories.

However, before I could get there, I needed to actually put these methodological decisions into practice. Having decided that I wanted to blend observation with this 'organic' and iterative style of interviewing, to encourage and analyse my interview data as storytelling, the next challenge became finding a group of teenagers to actually work with.

Where to research teenagers?

I initially – and perhaps lazily – assumed that my fieldwork would be best located within schools, simply because schools offer a self-contained and well-regulated environment through which to access large numbers of teenagers. They are places where young people spend a great deal of time interacting ‘naturally’ in peer groups – though they are also, of course, highly-regulated environments in which young people also spend a great deal of time following strict rules and structures. Nevertheless, a great many of the studies I discussed in the literature review took place in schools, and I had already conducted similar, schools-based research as part of my MA. As such, when I came to start planning my fieldwork, I diligently sent out an email to dozens of schools both near my home and further away – and received no replies at all. Whether I had failed to adequately set out the value of the project, my own credentials or the schools simply did not have the time or the inclination to host such research, I cannot know – but a different approach was clearly needed.

I therefore reflected upon alternative settings that bring teenagers together in ‘natural’ groups and which might have the time and space to host my research – and realised that youth clubs could actually be places of far richer potential for my project. Youth clubs are places of social interaction, creativity and leisure activity much like social media themselves – and, unlike schools, they are places where young people are able to use their phones and access social media as they wish. Attendance at youth clubs is generally voluntary, meaning that ‘natural’ peer groups, relationships and behaviours are more likely to be foregrounded, although clubs have their own rules and codes of conduct. As such, I hoped that locating my research in such clubs might offer a closer relationship between the environment in which the research took place, and the *digital* environment I was researching. I sent out a new email (reproduced in Appendix B) to a series of clubs – and was delighted to receive several enthusiastic invitations. Eventually, I carried out my fieldwork in four such clubs – three situated in inner London boroughs, and one in a market town in the North East of England.

What all four clubs had in common were locations in areas of relative economic deprivation, and an associated, charitable remit to provide services and

support which the attendees might otherwise struggle to access, from games and leisure activities, to sexual health advice and careers planning. However, the attendees of the youth clubs varied according to local demographics; a majority of the attendees at the London youth clubs were black or mixed race, whilst every attendee of the North East club was white. Interestingly, all the attendees at the North East club were also male, something which the youth workers explained had developed organically, as opposed to being a specific policy. The clubs also varied in terms of the age range they catered to; three were for secondary school-aged children only (aged eleven and over), whilst one of the London clubs also catered to younger children.

A similar range of facilities was on offer at each club, including pool tables, video games and dance spaces – and the teenagers attended the clubs to use these and to socialise – not to discuss their social media activity with a stranger. Methodologically, then, developing a rapport with the teenagers over time, building trust and encouraging them to participate voluntarily became important on two levels. As I have already outlined, it would encourage the teenagers to more openly and comfortably tell me stories about their social media experiences, building familiarity and trust and (partially) dismantling the implicit power imbalances between us. However, it would also encourage them to participate voluntarily in the first place, shifting me from suspicious stranger to, whilst certainly not a friend, something more familiar.

Observations and interviews: the practicalities of the process

Following these practical and ethical considerations, I ultimately combined two broad research methods. First, I undertook a more casual, observational role in each youth club over a period of time – generally on a weekly or twice-weekly basis over three to four weeks. This typically involved sitting with the youth worker taking attendance as young people arrived at the club, introducing myself and casually chatting to anyone who stopped, whilst also observing the way the young people used the club, moved around the space and gathered in certain areas, particularly

with regard to how they used their phones. In one youth club, I was invited to actively participate in activities such as painting as part of this introductory stage.

This approach proved productive and enlightening; I recorded a shift in one club from a particular teenager asking ‘are you a police officer?’ on my first visit, to, several weeks later, that individual proactively approaching me to tell me that the club had opened when I had been waiting outside. Another girl, whom I have named Naomi in my analytical discussions, was initially dismissive of my presence at the club in a loud and expressive way, shouting comments along the lines of ‘no way’ when youth workers suggested she might like to speak to me. After a few weeks, she chose to come and do some drawing at the table where I was sitting, chatting to me casually, and a week or two after that she chose to participate in a structured interview. These shifts, then, not only marked a successful building of familiarity over time, but also emphasised how important it was for me to consider the relationship between myself and the teenagers, and how they were likely to perceive me. I was very explicitly *not* part of the same communities as my research participants – a point made vocally by one teenager during an initial scoping visit, who loudly declared ‘you sound too posh to be from around here’ – but nor did I occupy the same authoritative adult status as a teacher or youth worker. I sought, therefore, to pay close attention to the *evolution* of my relationship with the teenage participants, reflecting on their behaviours and engagement with me week after week, and their changing (or consistent) language over the course of the research.

Throughout this first phase I produced written notes, commenting on the ways in which I watched the teenagers moving around the clubs, interacting with each other and with me, and using their phones. I noted, for example, how the teenagers often, but not always, congregated in single-sex groups, and just how much their smartphones held their attention, both individually and collectively. I noted the ways in which particular teenagers’ interactions with me changed over several sessions, as with Naomi above. Sometimes I took these notes (as subtly as possible) whilst actually in the youth clubs; more often I wrote them up after I went home. These notes are not foregrounded in my analytical chapters, but I do occasionally quote from them to illustrate particular points, and I used them to remind myself of the evolving relationships with individual teenagers when writing

many months later. There is a rich literature on taking and analysing fieldnotes, which I admittedly did not engage with prior to my fieldwork; rather, I approached my note-taking as a kind of informal diary or aide-memoire. However, as with many aspects of my methodology, I later discovered literature which helped me better analyse my process, unpacking the multiple layers of memory, interpretation and re-interpretation which go into writing, and writing up fieldnotes (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019; Schatzman and Strauss 1973). This enabled me to re-interpret my fieldnotes as my own stories about what happened within the youth clubs – and therefore to more firmly justify my decision to keep them in the background of my analysis, so as to foreground the teenagers' own voices. I read, too, Laura Harvey's (2011) article on private diaries in qualitative research, and whilst I did not consider my fieldnotes to be diaries at the time, Harvey's suggestion that diaries can 'provide a way for participants and researchers to explore ambivalence in their intimate daily lives' (Harvey 2011: 665) seemed resonant. Re-reading my fieldnotes later, particularly the descriptions of how certain teenagers seemed to become more familiar over time, reminded me that those changes were ambivalent, not linear. The fieldnotes helped me to better see some of the privileges and fragilities I unpack below.

Second, I carried out semi-structured interviews with forty-seven teenagers aged from thirteen to nineteen – they are profiled in more detail in Appendix A. On one or two occasions these interviews were one-to-one (although even then, other teenagers sometimes joined the interview for a short period of time before leaving), but the majority of interviews took place in groups featuring between three and nine young people. In order to structure the interviews, I began by creating a list of topics or themes (reproduced in Appendix C) that I wanted to cover, based on those which emerged from the existing literature and my theoretical framework. These included practical questions around when and how the teenagers actually used social media – which quickly focused the study on the two most popular applications of the time – Snapchat and Instagram. As I note in my conclusion, TikTok only launched in the UK after I had completed my fieldwork, though it rapidly became an enormously popular application, particularly amongst young people.

Finding ways of drawing conclusions which can hold some longevity even as the technology researched evolves is a particular challenge of working with new media. I have attempted to meet this challenge in part by, as discussed, not centring the specific functionality of Snapchat and Instagram in my study. Nevertheless, it was important to consider aspects like their inbuilt editing capabilities, and these emerge throughout the analytical chapters. Other practical questions considered who the teenagers were connected to on social media and the types of content they shared; their processes of creating and curating social media content, and appraising *other* users' content; and any risks or fears they felt associated with social media. The list of themes also included a broader focus on processes of gendering, gender similarities, differences and hierarchies. I wanted to invite discussion of gender without asking leading questions which implied that there 'must' be, for example, differences in how teen boys and girls used social media. I was more successful with regard to this in some interviews than others, as I discuss in the analytical chapters. Above all, I wanted to build an atmosphere of debate and discussion, agreement and disagreement, as crucial to developing collaborative, collective storytelling and meaning-making. I wanted to identify and analyse places where the teenagers bounced ideas off each other, built stories together, were bolstered or challenged by each other. These themes and questions therefore provided a rough plan for each interview, but I was primarily led by the participants in structuring my questions. In different interviews I followed up on different topics and stories which the teenagers ventured, and tried to foster an active discussion; this was broadly successful, with the teenagers in several of the interviews relaxing into enthusiastic conversation with myself, and each other.

It is worth underlining that I did not ask questions or encourage discussion about social media influencers or celebrities. Such individuals, and the wider online cultures of which they are part, are undoubtedly an important part of UK teenagers' social media lives. Teenagers' relations to and feelings about influencer culture are fascinating subsections of the broader literature on young people and new media, and could potentially have been a very fruitful area of discussion. I do reference influencers briefly in the chapter on bodies and self-representation. However, as already discussed, my focus was always on how teenagers told stories, interpreted

and understood their *own* social media activity. As it happened, none of the teenagers volunteered lengthy discussions of influencer culture, even within my very open, participant-led interview structure. Perhaps that tells us that (these teens) had plenty of stories to tell about themselves, and their immediate peers.

Throughout, I encouraged the teenagers to have their phones out if they wished, to play with them and respond to them. This was partly so I could further observe how the teenagers engaged with their phones, and partly so they could use them to illustrate or develop particular points if they wished. It deviated from the usual status of phones in spaces of adult authority, where they have to be put away (indeed, in one of the interviews, the teenagers complained about precisely this at school, and I quote from that interview in the chapter on embodiment). As such, it was an attempt to recreate some of the socialising and huddling around mobile devices that I had already observed during the observation phase. It allowed for a more 'live' engagement with social media, and encouraged further discussion of how much the phones felt like part of the teenagers' bodies, as I discuss in the first analytical chapter.

Occasionally the teenagers would show me things on their phones, for example to illustrate the 'Quick Adds' function within Snapchat, but I did not ask them to do this; indeed, I explicitly asked them *not* to show me content they had been sent, or other users' social media profiles. This was for two main reasons: first, as I have already outlined, I was primarily interested in the ways in which teenagers themselves framed and interpreted social media activity, rather than foregrounding my own interpretation of particular content. In other words, I wanted to explore how the teenagers understood, say, their self-representation within social media, rather than appraising that self-representation myself. Second, I was aware that the networked nature of social media meant that asking to see particular content on teenagers' phones could easily result in them accidentally showing me *other* teenagers' social media content, which I would not have explicit permission to view. I explore this further in the ethics section below. I recorded the interviews on a Dictaphone which I discussed with the participants before turning on – this too is unpacked further in the ethics section. Most of the interviews lasted between forty-five minutes and an hour.

Thinking ethically: iterative approaches

All social researchers must pay careful attention to the ethical dimensions of the project, but this is particularly important when working with potentially vulnerable participants, including those aged under eighteen. Chih Hoong Sin (2005) recommends that social researchers view ethical frameworks neither as processes to tick off at the beginning of fieldwork procedures nor as bolt-ons to incorporate at the end, but rather, as reflexive processes which should be continually revisited throughout the research process and, if necessary, updated in line with new learnings or new input from participants. From the outset, I considered this approach to be particularly salient when working with young people and securing informed consent, and I planned to regularly ask participants to re-confirm that they were comfortable with and consented to the research process throughout. In the event – and perhaps it was something I should have predicted – an iterative, reflexive and adaptive approach to ethical considerations proved far more multi-faceted than merely checking back with my research participants every so often throughout the fieldwork – though I did this also. Rather, I continually reflected upon and adapted my entire approach to ethics over the course of the fieldwork, as I will explain here.

The British Educational Research Association (BERA) sets out specific responsibilities which social researchers should hold toward young and vulnerable participants. These include respect, mindfulness of structural inequalities and maximising benefits whilst minimising harms. BERA endorses the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which requires a foregrounding of the best interests of participants at all times. All participants capable of forming their own views should be enabled to express those views freely and comprehensively (BERA 2018: 15).

Detailed guidance is offered around:

- informed consent;
- transparency throughout the research process;
- rights of withdrawal;
- sensible offering of incentives;
- clarity around possible harms and steps to minimise them;

- privacy and data storage; and
- disclosure of illegal or harmful information which may come to light throughout the process of the research. (BERA 2018: 6-26).

Specific advice and principles are offered to researchers of social media and online activities. Researchers are reminded that ‘digital information is generated by individuals’ (BERA 2018: 7) and that they must therefore consider issues such as the traceability and authorship of online content, and with what consent that content is viewed or gathered. They are reminded, also, that ‘ambiguity about privacy within some online communities in which sensitive or illegal topics are being discussed, or material shared, raises further ethical concerns’ (BERA 2018: 23).

I developed a careful plan. I wrote out a description of the project in language chosen to be accessible and engaging for teenagers, covering all of the areas stipulated by the BERA guidelines. This was signed off as part of a mandatory ethics process at the University of Warwick and is reproduced in Appendix D. I printed out multiple copies, and attached two separate consent forms – one for the teenager themselves, and one for their parents. The reaction from the youth workers in each club, however, was rather different. They advised me that forms which the attendees had to take home and then bring back at a later date were highly unlikely to be returned, largely because of the more casual and voluntary environment of the youth clubs compared with schools. More importantly, in order to join the clubs in the first place, each young person had had to read and sign an agreement, along with their parent or guardian, which covered a code of conduct for behaviour and explained that third parties would sometimes deliver sessions within the clubs. Youth clubs, then, were proving a more flexible and casual research location than I suspect schools would have been, and it was important to adapt my methodological and ethical approach accordingly.

We agreed – and I also discussed this with my supervisors – that a more appropriate means of gaining informed consent would be for me to speak to the young people as a group and alongside a youth worker, explaining my project, inviting them to ask questions, and explaining that if they wished, they could participate when I attended the club over the coming weeks. This would be more engaging and informative than a written document which they might not otherwise

read, and it would embed my research within the broader structure of the clubs. It would also give the teenagers the opportunity to go home and discuss the project with their parents or guardians before participating, and to ask further questions either of me or the youth workers.

At each club, my introduction explained that I was a doctoral researcher at the University of Warwick, that I was researching teenagers, social media and gender, and that I was interested in what they had to say about these issues through an interview format. I stressed that participation was voluntary, that they were free to leave at any time, and even if they participated they did not have to speak. I stressed, also, that participation would be anonymous, that their names and the name of the youth club would never be mentioned in writing or verbally. I would record the interviews on a Dictaphone but when I transcribed them each participant would be given a pseudonym, and no one else would have access to the recordings. I explained that my research would be written up into a PhD thesis, and would potentially appear in publications like journal articles or be spoken about at conferences but that again, their real names and that of their club would never be mentioned. And I discussed why they might think research like this was important, and how it was an opportunity to have their say about an issue that directly affected them.

This final point was reiterated by the youth workers, who actively encouraged the teenagers to participate as part of the clubs' wider programs of activities and events. The written information document, with consent forms, was offered to the teenagers to take away. Then, at the beginning of each interview, I gave a similar speech, setting out the details of the project and inviting questions. My primary goal each time was to emphasise the teenagers' own agency; that this was an opportunity to share their thoughts as much or as little as they liked. All teenagers were required to sign the consent form *before* participating in the interview, and many also brought back a signed copy from a parent or guardian at home, though sometimes after they had participated. As predicted by the youth workers, some participants never returned a signed copy from a parent or guardian. Whilst I felt anxious about this, the combined judgement of myself, the youth workers and my PhD supervisors was that this was an acceptable compromise given the broader structure of the youth clubs, the parental agreements which framed the teenagers' attendance, and the

casual nature of the interviews, which ultimately never pushed participants into vulnerable positions.

Nevertheless, this made it particularly important to pay attention to the structure of the interview process and to ensure that the youth workers had oversight over what was being said, by myself and the teenagers. In order to ensure that my research was in line with the ethos of the clubs, their safeguarding practices and those original signed codes of conduct, and that the youth workers retained awareness of what was being said, each interview took place in open or semi-open areas of the clubs, either with a youth worker present or regularly entering. Given the highly friendly and familiar relationships which the youth workers maintained with the attendees – far less formal than, say, typical pupil/teacher relationships, I did not feel that their presence had a restrictive or detrimental effect on the teenagers' willingness to speak – if anything, I felt that it encouraged the teenagers to feel comfortable with me. I did not offer formal incentives, but I brought sweets to each interview, and invited the teenagers to help themselves. The youth workers had suggested that this would prove popular, and this seemed to be borne out by the participants' enthusiasm! It also helped to create a relaxed, friendly and informal atmosphere.

As highlighted in the BERA guidelines, it was important to consider the unique ethical dimensions of carrying out research relating to digital technology and social media. I knew that my focus on the *stories* teenagers told about social media, rather than a direct interrogation of social media content itself, would help to navigate some of the difficulties the guidelines highlight around online authorship and privacy. Nevertheless, I had to anticipate the possibility of being shown content produced by someone who was not participating in the research, and who had not given me permission to view it. I was careful to advise the teenagers not to show me social media content that they had not produced themselves, whether other users' profiles or content that they had been sent. The teenagers often drew on their phones to illustrate their discussions, scrolling through their social media accounts whilst telling me how many 'likes', friends or messages they had, but only very rarely showed me things directly. As mentioned above, these things were usually specific aspects of social media functionality, such as Snapchat's 'Quick Adds'. Interestingly, these

considerations highlighted another dimension of the dynamic spatiality of social media, in which content may travel far beyond its intended audience; as such, they helped me to better formulate my virtual potentialities framework.

As Annette Markham (2011) underlines, the pace of technological change in the digital landscape is extremely fast, and researchers in this area need to be prepared to continually reflect upon and update their ethical frameworks accordingly. This is perhaps more important when using digital research methods, such as those involving direct connection with research participants through social media platforms. Nevertheless, an iterative, responsive approach to ethics was still important for me to consider when formulating the framework for my interviews and thinking about my interaction with the teenagers. In particular, I thought about it in relation to anticipating potentially problematic or harmful themes which might emerge through the interviews. During the course of my PhD, links between young people's mental health and social media became noticeably more prominent in the mainstream media. For example, in 2017, fourteen-year-old Molly Russell tragically took her own life. Her parents later discovered that she had been viewing images related to self-harm and suicide on Instagram, and embarked on a campaign to better protect young people from such material which was well-reported in the British media over the following years (see, for example *BBC News Online* 28 October 2019; *Guardian* 18 March 2019; *Sky News* 17 January 2020). As such, throughout my doctoral studies, I was careful to pay continuous attention to the evolving UK media landscape in relation to social media and young people in particular. I did not feel that anything occurred which merited a significant reframing of my interviews, but I did retain a keen awareness of the potential links between mental health and social media when conducting my research. I focused on asking open questions, empowering the teenagers to say as much or as little as they wished, and was fully prepared to stop interviews or speak individually to participants after interviews if they showed any distress or discussed themes which I considered to be concerning.

Indeed, I knew before I began my research that I would be asking questions about potentially very private aspects of teenagers' lives. As discussed in my literature review, social media are places where teenagers *live* – they are, therefore, places where teenagers engage in potentially intimate, sensitive or even illegal

activity – in particular, creating and sharing sexually explicit images of those aged under eighteen. I considered the ethical dimensions of this very carefully. In my speech at the beginning of each interview I explained that whilst the interview would be anonymous, if I heard anything that I suspected to be harmful or illegal, I would be compelled to escalate it, through discussion with the youth workers. Interestingly, most of the teenagers I interviewed seemed very relaxed with this and indeed very familiar with the process for reporting illegal activity within social media; as I report in the final analytical chapter, several of the teenagers described incidents where particular social media incidents had been escalated to parents, teachers or the police. In the event, the teenagers I interviewed only made reference to historic incidents which had already been reported. Nevertheless, I remained alert to these possibilities throughout each interview, and on the few occasions when teenagers referenced what sounded like particularly emotional or challenging incidents, I was careful to reassure them that they did not need to discuss this if they did not want to. I was careful, also, to check and re-check with teenagers who described emotionally heightened experiences if they were feeling okay.

A final practical point to highlight in relation to ethics is that I secured an Enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) certificate through the University of Warwick before beginning my research, and made this clear to all the youth clubs I approached. And a final *observational* point to highlight in relation to ethics is that I ultimately felt very satisfied with the relationship I built up with the teenage participants; I feel confident in stating that the majority of participants seemed to actively enjoy the process, participating energetically and enthusiastically, and thanking me at the end of the interviews. This, I hope, is a testament to a careful and participant-centric approach to ethics throughout.

Analysing the data: stories and meaning-making, limitations and omissions

I did not have a particular number of interviews in mind that I wanted to secure; I transitioned from the fieldwork phase to the analytical phase of my research in a relatively open way. I reached a point where I had interviewed the most enthusiastic and interested teenagers in each youth club, and was struggling to

encourage additional teenagers to participate. Additionally, fewer teenagers were actually attending the youth clubs due to the good weather of the summer months, which was encouraging them to spend more time outside. This felt, then, like an appropriate time to move into my data analysis – which was heavily influenced by Braun and Clarke’s 2006 article on thematic analysis. They set out six specific stages for conducting such analysis: familiarising yourself with your data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the report. I followed these stages, through slightly more loosely than their article proposes. Rather, their stages provided a loose blueprint for my analytical process.

I began by transcribing the interviews, which was simultaneously useful (in terms of re-familiarising myself with the data, particularly some weeks after the interviews had taken place) and hugely challenging (because the teenagers often spoke extremely quickly, with strong regional accents, frequent use of slang, multiple interruptions and a great deal of background noise from the youth clubs). I applied pseudonyms at the point of transcription, so I never stored the participants’ names in written form. Choosing pseudonyms felt like a fraught process; I worried about reinforcing classed, racial and/or ethnic stereotypes on the one hand, and accidentally flattening the diversity of the participants on the other. Ultimately, however, I felt that pseudonyms offered the best compromise between ensuring participant anonymity, and accurately reflecting the sense of narrative and dialogue within the interviews. As I have explained throughout this chapter, collective and interactive meaning-making in the group interview context is central to my analysis, and so conversations between participants, enthusiastic agreements and passionate *disagreements*, are reproduced and analysed in the discussions that follow.

Next, I read and re-read the transcripts, noting down and highlighting particular themes, stories or even individual words which either seemed to emerge repeatedly, or stood out as particularly striking or interesting, and which related to the core research focus of gender and sexuality. As part of this process, I sometimes used the ‘find’ function within Microsoft Word to seek out particular words within the text – this, for example, is how I identified repeat use of the term ‘expose’, which I discuss in the chapters on intimacy and risk. From there, I gradually sorted these

extracts into three broad thematic categories, each of which explored different dimensions of gender and sexuality. The first category related to self-representation and embodiment; the second related to relationships and intimacy; and the third related to disciplinary or risk management practices. Each thematic category would map onto an individual analytical chapter. It is important, however, to underline that this process was not straightforward, and the thematic categories were not – and are not – tightly bounded and entirely discrete. I moved several of the extracts between different chapters throughout the analysis and writing process, changing my mind as to where they best fitted and built the most compelling story. Some of the extracts I initially intended to include in my analysis I ended up removing because they proved repetitive.

As outlined in both my research question and the previous chapter, I conceptualise social media through a model of ‘virtual potentialities’. That is, I consider social media activities and experiences to be characterised by continuous *negotiation* between multiple different future possibilities. Throughout my analysis, I sought to pay attention to such negotiations, and to highlight the ways in which the teenagers navigated them. Additionally, as I have already discussed, I prioritised processes of storytelling, narrative and meaning-making – sometimes individual but primarily collective and collaborative – and these operated across several different levels. One level incorporated the interviews as data collection – the ways in which the teenagers told stories about their social media experiences, and the ways in which they collectively judged and interpreted social media behaviour and content. Another level incorporated the interviews as situated performance – the ways in which the teenagers bounced ideas off each other, convinced each other of different perspectives, played on different personas. Following my reading of Frosh, Phoenix and Pattman, this level also incorporated the specific nature of *group* interviews, and the ways in which group relationships seemed to encourage particular, and sometimes contradictory performances. The friendship groups present in most of my interviews seemed to encourage the development of particular characters or personas, from noisy ‘jokers’ to quiet ‘thinkers’ – characters which incorporate gendered, and gendering characteristics – and I paid attention to these in my analysis, describing tone, body language and the reaction of other group members

where relevant. Meanwhile, as for Pattman et al, different discussions of masculinities and femininities notably emerged in different types of groups; mixed groups tended to be more considerate, hesitant or even awkward in making broad statements about 'boys' and 'girls', whereas single-sex groups were much more forthright. And as part of this, I was aware that certain groups of girls seemed to treat me as 'in the know' or perhaps even a confidante in a way that the boys certainly did not – for example, in comically sighing about the difficulties of finding a boyfriend. By contrast, in some mixed groups I noticed particularly mannered portrayals of a certain kind of masculinity, with boys lying almost horizontally in their chairs, splaying their legs and speaking laconically, even dismissively, including in response to the girls. Finally, another level of storytelling and meaning-making incorporated the social media experiences actually described by the teenagers – the ways in which teen social media activity involves curation, creativity and meaning-making.

Following, also, the feminist epistemologies which frame my approach, the positionalities of both myself and my research participants have an important influence on the data I was able to collect, and the ways in which I analysed them. As such, I have aimed to highlight points where I think my own values or experiences are overly foregrounded, or mean that I frame questions in leading ways. For example, my feminist politics appear a little clumsily in the chapter on risk, where I try to encourage one of the teenagers to discuss the sexist double standards implicit in judging a girl, but not a boy, for participating in a sexual act. Equally, I have provided brief descriptions of the teenagers in my analysis, including commentary on how their friendships seemed to shape their discussions.

Nevertheless, it is important to underline that there are myriad specificities of my research participants' contexts that I do *not* centre in my analysis. As I have made clear, the youth clubs I worked in were all located in areas of relative economic deprivation, and whilst the attendees of the northern youth club were all white, the attendees of the London clubs were predominantly black and mixed race. There are points in my analysis where I briefly engage with some of these issues, underlining the differences that they opened up between myself and the research participants – that statement 'you sound too posh to be from around here', is a case in point. Likewise, there are points in which I have highlighted the ways in which class and

race inflected and affected the participants' experiences of social media (the chapter on bodies and self-representation, for example, considers racialised dimensions of beauty in social media imagery). However, it is important to make clear that I did not engage at length with race or class either in establishing my research methodology, or in my data analysis.

These absences are partly practical; I sought to use virtual potentialities as a *framework* to think about and analyse the stories teenagers tell about social media and gender. In other words, I wanted to foreground the spatio-temporal ways in which I conceptualise social media, rather than the specific positionalities of the participants, important though I knew they were. Additionally, whilst I know that gender never exists in a vacuum and that, following Crenshaw (1989; 1991) and others, it must be understood as productively interacting with myriad other categories and power dynamics, I still wanted to lead with gender. In a space-limited PhD project, there are always absences and omissions – indeed, much of the research training I received in the first year of my PhD emphasised the importance of narrowing one's scope, and becoming comfortable with those absences.

However, if I am honest with myself, some of the absences in my thesis are also partly – indeed, predominantly – about my own privileges, anxieties and fragilities as a researcher. First, I was so keen to find research locations, so demoralised when I received no responses from any of the schools I contacted, and so relieved when the youth clubs I contacted *did* respond, that I did not, at the point of arranging my fieldwork, think as hard as I could have done about the potential demographics of those youth clubs' attendees, and how different they were likely to be from myself. This was not my first experience of carrying out interviews with teenagers, and I had planned carefully for the inherent unequal power dynamics between myself as an older and educated researcher, and the participants as younger and with a less detailed understanding of the research I was undertaking. The methodology outlined above, in which I gradually built up relationships with the teenagers over time, and attempted to always encourage them to lead the research process, was an attempt to (partially) alleviate these power imbalances.

Another aspect of power imbalances which I considered was the idea of giving 'voice' or 'agency' to the teenagers I interviewed, both before and after the

fieldwork. Emma Davidson's (2017) 'Saying It Like It Is? Power, Participation and Research Involving Young People' and Orla McGarry's (2016) 'Repositioning the research encounter: exploring power dynamics and positionality in youth research' were particularly useful in helping me problematise this issue. Certainly I did not think of myself as 'giving voice' to the research participants beyond suggesting to them that they might enjoy taking part. I did not want to imply that particular outcomes would definitely or even likely occur for them if they participated – though the youth workers at each club notably told the teenagers that taking part could be an opportunity to 'get their views heard'. Davidson argues that 'participation should be approached in a way that opens up possibilities for creativity, resistance, rebellion – with space for fun and humour along the way' (Davidson 2017: 237), and there were definitely many points throughout the research where the participants, and myself, laughed together. Some of these are highlighted in the analytical chapters. But in spite of all these considerations, racialised and classed dimensions were not things I began to think about at length until I arrived at the youth clubs, rather than 'baking them into' the research planning.

Second, once I *did* begin thinking about these dimensions more carefully, I felt a complex mixture of anxiety and uncertainty, particularly in relation to the risks of 'researching down'. That cry of 'you sound too posh to be from around here' grated more than it should have – I have always had a more middle-class-sounding accent than I might be expected to, given where I grew up and my parents' backgrounds, and there were occasions at school when other children made fun of me for it. As an adult, I have resented assumptions based on my accent that I was privately educated, or that I come from a wealthy family – and yet those resentments are simultaneously ridiculous given that by any reasonable measure I am still middle-class, privileged and extremely lucky. I actually felt more comfortable, perhaps even more 'at home' in the working-class environments of the youth clubs than I might have been expected to by the youth workers or even the participants themselves – the clubs were in many ways remarkably reminiscent of the one I attended as a young teenager. In other words, I felt less like I was researching 'other' from a class perspective than I perhaps should have done. Yet I was also acutely aware that my

clothes, accent, language and behaviour – as well as my race – all marked me out as from a dramatically different background to the research participants.

Then, when it came to thinking about race, I know that I was too unwilling to vocalise and unpack issues related to race or ethnicity – precisely because of the fragilities and anxieties related to my white privilege. I justified this to myself at the time by not wanting to overemphasise the power dynamic of myself as white middle-class researcher and the interviewees as black and mixed race working-class teenagers, particularly when my introductions to the project had focused on social media and *gender*, not race. It felt clumsy, and like it might be an undoing of the relationships I had worked hard to build over the previous weeks of observation and casual interaction. But with hindsight, this looks precisely like Sara Ahmed's claim that 'white bodies do not have to face their whiteness' (Ahmed 2007: 156), and I am somewhat embarrassed to read back through my transcriptions and note the myriad points at which I shy away from exploring further the racialised issues which the teenagers themselves had highlighted.

For example, in the analytical chapters on bodies and self-representation, and on intimacy, I relate discussions some of the teenage girls had on racialised beauty standards and relationships. In those interviews, I did not probe the interviewees explicitly on the issue of race, but instead listened to their conversation and asked generalised follow-ups about how they felt. Explicitly discussing race would probably have resulted in a more sophisticated and generative discussion of racialised power dynamics in social media, and this is a clear limitation in both my data and my analysis. Were I to begin my research again, I would seek to ask more intentional and systematic questions around self-identification at the outset of the interviews, which would hopefully encourage further discussions in relation to aspects of identity which intersect and interact with gender.

Later, I found H. Richard Milner IV's 'Race, Culture, and Researcher Positionality: Working Through Dangers Seen, Unseen, and Unforeseen' (2007), a useful means of revisiting and better understanding these dynamics. Milner draws on critical race theory to present an array of visible and invisible dangers in conducting educational research, particularly those that result from researchers adopting colour and/or culture-blind approaches. He suggests that, to alleviate these

dangers, researchers must begin by researching the self, and then research the self in relation to others. He calls on researchers to ask themselves probing questions in relation to their own cultural and racial heritage, and to consider the 'contextual nature of race, racism and culture' (Milner 2007: 297) in their studies. I know that I could have done this far more from the outset, thinking about my own positionality not just as a woman, but as a white, middle-class and able-bodied woman. Certainly the very fact that the urban youth clubs I visited, located in areas of social deprivation, were far more likely to cater to BAME young people, points to endemic structural racism and socioeconomic inequality. I could have considered this far more thoughtfully when developing my research methodology, and collected richer data as a result.

All this is not intended to excuse the lack of detailed class or race analysis in my research, but it is an attempt to explain it. I certainly do not pretend that my thesis offers a sophisticated analysis of classed or racialised UK teenage experiences of social media. However, I do hope that my virtual potentialities framework offers a new way of thinking about social media – a way of thinking which could, in the future, be used to explore digitised issues of class and race with far greater sophistication than I have here.

Making (messy) sense

Redrafting this chapter to incorporate this messiness took many weeks longer than I expected. It involved a new set of reading, a new period of self-reflection, and a great deal of grappling with the idea of presenting something deliberately imperfect to my supervisors, my examiners and other future readers. One of those new pieces of reading was John Law's *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research*, which argues that attempts to describe that which is 'complex, diffuse and messy' (Law 2004: 2) in simple or clear ways tend to fail. Communicating ephemeral, changeable, and complicated social realities requires new and multiple approaches to communication. We need, he argues, to become more comfortable with mess and multiplicity. This felt at once overwhelming and familiar. My virtual potentialities framework is, I hope, an attempt to do something similar – to illustrate the vast

possibilities that social media users are implicitly aware of – both temporal and spatial – even if many of those possibilities never actually come to be.

Another of those new pieces of reading – a paragraph by Giovanna Fassentta Guariento, examining the power dynamics between researchers and (younger) research participants – offered a particularly compelling, even liberating way of thinking about imperfection:

Researchers need to recognise the imperfections of a relationship that is necessarily unequal, rather than trusting specific techniques to solve these contradictions through their inherent power. Participatory techniques may help children's voices to come through more powerfully by leaving more space for individual styles of interaction and by opening more channels for expression; they cannot be relied on, however, to act as an infallible tool-kit to redress a power imbalance. (Guariento 2010: 81).

Guarentio offers a stark reminder of the impossibility of fully unpacking and undoing the power dynamics between researchers and participants, in particular when working with young people. She celebrates and encourages techniques to redress those power dynamics where possible; she foregrounds imaginative, creative and innovative approaches to research methodology. Whilst I never hoped or pretended that my methodology placed me on an even footing with the teenagers, or fully unpacked the inequalities and hierarchies between us, I did seek to generate a relaxed and participatory atmosphere in every interview. I believe this enabled most or all of the teenagers to exercise their own 'individual styles of interaction' – and, in some cases, to choose not to interact at all.

But Guarentio also offers a reminder that these efforts will never quite be enough. No research methodology is an 'infallible tool-kit' – and the subsequent writing up of a methodology cannot be either. That first draft of this chapter attempted to paper over the difficulties and failures of my research process; redrafting it felt unsettling but ultimately liberating. There is nothing perfect about

the three analytical chapters that follow, but I hope they illustrate my own – and my research participants’ – messy, imperfect, nonlinear processes of making sense of social media.

Chapter 4: Bodies becoming, bodies (un)bounded: Stories about embodiment in teen social media

Zachary blearily opens his eyes. Without thinking, he reaches for his phone. His fingers close around it reflexively. He knows its shape like his own hand.

Fi tilts her head right and left, searching for the perfect shot. Afterwards, she scrolls through filters, lightens and brightens, omits and erases. She wants to look the same, but special.

Marvin gazes at the glowing screen. She's hot, but is she real?

Social media practices are bodily practices; they involve and frequently emphasise the body. Bodies *do* social media, particularly social media as accessed through smartphones – they log on, scroll and swipe, carry social media with them through physical space. And bodies are *represented* in social media – a vast array of social media imagery, text, and associated discussion and judgement is centred on depictions of the body. Indeed, when I remember that to *embody* something is to put something *into* a body, ‘to impart a material, corporeal, or sensual character’ to that thing (OED Online September 2020), I arrive at another way of approaching the relationship between social media and the body – a consideration of the digital material created, manipulated and shared through social media as *bodies* of content. A chapter focusing on embodiment, then, seems a fitting way to open my analysis, drawing together multiple ways of thinking about embodied potential and exploring some of the most vivid gendered and gendering dynamics in my data.

I begin the chapter by theorising embodiment in more detail. If, as I outlined in my literature review, I think about both gender and teenagerhood as processes of potential, of *becoming*, then closer attention to ideas of ‘becoming bodies’ enables me to focus on embodiment as process, flux and growth. Next, I explore how teen bodies ‘do’ social media. For teenagers at the time of writing, these physical processes are dominated by the smartphone; as such, the relationships between

social media, social media participants and the smartphones they carry are critical to my study. I turn to my data, and consider the embodied nature of smartphones and the physicality cited (and often directly demonstrated) by the teenage interviewees in relation to their devices. What physicality is involved in logging on, scrolling through content, posting, sharing and interacting via social media? How are these processes re/shaped by the transformed temporalities and spatialities of social media that I have termed 'virtual potentialities'?

From there, I explore how teen bodies are *represented* in social media – and how those representations are judged. Social media in general, and Snapchat and Instagram in particular, are saturated in self-representation – but self-representation which is visibly and tangibly manipulated, edited and amended by the functionality of both smartphones, and the social media apps themselves. As outlined in Chapter 3, my focus here is not on a direct examination of teen social media content, but on the stories that are told *about* this content. I explore, therefore, the ways in which my research participants describe these dynamics, the stories they tell about their own processes of social media self-representation, and the imagined reactions from others which influence those processes. What are the drivers and decisions behind displaying bodies in particular ways in social media? What kinds of self-representation – and judgements of others' self-representation – take place? I explore the motivations teenagers describe behind particular kinds of content creation, the ways in which they wish to be perceived and the ways in which they perceive others.

Finally, I consider the thorny questions of authenticity and honesty that emerge from these processes of self-representation and judgement. How do teenagers interpret those bodies of content – and, by extension, their own and each other's physical bodies? How do the specific temporalities and spatialities of bodies within social media – that is, bodies which have undergone thoughtful manipulation, filtering, posing and performing – generate re/newed dynamics of judgement as they are shared through time and space? How are these judgements gendered, and gendering? Once again, an interplay between the old and the new is sharply apparent – between, for example, the sexist male gaze first theorised by Laura Mulvey (1975) and now heavily established in media scholarship, and a new form of

digital gaze, which must take account of filtering and editing processes. The misalignments between how teen bodies appear digitally, in social media, and how they appear physically, face-to-face, generate a raft of effects in relation to body image, insecurity and (dis)honesty. The teenagers I interviewed seemed acutely aware of these misalignments and complications, the potential unreliability of the content they viewed and shared through social media, and their own complicity in processes of sometimes harsh judgement. But they also had to live and navigate those complexities themselves, walking a delicate tightrope between how they wanted to be seen and how they saw others.

Theorising embodiment: becoming (intra) active

The literature on bodies and embodiment could fill hundreds of theses in itself. By attending specifically to that term I have outlined as particularly important to my conceptualisation of gender, and of teenagers – *becoming* – I can focus my attention on a useful section of this literature.

Deleuze and Guattari (2013 [1980]), for example, use ‘becoming’ as a means of moving beyond binaries or dualisms, emphasising it as a matter of continually shifting, transforming relations. ‘To become is not to progress or regress along a series’, they write, nor a ‘correspondence between relations’ but rather something which ‘produces nothing other than itself’ (Deleuze and Guattari 2013 [1980]: 277). In developing this idea they refer explicitly to Henri Bergson’s theory of duration, which, as I explained in my literature review, conceptualises individuals’ perception of temporality as a kind of intuitive, constantly shifting multiplicity, something which can be cognitively grasped at but is always changing. This theory may not seem directly tied to embodiment, but it has been used fruitfully throughout various studies of young people and gender. Rebecca Coleman (2008), for example, deploys it to study girls, media affect and body image, whilst Renold and Ringrose (2011) apply it to teen girls’ sexual cultures in an era of so-called ‘sexualisation’. Both studies leverage ‘becoming’ to trace the ways in which teen girls’ bodies interact productively, affect and are affected by their relations with their surroundings, and in particular media – including social media – imagery. By thinking about teen bodies

as ‘becoming’ through their relations with such images, these studies offer a feminist dismantling of the subject/object dualism, exploring how a ‘body is not a human subject who has relations *with* images, then, but rather a body *is* the relation between what conventional philosophy has called a human subject and images’ (Coleman 2008: 168).

Another useful means of thinking through relations between bodies is offered by Karen Barad (2003) through a model of dynamic intra-activity. This, too, has been deployed in several studies of young people, gender and social media (Evers and Germon 2017; Renold and Ringrose 2017; Ringrose and Rawlings 2015; Ringrose and Renold 2016). Like Elizabeth Grosz (1994) and other feminist new materialists who emerged through the 1990s, Barad’s work has helped develop new approaches to examining physical bodies and therefore gender. Bodies are seen as productively interacting with different facets of digital culture and technology, producing, reproducing and resisting gender dynamics. ‘Becoming’ a gendered and gendering teenager means navigating complex dynamics of physical flux – not just pubescent growth and development, but also creative representations of the body with and against representations of *other* bodies.

I opened my literature review with Simone de Beauvoir and various readings of *The Second Sex* that centre the growing, changing material body in their understandings of gender and teenagerhood. It is no coincidence that perhaps one of the most compelling explorations of relations between the body and its surroundings, its movement in space and its comportment is offered by Iris Marion Young’s (2005 [1980]) phenomenology of ‘throwing like a girl’. This, too, is a reading of *The Second Sex* – one which both celebrates Beauvoir’s analysis of the ‘situation’ of women, and seeks to attend to the lack of attention she pays to the ‘status and orientation of the woman’s body as relating to its surroundings in living action’ (Young 2005 [1980]: 29). The female body which is capable of throwing a ball in *any* way, in part becomes a gendered *girl’s* body through a particular type of throwing. This underlines both the productive, gendered interactions between body and space, body and action, and an understanding of bodies as not just physical situations, but social ones. It underlines how bodily agency can still be framed – and perhaps

restricted – by social judgements, and it highlights precisely how arbitrary those judgements may be.

Ultimately, thinking through the relations between bodies and their surroundings – and paying attention to how those relations produce gendered and gendering phenomena – seems particularly pertinent in a social media landscape already and increasingly dominated by imagery *of* bodies. Within and through social media, embodied practices of self-representation – and discussion of *others'* self-representation – productively produce and reproduce gender.

These various texts help me to think about embodiment as productive processes, not static ways of being. Gendered bodies come into being not just because of how they physically grow and change, but through their interactions and intra-actions with media, with images and with devices. My study focuses on social media as sites, mediums and parties to such intra-actions. I think about *all* the teenagers I interviewed – not just the teen girls – as bodies intra-acting with mobile devices, with images and with other teenagers. Furthermore, I think about their bodies as *becoming* – always on a journey, always seeking out, always moving toward a (possible) destination. To explore embodiment in teen social media is to explore the ways in which teenagers' *physical* bodies, physical engagements with their smartphones, digital *representations* of their bodies and social interactions *about* their bodies productively intra-act. It is to explore how the physical, the digital and the social intra-act through time and space, building a plethora of gendered and gendering potentialities.

'It feels like when my phone dies, I die with it': Smartphones and social media

Social media and smartphones are almost one and the same thing for teenagers in the UK. Ofcom's 2019 report on young people's media use and attitudes revealed that the proportion of 12-15-year-olds with a social media profile had remained constant since 2015 at around 70%. However, the sites they considered their main social media had evolved from domination by Facebook, to focusing on Snapchat and Instagram by 2019 – both of these are mobile apps first and foremost (Ofcom 2019: 3). The same report found that 83% of 12-15-year-olds in the UK have

their own smartphone (Ofcom 2019: 5), and this was certainly borne out in my fieldwork. I watched teenagers using their smartphones individually, clustered round them in pairs and in groups, using them whilst stationary and on the move, inside and outside.

The smartphone is more than merely a device carried around close to and yet absolutely distinct and separate from the body, however. Smartphones encompass a unique combination of portability, rich multimedia functionality, high-speed connectivity with peers and ubiquity in everyday interactions. This combination sets smartphones apart from devices such as Nintendo Game Boys and Tamagotchis which have previously been prominent in youth culture. Smartphones' rich and high-speed connectivity, in particular, means that they enable teenagers to be near-permanently connected with *other* teenagers, near-continually plugged into the virtual networks of social media. As such, they enable teenage bodies to, in a sense, transcend their immediate physical space and extend into a dynamic digital space. I observed highly physical engagements between the teenagers and their smartphones on my visits to the youth clubs. Groups huddled round the same smartphone, commenting together on content they were perusing. Pairs or small groups of friends clustered in corners, draped themselves over chairs, tapped at their phones and discussed their activity and observations. The smartphone often seemed to form a kind of physical locus for group activity. In short, teenagers' smartphones are inextricably entangled *with* their bodies – in a sense, they are *embodied* devices – and yet they are also entangled with *others'* bodies.

A particular smartphone function – new, again, in comparison with older devices – is their cameras. These are core to visual-dominated social media, and Instagram and Snapchat in particular. Both platforms' core functionality involves taking a photo, adding a choice of visual effects, and then posting or sharing it. And smartphone cameras enable users to engage both with the physical space around them and their own bodies, through an array of self-representation activities. In 2008 – the year, as outlined in my literature review, in which 'the smartphone took off in the UK' (Ofcom 2 August 2018) – David Buckingham asserted that Western youth culture was becoming dominated by the sharing of images through mobile technology. His argument incorporates three interlocked ideas. First, there is the

notion of visual media as a core pillar of youth culture; second, there is the process of *sharing* said media, an explicitly social and interactive practice in itself; and third, there is mobile technology, which increasingly means smartphone cameras and connectivity (Buckingham 2008). The creation of images ‘on the go’ – a significant portion of which are selfies – and the constant sharing of those images are, in other words, critical to understanding modern youth culture.

With all this in mind, I spoke to fourteen-year-old Lee and seventeen-year-old Sasha about the ‘always on’ nature of smartphones, and how they felt about their own devices. Both were white attendees of an urban youth club, and they seemed to have a jokey, playful friendship; I noticed them chatting and teasing each other on several different visits to the club. Their discussions revealed some of the ways in which those phones can be considered less as interface, and more as elements of embodiment in their own right.

Lee: It feels like when my phone dies I die with it. Like – I’m just like ‘no! where’s my phone!’

Sasha: Yeah man. You sit there waiting for it to turn on.

Lee: Yeah, sit there, right there, innit [Sasha agrees] with the little charge waiting for it to come on...

Sasha: Yeah, waiting.

Lee: ...and it comes on and it’s on zero percent and it dies again and you’re like [Pulls a horrified face].

Lee’s description of his phone ‘dying’ when it runs out of battery – and then the linkage of this with a sense of his own death – is both an explicit animation of the inanimate device, and a realisation of an ‘intra-acting cyborg-subjectivit[y]’ (Renold and Ringrose 2017: 1068), whereby the smartphone has become an explicit part of the self. It echoes the conclusions of both Gitte Stald (2008) and the House of Lords

Select Committee on Communications (21 March 2017) discussed in the literature review, that teenagers' smartphones are not merely possessions – they are embodied parts of those teenagers. Lee's line is simultaneously comedic – his tone of voice was deliberately jokey and he seemed self-aware of the exaggerated drama of the statement – and serious, illustrating the cyborg-like nature of life mediated via smartphones. This deliberate presentation of two emotions simultaneously suggests a knowing negotiation or tension on Lee's part, at once diminishing and underlining the smartphone's significance. I was interested, reading back, to note that I, as the interviewer, shortly afterwards fell into the same pattern of imbuing the inorganic smartphone with a kind of life. As we shall see, I asked if Lee 'put it to sleep' overnight, rather than merely silencing it or switching it off.

The teenagers' repetitive use of the term 'waiting' underlines, too, a further embodied entanglement between the temporality of the physical world and that of the digital. Teenage bodies are kept waiting by technology; their transitions through time are punctuated and measured by social media. 'Waiting' is also a word saturated in anticipation and potential; we can see the virtual potentialities of social media interaction and activity soaking into the teenagers' physical situation.

Lee went on to describe the culmination of this waiting, and the experience of being bombarded by signals of social media interaction, particularly when a phone is switched on:

Lee: But you know what I hate as well? When you wake up in the morning, turn your phone on, and it's 'kading kading kading kading'. [...] A thousand messages come through.

Here, Lee underlines the 'always on' nature of smartphone communication – whether through social media or otherwise – whereby even turning the device off is not enough to stem the flow of contact. Rather, the messages build up to be presented in a flow of 'kadings' once the phone is reactivated, a presumably high-pressure situation which he claims to 'hate'. The smartphone, like the social media it provides access to, presents a continuous build-up of content that seems impossible to pause or step away from. Unlike a desktop computer which a user periodically logs

onto and off from, and which remains relatively static between those engagements, a smartphone with a list of contacts and a social media application or two takes on a *life of its own*.

This is a deliberately evocative phrase. I want to underline how teenagers' smartphones can seem active and uncontrollable, constantly placing demands on their own lives. And yet, the lives of these smartphones simultaneously *are* the lives of the teenagers, providing the means for them to realise their own lives, their relationships and their expressions of selfhood. A vibrantly 'alive' smartphone, presenting a continuous series of 'kappings' demanding immediate response is, whilst stressful, also a clear signal of a vibrant *personal* life. It has its user in a double bind, where its very liveliness is at once desirable and stressful. The symbiotic relationship between people and technology explored by several scholars in my literature review seem sharply apparent. So too, does the reshaping of temporality and spatiality by new media. The smartphone, and the social media it enables access to, manipulate both the spatiality of the teenage body (they are carried everywhere physically, and plug the user into an extended world digitally), and the temporality of the teenage body (they are constant considerations, and their alerts and alarms punctuate the user's timeline).

Lee became particularly friendly after this interview, and regularly approached me on future visits to the club in order to chat. An interesting turn of events occurred when he explained that his smartphone had broken earlier in the week and he had had to wait a few days for it to be repaired. Remembering his statement about 'dying with it', I asked how he had felt. As in the interview, his reaction seemed to oscillate between acknowledgement of the deeply embodied link between himself and the phone, and a recognition that this link might not be as firm or fixed as it sometimes seemed. That is, he described how difficult and painful it had been being without his phone, yet also mentioned – in a tone of surprise – feeling 'refreshed'. The word stuck with me, although this was a casual conversation rather than a recorded interview. It seemed to echo ideas of health and rejuvenation – both mental and physical – of taking a break from something demanding or exhausting. Yet Lee also acknowledged a sense of relief and excitement when his phone was repaired and returned to him. This seemed, then, to underline an ambivalence with

regard to his embodied relationship with the phone; he both recognised the demands it placed on him, without which he felt 'refreshed', yet he also felt a different, equally palpable sense of frustration when parted from it. In other words, both engaging with the smartphone, and being unable to engage with the smartphone, are framed as simultaneously positive and negative, demanding and refreshing.

Similar parallels between the smartphone and a living thing or a part of the body were made by thirteen-year-olds Rhianna, Chloe and Liv. Liv was black, Rhianna and Chloe were mixed race. They, like Lee and Sasha, appeared to have a close friendship, often spending time together at their inner-city youth club and arriving or leaving together, although they did not attend the same school. They were confident and chatty in manner, and their loud discussions of boyfriends and the attractiveness of different boys suggested that they were comfortably – and publicly – heterosexual. They emphasised how the omnipresence of their phones was entwined in a measurable way with their digital friendships:

Rhianna: I use my phone twenty-four hours a day. No matter where I am, as soon as you text me I will open it.

Chloe: /Yeah I have really, really quick replies.

*Rhianna: /If my phone dies, I will start using my brother's phone. It's like 'awh!'
[Noise of urgency and frustration]*

Chloe: /It's true.

Liv: /I have to get somebody's phone because – just – I can't live without it.

Rhianna: I have very very very fast replies so if I reply slow to you I just don't like you.

Like Lee and Sasha, the girls imbue their technology with a kind of life. Not only can their phones 'die' but this death becomes entangled with their own lives; they 'can't live without it'. Also like Lee and Sasha, the girls here demonstrate how utterly embedded their mobile devices are in their everyday lives. 'No matter where I am, as soon as you text me I will open it' asserts Rhianna, demonstrating that her phone is carried with her everywhere, at all times. The physical space occupied by a teenage body, in other words, is also occupied by a smartphone; the two are in some ways indistinguishable. Again we can see social media – or rather, social media as accessed via a smartphone – as transforming teenage experiences of spatiality, though here the transformation is less about the experiences of *digital* space as the teenagers access social media, and more about the experiences of *physical* space as they carry social media with them. Carrying a smartphone – and by extension, carrying a constant connection to social media – means that the experience of physical space is extended and complicated. Immediate physical space might appear empty, yet it is filled with the virtual potentialities of myriad social media connections.

Social media and smartphones are also strongly related here to the mediation of relationships, where the speed and frequency of replies are a measure of the strength of friendship. 'If I reply slow to you I just don't like you', Rhianna claims, in a statement with an interesting double potential. Her slow replying can be both a *punishment* meted out to those she does not like, and a means of visibly *illustrating* that dislike. Here, smartphones and the social media they encompass become a way of asserting feelings, and of concretising relationships in a measurable way. Social media and smartphones enable an extension in space and time of offline interactions. Friendships and relationships are continued at home, in front of the TV, in bed, late at night, first thing in the morning. Teenagers feel *required* to engage in this constant embodied practice in order to maintain their relationships, and whilst stress can be attached to this, Rhianna's noise of frustration underlines the stress associated with *not* responding, rather than receiving the list of 'katings' mentioned by Lee and Sasha. Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2001) has discussed how time (and space) *away* from mobile phones can be stressful, and as we have seen, the House of Lords Select Committee on Communications (2017) has paralleled the loss of a teenage smartphone with loss of a limb. Teenagers are in an embodied double bind;

successfully keeping up with the demands of a smartphone is exhausting and stressful, but so too is not responding.

There are gendered dynamics to consider here also. It is, I think, no coincidence that this all-female group discussed the particular stresses and pressures of fast replying so animatedly, in contrast to Lee's pointedly irritated and humorous descriptions of 'kadings'. Rihanna, Liv and Chloe here display an eagerness to please, an imperative to care, whilst Lee displays a performed *not* caring – one which, as I shall go on to show, many of the other male interviewees echoed. Feminist explorations of caring have argued that it is a deeply gendered concept, through which girls and boys are socialised into different performances and different priorities; Carol Gilligan's (1993 [1982]) ethics of care in particular suggests that women and men approach moral issues as questions of conflicting responsibilities and competing rights, respectively. I think the contrasting attitudes of the girls and boys I interviewed to the demands of the smartphone not only illustrate these gendered dimensions of care, but also show how for girls, in particular, this imperative to care, to respond to the needs of others via the phone, translates into a highly embodied sense of stress and anxiety. The virtual potentialities at play here – the consequences of *not* replying in good time, and of *actually* replying in good time – have a range of embodied effects, from Lee's sense of refreshment, to Liv's assertion that she cannot 'live'.

A series of unwritten rules and assumptions thus underpins how these teenagers use their smartphones and how they engage with social media. A failure to participate in the 'correct' way, whether accidentally or purposefully, can induce (gendered) negative effects, from the anger described by Sasha to the awareness of dislike mentioned by Rhianna. There are consequences, prices to be paid for not participating in line with the rules. Indeed, I experienced these consequences in a gentle way myself; my observational notes from two of the urban youth clubs describe 'scornful laughter' and a 'highly disparaging reaction' when I referenced using Facebook as a teenager.

This notion of an unwritten rulebook underpinning social norms is hardly a new idea, and nor is the associated pressure and volatility experienced by young people in particular, who may be more likely to be new to navigating and negotiating

these rules. Yet, the massification of smartphones and social media does seem to be making those rules faster-moving and more complicated, because the interactions and behaviours they govern are, as we have seen, carried everywhere, at all times. In order to maintain close friendships, these teenagers must not merely engage with those friends in face-to-face scenarios, call them on the phone every few days, perhaps even write them a letter or two. They must carry a device, on their person, at all times and in all spaces; their embodied position in the world overlaps with a physical piece of technology, and the digital and virtual potential of that technology, the networks it plugs them into.

It is worth underlining that all of this smartphone activity depends on mobile data or access to WiFi networks – another issue which is entangled with spatiality, because it dictates where teenagers can physically be. Few teenagers have unlimited data plans on their smartphones, so the physical spaces where they gather are influenced by the availability of free WiFi; the youth workers I spoke to commented on this being a particularly important factor in encouraging young people to use their youth clubs. Indeed, those youth workers would sometimes see teenagers sitting outside the clubs rather than entering the buildings, simply so they could access the WiFi. Rhianna, Liv and Chloe described similar dynamics:

Rhianna: Say when you're out yeah, and you don't have mobile data.

All: /Awww!!! [Noise of frustration, acknowledgement]

Rhianna: /But like tryna go to the McDonalds together – free Wifi but it don't work – so I have to log into my friend's phone...urgh.

Liv: You'll go plug into McDonalds to get free Wifi.

Others: Yeah.

Rhianna: It don't work though.

Chloe: If I'm not on my phone for more than – say about eight hours – something's happened to me.

Liv: Unless I'm sleeping, then.

Rhianna: Yeah I'm on it – unless I'm sleeping, I'm on it.

Chloe: I sleep like three hours. Three hours a day. I don't sleep much. Cos I sleep in class.

Rhianna: I always sleep in in class.

Liv: Always get caught in class when you're sleeping.

We can see here the smartphone dictating both where teenagers go – that is, the geographical spatiality of their physical bodies – and the timings of their daily life – that is, the punctuating of the temporality of their physical bodies. Places offering free WiFi, such as McDonalds, are particularly alluring precisely because they offer a route into another 'place' – the digital spatiality of social media. Physical and virtual spatiality are inextricably entangled, and the virtual potentialities of the social media realm are enticing.

We can also see a lack of phone activity being paralleled with something being wrong; 'something's happened to [Chloe]' if she is not on her phone for more than around eight hours, and, crucially, this lack of activity will be visible across her virtual networks because she will not be active on social media. Social media, then, are rarely things that teenagers merely observe from a distance; rather, their active *participation* in social media is concretely visible to others. They are visible, tangibly marked as present in virtual online space for specific amounts of time. Echoes of surveillance and monitoring are clearly apparent. And whilst the teenagers here do not directly intimate that they sleep less because of the demands of social media and their smartphones, I do think that their direct segue from discussing the social media demands of their devices, to explaining that they 'don't sleep much' is telling.

Sasha similarly explained how the availability of WiFi related to how she accessed social media and used her phone:

Interviewer: So would you ever use the normal text function on the phone?

Sasha: Oh I can't, I don't have like credit. [Laughing] If I – I actually would like if I had credit. But I don't have credit.

Interviewer: Oh yeah, cos Snapchat's free obviously.

Sasha: Yeah like you only need it for WiFi. That's what I hate cos sometimes I'm like, if I'm outside somewhere I need to like call or text and I don't have credit I'm like aw, flip sake, cos I can't even text...

Sasha's tone here was of amused frustration; she was laughing about the way in which a lack of phone credit could restrict her activities, whilst also describing it as a significant irritation. Smartphones are ostensibly highly portable and convenient devices – as I explored in the literature review, mobility is an important facet of understanding social media spatiality – and yet for the teenagers I interviewed, that portability and convenience is not always straightforward. Snapchat does not require phone credit to work – but it does require a WiFi network. Without that, Sasha's phone becomes impotent – it still has the *potential* for reaching her friends, plugging her into networked publics – but it is a potential she cannot realise. Mobility, then, remains useful for theorising social media spatiality – but it is inconsistent and complicated. For teenagers who do not have the money to keep their smartphones continually topped up, the promise of mobility is erratic and sometimes out of reach.

In the same interview, Lee repeatedly complained about the standard of WiFi in the youth club whilst he was trying to show me things on his phone. It was a neat reminder of the way in which WiFi networks, technically invisible and yet sharply concretised by the WiFi symbol on a smartphone screen, dominate teen engagements with their physical surroundings. WiFi is made tangible by the ease (or difficulty) with which teenagers can use their phones and access social media; it

cannot be directly seen or engaged with, and yet it unlocks the digital spaces in which teenagers congregate, the activities through which they negotiate their relationships, the functions through which they mediate their self-representation. WiFi requires an act of imagination; few of us genuinely understand how it works, and yet it provides access to a multitude of the banal workings of everyday life.

Understanding the relationships between teenagers' bodily experiences and social media, then, begins by understanding the relationships between teenagers and their smartphones. These devices are carried *with* teen bodies, engaged with *by* teen bodies, and even dictate *where* those bodies travel. The space of the body and the space of the smartphone continuously overlap and intermingle. Yet, the smartphone also provides an extension of the body into a *new* space – the virtual spaces of the internet, and of social media – and hence into a realm of virtual potentialities. Similarly, the temporality of the body is entangled, in some ways, with the temporality of the smartphone; mobile devices explicitly measure, analyse and present users with data pertaining to when and for how long they are used. Teenagers can ascertain when their peers are sleeping or whether they are good friends based on how active there are on their devices – and they know, always, that the same ascertainment is being applied to them. Virtual potentialities – this time in relation to the strength of friendship – are generated and negotiated by the smartphone. And those smartphones are treated as though they are *alive* – even as they are known not to be. There are echoes here of Haraway's (2016 [1985]) cyborg, her disintegration of the boundaries between human and machine.

'If you're not looking decent then you need to come off social media': The unwritten rules of self-representation

Smartphones, then, are central to understanding how teenage bodies 'do' social media, and they fuel complex dynamics in relation to the temporality and spatiality of those bodies. They offer teenage bodies multiple links with the wider world, both through their offline friendship groups and beyond. In many ways, then, they make teenage bodies less isolated, less alone, more connected with other spaces and extended further through space. But with these links come pressures.

Teenagers feel pressure to behave in certain ways, to follow (or resist) unwritten rules and regulations, all framed by the possibilities of being judged, or worse, by their social media peers. I have discussed how some of those pressures relate to friendship and ‘always on’ social media availability; now, I turn to appearance.

Just as smartphones are crucial to how teenage bodies ‘do’ social media, so they are central to how teenage bodies are *represented* in social media, thanks to their inbuilt cameras. As mentioned previously, Instagram and Snapchat are dominated by the visual. Whilst posts on both platforms can be made to be text-only with a little manipulation, they are very much encouraged to be images or videos, making use of smartphones’ inbuilt camera and screenshotting functionality. And as those cameras become ever more powerful, and as the editing and filtering functions available within social media apps become ever richer, so too has teen self-representation within social media become more sophisticated and more prolific. As set out in the literature review, so-called ‘selfies’ make up a substantial proportion of the content produced by teenagers through social media, and, following Theresa Senft and Nancy Baym (2015) it is useful to consider such selfies through the double lens of object and practice. They are both content which teenagers produce, and creative processes in which teenagers participate. Also as set out in previously, many of these practices, and the cultural discussions surrounding them, are highly gendered.

I sought, therefore, to explore how the research participants selected and manipulated the photos they posted of themselves within social media – and the judgements they passed on the photos posted of others, with particular reference to gendered dynamics. Liv, Rhianna and Chloe, for example, discussed in detail the actions and thought processes behind selecting photos for social media:

Interviewer: Tell me about the pictures that you put on – so both Snapchat and Instagram are obviously picture-based...

[All speaking at once.]

Rhianna: You can’t look bummy! You can’t look bummy.

Liv: You have to look nice, you have to look at least decent. If you're not looking decent then you need to come off social media.

Liv cuts to the heart of one of the unwritten rules governing teenage self-representation on social media – that you have to look ‘decent’ as a minimum, and if you do not, you need to ‘get off’. Rhianna’s imperative that you ‘can’t’ look a certain way has the same effect; ‘bummy’ is local slang for ugly. Yet ‘decent’ is of course a subjective term, and therefore one that is defined and decided by other social media users, as well as by the actual functionality of social media, that is, filters and editing procedures. Crucially, also, it is a term which is continually *changing*. Both the technical capabilities of smartphones and social media apps, and norms and standards of attractiveness within (context-specific) teenage cultures, are in constant flux. Returning to the ideas of embodied potential and continuous becoming, social media can be understood as enabling these teenagers to experiment with myriad possibilities of how to present themselves. And yet, these possibilities are always framed within a wider set of rules and regulations – albeit rules and regulations which shift and change.

We can see, then, that model of social media practices as creative processes, simultaneously displaying what ‘decent’ looks like, and also helping to *define* and reproduce what ‘decent’ looks like. ‘Decent’ is an evolving concept, specific to different age groups, genders, races and social classes – the key point is that social media both make it sharply visible, and influence how it is constructed, through the specific functionality on offer. When Instagram and Snapchat filters, and smartphone applications such as Facetune, serve to make skin look clear and blemish-free, so that feature becomes an increasingly central element of looking ‘decent’. This might initially seem to be no different from other media contexts. After all, television, film, digital media and celebrity culture all influence how ideas of ‘decent’ are constructed and rendered visible. But the specific spatiality and temporality of social media, conceptualised through virtual potentialities, help to underline some points of distinction. Hugely significant though celebrities and influencers undoubtedly are within social media, the vast majority of users are not famous, and so the vast

majority of social media content is user-generated, produced within and for peer networks. Whereas ideas of 'decent' disseminated through mass media may be more readily identified as imposed by corporations with their own motivations and ideals, ideas of 'decent' disseminated through social media are far more likely to be created and reproduced by direct peers. There is an intimacy and immediacy to social media which may be lacking in other contexts – and, as I will explore further in the following analytical chapters, this generates risks as well as enjoyment.

To explore these ideas further, I asked the girls to unpack what they meant by 'looking decent', and what qualified as a good selfie:

Interviewer: So tell me what makes a good picture then. What makes you look good?

Chloe: Your skin has to look clear. Has to look clear.

Rhianna: For me my hair has to be like straight,

Others: /Like this [acting].

Rhianna: /Cos if my hair's like curly it'll be like 'oh'! [Expression of annoyance, frustration]

Chloe: Your hair has to look lean. The most important thing is your eyebrows.

Others: Yeah! Eyebrows. Eyebrows.

Rhianna: Eyebrows. Every type of picture.

Liv: And your eyes have to actually like glow, and your eyelashes have to look like, kind of coloured.

Chloe: /What, like mine? [Jokey, laughter from others]

Liv: /Yeah, they have to look like...you have to do your makeup.

All: /Makeup, makeup.

Liv: It's just hard.

It is striking, here, how often the girls use the term 'has to'. Once again, there is a clear and rigid structure of rules and regulations in terms of how the girls can look in their social media images – at least, if they want to look (a certain kind of) good. Also once again, this is hardly a new teenage dynamic – and yet the temporality and spatiality of social media take it into new places. The girls reference clear skin and glowing eyes as being particularly important. These are longstanding features of Western female beauty, apparent throughout any girls' or women's magazine or makeup brand – and they are also two of the most common effects added by Snapchat and Instagram filters. Social media functionality simultaneously reflects normative standards of beauty, and helps determine and embolden those standards of beauty, by forming one of the bodies of *content* against which teenage girls measure their own looks. And because that body of content is primarily user-generated, creating a set of ideals which *other* users draw on when creating their own selfies, so those ideals are concretised and reproduced. When one's peers, rather than a distant celebrity, recreate and reify a particular type of attractiveness, that attractiveness is normalised and seems more 'natural' than an attractiveness imposed by a corporate brand.

Normative beauty standards can be unpacked further by examining the straight or 'lean' hair referenced by Chloe and confirmed by Liv and Rhianna. It is a nod to specifically *white* female beauty standards, and is a particularly arduous demand for black or mixed race girls with naturally curly or Afro hair. There is a deeper issue here with regards to the filters built into social media applications, which have been analysed in various media outlets as racist, thanks to their rendering skin tones lighter (see, for example, *BBC News Online* 17 May 2016, *Huffington Post* 25 January 2017, *Racked* 2 July 2015). Yet again, these dynamics are not exclusive to

social media – the whiteness inherent to normative Western beauty standards has long been analysed by scholars and journalists alike (see, for example, Calogero et al 2007; Deliovsky 2008)– but, crucially, social media functionality introduces a new dimension. When the photographic filters used by the girls are overwhelmingly likely to render their skin paler, their hair straighter – and when those filters set the standard for looking ‘bang’ or ‘decent’ *within* social media, looking ‘decent’ becomes synonymous with looking white. Those whitened, ‘decent’ images are disseminated, spread and fixed in time – and they are also particularly visible to the girls themselves. Never before in human history have teenagers been able to see their own image so frequently, in such volume – and edited and amended so subtly. There are, then, potential gaps or misalignments between how teenagers look physically, face-to-face or in a mirror, and how they appear in social media – an issue I will return to presently.

However, this is not to say that teenagers experience and exhibit straightforward compliance with beauty norms within social media. As offline, so online; the girls went on to discuss how their own social media self-representation sometimes subverted these rules and expectations:

Rhianna: All of our like social medias are like – bang.

Liv: /They’re decent, they’re at least decent.

Rhianna: /Like, most of my Snapchats, yeah, are of muggies. Of like all of us yeah. But then...

Interviewer: What’s muggies?

Liv: Like – kind of like ugly screenshots of us.

Others: Yeah.

Interviewer: But on purpose?

All: Yeah.

Initially, then, this seems a straightforward continuation of the ‘decent’ trope, with the additional introduction of ‘bang’, regional slang for hot or sexy which therefore introduces definite connotations of *sexual* attractiveness, which I will explore further in the chapter on intimacy. However, the girls go on to introduce the idea of ‘muggies’ on Snapchat, which they define as *deliberately ugly* photos – pulling silly faces and so on. So there *is* space for the subversion of homogenous ideas of attractiveness and the introduction of humour, though it is notable that the girls characterise this as a group activity (‘us’ and ‘all of us’), and therefore something which perhaps feels safer and more acceptable via the shared dynamics of a social group. It is notable, too, that ‘muggies’ are described as more prominent on Snapchat, which can offer particularly ephemeral forms of self-representation through its automatically deleted content. Chloe, for example, went on to say that:

on Instagram, I feel like I have to edit my pictures more, because you have to look more presentable because it’s sort of permanently there until you delete it, whereas Snapchat it’s only on there for 24 hours so I don’t really care.

Chloe highlights here the dynamics of permanence versus ephemerality that exist within social media. Whilst these dynamics are more complicated than she implies here – Snapchat images can be screenshot and take on a greater permanence than intended (Handyside and Ringrose 2017; Jaynes 2020), whilst Instagram photos, as we shall see, can be deleted – the point is that she is acutely aware of the apps’ functionality and the *potential* for photos to have a certain fixity. She is aware, too, of how the reputations and judgements attached to social media content can have a stickiness through time.

The implication, then, seems to be that if teens deliberately create ‘ugly’ representations of themselves within social media, it is best to be both reasonably in control of how long that representation will last, and part of a group. There is more

safety and security, more comedy in a group of friends creating ‘muggies’ together than there is in posting a single or more permanent image, which of course might not be interpreted as *deliberately* ugly. The girls, then, are juggling multiple different potential interpretations of their images. They do not want their peers to think they are *actually* ugly; they want their peers to recognise that they are appearing in an ugly way *on purpose*. Numerous layers of editing and interpretation, artifice and candour interplay together to create this thing called a ‘muggy’ – and those interplays are enabled, fostered and upheld by social media. Social media, then can be seen to engineer and drive complex dynamics in relation to the interpretation of appearance and, consequently, measures of attractive or unattractive appearance. The rules of social media self-representation are not simply that one must look good; rather, they are that one must be in control of how one’s image is interpreted. The *potential* permanence, *potential* spreading of social media content is entangled with that ‘decent’ concept.

The notion of control was thrown into even sharper relief when the girls went on to draw a distinction between Snapchat, where they post such ‘muggies’, and Instagram, where a much more arduous – and controlled – process of preparation and editing takes place:

Rhianna: /But on Insta, yeah. No when you take a picture yeah we all do the same thing. We all like sorta like put makeup on yeah, get into something yeah, then as soon as you’ve taken the picture and get back changed again

Chloe: /That’s what I do.

Rhianna: /And then you have to edit the photo – ah [sighing].

Liv: It’s just a long process!

[All speaking at once, shouting about Instagram]

Rhianna: But if someone else looks ugly on a picture I can't post it.

Interviewer: Ah ok, so like a friendship thing, you need to make sure that you all look good?

All: Yeah.

All three girls notably spoke extremely quickly and enthusiastically throughout this exchange, interrupting each other and leaping from their seats to act out their preparations for such photos. This physical demonstration was not only another embodied practice in itself; it almost seemed like a reflex, a series of standardised actions or performances that had become cemented in both the girls' minds and their bodies. The spatial entanglements of the body, the smartphone, and the representation of the body within social media were made sharply visible. Embodied self-representation in social media is not just about how one is represented onscreen, but also about the physicality involved in getting that picture on the screen in the first place.

Also notable here is just how arduous those physical processes are. Preparing for the photo with the right makeup and clothing (and then getting changed again afterwards); posing in the right way; editing the photo; thinking, as Chloe underlines, about how long a photo will be visible for – there is layer upon layer of creativity, curation, deliberation and *labour* associated with social media self-representation. Each of those layers incorporates a multitude of virtual potentialities as the girls negotiate how particular outfits, makeup styles, poses and expressions will be perceived and appraised by others. Ugliness is referenced again, but here without the deliberation associated with 'muggies'. By underlining that she cannot post a photo to social media if one of her friends looks ugly in it, Rhianna highlights the critical importance of friendship to social media self-representation. It is not merely about representation, interpretation and judgement of the individual, but about those dynamics applied to a peer group. To post a deliberately ugly picture of a friend to social media would be a truly horrible thing, a kind of violence. It would violate the unwritten rules and regulations of attractiveness within social media – but, more

than that, it would make that friend visible within an enormous and ever-shifting network of potential scrutinisers. A framework of virtual potentialities allows us to see just how cruel such an act *might* be, opening up the friend to enormous *possibilities* of judgement, cruelty and vulnerability. It would, in short, entail enormous risk – and this is an idea I will unpack further in the next two analytical chapters.

‘Boys with their muscles out and girls with loads of makeup on their face’:

Gendered performance, gendering identities

Liv, Rhianna and Chloe experience, of course, specific dynamics of gender (as well as race, class, age, geography and more). I wanted to learn more about how aware teenagers are of these specificities, with particular reference to gender. What role does gender play in teenage self-representation within social media? How do teenagers produce, and reproduce, and resist, gendered dynamics of self-representation? Striking similarities emerged in almost every interview, perhaps summed up most succinctly by sixteen-year-old Zoe:

Interviewer: And how would you choose what kind of photo to put up, what makes a good Instagram photo?

Zoe: Boys with their muscles out and girls with loads of makeup on their face.

This concise description mirrors a particular set of heteronormative cultural practices and expectations; whilst both boys and girls seek to present themselves as attractively as possible, for boys this means imitating a particular masculine ideal of muscular physique, and for girls it means augmenting their faces with makeup. These ideals are both heteronormative – girls’ attractiveness is associated with beauty, boys’ with strength, and those different forms of attractiveness are structured to

appeal sexually to each other – and classed and culturally specific, prizing a particular gym-honed and makeup-augmented aesthetic.³

Particularly striking here was less what Zoe said and more the firm and confident concision with which she said it; this gendered contrast was painted as remarkably obvious, almost a reflex description. Equally striking was the fact that in several different interviews with entirely different groups of teenagers, when I asked this question many participants leapt to their feet and struck similar, stylised poses. *He stood up, stuck out one hip, put his hands on his waist and pulled an exaggerated pout* reads one field note, describing a fourteen-year-old boy demonstrating a typically feminine approach to social media self-representation. *They folded their arms, stood with legs wide apart and adopted an exaggeratedly serious facial expression* reads another, describing a group of teenage girls illustrating ‘what boys post’. My repeated reference to exaggeration underlines, of course, the performative nature of the interview format, in which some of the teenagers seemed keen to compete with each other in the most over-the-top imitation of girls’ and boys’ behaviour on social media. But it also highlights the ways in which the visual dimensions of social media may enable or even encourage particularly stylised types of gendered self-representation, whereby bodies are contorted in physical space and then manipulated in digital space.

Similarly, I asked Liv, Rhianna and Chloe to consider whether they thought boys tackled self-representation on social media in different ways to girls:

Chloe: Boys use Instagram but they’ve always got like – they haven’t really got posts.

³ Myriad scholars have explored the relations between social class, socioeconomic status and aesthetic ideals, and their intersections with categories of race, sexuality, nationality, age and others. Beverley Skeggs (1997; 2004; 2011), as I discussed in the literature review, has undertaken some of the most influential British studies of working-class women striving to attain ‘respectable’ femininity, through cultural practices as much as economic status. Some particularly interesting recent scholarship has examined these dynamics in relation to popular media, popular culture and reality television whereby viewers are deliberately invited to associate working-class aesthetics with excess (see, for example, McCann 2015; Woods 2014).

Liv: They've only got like three or one post – they like – it's like they're – for boys, it's like Snapchat is their Instagram and Instagram is their Snapchat.

Chloe: Yeah, boys use Snapchat more than Instagram.

Here, Chloe makes a straightforward functional claim with regard to boys' social media activity – that they simply post less content on Instagram than girls. This was a claim echoed in most of my other interviews, and, as set out in the literature review, reflects the majority of quantitative studies of social media, which have found girls and women to be more avid users of social media than boys and men (see, for example, *Independent* 26 March 2018, Pew Research Center 31 May 2018). It reflects, also, the theme outlined earlier of girls seemingly taking on a greater labour of responsiveness and availability to their friends through social media. In a qualitative interview format, however, our focus is on the *story* that is being created or developed, and Liv goes on to introduce the interesting claim that boys' Instagram usage is more akin to girls' Snapchat usage. I asked them to explore this further:

Interviewer: Okay, tell me more about that.

Liv: Because boys – they have – they post one photo and then within like what eight, five hours the photo's gone.

Chloe: They'll delete it.

Rhianna: Yeah.

Here, the girls associate boys' Instagram usage with their own Snapchat usage because of its supposed ephemeral nature, whereby boys delete their pictures hours after posting them. The qualitative point here is not to suggest that all boys behave in this way, but rather to underline that the permanence or, conversely, fleetingness of social media self-representation is an important and observable function, and one

that teenage users are acutely aware of. Self-representation within social media can come and go. It can be present and then deleted. In other words, the unique temporalities of social media, whereby content can be preserved, deleted or amended, often in unpredictable ways, are closely related to how teens visually represent themselves. It is worth underlining, here, that Chloe earlier mentioned that she cares less about self-representation which is only posted temporarily; she is not so concerned about looking 'bang' or 'decent' on the more ephemeral Snapchat by comparison with Instagram. Controlling the lifespan of a social media post means enacting greater control over how one's self-representation is judged and appraised.

Another aspect of control enacted over social media self-representation – and one which emerged repeatedly throughout interviews with a wide range of teenagers – is decision-making in relation to which parts of the body are accentuated, and which are hidden. A particularly common trope was the process of hiding one's face in a social media post, whether through the mechanics of the photo itself (using a flash to blur out the face, taking a photo in a mirror which obscures the head) or through the editing afterwards (placing an emoji over the face). Thirteen-year-olds Marnie, Hannah and Tomas, together with fourteen-year-old Lee who also separately participated in the interview with Sasha, discussed these processes:

Interviewer: Okay. Fair enough. And how do you think boys and girls – do you think that's the same for girls? Will girls post different things?

Marnie: Yeah, course they will.

Lee: Their arses in mirrors.

Tomas: Innit. Or they're just – if they're ugly yeah, they put a flash on their thing so then their face – no they put a flash on their phone and then it flashes – you can't see your face – they can't see their face. And only you can see their body.

Lee's description of girls' 'arses in mirrors' is uncomfortably sexualised and crude, but also underlines a particularly significant version of teenage self-representation within social media – hiding one's face but displaying one's body. Indeed, Tomas goes on to describe a different tactic again for achieving this – using a camera flash to obscure the face. Stories of faces being covered, either through specific positioning of the body with the photo is taken, or with post-photo effects like emojis repeatedly emerged in my interviews, although different groups of teenagers made different claims as to who does it, and why. Tomas here succinctly summarises one of the most frequently suggested motivations – that girls hide their faces because they are 'ugly'.

Multiple layers of judgement, and multiple forms of identity are layered up here. Ugliness is, of course, a subjective and highly loaded term. There is an echo of the rules and regulations that Liv, Rhianna and Chloe described, that girls 'have to' look 'bang' or 'decent' on social media. But Tomas is approaching this from the side of the judge, not the subject, inadvertently indicating how the strict frameworks of appraisal applied by social media *audiences* go on to dictate the behaviour of social media *subjects*. Ringrose et al, drawing on the work of Deborah Tolman, have argued that 'what is most problematic for young people are the pernicious and persistent discourses of gender inequality and sexual double standards around teen girls' and also adult women's sexuality and bodies (Tolman 2012)' (Ringrose et al 2013: 319), and I think this is precisely what is at play here. Teenage girls who show their faces in social media imagery *risk* being derided as ugly, because the rules for looking 'bang' are so strict – yet, if they hide their faces, it is assumed that they are ugly anyway. Again, the double meaning of selfie as object and practice, and the double bind of sexualised judgement, is clearly apparent.

Following on from the above, Mikey illustrated this double bind further.

Hannah: Cos you put in the mirror.

Mikey: Yeah so [illegible] boys basically. So like – and then as soon as you meet them in real life they well ugly. Faces...

[Nervous laughter]

Whilst I was unable to discern Mikey's precise words on the transcription, his sentiment seems to be that girls hide their faces in social media imagery because they are attempting to appeal to boys. In other words, they are using such imagery to appear as attractive as possible within heteronormative dynamics of courtship – and appearing attractive means hiding their faces and displaying their bodies. Yet, Mikey then describes the discovery in 'real life' that such girls are 'well ugly'. On the one hand, this seems to be a simple sexist appraisal of girls' appearances – and a demonstration of precisely why some girls might feel pressure to hide their faces in social media photos. The nervous nature of the laughter which followed suggested that the teenagers were well aware of this. But there is also an interesting misalignment here between those girls as represented through social media selfies and those girls in the physical world – in other words, between their virtual and their physical bodies. I will return to this theme presently.

I was keen to understand whether the participants really felt this behaviour was exclusive to girls, or whether their conversation had simply landed on girls first:

Interviewer: Do boys hide their faces?

Lee/Tomas: No.

Interviewer: Why not?

Tomas: Cos -

Lee: /Well, yeah –

Tomas: /Only a few boys.

Marnie: [Name]

Tomas: Yeah this boy that we know, he's basically a girl he takes pictures in the mirror.

Interviewer: So why do you think girls are more likely to hide their faces than boys?

Marnie: Cos they think they're ugly. But – they're probably not, but that's what they think.

Interviewer: Why do you think they think that?

Marnie: Because it's probably like insecurity.

Lee: Cos they're – probably they've been put down before.

Others: Yeah. Insecurities.

Tomas' description of a boy being 'basically a girl' *because* he takes photos in the mirror is fascinating. He points to a Butlerian '*stylised repetition of acts*' (Butler 1988: 519, original emphasis) through which taking pictures in the mirror is so strongly gendered as feminine that it makes an individual 'basically a girl'. It is important to underline here, I think, the sex/gender slippage between different uses of 'boy' and 'girl'. I would argue that Tomas retains throughout a clear understanding of the sex of this individual as male – after all, he identifies him as 'a boy that we know'. Rather, he is arguing that this particular act – taking social media photos of oneself in front of a mirror – is powerfully coded as feminine. Self-representation in social media is thus shown here to be part of contemporary gendered constructions of the self, productively generating masculinity and femininity – which teenage social media users may both embody and resist.

Marnie then introduces a more thoughtful and nuanced assessment of these blunt judgements of 'ugliness', pointing out that girls hide their faces because they *think* they are 'ugly', rather than because they actually *are*. She underlines that the mechanisms of using social media are deeply related to girls' sense of their own

attractiveness. Once again, we can see how a long-established offline teen behaviour – experimenting with one’s looks and attempting to appear as attractive as possible – is reshaped and reformed in the digital era, whereby creating and sharing visual representations of oneself is a core part of everyday teen behaviour. On the one hand, social media offer sophisticated new mechanisms for teenagers to manipulate and experiment with their looks; on the other hand, they offer sophisticated new mechanisms for *other* teenagers to appraise and judge those looks, in excruciating detail.

Turning back to Rhianna and Liv, we can see the same claim of hiding faces and displaying bodies being made – but this time in relation to boys:

Liv: /And whenever they post a picture yeah, they always cover their face.

Rhianna: And I think boys just think they’re prestige.

There are spatial dynamics at play here in terms of which parts of the body are shown and which parts are hidden. Covering one’s face in a photo is a way of ensuring a kind of anonymity at the same time as being visible; of participating without being entirely seen. As we shall see in a later chapter, there are dynamics of risk management at play here, whereby teenagers deliberately hide elements of themselves on social media. Social media, we can see, actually enable teenagers more manipulation and management of their own visibility than might be imagined. Here, like Tomas, Rhianna applies a gendered judgement to this type of behaviour, associating it with boys who think they are ‘prestige’ – local slang for being particularly cool.

Sixteen-year-olds Sian, Laura and Tai, all of whom were black and members of an inner-city youth club, gave their own take on the differences between boys’ and girls’ self-representation on social media, which can shed further light on these comments:

Sian: Boys post – boys post rubbish.

Laura: Disgusting.

Sian: They just chat rubbish.

Interviewer: Can you give me some examples?

Sian: If it's not money it's asking them out.

Laura: Yeah. Literally. If it's not about money or I'm on my brand, it's about girls, and sex, and...and to be honest, like quotes. Dead quotes.

Interviewer: And that's on like Instagram and Snapchat or are you talking about Instagram?

Sian: Instagram's money.

Laura: And, um, designer. Clothes, shoes.

Sian and Laura characterise teenage boys' social media self-representation as being tied to either money or sex – a well-established offline trope reflected and retold via social media. Laura's phrase 'on my brand' is particularly telling. She illustrates how the visual nature of social media, and their ability to disseminate an individual's self-representation far beyond their immediate peer group, enable the individual within social media to operate like a business. Harvey, Ringrose and Gill (2013) have theorised how wealth signifiers such as images of designer goods are circulated by boys on social media as a form of cultural and social capital, and that seems sharply echoed here. Meanwhile, professional social media influencers have enormously increased in profile and prolificity in recent years, and whilst, as I discussed in Chapter 3, I neither asked specific questions about them, nor did any of the teenagers comment on them directly, it seems reasonable to assume that many of them would have been aware of celebrity Instagrammers, YouTubers and the like. Myriad news organisations have reported claims that today's teenagers both trust social media influencers and want to emulate them, thanks to a delicate combination of desirable

lifestyles filled with covetable products and exotic locations, but also a sense of normality or relatability that can be lacking in other aspects of celebrity culture (see, for example, *CNBC* 11 November 2019). Laura then references ‘dead quotes’, referring to prolific social media posts which consist largely of text, often stylised. Whilst this was not a description echoed in other interviews or focus groups, it does introduce another aspect of the ‘branding’ approach to social media self-representation, whereby language is carefully selected to illustrate a particular lifestyle, a particular public impression of the self. Quotes about ‘money’ or ‘girls, and sex’ clearly re/produce a particular kind of masculinity, designed to impress.

Indeed, I was struck to hear explicit references to ‘business’ in different interviews – all, however, raised by teenage boys as opposed to girls. Take, for example, eighteen-year-old Sam:

Sam: Nah, I was gonna say like – and it’s a good way to – it can help you like with different aspects of life as well – like let’s say you have a business or something. Social media’s a good way to get your business out there.

He underlines the networked publics of social media as a useful means for teenagers to reach other communities, potential audiences for an unnamed business endeavour. Social media thus form a mechanism both for reaching beyond one’s own peer groups and physical area, and for presenting oneself as commercially successful. Desirable self-representation in this context is linked not only to wealth, but to active commercial acumen.

There are clear echoes here of a neoliberal subjectivity which has been explored by myriad scholars of social media and youth culture. Many of those studies draw on postfeminism to explore teen girls’ simultaneous resistance to, and reproduction of, gendered ideals of beauty and sexuality (see, for example, Charteris, Gregory and Masters 2018; Elias and Gill 2017; Mahoney 2020; Retallack, Ringrose and Lawrence 2016). In Sam’s case, a similar (and similarly gendered) mechanism is at play, but rather than a teen girl describing the ‘right’ way of appearing (physically) attractive, a teen boy is describing the ‘right’ way of appearing (fiscally) attractive.

Social media ostensibly offer teenagers the ability to take control of this appearance, to enact a kind of empowered individuality which is highly neoliberal in and of itself. But social media also offer teenagers the ability to showcase such performance to others, to demonstrate to their networked publics *just* how successful their neoliberal subjectivity is.

Another reference to 'business' was offered by fifteen-year-old Callum, who was quite a reticent interviewee. People laughed knowingly at the below exchange but he refused to elaborate any further, leaving me somewhat confused as to the precise nature of his 'business':

Interviewer: Can you guys tell me what you use Snapchat and Instagram for? You said for communication, but can you give me some examples?

Callum: Yeah for business, business innit?

Interviewer: Can you explain more what you mean?

Callum: Like on Snapchat, communicate with – manager. [Laughter] Get sponsors. Or use Instagram yeah, to find like, models and that innit? Do business with them.

His tone and attitude here were almost more telling than the language he used; he leaned back in his chair, crossed his arms and laughed knowingly – a laughter mirrored by the rest of the focus group. The impression fostered was that this was an area of social media I, as an adult interviewer, was not going to be invited into – but that they all *knew* was significant. And, this, in turn, underlines the immense power of social media in generating spaces and networks which teenagers can make their own. Whilst neither Sam nor Callum would give any clarification as to precisely what kind of business they were imagining, once again the *story* being told in both interviews is illuminating. These teenage boys associate social media with capitalism, with money and with personal brand-building. They see social media as a potential means to profit, and self-representation *within* social media as a crucial part of this.

If the currency of social media is attention, Sam and Callum suggest that such attention can be easily converted into *actual* currency.

Sasha suggested that teenage boys choose props to include in their social media self-representation, bolstering this idea of a personal brand:

Sasha: Rather than like – boys don't really post that much with their friends. I think they just post like with themselves to get more attention. But they'll post like with objects, like, things that they think are good, like – or they'll wear like loads of like Gucci, like brands and stuff to make themselves look like 'ah, I've got, like, money'. And girls will just like post – maybe they'll post like dresses but it'll be like a group photo.

The neoliberal dimension of social media self-representation becomes even more pronounced here, as Sasha references designer goods and brands, and the desire to look wealthy. She codes this as particularly masculine behaviour, in contrast with feminine self-representation as more tied to friendships and group dynamics. Yet again, sharp gender dimensions are apparent both in the self-representation girls and boys undertake, and the ways in which these are read and narrated by other teenagers. Social media self-representation, to echo Senft's definition of the selfie as both object and practice, is both an activity which teenagers undertake, and a product which produces and re/shapes teenage ideas of femininity and masculinity.

Sian and Tai provided another take on what feminine social media self-representation might look like:

Interviewer: And what sort of things do you reckon girls post?

Tai: Girls just – girls just wanna be pretty. [Laughing]

Interviewer: Yeah?

[All laughing, agreeing]

Tai: Yeah everyone just wanna show bum and breasts.

Interviewer: Okay, so boys want to show money, girls want to show...body?!

All: Yeah!

Interviewer: What about you guys? Do you think you post like that?

[Nudging, light protest]

Sian: No. I post social media like – my face.

Interviewer: Yeah?

All: [Agreement]

All of these extracts reproduce a highly heteronormative and heterosexualised model of teenage masculinity and femininity, which I attempted to summarise with my own (enthusiastically received!) suggestion that boys want to display wealth, whilst girls want to display their looks. The sexualised references to ‘bum and breasts’, and Sian’s earlier description of boys ‘asking them out’ are a clear indication of the heterosexual courtship dynamics playing out through social media, which I will explore in more detail in the next chapter. This long-established binary was reinforced in almost every interview I undertook – and yet resistance was also apparent throughout. In this particular exchange, the girls notably laugh after Tai claims that ‘girls just wanna be pretty’ – and indeed, she laughs herself, as if she is aware that there might be complexities or problems underpinning her statement. When I go on to ask if these particular girls create those kinds of pictures, they gently protest, in Sian’s case claiming to simply post pictures of ‘like – my face’. In other words, there is a contrast at play here between how ‘other girls’ use social media and how these *particular* girls use social media – they appraise and judge a broader model of femininity differently to how they appraise and judge themselves. The teenagers

do not fit entirely neatly or comfortably into their own categorisations of what boys and girls do on social media – their own *living* of gender is more complicated and messier than the binary way they *describe* gender.

A similar kind of distancing was displayed by Sasha, when Lee suggested that girls ‘showed off’ more through social media:

Sasha: I feel like boys post it more than – like – themselves – like, showing off –

Lee: /I think girls post it more personally.

Sasha: No, I think girls post more with like their friends.

Here, Sasha undertakes a similar kind of distancing to Sian, rebuking Lee’s suggestions that girls (like herself) post more pictures of themselves ‘showing off’ than boys. Both exchanges seem to suggest that whilst teenagers are acutely aware of the heteronormative ideals, pressures and judgements they are subjected to – and in many cases re/produce these – they also make attempts to resist and step outside of them. As the exchange continued, this distancing between ‘all girls’ and Sasha as a ‘particular girl’ was further unpacked:

Interviewer: So you think – tell me more about these pictures – the different kinds of pictures that girls and boys post.

Lee: They act all hard and they act like slags.

Sasha: [Slight protest]

Interviewer: Boys act hard, girls act like slags?

Lee: Yeah.

Interviewer: Tell me more about what that means.

Lee: [To Sasha] I'm not on about like you girls, like obviously – no I'm not tryna say that it's every girl.

Interviewer: I know.

Lee: I'm just saying.

Sasha: Like people like girls they wouldn't post like their face, they'll post like pictures of their body, like they'll turn round –

Lee: /Yeah, sit there in the mirror innit and sit there -

Sasha: /Yeah exactly – their bum out, it's like not actually their face it's just their bum or they'll wear like a really low-cut top but their face won't be shown on it, or they'll have like the flash on so it'll just be their body showing.

Lee: /Or they'll take the picture and then they put the emoji over their face. Like, you know, if you're gonna take a picture like that at least put your face in it.

Sasha: Your face should be in it!

This exchange is a compelling illustration of the complex layers of manipulation, performance, negotiation and judgement which underpin teenage self-representation within social media. 'They act all hard and they act like slags' crisply associates masculinity with strength or even violence, femininity with sex – and, beyond this, derides those very standards of femininity through precisely the sexist double standards outlined by Ringrose et al (2013). Interestingly, when Sasha indicates a sense of resistance to this judgement, Lee slightly backpedals, underlining

that 'I'm not on about like you girls' and 'I'm not tryna say it's every girl'. There is another conflict here between the general and the specific, between ideas of what all girls are supposedly like, and what this particular girl is supposedly like. This conflict seems integral to Sasha's and Lee's friendship; he denounces hypothetical, generic 'girls' in a way that would presumably either be unacceptable to Sasha if it were directed at her, or would prevent Lee from liking or respecting her himself, or both. Sasha then actually comes in to help her friend, explaining that the term 'slag' is applied to a particular type of behaviour – girls posting photos of their bodies which are sexualised through 'their bum out' or a 'low-cut top'. This is not actually, then, a mode of behaviour which is associated with *all* girls, but rather one that distinguishes the 'right' kind of girl from the 'wrong' kind of girl. And both Lee and Sasha know this; whilst it is noticeably easy for them to leap to that derogatory description when they are asked to think about girls in general, they are able to unpick those associations too. Both teenagers have a sophisticated understanding of the multi-layered workings of gender; they know – at least when they stop to think about it – that it works to categorise and condemn girls in general. They know that gender can be resisted and reshaped, since they have a more nuanced and complimentary view of (certain) individual girls than the characteristics they use to generalise.

The data I unpacked earlier demonstrated how another reading of this kind of image is that such girls are insecure because of perceived 'ugliness'. In other words, such girls respond to a culture that judges and demeans them by simultaneously resisting it (hiding their faces) and embracing it (showcasing their bodies). There are more complicated gender dynamics at play in teens' social media self-representation than mere reflection and reproduction of masculine and feminine standards; social media also offer new ways for those standards to be manipulated and negotiated. Social media grant teenagers access to new – and continually evolving – ways of manipulating their appearance, sharing that appearance with their peers, and judging the appearance of others. From the physical positioning of a body in a picture, to the props that body is pictured with, to decisions around hiding and displaying different parts of the body, social media enable teenagers to experiment with their looks in complex new ways. Social media also enable those experimentations to be shared through digital space and recorded

in digital time – and, following my virtual potentialities framework, these spatialities and temporalities are necessarily unstable. Sharing through digital space is never to a reliably fixed and limited audience, and recording through digital time is never without the possibility of later amendment.

These extracts underline how teen self-representation in social media is enormously influenced by the networked publics *of* social media, and the imagined audiences for that self-representation. Teenage bodies within social media are under continuous scrutiny and associated judgement. This is not to say that the audiences within social media cannot also be a source of comfort and support for teenagers; some of the girls here in particular demonstrated a careful unpicking of the individual feelings behind certain types of post or picture. But entangled throughout every post, every picture is a desire to look ‘decent’, where ‘decent’ is both highly gendered (and inflected by other social and cultural categories), and where ‘decent’ is in part *created* by social media. Both the social interactions *within* social media, and the evolving technical capabilities *of* social media, help to shape ideas of what ‘decent’ looks like. Staging, editing and filtering processes – both as social decisions, and as technical functions – produce and reproduce ideals of appearance.

‘You’re not bad but you’re not what I want – thought you’d be’: Authenticity and honesty

Manipulation of their social media self-representation, then, is critical to both how teenagers manage their reputations as looking ‘decent’, and create and uphold those concepts of what ‘decent’ looks like. On the one hand, these processes are directly comparable to, say, experimenting with makeup or fashion choices in the physical world. On the other hand, social media’s sophisticated editing and filtering functionality, by creating misalignments between the body in social media, and the body in the physical world, generate new dynamics in relation to authenticity and honesty. These dynamics are both sharply gendered, and gendering.

Lee and Sasha explained how filters have an impact on which social media applications or platforms they prefer:

Interviewer: And which one do you like best?

Both: Snapchat.

Interviewer: Why?

Sasha: Dunno. It's just like easy to talk to people. And you can take good pictures on there. Filters. [Both laughing, agreeing].

Interviewer: So it's the filters that are –

Sasha: /Yeah.

Interviewer: But you can use filters on Instagram as well, right?

Sasha: Yeah but they're not very good.

Lee: They're not really that nice. They don't make you look that nice.

Interviewer: Okay. So the ones on Snapchat make you look better.

Sasha: Yeah.

Rather than analysing the functionality of different social media applications and filters, and why some are preferable to others, I am interested here in the acknowledgement that filters can be used to manipulate selfies, and make the user look 'nice'. There is enjoyment and attraction in making oneself look attractive through social media. So far, so straightforward; this is, arguably, simply another dimension of the requirement to look 'decent' that we have already seen. But consider, then, sixteen-year-old Zoe's rather more scathing take on filters:

Zoe: *Girls that wear loads and loads and loads and loads and loads of makeup are the only ones that use filter. But nowadays, girls won't be leaving without their filters.*

Interviewer: *Why not?*

Zoe: *Cos most girls' lives revolve round Snapchat.*

Interviewer: *And why do you think they like to use filters rather than not?*

Zoe: *Cos they don't know how to communicate with one another. They like to send their pictures to tell people and everything.*

Interviewer: *Do you think it's easier to say things with a picture rather than –*

Zoe: */No. Just go and see the person face to face and tell them.*

Zoe's claim that girls 'won't be leaving without their filters' is fascinating, conflating the virtual digital realm of social media with the physical world into which girls step when they leave their homes. Clearly, teenagers cannot place a social media filter over their faces in the physical world – and yet simply carrying their smartphone with them, having the option of doing so on *photos* of themselves is characterised as being 'with' filters. I would argue that Zoe here demonstrates how virtual teenage bodies are no less real than physical ones. Following the ideas on virtuality set out in my literature review – Bergson 2007 [1946]; Deleuze and Guattari (2013 [1980]); and more recently van Doorn (2011) – we can see here a truly productive and generative understanding of virtual bodies, where the digital practice of applying filters to a selfie *materialises* a particular gendered body.

Yet the explicit realness of virtual teenage bodies in social media also introduces a potential clash between how the body appears in that digital realm, and how it appears in the physical world. If that gap is too wide, then cognitive dissonance occurs, as Tomas and Mikey touched upon. Following a discussion of how funny

Snapchat could be, I asked Sam, Leo and Robert about the photos they chose to post – and peruse – on Instagram. The trio were all eighteen years old, black and attendees of an urban youth club in an area which has experienced post-war economic decline and unrest linked to racial tensions, though is more recently undergoing programmes of regeneration. Whilst they volunteered to participate, their manner was initially reticent and even defensive; they slouched backwards in their chairs, spoke quietly and little for the first part of the interview, before growing in confidence and loquacity. Performative masculinity and associated heterosexuality seemed apparent in the body language and mannerisms of all three; they sat with legs splayed, caught each other's eyes, smirked and nudged each other at points in discussion relating to girls and relationships, as I shall show.

Their dialogue explored some of the complex dynamics around image authenticity, self-representation and judgement on social media.

Interviewer: And what about on Instagram? Is that as funny?

Both: Nah.

Leo: It's just – if I filter – if I feel I'm lookin' nice, I'll just slap something up on Instagram, quick.

Interviewer: Totally. Filters are a good thing, right? [Laughter]

Sam: Yeah. Honestly!

Interviewer: But you see, that didn't exist when I was younger either. You had to take –

Leo: /Ah, it should have stayed like that I'm not gonna lie though.

Interviewer: Yeah?

Leo: *The filter stuff is bad, so bad.*

Interviewer: *How so?*

Sam: *Even though – even though there’s some people who like – you know that’s their face –*

[Interruption from elsewhere in the youth club]

Sam: *Yeah yeah yeah – what was I saying – yeah, even though like you know how a person looks in real life, filters can actually like come across as a very just...*

Leo: */They change how a person completely looks.*

Sam: *Yeah. So it’s like – they become like a catfish. They don’t actually look – like, to what they do.*

Sam initially acknowledges the filter functionality built into social media as a good thing when it comes to manipulating images of himself. Then, however, both Sam and Leo discuss the *negative* impacts of that same manipulation when applied to photos they are perusing of others. If someone edits their photos to the degree that they look startlingly different face-to-face (the boys, of course, made no explanation of precisely where this line would be drawn), then that person is derided as a ‘catfish’. This slang term has unknown origins, though was popularised in a 2010 documentary of the same name (Joost and Schulman 2010) and typically ‘refers to a person who creates a fake online profile in order to fraudulently seduce someone’ (Slate 18 January 2013). Here, Sam and Leo refer more specifically to individuals whose identity is known, but who manipulate social media imagery of themselves to the degree that they look extremely different physically or face-to-face.

Leo’s suggestion that ‘it should have stayed like that’ seems to indicate an awareness of this tension. He knows that the benefits of being able to manipulate

one's images rapidly turn into problems or challenges when the focus shifts to the *reception* of those images. An enjoyable social media function – filtering and editing images of the self so that they look as attractive as possible – is entangled with an understanding that this pleasure can be painful when applied to somebody else. Being mediated by a filter and mediating others through a filter are different. Thinking back to the notion of 'becoming bodies', there is a sense here of social media driving irrevocably forward, taking teenagers into a future about which they may feel ambivalent. This is hardly a unique observation or phenomenon in terms of human/digital relations, but it seems particularly poignant here. Just as teenagers' physical bodies are irremovably changing and growing, so the technology with which they can manipulate how their bodies are seen is changing and growing. For teenagers, bodies cannot 'just stay like that'.

Sam and Leo had noticeably referred to 'people' rather than boys or girls, men or women – so I asked if that was deliberate:

Interviewer: Yes. So is that – are we talking about girls here, or boys, or both?

Sam: It could be anyone.

Leo: Yeah. It can actually be anyone.

Sam: It could be anyone. Filters are just – they can actually just change the way a person looks.

Interviewer: And so do you have that experience where you've been surprised later on because you thought someone looked one way?

Leo: Yeah, I've had that a couple times.

Interviewer: Can you tell me more about it?

Leo: /Nah, it was just a thing, like what I saw – on the socials was like a completely different person –

Sam: /Yeah, like –

Leo: /To when I actually saw her and like...

Interviewer: And then you met?

Leo: Yeah. And it's like 'awwww!' It's so disappointing! [Laughter]

Sam: It's like – you're not bad but you're not what I want – thought you'd be.

The thrice-repeated 'anyone' at the start of this exchange suggested that Sam and Leo were keen to emphasise a lack of gendered difference with regard to catfishing, though this seemed to be somewhat underdone as the conversation progressed. First, the story Leo drew on not only referenced a girl, but also incorporated a clear dimension of heterosexuality, flirtation and ultimately disappointment. Then, Sam's slip into 'what I want' underlined the use of social media as a tool for finding potential romantic partners, something I will explore further in the chapter on intimacy. His correction to 'thought you'd be' draws attention, like Leo, to the manipulation and editing of social media self-representation, and how this can generate a misleading idea of someone's looks.

The boys continued their discussion, extending their description of this contradiction and describing the girl in question as actively dishonest:

Leo: Yeah you're not – that's not what it was – you're lying!

Sam: Yeah, you're lying!

Interviewer: Why do you think that happens?

Sam: Cos there's um – people like to take good photos. So if someone knows how to take good photos it makes them look better in the picture. That's not their fault though.

Interviewer: And do you ever worry that people might think that about you guys if they met you?

Leo: No – I feel like I look the same in my...

Sam: I don't care.

Leo: Yeah, I don't.

Sam: I actually don't care.

Interviewer: Okay. So you don't care in the sense that you don't care if someone meets you and just thinks you look different?

Sam: Yeah cos – there's actually nothing I can do about it. I just take photos.

Leo: Yeah.

Sam: So if you don't think I look how I look like in my photos there's nothing I can do about it.

Multiple interesting double standards and multi-layered definitions are at play throughout this exchange in relation to bodies, looks, judgement and gender. The word 'lying', used by both Sam and Leo to describe the behaviour of the unknown girl that Leo was disappointed by, is a particularly interesting one, suggesting an act of deliberate deception and dishonesty. A double standard is clear, given that Sam earlier enthusiastically agreed with the positive effect of filters on his own photos.

Where the lines lie, then, between acceptable image manipulation and ‘lying’ is unclear. Little attention is paid to the stresses or pressures that might engender such behaviour; rather, it is derided simply as dishonest.

Yet Sam then acknowledges that the deliberation associated with ‘lying’ might not be quite accurate, explaining that ‘people like to take good photos’ and it is therefore ‘not their fault’ if someone’s skill at doing so means their virtual body ends up looking more attractive than their physical one. There is an awareness, I think, that the editing functionality of social media applications is not simply a tool that *some* teenagers harness in order to mislead or deceive, but rather that it is intimately entangled with the mechanics of self-representation in which *all* teenagers participate.

The notion of a disconnect or misalignment between social media representations of the self, and the physical self is an interesting one in light of the wider theme of transformed space and time within social media. Modern smartphone cameras are both extremely powerful, and quick and straightforward to use; it has never been so easy for individuals to take vast quantities of photos of themselves, and share them with others. Yet unlike traditional albums, Instagram and Snapchat are not merely repositories for those photos; they are active, dynamic platforms, rich with engagement and interaction. This complicates the relationship between the individual and the *image* of the individual; the latter is no longer a static object, but an advert or, in this case, a preview for face-to-face interaction.

Later in the interview, when discussing the positive and negative aspects of social media, I asked the boys to reconsider these ‘catfish’ dynamics. Their responses further underlined the gendered element to the concept, one which had already been hinted at by Leo and Sam in their discussion of the ‘disappointing’ encounter.

Interviewer: What about the stuff that you guys were saying about photos and people looking different to how they look in ‘real life’ and these filters and stuff – do you think that has any effect on people?

Sam: Yeah it can, it can. I can’t lie.

Robert: Hundred percent.

Sam: Can't lie. I know certain girls that are famous for looking better in photos than they do in person.

Leo: Yeah.

Sam: And it's like – it's not really something – it's not that deep to like – I don't know why she's famous cos she doesn't look how she looks on photos but that's – I dunno, that's just people innit?

Robert: That's actually just people.

The repeated word 'famous' here is a particularly interesting one, hinting both at the kinds of notoriety that can spread both online and offline amongst teenage peer groups, and at so-called 'social media influencers' who deliberately build enormous audiences on Instagram and other platforms in order to earn money. Sam briefly tries to unpack the reasons for girls being more likely to gain fame in this way, but rapidly gives up and falls back into claiming it is 'just people'. This emerged over and over again – an awareness that a gendered difference is going on, but an unwillingness or inability to dig into it further. Nevertheless, later on in the same interview, Robert did attempt to think through this issue a little more:

Interviewer: And then we were talking a bit about how boys and girls might use it differently, whether you think they use it differently? Any sort of differences or similarities?

Robert: Girls would have – like I would say girls have a harder time.

Interviewer: How so?

Robert: I feel like – like for boys, looks isn't really a thing. And girls – they have to like

– I feel like girls automatically feel – you have a thing where they wanna look nice all the time.

Interviewer: Like on Instagram and Snapchat cos they're totally visual, right? They're led by photos.

Robert: Mm. But boys – it's not really – looks, it's not really a thing.

Here, Robert responds to a question about differences and similarities by volunteering that girls have a harder time – and we have seen this reflected elsewhere, in terms of the amount of pressure faced. The idea that looks are 'not really a thing' for boys likewise underlines the theme that for boys, attractiveness or looking 'decent' may be more tied to objects or displays of wealth, whereas for girls, looks *are* the object. Yet there are tensions and contradictions at play here too. The idea that girls feel that they *must* look nice has, of course, been corroborated, for example by Liv, Rhianna and Chloe claiming they 'have to' look a certain way. Yet dismissing this as 'automatic' is a light-touch explanation, failing to acknowledge the dynamics Tomas and Mikey introduced when they derided girls as ugly if they choose to hide their faces.

So let me turn, finally, back to teenage girls' voices. Liv, Rhianna and Chloe told a similar story to the boys, about a girl who got a reputation for 'lying':

Interviewer: Does this affect, then, the kind of pictures that you want to post? Like if you're saying people want a certain kind of bum, and certain skin and certain boobs, does that affect – do you take certain photos that like – help with that?

All: Yeah.

Liv: Not like really. It's not like – Photoshop.

Chloe: I know some girl that Photoshopped her picture. I know some girl like – I don't know her personally – but like I have her on Instagram. But she Photoshopped her pictures –

Liv: /To make –

Chloe: /And then she became very very very bait – like everybody knew her and then when people went to go meet her, they got really rude, and then she ended up being hated because she Photoshopped her pictures. Like people try to change themselves but like – really – God made us in his own image so like – like I don't know why people try to change.

The girls' initial 'yeah' is simultaneously emphatic and almost banal in its tone; they seem to think that the process of choosing particular photos in order to present a certain kind of attractiveness is so obvious that it is barely worth acknowledging. Interestingly, Liv then introduces a partial backtrack, suggesting that the processes they apply to their photos are not, however, in the same league as Photoshop – a technology which in their eyes (though arguably not in actuality), offers a far more substantial form of photo editing. The implication is that there are different levels of manipulation, and what these girls do is acceptable or normal, as opposed to the 'some girl that Photoshopped her pictures'. It then becomes apparent precisely why Liv wants to distance herself and her friends from this particular girl, because her own Photoshopping, they claim, led to her becoming 'very very very bait'. There is a double meaning to this slang – it means both attractive to the opposite sex, and doing something which is deemed more obvious than it should be – something which should be done in secret. The literal meaning – that of enticing prey – should also not be overlooked. This is a hugely gendered term, speaking to age-old tropes of girls and women who appear sexually attractive and are simultaneously admired and vilified for it. In other words, Chloe is here describing the other side of the scenario referenced by Sam and Leo.

Another dimensions to this distancing might, however, be a process of normalisation, in which Liv justifies her own and her friends' use of filters and photo-editing. Because their behaviour is not as 'extreme' as those girls who are 'very very very bait', those 'bait' girls can be siphoned off and categorised as a 'bad' kind of girl, whereas Liv and her friends remain acceptable and respectable. There are similar dynamics here to those set out by Lee and Sasha, whereby a certain kind of hypothetical girl is othered, whereas the actual girl who is part of the exchange is justified. Gender as a *hierarchical* process or set of power dynamics serves not only to differentiate teen girls and boys, but also 'proper' girls from subversive ones, 'acceptable' boys from objectionable ones.

Chloe concludes by claiming that 'people try to change themselves but like – really – God made us in his own image so like – like I don't know why people try to change'. This might be seen as a discursive move which, rather like Liv's dismissal of other girls as 'bait', works to disavow Chloe's own attempts at using social media to manipulate and control how she is seen. However, I was both touched by this call for confidence and self-love, and found it a striking contrast with the myriad ways in which social media enable and encourage users to 'change'. The relationship between social media and embodiment is dominated, as we have seen, by the ability to edit, to alter, to filter and to manipulate. And as with so much of teen social media culture, this is at once a continuation of long-established offline tropes and a rupture with them, because the unique capabilities of social media make those experimentations more complex, more sophisticated, more visible through space and more sticky through time. For girls in particular, a tightrope is created by this concept of 'changing' – a tightrope between appearing authentic or consistent in one's social media imagery, and deploying the filtering and editing techniques which enable an acceptable version of femininity. It is, furthermore, a tightrope created and negotiated by setting up some other girls who serve as foils against which oneself, and one's friends, seem 'normal'.

Teenage bodies: split through social media

Gender can be understood in myriad ways. It is a set of stories told by bodies, to bodies, about bodies, and because of bodies. It is something that happens to bodies – and which bodies resist, in various ways and forms. It is about difference, and the ways in which difference is organised into hierarchies and hegemonies, through the mechanics of patriarchal power. And it is about *becoming* – about productive, generative, transformative intra-actions between bodies and culture, bodies and their surroundings, bodies and other bodies.

The theoretical lens of ‘becoming bodies’ offered by Deleuze and Guattari, Barad, Young and others, helps me to see teenagers productively intra-acting with both their smartphones, and the social media those devices offer access to. Meanwhile, my framework of virtual potentialities helps me to pinpoint (some) of the myriad future possibilities these intra-actions create through space and time. From a spatial perspective, teenagers’ physical bodies and the physical space they occupy overlap with and are interconnected to social media space, for they carry social media with them everywhere, on their smartphones. Meanwhile, creating and sharing social media content which is *representative* of the body involves a kind of *extension* of the body into a new digital space, pushing it out into constantly shifting and changing networked publics. The editing and filtering functions within social media allow those representations to be manipulated and altered in digital space, forming misalignments between teenage bodies as they exist in the physical world, and as they exist online. From a temporal perspective, teenagers’ engagements with social media are both incredibly frequent and take place from morning to night, engendering feelings of urgency and pressure which are in themselves highly embodied sensations. Moreover, content creation and sharing grants teenage bodies new kinds of semi or perceived permanence and fixity through time – and yet the manipulation of those bodies through filtering and editing ensures that they are also, always, changing.

I drew, in my literature review, on Beauvoir’s eloquent description of the prepubescent girl to ground my theorising of gender as embodied potential: ‘the future not only approaches: it takes residence in her body’ (Beauvoir 1997 [1949]: 351). Examining embodiment in teen social media practices, I find that future taking

residence not only in teens' physical bodies but in their *digital* bodies. Smartphones seem to twitch in their hands as they await a vibration or a beep. Selfies are posted with an intake of breath as the reactions of endless potential audiences are anticipated. And as those images are filtered, edited and amended, so jarring misalignments open up between the image and that which it represents.

For these teenagers, embodied experiences of social media – whether the physical processes involved in logging on and participating, or the processes of manipulating and managing one's self-representation – are far more arduous and complex than they might first appear. Social media applications – both in the physical processes of accessing them, and the self-representation shared within them – *split* teenage bodies between the material and the virtual. A teenager who actively creates, manipulates and shares photos of themselves through social media is embodied both in the physical world and in the digital world. Both senses of embodiment are utterly real. But when the appearance of the material body in physical space clashes and contrasts with the appearance of the virtual body in social media space, that teenager must navigate accusations of dishonesty. The judgements attached to these questions of authenticity seem very gendered, with girls – and different '*types*' of girls – being subject to more negativity if they are perceived to be falsifying an image of themselves. But the term *perceived* is particularly important. Editing and manipulation of social media self-representation is absolutely acceptable – indeed, advantageous – if it is not assessed to be excessive. Girls in particular must navigate a paradoxical tightrope between looking 'bang' or 'decent' within social media, but not creating too much of a fissure between those images and how they appear in the physical world.

Any notions that social media are quick, carefree and easy for teenagers to participate in are a fallacy – in spite of the breezy language which the apps use to describe themselves. Social media self-representation is both an activity which teenagers *do*, and a mechanism which re/shapes and re/produces ideas of what teenagers *are*, particularly in relation to gender.

Chapter 5: Uncertain aspirations, unexpected exposure: Stories about intimacy in teen social media

Belinda rolls her eyes as she opens the message. 'Hey sexy, how r u?' She doesn't know him. She doesn't want to know him.

Tyler watches the top of her head, moving up and down. He bites his lip, and reaches for his phone.

Shanice puts her arm around her boyfriend. She takes the picture from a particular angle – her face, the back of his head. When she posts it, others will know, but they won't really know.

Social media are explicitly interactive, dialogic and relational. They foster communication and engagement between users; they create, uphold, and sometimes challenge, relationships. This chapter seeks to examine and unpack those relationships – specifically through the concept of intimacy, which offers several particularly useful ways of exploring relationships in social media.

First, there is a particularly *intimate* dimension to the ways many relationships are negotiated through social media, whether the intensity of close friendships or the frisson of romantic or sexual relationships. Second, a rich body of scholarship has examined the digital *transformation* of intimacy in the internet era, and I consider virtual potentialities to be closely related to this. Nevertheless, it is important to underline that intimacy is not *exclusively* a relational or interpersonal concept; there are ways of understanding intimacy which are deeply individualistic and personal.

As such, this chapter examines how teenagers use social media to forge, maintain and negotiate intimate relationships with each other, exploring those behaviours and activities through my virtual potentialities framework. I begin by theorising intimacy in more detail, paying particular attention to the ways in which digital technologies have been found to transform, disrupt and mediate intimacy,

and the particularities of teenage negotiations of intimacy. Then I turn to my fieldwork data, considering the ways in which teenagers form initial connections within social media – not just with existing, offline peers but with strangers. I examine how teenagers utilise the technical functions of social media to give their connections with peers a virtual form, and how these functions overlap with and bleed into teenagers' offline spaces.

From there, I consider how these connections are verified or authenticated, paying specific attention to the importance of the visual. I focus particularly on how individuals' looks and visual self-representations are used to verify their identities and intentions, reflecting on some of the findings from the previous chapter, on embodiment. Building on the explorations of authenticity and honesty in that chapter, I explore, too how images of other social media users – their own profile pictures or selfies – are used as evidence to affirm that they are 'real', even when simultaneously recognised by the same teenagers as (potentially) unreliable. This leads me to an exploration of the processes by which teenagers predict other users' readings or reactions to their own social media activity, and the imaginative projections and processes of second-guessing which take place online.

I then turn to the dimensions of intimacy within social media which are charged with desire and sexuality. I examine how desire flows through teen social media relationships and behaviours, and how teenagers use social media to seek out, negotiate and perform romantic and sexual relationships. I consider teen awareness of a darker side to these forms of intimacy, and their negotiation of strangers apparently requesting sexualised social media connections. Finally, I turn to the notion of exposure and the blowing open of these various forms of intimacy, exploring how the risk of such exposure is a continuous consideration for teenage social media users. Ultimately, I will argue that teenage negotiations of intimacy and relationships, as enabled and mediated by social media, are constant negotiations between the private and the *potential* public, and they play out in some sharply gendered ways.

Theorising intimacy: closeness, sharing, digital transformation and possibility

‘Intimate’ may be understood as that which is ‘inmost, most inward, deep-seated’; ‘pertaining to the inmost thoughts or feelings; close in acquaintance or association; closely connected by friendship or personal knowledge; characterised by familiarity (with a person or thing); very familiar’. Intimacy is said, also, to be ‘pertaining to or dealing with such close personal relations’ (*OED Online* 2019). These are familiar definitions but worth dwelling on, particularly the repeated references to closeness. Social media introduce a new and interesting dimension to closeness, because they engender new kinds of *virtual* closeness. A sense of physical closeness can be imagined within social media interactions, even if the parties are physically distant from each other. Similarly, a sense of emotional or affective closeness can be experienced and amplified through engagements with social media; friendships, flirtations and romantic relationships alike are nurtured through social media display, public commentary and private communication. Social media applications become mechanisms for transforming perceptions of spatiality – here, spatiality as it relates to intimate relationships.

Another important dimension of intimacy relates to the idea of sharing – and this, also, is a key function of social media applications. In 1998, Lauren Berlant introduces a special issue of *Critical Inquiry* by writing that intimacy ‘involves an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about oneself and others that will turn out in a particular way. Usually, this story is set within zones of familiarity and comfort’ (1998: 281). There are several useful points here for an exploration of teenagers and social media. First, Berlant uses the word *aspiration*, deliberately associating intimacy with a sense of hope, ambition and perhaps above all, desire. Intimacy here is bound up with *wanting* something – and indeed, much of the data I have already examined in this thesis have illustrated teenagers’ wants – wanting to represent themselves in particular ways, to be perceived in particular ways, to connect to particular others.

Second, Berlant associates intimacy with narrative and storytelling, something that social media applications facilitate through content creation, content sharing, and functions explicitly called ‘My Story’. Narrative is a process of meaning-making and creativity; it is a way for teenagers to better understand their world and,

in a sense, to create it. It is also, as I set out in my methodology chapter, the kind of data I am most interested in collecting and analysing. Thinking about intimacy in relation to storytelling and narrative means thinking about intimacy as shared processes of meaning-making – and these processes take place both within social media and within the interviews I held.

Berlant's phrase 'turn out in a particular way' touches on an intimate desire for control over the future. As I have shown, the virtual potentialities of social media disrupt such control, by forcing users to maintain a continual awareness of *multiple* pathways – multiple audiences who may see their social media content, multiple ways in which that content might be interpreted. And as we shall see, there is always the risk that intimacy explored and negotiated within social media will be blown open and exposed. Following Brian Massumi as outlined in the literature review, I can conceptualise future threat or 'menace potential' as truly vast in scale, containing 'so much more, potentially, than anything that has already happened' (Massumi 2010: 53). This is a particularly useful concept to bear in mind when considering the constant possibility for social media intimacy to be blown open, to be shared with far more people than originally intended. Those possibilities are utterly real, embodied sensations; they have an 'affective reality of a past future, truly felt' (Massumi 2010: 54).

Social media, then, disrupt and complicate that *temporal* dimension of intimacy relating to (imagined) control over the future. Berlant also characterises intimate spheres as saturated with ambivalences and unpredictability, and this, too, seems a useful lens to bring to bear on teenagers' use of social media. If we conceptualise social media applications as such intimate spheres, and as places where intimate relationships are negotiated, then Berlant encourages us to foreground ambivalence, uncertainty and instability. We arrive, again, at the concept of negotiation and tension so prevalent throughout my explorations of teenagers and social media.

The sense of tension between contradictory emotions or possibilities in a conceptualisation of social media intimacy is underlined by Jette Kofoed (2017). She draws on Berlant to conceptualise intimacy in her Snapchat study, underlining Berlant's claim that 'all of [intimacy's] positive sides inevitably meet with instability,

drama, and betrayal' (Kofoed 2017: 121). Kofoed's point, then, is that intimacy within social media in general, and Snapchat in particular, is saturated with ambivalences and contradictory *desires*. She writes that the 'intimacies of Snapchat seem to exist in a web of affects that are not limited to joy or connectivity, but include all the difficulties of not-knowing, feeling exposed and negotiating with the self and others about what to share and how to save face' (Kofoed 2017: 122). This again underlines the motion of exposure which is central to my own study of social media intimacy. Exposure, as I will show, is a continual risk or possibility for teenage social media users, even if it does not always come to pass; it is another dimension of virtual potentialities of which teenagers retain a constant awareness.

The transformation of intimacy by digital technologies has proven a rich and growing area of scholarship, and one which has clear and substantial implications for a study of teenagers and social media. Twenty years on from Berlant's special issue, Amy Shields Dobson, Brady Robards and Nicholas Carah quote her in their own introduction, this time to an edited collection on *Digital Intimate Publics and Social Media*. They trace Berlant's notion of zones of familiarity into the digital era, where 'social media can function to challenge or disrupt the boundaries of these zones', and aim to '[c]hart a theory of digital intimate publics', following Berlant in understanding these as related to commodification, normativity and desire (2018 xix-xx). Social media are, they argue, 'machines through which intimate practices are publicised, privatised, commodified, and exploited' (2018 xx), a series of verbs which seems particularly pertinent in light of the findings from my own interviews. They draw, too, on the notion of networked publics, underlining the salience of this model for conceptualising the dynamic spatiality of social media. Similarly, Hobbs et al make a claim for a 'digital transformation of intimacy' in relation to dating apps (2017), and this too can be used to examine how the digital era and new technologies are transforming intimacy. Websites and mobile apps have become sites in which intimacy is performed, negotiated and manipulated; they offer new forms of intimate connection and communication. Ultimately, intimacy in the digital era can be understood as operating across increasingly blurry distinctions of public and private, and with an underlying awareness, always, of the *possibility* of the private being made public – precisely what I explore in my examination of exposure.

Simultaneously, intimacy within social media – and specifically *teenage* intimacy within social media – repeats and reproduces many offline and pre-digital dynamics of intimacy. The gendered double standards applied to teen girls' appearance, for example, whereby girls who create and share sexualised images of themselves are at once applauded and derided for doing so, are hardly exclusive to the digital era. Anglophone scholars have long observed teenage girls facing cultural pressure to make their appearance as attractive as possible – and running the risk of being derided as 'slags' or 'sluts' when they do so (see, for example Gill and Scharff 2011; Pomerantz 2008; Rawlings 2014; Ringrose and Rawlings 2015). Yet social media twist and emphasise these dynamics in new ways, for example by enabling teenagers to manipulate their appearance with far more sophistication, as we saw in the previous chapter, or simply because of the volume and speed of image generation and sharing.

I want, as throughout my project, to pay attention here to these lines of continuity and repetition, as well as the points of rupture and transformation engendered by social media. Whilst there are clearly myriad strong cases for the digital transformation of intimacy through social media applications and ubiquitous smartphones, there is also extensive research exploring how teenagers use social media to repeat and reproduce the same tropes of intimacy that they have long engaged with offline. I want, also, to conceptualise intimacy in social media, following Berlant and Kofoed, as existing in tension between the desirable and the dangerous, the planned and the unpredictable – and given the spatial and temporal nature of these tensions, I would characterise them as further forms of virtual potentialities.

'They just add you and then you're like – accept!': Forming connections in social media

'Add a friend' is a peculiarly modern phrase. One can imagine someone living just a few decades ago being utterly baffled by it. How can an entire relationship possibly be condensed into such a simple action? How can the process of making friends with somebody be as simple as adding them to some list? Yet it has become

a fundamental action within many social media applications; an explicit concretisation of a relationship; the formation of a digital connection.

How, then, do teenagers form those connections? How do they create and manage their 'networked publics', both with individuals with whom they already have an offline relationship, and those with whom they do not? When I asked them who they were connected with on social media, most of my participants began by mentioning their friends. There was an apparent keenness to emphasise that social media are, above all, platforms or applications for maintaining relationships which already exist offline – to mirror, then, the claims made by social media companies themselves. However, as our conversations continued, many of the teenagers began to discuss the mechanisms by which they might connect with very distant acquaintances – or total strangers – via social media. Teenagers spoke of being added on Snapchat or followed on Instagram by friends of friends or even total strangers. Sometimes these expansions of their networked publics via what I am terming 'stranger connections' were welcomed and actively encouraged, particularly on Instagram. For example, fifteen-year-old Ben, a black teenager who attended one of the urban youth clubs, explains how he would create the ideal post on the platform:

Ben: Like the better the light the better the picture. And if the lighting's good then the picture's good. It means more followers.

He describes a clear transactional process to Instagram content generation; 'good' pictures attract more followers and thus generate a measurable, visible expansion of the social media network. In this instance, stranger connections within social media are actively sought, building up a tangible and measurable indication of popularity, a concrete expansion of virtual space into a wider and wider network. There are clear links here to the culture of so-called 'social media influencers'; celebrities, many of whom are teenagers themselves, whose fame is cultivated primarily through platforms such as Instagram, and who can build up tangible follower communities numbering in the millions. Seventeen-year-old Tina and fourteen-year-old Ryan, both white teenagers from one of the urban youth clubs, offered another discussion of followers:

Interviewer: So having lots of followers is really important?

Tina: Yeah. Cos if you have like ten followers and then...

Ryan: /Yeah. You know.

Tina: /Like your picture or something and you only get like one like, it's a bit embarrassing. [Laughter]

This exchange underlines the particular visibility of certain kinds of Instagram intimacy, whereby users can see precisely how many *other* users are engaging with a specific teenager's Instagram posts. Ten followers, or a single like on a particular post, are derided as embarrassingly low figures – and it is an embarrassment that other peers can see and interact with.

Fourteen-year-old Zoe, a white attendee of the same club, underlined this from a different perspective. I asked her to tell me a little about the different social media apps her peers used and why she thought they were popular:

Zoe: Instagram cos – most children our age – they just go on it to see how many followers and likes and comments they can get on their photo. And most of them – half their followers they probably don't even know them.

I was particularly struck here by Zoe's use of the phrase 'children our age'; she was the only interviewee who described herself, or her peers, as a child. It seemed almost endearing and also jarring; a sharp reminder of the clarity that Zoe, if not necessarily the other teenagers, felt about being *not* an adult. On the other hand, phrasing like 'most' and 'they' does draw a distinction between Zoe and such other children, carefully suggesting that seeing 'how many followers and likes and comments they can get' is something that other young people do, not her. A similar form of

distancing is happening here to those explored in the chapter on embodiment; lines are being drawn between Zoe herself, and others.

It is worth underlining that one Instagram follower is equivalent to another as far as the public-facing aspect of the app is concerned. That is, each user's profile simply incorporates a list of followers and a total number; no differentiation is made between friends and strangers, close relationships and 'random followers'. Instagram followers therefore give an *impression* of intimacy, because there is no way for observers to ascertain how many of a user's total number of followers are truly intimate relationships. Reflecting here on Berlant's association of intimacy with shared narrative and storytelling, we can see tangible, measurable numbers of social media connections being used to tell a story of popularity, of status and of perceived intimacy. I am not, of course, claiming that a teenager who sees a peer with thousands of Instagram followers assumes that every one of those followers is a close friend, someone with an intimate connection with the original user. But the *imagined* intimacy – the virtual potentialities of hundreds or even thousands of other Instagram users desiring an intimate connection with the original user – is clearly very powerful as a form of status symbol. It positions the user in question as a *desirable* subject, through a public form of digital display.

Similar mechanics are at play within Snapchat; whilst users' connections within the app are not listed and put on public or semi-public display as they are within Instagram, each user *is* accorded an activity score by the app, which appears next to their username. Since this number is a measure of how much the individual in question uses Snapchat, it operates by extension as a measure of how active and broad a network that individual participates in. In other words, Snapchat scores, like numbers of Instagram followers, are a (virtual) concretisation of the size and dynamism of teenagers' friendship groups, the numbers of *other* social media users they are connected to, and ultimately their popularity, their desirability and their experiences of intimacy. Social media spatialises relationships by displaying them in these remarkably simple numerate terms, for other social media users to peruse and appraise – and teenagers like Ben, Tina, Ryan and Zoe seem highly aware of this.

However, the mechanism of attracting new followers that Ben outlines is just one side of stranger connections within social media. Sometimes, such connections

are neither sought nor welcomed. Consider, for example, the following exchange between thirteen-year-olds Liv, Rhianna and Chloe:

Interviewer: And so who do you talk to on Snapchat? Is it mostly your friends?

Liv: Friends.

Rhianna: Yeah. But if people add me that I don't know I just don't add them back.

Interviewer: Yeah?

Chloe: Well if they add me I'd just be like 'who's this?' If I don't know them I just unfriend them.

I had framed my question around the idea of pre-existing, offline friendships which are then extended into Snapchat, and Liv and Rhianna initially support this. However, Rhianna immediately and independently introduces the notion of people 'that I don't know' requesting a Snapchat connection with her, without being prompted, suggesting that such activity is commonplace. Certainly it had already emerged in earlier interviews, and went on to appear in others. But it is worth delving a little more into what 'know' actually means in this context. It is an innocuous-sounding term and yet it is far more complicated than it first seems, particularly in the context of social media and digital culture.

The most obvious interpretation of someone who Chloe does not 'know' would be someone with whom she has not engaged or interacted – more specifically, someone she has not met in an active way *offline*. Traditional interpretations of 'knowing' someone would involve something rather more active than simply meeting someone in passing; they would require some form of sustained interaction over time. Chloe explains that if someone she does not 'know' adds her on Snapchat, she will challenge them to identify themselves and 'unfriend' them if they turn out to be 'unknown'. This suggests, I think, a certain ease and familiarity with the process of

forming social media connections with those with whom she has only a tenuous or weak connection. That is, Chloe illustrates here how social media enable teenagers to form tangible – and *potentially* intimate – connections with others, regardless of the depth of initial knowledge. Social media and digital culture have, in other words, introduced far richer and broader means of ‘knowing’ others. Sophisticated and meaningful relationships can clearly be fostered entirely online – Hobbs et al’s (2017) study of intimacy and online dating is just one example – so it is no longer enough to characterise ‘know’ as applying only to those whom one has met and interacted with *offline*.

The networked publics built and maintained through social media encourage users to connect in a tangible way with far larger groups of other users than they might typically be able to in everyday life. It is not uncommon for teenagers to have thousands of Instagram followers, thousands of contacts in Snapchat, and as many of the teenagers I have quoted underline, there is often a fierce desire to extend and grow those networks even further. Not all of those connections can or will be ‘known’ to equivalent levels of detail and intimacy, and levels of intimacy will of course change over time as users get to ‘know’ each other better, or interact less. As such, maintaining an active social media profile requires management and mediation of multiple different levels of knowledge – multiple different virtual potentialities. Chloe describes here just one brisk and efficient means of managing those multiple levels.

There are, we can see, various complexities and contradictions inherent in the idea of teenagers ‘knowing’ another social media user – both within and beyond the social media applications themselves. We can see, also, how social media both extend and complicate what it means to ‘know’ someone. I asked the girls to expand on this idea of people they did not ‘know’ adding them on social media:

Interviewer: So some other people have been telling me that random people will add them, people that they don’t know. So does that happen to you, can you tell me about that?

Rhianna: Yeah.

Chloe: Yeah.

Liv: It happens a lot.

Chloe: It happens a lot. That's [illegible, talking over each other].

Liv: It's just like – it's when you do Quick Adds.

Rhianna: My Snapchat – like – well on Snapchat there's Quick Adds. Where you can just add like random people.

'It happens a lot' underlines the commonness – almost banality – of strangers adding or following teenagers on social media, and this was corroborated both in the interviews with other participants, and by these girls excitedly interrupting each other to describe its mechanisations. Much as social media companies might emphasise that they are creating platforms for friendship, for sharing and creating with those friends, and for communicating with individuals that users already know well, the applications are also designed explicitly to enable stranger connections. Liv and Rhianna go on to explain a specific technical function used for forming these stranger connections within Snapchat at the time of writing – Quick Adds, which, in the company's own words, 'recommends friends based on who you're already friends with, who you subscribe to, and more' (Snapchat Support: Add Friends 2019). This statement is directly followed by an emoji of two dancing girls, lending a light-hearted and playful tone to the Quick Adds function – and yet this is a playfulness which belies the lack of transparency the company provides regarding how the function works. The 'and more' is left unspoken, and another sense of undefined possibilities and potentials is apparent, this time in relation to Snapchat's technical capabilities. Whilst the suggestion from Snapchat itself seems to be that Quick Adds recommends friends or acquaintances that have been forgotten or left off the user's contact list, Rhianna's phrase 'random people' speaks to a sense of unpredictability and unfamiliarity. The term 'quick' only serves to underline a rapid pace of change

and activity associated with these connections. I asked the girls to explain Quick Adds in more detail:

Interviewer: So Quick Adds, just so I'm clear, so you type in a name or it's –

Rhianna: [Demonstrating on phone] No you basically go onto the – the like – three lines – and then it goes 'share username' and then you send it to like everyone in your friends list.

Chloe: [Demonstrating on phone] Like say I wanna do this – like say this one – so I click on it – and I say 'share username' – and I go like that – and I send it to anybody. And then it'll come up. [Discussion, shouting over each other]

Liv: It's just like this random people.

Chloe: Yeah. It'll come up like this. So when you send it...

Liv: /Go into 'add'.

Chloe: /And it'll just come up like that and then it'll come up on their screen at...

Interviewer: So it could be someone that one of your friends knows?

All: Yeah.

The girls demonstrate, then, a combination of familiarity with the Quick Adds function, and lack of understanding as to how it actually works and which data it draws on. There are some cloudy dynamics sitting under the formation of stranger connections on social media, and the teenagers I spoke to seemed relatively comfortable with this lack of clarity. The networks of friends, of friends of friends

which social media give shape to – and the applications’ ability to lend a virtual concreteness to relationships that do not exist in the offline world – are features with which the teenagers I spoke to seemed very comfortable. Yet those broad and shifting networks, examined through a lens of virtual potentialities, also require teenagers to retain an awareness of multiple possibilities at once. Who might these strangers be, these strangers Snapchat suggests they add, or who might add them? What might their motivations be?

To unpack this further, I asked the girls why they thought strangers might seek to add them on social media. The girls touched on, once again, an interplay between the heteronormative sexual dynamics operating within social media, and the technical functions of social media:

Interviewer: So what do you think they want? Why do you think random people add you?

[All shouting]

Rhianna: Cos they think I’m pretty! [Laughter, jokey]

Rhianna’s jokey ‘because they think I’m pretty’ seems to echo Ben’s earlier description of ‘better’ pictures leading to ‘more followers’. Social media attractiveness, as explored in the previous chapter, is a form of currency – albeit one that Rhianna is purposefully treating flippantly. The subsequent laughter from the other girls seems to suggest a tacit agreement; that is, attractiveness on social media results in attention – and sometimes connection – from other social media users. I wondered if there was a potential undertone of sexualisation here, whereby ‘attractive’ girls are deliberately sought out, and whilst Rhianna does not highlight this in the exchange above, later conversation between the three teen girls explored it more explicitly:

Rhianna: It’s just like – no – on Instagram like before, like loads of like men start messaging.

Liv/Chloe: Yeah.

Rhianna: Like we've all had that, like random men like just start messaging us.

Liv: Cos on Instagram you could like – you may not like follow the person but they can still message you and you can like still see them.

The sheer banality of this exchange is particularly striking; the girls seemed at pains to illustrate quite how commonplace the process of 'random men' approaching them through social media – in this case, Instagram – was for them. Liv explains how this works from a technical perspective; unless one's Instagram account is set to private, any other user can send a private message. Here, social media seems to demand the holding of several contrasting positions at once. The girls are well aware that a (hetero)sexualised dynamic underpins some of the formation of stranger connections on social media, but they are neither wholly critical nor wholly embracing of this. The technical functionality of social media – and wider teenage dynamics of sexual currency – are overlapping and entangled.

Alternatively, social media connections may be sought by strangers whom teenagers meet – or simply briefly come into contact with – offline. Liv, Rhianna and Chloe claimed that particular local areas were the 'worst' for people, namely boys, approaching them to request their Snapchat usernames:

Rhianna: Especially in AREA. AREA is the worst.

Interviewer: What, like in the town centre?

Chloe: AREA and AREA. AREA, AREA, AREA are the worst places.

Interviewer: So some boy you don't know will come up to you?

Chloe: Yeah. Happened to me the other day when I was there. I was in AREA. I was just walking with my cousin, and like this group of like five boys came up to me and was like 'you're peng can I have your snap' and I was like 'no!' And they was like 'er it wasn't for me anyways. It was for my friend'. Where's your friend? [Laughter] 'He's over there'. Why couldn't he come over to me! Why've you all come?

Clearly there are dynamics at play here in relation to teenage courtship and the heteronormative performances of relationships, which I will return to. For now, I want to underline that, once again, a particular mechanism or action – a stranger attempting to formalise a connection with a teenager – takes place both offline *and* online, and overlaps between the two realms. Social media have not engendered a whole new form of teenage behaviour, but they have altered some of the temporality and spatiality of that behaviour. The girls claim that a particular geographical location is notorious for approaches from boys with whom they have no prior relationship – boys who then request their Snapchat usernames. That is, they request the concrete formation of a digital connection. An encounter in the offline world is the catalyst for an (attempted) online relationship. Crucially, it seems desirable – at least, for the boy who asks for the Snapchat username – for the connection to be shifted *from* the physical world *to* social media. We might speculate that the very intimacy of social media – the (semi) private, one-to-one connection that the boy in this instance might form with Chloe through Snapchat – offers a more secure and private environment for a fledgling relationship. We might speculate, also, that both the functionality and the notoriety of Snapchat for sharing sexualised content make it a particularly attractive platform for teenage boys seeking to connect with girls. The key point is that all of these speculations foreground the ways in which social media like Snapchat offer new spaces and altered timeframes in which teenage relationships are negotiated.

A more sinister undertone still to the formation of social media connections with strangers lay in the possible motivations of such connections. Fourteen-year-old Lee and seventeen-year-old Sasha, for example, discussed similar experiences to Liv, Rhianna and Chloe, of strangers adding them on Snapchat:

Interviewer: So how do you meet strangers using your phone?

Lee: They just add you and then you're like, then you're like, [imitates using phone] accept!

Sasha: No, you know, sometimes I get like weird requests and sometimes I add it just to see if I know them or if I know who it is...

Lee: Yeah, and then block them.

Sasha: ...And then, cos that's like some random paedophile that's like 54, and then you're like 'okay! Delete!' [Laughter from both].

Like Rhianna, Liv, and Chloe, Lee and Sasha draw on their physical phones in the interview to illustrate their points, echoing back to the idea of social media embodiment as utterly entangled with teenagers' mobile devices. Also similarly, they grapple with the notion of 'knowing' someone and the multiple meanings and possibilities bound up in this. Lee performs a carefree banality in accepting connection requests from strangers, overlaid with a comical sense of bravado. Later in the interview he volunteered a discussion on the murder of Breck Brednar, a fourteen-year-old boy who was 'lured to his death' by a man he met through online gaming (*BBC News Online* 19 September 2018); Lee had heard about the case through an educational session at the Army Cadets. It seemed, then, that Lee had an explicit awareness of, even a fascination with, the potentially sinister side of stranger connections through digital media, and that his performance of bravado here was not necessarily through lack of information.

Sasha is careful to be a little more measured and explains that she typically checks and verifies a request that appears to be 'weird' – a process I will discuss in more detail later. She then goes on to reference 'random paedophiles' in a remarkably casual way, clearly introducing a potential threat (albeit perhaps with some laziness around the definition of the term) and then laughing with Lee about

it. The point I want to emphasise here is not so much the presence or activities of paedophiles on social media, but rather the fact that paedophiles are referenced, explicitly and casually, by these teenage social media users. Lee and Sasha display here a sharp awareness of the strands of external concern and even panic woven through teen social media usage – and absolute confidence in their ability to navigate them.

We can see that relationships on Instagram and Snapchat have a (virtual) spatiality in that they are concretised through lists of followers, friends and recorded interactions. A user is either in another's list of Snapchat contacts or Instagram followers, or they are not. This lends social media relationships the impression of being rather more distinct and discrete than offline relationships; there is a binary representation of 'friend' or 'stranger', although of course the emotions and behaviours associated with these representations can be very different. As such, the creation of a connection through social media – whether through an active reaching out to another user, or through the acceptance of a request *from* another user – creates a kind of fixing or formalising of a relationship, a tangible action which does not exist in the offline world. Notably, all connections acquire the same level of tangibility, even though some genuinely are the digital iteration of an intimate offline relationship, whilst others are with remoter friends of friends or total strangers. Similarly, the social media applications most popular with teenagers at the time of writing – Instagram and Snapchat – have inbuilt functionality which enables strangers to connect with teenagers via nothing more than their username, as well as functions such as Snapchat's Quick Adds which seem engendered to actively promote such connections. Meanwhile, unless a teenager's Instagram is deliberately set to be private, then anyone can find them, follow them and send them private messages.

The transformed temporality and spatiality of social media, then, serve to make intimacy both tangible and measurable, crystallised into lists of friends and followers, and yet simultaneously unstable or unpredictable, because those crystallised relationships *may* be far more casual or tenuous than they first appear. The intimacy bar for forming social media connections can be extremely low; as Ben underlines, simply posting a photo with good lighting may be enough for him to generate a new follower. I wanted to explore further these tensions and

complications, delving into the levels of familiarity teenagers might or might not have with those they are connected to within social media. After all, offline relationships traditionally require a sense of familiarity to be built up between the parties over time and within particular spaces – though those spaces can be virtual as well as physical, as a pair of pen pals might build up a relationship through writing, for example. Such constructive, generative processes of relationship-building also take place within social media; so-called Snapchat ‘streaks’, whereby users build up a score by messaging each other on consecutive days without a break, are a particularly explicit example. And yet there are also marked temporal and spatial differences in social media relationships which are ignited at the click of a Quick Adds button. When the parties are physically distant from each other, when they may never have even met face-to-face, how does this affect how relationships evolve?

‘It’s just a good way of finding out who people really are’: Identity verification and authenticity

The exchanges with Liv, Rhianna and Chloe, and also Lee and Sasha, illustrate a claim made by many of the teenagers I spoke to; if they do not already know somebody who connects with them through social media, then refusing or severing the connection is relatively simple. Yet, as I began to explore this simple act, I found that an array of possibilities and potential implications are bound up in that word ‘know’. Someone a teenager ‘does not know’ may be someone they have never met or heard of – a classic ‘stranger’. They may be someone they have never met, but who is a friend or relative *of* a friend or relative. They may be someone the teenager has briefly met offline and is getting to know better *online*.

These tensions between different types of ‘knowing’ are, I would argue, critical to analysing teenage intimacy in social media, and specifically how social media re/shape intimacy and relationships. Far more so than in the offline, physical world, the online world can link up people who do not have a pre-existing relationship. This means that a crucial part of negotiating intimacy is the determination of how well someone is ‘known’. Consider, for example, the weight attached to that word ‘know’ by Rhianna, Liv and Chloe here, discussing the point at

which they would give someone their mobile number (as opposed to their Snapchat or Instagram username):

Rhianna: I use WhatsApp but I don't give my number out to people like...that I don't know.

Chloe: /I don't give out people...yeah...unless I've been talking to them for absolutely ages...

Liv: /Like for a long time. I have to know you for at least like three or four months.

[Interrupting]

Chloe: /Yeah, if it's someone that I've known for a long time...like yeah.

Liv: /I need to know you like meet you, I can't like, give someone my number if I haven't met you in person or if I don't know much about you.

The girls attach an intimacy requirement to giving someone their mobile numbers, which they attempt to measure both in terms of time (how long have they known the person) and in Liv's case, space (she prefers to have met them in person, if not learnt a certain level of information about them). Yet this apparent measurability of intimacy contrasts with the vagueness and contradictions inherent within those measurements. What is a 'long time' or 'absolutely ages'? What does knowing someone for 'three or four months' mean? What does it mean to know 'much about' someone? The girls' language underlines how they are continually making judgements and assessments in terms of their social media relationships, ascertaining the levels of intimacy they feel with other social media users and determining whether this intimacy should translate to sharing their phone numbers. These judgements become even more interesting when contrasted with the girls'

approaches to social media, and willingness to (sometimes) have their social media usernames, if not their entire profiles, publicly available. It seems that there is something more intimate, more personal, more immediate, perhaps, in sharing one's phone number (thereby potentially giving others access to a live interaction in real time) as opposed to one's social media username (thereby giving others access to curated images and stories of oneself).

'Know', then, is another term encompassing multiple layers of meaning and potential, another term with potentially contradictory meanings which teenagers must navigate and negotiate throughout their digital (and offline) interactions. Once again, this is hardly a brand-new concept for the digital era, but it seems clear that social media add some further complexity to how it operates. Do a series of exchanges via Snapchat – which are likely, of course, to be predominantly humorous images with a caption or two splashed on top – constitute 'getting to know' someone in the same way as a series of offline conversations?

Liv, Rhianna and Chloe's exchange also introduces the idea of verifying and authenticating the relationships which are formed and negotiated through social media – and there is far more to these processes than simply assessing the depth and seriousness of the relationship as it exists offline. Teenagers, as hinted at by Lee and Sasha's reference to 'paedophiles', are acutely aware that people can hide behind false identities or pretences on social media, sometimes with sinister motivations. And when such false identities are a possibility – and when they can be motivated by nefarious ends – this means that risk management, and negotiations of the potentially sinister, are continually entangled with teenage intimacy in social media. It is important to underline that I am *not* claiming that social media provide an inherently threatening or dangerous landscape for teenage users – rather, that the *possibility* of such risks is always there. Online intimacy, then – particularly intimacy with users whom one does not otherwise 'know' – is bound up in the *potential* for misleading, and even danger – potential which, following Massumi, we can understand as vast in scale, and 'superlatively real' (Massumi 2010: 53).

This tension, like so many of the concerns, fears and moral panics associated with teenagers and social media, is hardly a new phenomenon. I talked to eighteen-year-olds Leo and Sam about how, during my own adolescent years, there was public

worry associated with online chatrooms, and with whom young people might come into contact through these anonymised forums. Their responses shed light on the processes of verification and authentication which teenagers undertake – or *think they can* undertake – on social media, marking a powerful and positive evolution, they claimed, from those earlier days:

Leo: I think it's – I think it's better like – it's much better the way it is now. Like – in a few seconds – I can find out straight away if you're actually a real person like – no one thinks like chatrooms could like – be literally talking to anyone! Like you have no idea. But now I could literally like – someone could literally send me a Snapchat of their face. I know instantly that that's them.

Interviewer: So that makes you feel like – yeah, that's been proven?

Leo: Yeah.

Sam: Yeah, it's like, it's just a good way of finding out who people really are. Cos if no one's – if they're not willing to send like a video to you or something, then you can really suss them out, kind of like you're not who you say you are.

The boys explain how the visual, self-representative elements of social media which I examined in the previous chapter can be used as part of a verification process, proving that a person they are communicating with within social media is real or who they 'say they are'. A photo of a person's face is assumed to be verification of their truthful identity; Leo knows 'instantly that that's them' and Sam understands 'who people really are' on the basis of a photograph of the individual in question, transmitted through social media. 'Really are' in particular is a fascinating phrase, suggesting a perceived depth and strength to how well teenagers 'know' each other simply from viewing their photo.

On the one hand, this is unsurprising. Seeing someone's face as well as simply reading their words or hearing their voice is well-recognised as engendering a more powerful sense of familiarity, as the makers of videoconferencing technology well know. On the other hand, in the previous chapter we saw these same boys discussing social media users as 'lying' when they turn out to look different from their social media photos. Photos of course, can be easily falsified, and a photo is hardly proof of someone's intentions or character anyway. What we see here, then, is the visual dimension of social media generating an *impression* of intimacy and authenticity – more so, it seems, than text-based methods of communication – yet not quite as intimate, nor as intrusive, as a phone call. There are, it seems, different types or levels of visual authenticity, and Leo and Sam are able to hold contradictory positions simultaneously.

There are, of course, heavily gendered dimensions to these dynamics; Sam and Leo were explicitly discussing girls as 'lying' when they filter or augment their social media photos too dramatically. As this conversation continued, a gendered dynamic emerged also:

Interviewer: That's interesting. So if someone said – if you asked someone to send you a picture of them or a video or whatever and they didn't, you'd assume that that meant there's something dodgy?

Sam: Like – it's like yeah why you –

Leo: I wouldn't instantly think – like cos maybe it just could be someone who's just like insecure innit.

Sam: /Yeah or they might yeah be photo – like not photogenic, and they might not like taking pictures of themselves.

Leo: Yeah.

When invited to consider why someone might not send a photo of themselves, Sam and Leo notably do *not* immediately assume that something particularly sinister – like the paedophiles suggested by Lee and Sasha – is going on. Rather, their first explanation is the person in question is ‘insecure’ and ‘not photogenic’. We can see, again, clear echoes of the conversations pertaining to honesty and lying in the previous chapter, whereby teenagers’ looks are subjected to particular scrutiny and judgement. Some of the complexity, the constant pushes and pulls of teenagers forming intimate relationships through social media, is laid bare. Teenagers must verify their identity and intentions through photos of themselves, but those photos must simultaneously meet certain standards for attractiveness, whilst also not overstepping the mark in terms of how much they are edited and filtered. Brooke Erin Duffy and Emily Hund (2019: 4983) explore what they term a ‘socially mediated “authenticity bind”’ experienced by Instagram influencers, who must navigate a complex tension between appearing sincere and ‘real’ to their followers, whilst also creating and curating content appealing *to* those followers. There is, I think, another version of that authenticity bind at play here – and, just as in Duffy and Hund’s example, it is highly gendered. Leo and Sam went on to make it clear that they were talking about girls:

Sam: But.

Leo: But at the same time...

Sam: Yeah. If they’re not – if they don’t send photos then I usually like try and like cross-reference them with someone I think they would know or something.

Leo: Yeah.

Sam: Just to see if they’re real.

Interviewer: And is this the same for boys and girls? Or do you think it's different? Would you – like yeah, if you're speaking to a stranger who's a boy or a girl would you do the same thing?

Sam: Yeah. Everyone that I don't know I'm just gonna...

Leo: /See I don't speak to any boys that I don't already know on like social media.

Sam: Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. So if you were speaking to people that you've not met it would be more likely to be a girl?

Leo: Yeah.

Sam: Yeah.

*Interviewer: And would they ask you for pictures to do that verification thing?
[Laughter]*

Sam: Yeah. I'd send them a picture as well.

Sam describes something close to a formula underpinning how his social media relationships develop; 'if they don't send photos' he tries to 'cross-reference' them with a mutual contact. This language is fascinatingly formal and almost clinical, setting out a clear sense of transaction and exchange. 'Just to see if they're real' is similarly striking in tone – because what does 'real' mean now? It can simply mean existing as a human (the existence of fake social media accounts and bots seemed well-understood by my participants), or it can mean authentic (i.e. not acting 'fake' or 'lying'), or it can mean, as we saw in the previous chapter, not overusing filters or photo editing techniques – and the boys have oscillated between these meanings

within a single interview. In light of virtual potentialities, here we can see the myriad possibilities of 'realness', multiple possibilities for individuals' motivations, as intimate relationships are formed and negotiated. Teenagers navigating intimacy through social media must conceive of these multiple possibilities simultaneously – and whilst similar experiences do take place offline, the *visuals* of social media, the content-sharing *dynamics* of social media introduce new complexities.

We can see, also, that despite the non-gendered language the boys use earlier in the exchange, the entire discussion was in fact about a ritual of heterosexual courtship or flirtation. The boys are discussing social media communication with girls they have not yet met face-to-face; in other words, this process of cross-referencing is part of the development of (potentially) intimate heterosexual relationships. This is further demonstrated by the fact that Leo says so adamantly that he would not speak to a boy he does not know on social media; there seems to be no other point in establishing social media contact with a stranger than romantic or sexual purposes. Of course, not just 'any' girl will do; she must also be attractive – and, as we have seen, in order to demonstrate such attractiveness she must herself undertake complex processes of social media self-representation.

We are touching on some of the (hetero)sexualised dynamics underpinning the adding of strangers on social media. If adding strangers is a normalised part of teen courtship – and courtship is a normalised part of teen behaviour – then clearly adding strangers – and being added in turn – is going to happen. Yet because there are so many different *kinds* of strangers, and so many potential or imagined motivations of those strangers, including those with a sinister edge, these processes are highly complex and entangled with a sense of risk. Ultimately, the spatial and temporal gaps between social media users, mediated through digital networks, can create schisms between who a user is *perceived* to be and who they 'really' are – with 'really' in itself being an unstable concept. Just like the misalignments between users' appearance in the physical world and their appearance in social media photos which we examined in the previous chapter, social media engenders complexity around authenticity and trust – which teenagers must navigate if they are to engage in any form of intimacy. We can see, also, a clear relationship between intimacy and the heteronormative, sexualised dynamics underpinning the assessment of girls'

appearances in particular. Girls must strive to be simultaneously authentic and ‘real’, and also attractive in a hyper-visual context dominated by digital filters and editing functions. Long-established patterns of flirtation and courtship, whereby girls are sought out by boys specifically on the basis of their appearance, are clearly apparent.

‘If you just cover their face nobody knows who it is but everyone knows that you’re in a relationship’: Flirtation, romance, sexuality and desire

Intimacy can be friendly and platonic, or it can be sexualised and charged with desire. A great deal of scholarship has explored teenagers and desire, analysing young people as both desired and desiring subjects, with sexual autonomy and rich and complex sexual and romantic lives (see, for example, Jackson 1982; Moore and Reynolds 2017; Tolman 2005; Tsaliki 2016). Social media, as central elements of teenage popular culture and everyday life, are becoming increasingly entangled with these dimensions of teen intimacy. Moreover, the possibilities that social media offer teenagers for connecting with teens whom they do not otherwise ‘know’ seem often to be harnessed with a flirtatious, courtship-focused undertone. From the boy approaching Chloe in the street to ask for her Snapchat username, to Sam and Leo asking girls to send them photos to prove their ‘realness’, perhaps the most compelling aspect of social media forging new relationships between teens is the possibility of those relationships to become romantic or sexual – in other words, for those relationships to become particularly *intimate*.

I sought, therefore, to encourage the participants to discuss their romantic lives and the role that social media might play in them. Fourteen-year-old Lee (who also participated in the separate interview with Sasha) and thirteen-year-old Davy discussed the difference between creating social media content for friends, and creating content for girls whom they were interested in romantically – that is, with two contrasting potential audiences in mind:

Interviewer: So what kind of photo would you post to look good for girls and what kind of photo would you post to like, appeal to your friends?

Lee: None, none.

Davy: No, if you wanna post to your friends you basically, you get a picture of your friends. But if you're like by yourself yeah and tryna look good and you're posin' all that shit for girls.

Rather like Sam's cross-referencing, or Ben's good lighting, we can see here a clear transactional dimension to social media. Particular kinds of photos are selected in order to attract girls – a clear echo of the dynamics we saw in the previous chapter, whereby specific types of looking 'decent' or 'good' are mandated by social media, with particular goals in mind. A heterosexualised dynamic is repeated here; within a heteronormative framework, friendships are focused on humour and reinforcing the group bonds, whilst romantic or sexualised relationships are focused on looking 'good' and 'posin''. One form of intimacy – platonic friendship – is displayed through the image of the group, rather like the 'muggies' referenced by Liv, Rhianna and Chloe. Another form of intimacy – romantic and sexualised – is sought out through displaying an image of the self.

Leo and Sam also discussed this seeking out of potentially romantic or sexualised relationships through social media:

Interviewer: In terms of who you speak to on Snapchat – are they all people that you know like in real life? Or are you connected with people that you don't know?

Sam: No, not all of them.

Interviewer: So tell me about the people that you don't know in real life. How do you add them or how do they add you?

Leo: Sometimes through other social media.

Sam: Yeah you find them through other social media.

Interviewer: Like what?

Sam: So like...

Leo: /Insta.

Sam: Instagram – yeah Instagram’s like a good way cos like you can see pictures of other people.

Leo: Yeah.

Sam and Leo discuss the process of finding girls to add and begin communicating with via social media – and specifically reference Instagram as a ‘good way’ of doing so, because it is the easiest platform for viewing photos of other users. They have, of course, already established pictures as a means of establishing whether someone – normally a girl – is ‘real’. We can see just how foregrounded the visual, self-representative aspects of teen social media behaviour explored in the previous chapter are when it comes to negotiating intimacy. They offer a form of display for attracting potential intimate partners. And whilst there is a clear parallel here with the manipulation of *offline* appearance through clothing, make-up and so on, social media’s unique functionality also offers new modes of such manipulation. For those being perused, social media provide new means of curating their appearance, whilst for those doing the perusing, social media can enable a remarkably transactional type of gaze. Leo and Sam can quite literally scroll through images of girls whom they might wish to contact. Instagram, here, seems to function very similarly to dating apps such as Tinder.

Returning for a moment to the word ‘potential’, it is useful to remember the maybes and contradictions bound up in it. A potential partner is not a *definite* partner – rather, they are a *possible* partner. There is an echo here Berlant’s association of intimacy with aspiration, with a hope for things to ‘turn out in a particular way’ (Berlant 1998: 281) – and Massumi’s reminder that the future contains ‘so much

more, potentially, than anything that has already happened' (Massumi 2010: 53). We might, therefore, think of online flirting as a pleasurable end in itself, and not necessarily a direct route to future partnership. The particular spatiality of social media, whereby intimacy can be negotiated across physical distance, opens up relatively simple, straightforward (and low-cost!) ways for teenagers to play with the *possibility* of future relationships, regardless of whether they truly hope or intend for a relationship to translate into the offline world.

Sam and Leo went on to emphasise even further the notion of 'realness':

Sam: So it's like – that's like photo evidence that they exist. And if you, like, like the way they look or something –

Leo: /Yeah, you're gonna –

Sam: /You're gonna wanna add them somehow.

Leo: /You're gonna wanna add them direct somewhere.

Sam: /And then yeah. Like obviously Instagram, it's not a good platform to like chat to someone.

Leo: Yeah, so you just ask for Snapchat.

Sam: Yeah you just convert it to Snapchat.

Again, we can see a very familiar offline mechanism playing out through social media. The boys use Instagram to find girls they like the look of, and attempt to 'add them direct somewhere' – that is, form a private, one-to-one connection with them, ideally through Snapchat. There is a clear parallel to approaching someone in the offline world and asking for, say, their phone number – and yet a clear evolution and mark of difference, also. 'Add them direct', via Snapchat, means opening up a potential direct and private line of visual communication, one that most teenagers, as we saw

in the last chapter, carry with them everywhere, at all times. Here, then, the temporal and spatial transformations of social media mean that teenagers who may have never met face to face can share their Snapchat usernames with each other and transition directly to a particularly immediate, ubiquitous and intimate form of communication.

I asked the boys to confirm whether I had interpreted this series of events correctly:

Interviewer: So you'd maybe like use Instagram to like find pictures of someone that you think -

Leo: /Who looks good. [Laughter]

Interviewer: Yep, to like scope people out [Laughter]

Both: Yeah!

Leo's interruption of 'who looks good', and both boys' laughter, underline, I think, how frequent and common this process is. They describe a clear mechanism of flirtation or courtship, catalysed by how attractive they deem girls' Instagram posts to be. There are various means of searching Instagram to ensure that only girls who are geographically proximate are identified, should this be important. When said girls are found, the boys seek to 'convert' them to Snapchat in order to begin private conversations. However, this conversion will, as evidenced by the earlier dialogue between Rhianna, Liv and Chloe, necessarily involve the boys themselves being assessed in return. Social media gazes do not run in one direction; perusers are themselves perused.

Rather like the scenario described by Chloe in an area near her home, Snapchat is presented here as a medium which provides a clear route to a (potential) intimate relationship, because it is good for 'chatting' to someone. Of course, a multitude of possible meanings are bound up in the term 'chat'. Snapchat, as we know, offers highly visual, often playful and theoretically ephemeral forms of

communication. It enables teenagers to share images which should (but may not) disappear and has consequently become powerfully associated with so-called 'sexting' – that is, the sharing of particularly explicitly, sexualised or intimate imagery (see, for example, Poltash 2013; Roesner, Gill and Kohno 2014; Utz, Muscanell and Khalid 2015). Whilst the teenagers I spoke to did not elaborate in any great detail on such processes, an awareness of sexualised content seemed to permeate many of the interviews. We recall, for example, Laura's comment on boys' social media content being 'about girls, and sex', in the previous chapter.

It is worth underlining that very similar mechanisms were explored from the perspective of the girls I interviewed. Thirteen-year-old Cat, for example, describes the process behind the photos she posts to Instagram:

Cat: On Instagram you just have to look okay, because there's people on there that you don't know. Like, you can like someone yeah but they don't like you back, and you wanna look nice for this person. So then when they're preening your stuff yeah, you can be like 'ah yeah, I'm looking peng today', so when this person sees that, um, they're gonna like [Agreement]

Cat's tone of voice and body language made clear that by 'okay' she meant attractive rather than mediocre or merely acceptable. She emphasised 'have', underlining the imperative to meet certain standards of attractiveness in her Instagram images. Whilst Cat does not specifically reference boys here, she did at numerous other points in the interview, including a discussion of the difficulties in finding a boyfriend at secondary school compared to primary school. The mechanism she describes, then, of looking 'nice' for someone she 'likes' is the same as that described by Leo and Sam. I include it here to emphasise that girls should not be interpreted as lacking agency throughout these processes. As offline, so online; where a (heterosexual) male gaze falls squarely on teenage girls and their carefully managed appearances, girls may respond to that gaze with varying degrees of agency, deliberation and resistance. Furthermore, girls may gaze back.

Social media, then, play a key role in how teenagers form and negotiate intimate relationships, by offering private and continuously available times and spaces for doing so. But I was also interested in exploring the role social media plays once relationships have been formed. How do boyfriends and girlfriends perform or negotiate their relationships through social media? Sixteen-year-olds Sinead, Rachel, Tania and Dee explained a common dynamic:

Interviewer: Okay. And how does it work when people have like boyfriends and girlfriends on social media? Do they use social media as part of their relationship, like Snapchatting each other?

All: Yeah!

Sinead: Some of them will cover their faces. Like who you're going out with.

Rachel: Like the person's face.

Interviewer: Oh really? So -

Tania: So like you take a Snap together and they will put like an emoji –

Dee: /An emoji over their face so nobody knows who it is.

The discussion, as we can see, focuses less on how teenagers in romantic or sexual relationships exchange content with each other and more on how such relationships are presented publicly through social media. This, I would argue, is another crucial spatial and temporal transformation engendered by social media; it makes relationships public in new ways, displays them through time and space for scrutiny by others within the digital network. Teenagers in relationships who choose to display that relationship on social media are negotiating a substantial imagined audience; they are inviting an external group into a highly intimate context.

There is an echo, here, of the tactics referenced in the previous chapter whereby teenagers post photos of themselves with their faces hidden, whether with emojis, strategic lighting or facing away from the camera. Teenagers manipulate the functionality of both their smartphone cameras and social media applications themselves in order to play with the public-facing and private aspects of their intimate relationships. It results in a fascinating combination of the public and the private in a single image. The point is to share something, but not everything, as the girls go on to explain:

Interviewer: Why?

Dee: Cos they don't want people to know who -

Sinead: Yeah cos everybody's in everyone's business. So if you just cover their face nobody knows who it is but everyone knows that you're in a relationship.

We can see another aspect of self-representation here – the desire to be *seen* to be in a relationship and therefore, by extension, desirable. There is a clear parallel here with Ben's desire to maintain a long – and growing – list of Instagram followers and to therefore appear popular. The public-facing aspects of social media are used to develop an impression of oneself as a desirable subject, connected to a large network. Echoes of this are clearly present in the celebrity and influencer cultures which are increasingly prominent within social media also. However, this desire for desirability is tempered with a desire for privacy. There is another clear parallel here with the descriptions explored in the previous chapter on teens hiding their faces in social media self-representation, whether through emojis, lighting, or carefully-considered positioning. Here, conversely, the narrative described by the interviewees is less on displaying the body and hiding the face because of 'insecurities', and more on protecting some elements of the relationship because 'everybody's in everyone's business'. Once again, we can see teenagers negotiating

between the public and the private, between desires for contradictory things, managing those pushes and pulls with their social media activity.

When asked to discuss how they might choose to display romantic relationships on social media, Chloe, Rhianna and Liv introduced another angle to this notion of 'everyone's business':

Interviewer: And if you've got a boyfriend, or someone has a boyfriend, what happens on social media then? Like do you post photos of your boyfriend?

All: Sometimes, mm, no.

Rhianna: No, I never do that because my brothers will see and they'll be like 'eh! Who's that?!' [Laughter]

Chloe: My brother always asks! My brother, my brother always has to have a conversation with them and my brother asks them so many questions.

Rhianna: Yeah, my brother [NAME] – if I find out – if he finds out I have a boyfriend yeah, he'll be like 'ah, let me message him, cos if he messes with my sister I'll do bla bla bla'.

There are clearly some long-established gendered dynamics at play here, whereby teenage girls' romantic and sexual lives are subject to policing by male peers. The girls described this in a jokey, casual way and were laughing throughout – it was, it seemed, an utterly normative dynamic which went without interrogation. Yet again, however, we can see the new temporality and spatiality of social media transforming how these particular dynamics of teen life play out; this gendered surveillance can now take place at a distance, and from any place. Provided Chloe and Rhianna's brothers are connected to them virtually through social media, they can police their sisters' romantic lives from a distance – and Chloe and Rhianna remain aware of this,

always. Social media's imagined audiences may include, it seems, interrogators of one's most intimate relationships. There is an interesting paradox here, in that the digital spaces of social media may turn out to be where those who actually live with teenagers – and therefore, in theory at least, are physically closest to them – determine some of the most intimate details of those teenagers' lives.

We can see, then, how teen romantic relationships as displayed through social media are simultaneously between two individual people, and between those people and their wider social media audiences. Intimacy operates on several different levels at once. We can see, also, Berlant's theories of shared narrative coming to the fore, as the content creation, curation and display aspects of social media are central to how teens negotiate intimate relationships. As soon as intimacy is negotiated or displayed within social media, some aspect of it is rendered visible – even if to a limited, private set of social media connections. Intimacy becomes subject to interpretation and appraisal; it becomes part of processes of meaning-making and storytelling. And the desirable narratives always sit in opposition to less desirable ones; when it comes to teen intimacy in social media, risks are always sitting below the surface.

'This girl that I know, she got exposed on social media cos she done something with a boy': Threats, risk, exposure and gendered double standards

Throughout this chapter, then, I have touched on the potential risks and threats which are related to and sometimes flow from teenage intimacy on social media. One aspect is the awareness that 'paedophiles' or otherwise threatening individuals exist, and may contact teenagers through social media.⁴ Another aspect is simply the mystery of not knowing precisely who someone is and how authentic they are at the beginnings of an intimate negotiation. Another aspect again is the surveillance and policing which teenagers remain aware of if they display any aspects of said intimacy on social media applications.

⁴ I want to be clear, however, that I am interested here in what the word 'paedophile' represents to teenagers and the narrative or shared meaning it evokes, rather than making specific claims for the volume of sexual predators grooming teenagers through social media, which clearly sits outside the scope of this research.

However, one concept emerged throughout several interviews which seemed to draw together these risks and threats with the transformed temporality and spatiality of social media that I have foregrounded in this research – that of *exposure*. This term was used in multiple interviews, generally to describe the process – or merely the *risk* – of an intimate exchange or content being publicised far beyond the originally intended participant. Consider this, from nineteen-year-old Freddie. He was broadly calm and thoughtful with regards to social media, and when asked if there was anything he wanted to add to the interview, bearing in mind that the research project was about teenagers and social media, he volunteered a more sinister angle:

Freddie: I'd say it can be really dangerous.

Interviewer: Can you explain more about that?

Freddie: As in, people use it to bully other people, expose people.

Interviewer: Expose them in what way?

Freddie: As in, if you have like a video of someone that like – let's say – stripping naked or something. You can easily just post it online and then everyone sees you.

The word 'dangerous' leapt out in this exchange as a particularly serious and foreboding adjective, which Freddie chose in response to a very general question. It is worth underlining that Freddie, at nineteen years old, was the oldest interviewee and potentially more likely than younger teenagers to be critical of social media. That is, he was possibly less motivated by a desire to challenge the well-worn trope of social media being a negative influence on young people. Some of the younger interviewees seemed keener to disrupt this trope, clamouring to tell me about how easy it (theoretically) was to turn off their phones, and remove themselves from harmful social media situations. Nevertheless, Freddie's story struck a warning tone,

and it was interesting to see him go on to draw, independently, on the concept of exposure which, as I shall show, emerged through several other interviews also.

The precise details of his story – a video of someone ‘stripping naked or something’ which you can ‘easily just post online’ – clearly echo the rich academic and journalistic literature pertaining to the sharing of intimate or explicit content through social media (see, for example Crofts et al 2015; Davidson 2014; Dobson, Robards and Carah 2018; Smith 2017). Freddie is both adding to and reflecting the dominant cultural narrative of social media being harnessed for sexually explicit content generation and transmission. Similarly, the mechanism of publicising an incident which was (presumably) intended to be very private at the moment of creation adds to and reflects well-established narratives of so-called ‘revenge porn’. It is worth underlining that all of the urban youth clubs I visited had run some form of educational events or discussions regarding the phenomenon. The point I want to underline here, again, is how the transformational temporality and spatiality of social media are changing the shape of teenage intimacy. Even within the most trusting and loving relationship, this *possibility*, this virtual potentiality of the private being rendered public, is always there.

Freddie’s story does not specifically reference girls or boys. Noticeably, when girls in my interviews referenced the concept of exposure, they almost always described boys exposing girls. Consider, for example, this exchange between Liv, Rhianna and Chloe:

Liv: And nowadays boys film it. Nowadays boys film it when you’re giving head.

Chloe: Yeah a lot of boys film it and expose girls. And I think that’s what makes social [media] worse as well, because on iPhones now it’s so – you can literally screen record anything, anything.

Rhianna: Like we saw it today on Snap some boy posted it.

Liv: Yeah.

Interviewer: Someone giving him head?

All: Yeah.

There is a striking banality to this exchange, from Liv's casual statement that 'nowadays boys film it', to Rhianna explaining that earlier that day they saw a Snapchat video being taken by a boy of a girl giving him oral sex. When transcribing this particular interview, I became more aware than at perhaps any other point in the research of the contrasts between my own teen experiences and those that were being described to me. A long-established, well-researched trope explored in the literature review – that of boys wishing to showcase and display sexual endeavour – is given a new transmission through space and stickiness through time, thanks to the functionality of mobile devices and social media. Two important smartphone functions – their inbuilt cameras, and the ability to 'screen record' – that is, screenshot or otherwise copy a piece of content and send it elsewhere – are referenced here. They underline just how entangled the specific *functions* of teenagers' technology are with their intimate lives. The notion of intimate encounters being recorded and shared beyond their immediate time and place is something dramatically fuelled by social media and mobile devices. It is now incredibly easy for teenagers to create digital recordings – artefacts – of the most intimate moments in their lives – with or without permission.

I wanted to understand whether this particular video that all three girls had seen featured strangers, or people that they knew:

Interviewer: A boy that you knew?

All: No.

Rhianna: And you can literally – like you can screen record it and anybody could post that, it could go worldwide. You could even put it on a worldwide Snap account.

Interviewer: So how did you see this boy, and if he's not someone you know – like how –

Liv: /From someone's Snapchat that we know, someone has screen recorded it from their Snapchat and posted it on their Snapchat.

Chloe: I think it's disrespectful when other people repost it. The people who chat rubbish about it most probably have done it themselves. This is what I don't understand.

Interviewer: And can you tell when something's been reposted by someone else?

All: Yeah.

Rhianna: Cos if you repost it on Snap yeah, you can see like their Snap name that you've got it from.

Interviewer: Right.

Rhianna: So if I screen recorded something from [NAME] yeah, it'll come up [NAME] in the corner.

Interviewer: Right. So everyone would – so even if that was two people that you didn't know they'd still know your Snap name?

Rhianna: Yeah, unless I've got them saved as something else like 'best friend' – like obviously they might not know.

Interviewer: Right. So that's how quickly that can like spread?

Rhianna: Yeah, but then even she could – so say she post like a video or something, she coulda got the person that actually originally posted it to send it to her, so it wouldn't have come up with the person's name on the corner.

Interviewer: Okay, so there are different ways of playing it?

All: Yeah.

Here, again, the girls display great familiarity and ease with the technical functionality of their apps and devices, and the scale and dynamism of the online cultures they are connected to – they are aware that a screen recording could go ‘worldwide’. They understand how this video has reached them and, by extension, know that someone else could do that with the content *they* post. They understand how to track the path that content has taken through digital space – and the ways in which that path can be hidden or obscured. They understand that such intimate content could be posted on a ‘worldwide Snap account’ – that is, an account with millions of global followers. Chloe’s description of this kind of sharing as ‘disrespectful’ has echoes of Marnie’s suggestion, from the previous chapter, that girls who hide their faces in social media posts are insecure. That is, she is willing to critique the normative behaviours and judgements which are re/produced through teen social media practices – whilst also absolutely understanding that she is subject to them. These descriptions illustrate a precise awareness of the vast scale of future potential – and associated future *threat* – outlined by Massumi and given new shape by global networks of, in this example, Snapchat users. Intimacy as recorded on smartphones, whether through explicit filming at the time, or discussion of a recorded incident later, always has the potential to become un-intimate, to shatter its original sense of closeness.

The girls went on to explain the impact of these mechanisms on teenage girls’ behaviour, as they saw it. Here, my initial question follows on from the above extract; I wanted to clarify whether the girls meant that filming an intimate act, and sharing it with others, was more typical behaviour for teen boys than girls:

Interviewer: Okay, but that's what boys – so that's like a thing at the moment then you reckon, that boys –

Yeah: /Yeah.

Chloe: And that's why a lot of girls are sort of...

Liv: /Frigid.

Chloe: Yeah.

Rhianna: This is why girls are frigid because -

Liv: /They're scared.

Chloe: /They know what like the side effects are of getting exposed.

The term 'frigid' is fascinating. Meaning 'wanting in sexual vigour; impotent', the OED tells us it is 'now usually applied to women who are sexually unresponsive' (OED Online 2020). In other words, it is a hugely gendered term, applied almost exclusively to girls and women, used to accuse or blame them for not wanting to participate in sexual activity. It has a particular history of being medicalised in order to categorise, control and curtail female sexuality (Margolin 2017). Meanwhile, the labelling of individuals as frigid has been identified as a particular dynamic within teenage sexual cultures – a dynamic which can be understood as a risk of *not* engaging in sexual activity (Rosenthal and Peart 1996). 'Frigid' is yet another discursive term which helps to create and shape identities – in this case, sexual and particularly female sexual identities. It is also yet another concept which places teenage girls in a double bind, whereby they risk exposure if they are sexually active, but risk another form of exposure – that of being labelled with this negative category – if they refrain. Here, the girls explicitly state that so-called frigidity is motivated by fear, because such girls

understand what ‘the side effects are of getting exposed’. Once again, the multitude of possibilities that teenage social media users must consider are entangled with risk. Intimacy, whether or not it is actively recorded within social media, always carries with it the possibility of its own destruction – because social media can spread intimate acts so far beyond their original parties, with such ease.

I asked the girls to unpack further what they meant by frigid:

Interviewer: So is frigid a bad thing – would that be a bad thing to be known –

All: Yeah.

Rhianna: /To girls, yeah. Because – well not to me I don’t really care.

Chloe: /Well not really – exactly – I don’t care.

Rhianna: It’s that the boys now – like I’m not saying -

Liv: /Like if they call you frigid, they’ll start posting it and then other people will come up to you and say ‘oh, this person said that...’

Chloe: /It’s like nowadays, for girls – not that every girl wants a boyfriend but it’s hard to get a boyfriend because they only want you for like two things.

Liv: Yeah.

Chloe: Like, your face, your body and whatever, like whatever you’re on, like giving head and that.

Yet again, we can see the formation of a kind of distance between ‘girls in general’ and ‘these girls in particular’, as both Rhianna and Chloe claim not to care whether they are called frigid or not. However, as their discussion continues, they illustrate

just how difficult it is to step outside of the normative gendered standards and judgements of their culture. Rhianna seems to begin to explain that boys are primarily responsible for applying and sharing the ‘frigid’ label. Liv then elaborates on this, describing an entanglement of boys posting social media content deriding a girl as ‘frigid’, followed by other people seeing this content and repeating it in person. ‘Frigid’ labels, in other words, are circulated both online and offline, but it is the online dimension which enables those labels to be amplified to a far greater degree than for earlier generations. The gender dynamics here are particularly stark, with girls’ sexual activity a matter of public record and speculation, and utterly integral to the labels applied to them. The boys, in this description, seem to exist merely as broadcasters.

Chloe then goes on to argue that ‘nowadays’ it is ‘hard to get a boyfriend because they only want you for like two things’ – girls’ physical appearances, and the sexual activity they will engage in. She traces, in other words, some kind of evolution – either from her own earlier experiences, or from an earlier era more generally, and suggests that now, unlike then, relationships between boys and girls are dominated by the boys’ (hetero)sexual desires. The term ‘whatever you’re on’, in particular, struck me as an interesting way of categorising girls according to what sexual activity they will or will not engage in. It places such activity apart from individuals; there is no linking here of ‘whatever you’re on’ with specific boys. Rather, girls are labelled according to whether they will ‘give head’ in general, or not. Social media, as we have seen, offer remarkably efficient mechanisms for such labels to circulate in space and stick in time.

Liv, Rhianna and Chloe were describing an incident of exposure featuring people they did not actually know. By contrast, fourteen-year-old Zoe and her sixteen-year-old sister Naomi told me a story of such exposure happening in their peer group:

Zoe: Yeah like – cos like – people when they send nudes like they can keep it yeah, but like some boys they just expose them. Or like, they use them.

Interviewer: Why, do you think?

Naomi: Cos they know that they have something on that person.

Zoe: Yeah. Or not not even that, not even that, they know that they have someone on that person, it's just that they wanna impress someone or something. Or that they're tryna prove a point.

Interviewer: And you think it's mostly boys who do that? Has a girl ever done that?

Zoe: Yeah, some of the girls have done that.

Naomi: Disgusting.

Zoe: But what I don't get is if it was to happen to them they wouldn't like it.

Interviewer: Yeah, you're right. But that doesn't always stop people from doing things, right? So let me make sure that I've got this right. So you've known it to happen that a girl will be chatting to a boy, she'll send nudes –

Naomi: /Oh yeah, and then there was this girl once, she got exposed really really bad. She was doing something with a boy.

Zoe: /And he videod it.

Naomi: And he videod it, and he put it on – everyone put it on their Snapchat.

Whilst Zoe claims that 'some of the girls have done that' (exposed sexually explicit imagery which was originally intended to be private), it still seems significant that when she introduces the theme, she refers only to boys, claiming that 'some boys

they just expose them'. Then, when she and Naomi tell a specific story about this occurring, the mechanism is precisely that described by Rhianna, Liv and Chloe; a girl and a boy were 'doing something' together, he filmed it, and then he exposed it through social media. Naomi's description 'everyone put it on their Snapchat' serves to underline the rapid snowballing of such an incident, whereby the webs of contacts within social media all actively contribute to the single act of exposure. They are not passive consumers of that intimate moment or activity; they actively participate in disseminating it more widely, further shattering the original intimacy.

Both Naomi's and Zoe's speculations as to the motivations for such exposure are interesting. First, Naomi claims 'they know that they have something on that person', illustrating a kind of bargaining or blackmailing mechanism which can take place through social media. Holding a digital record of someone else's intimate moment or behaviour grants the holder power over that person – precisely because of the ease with which that content can then be exposed. The transformed spatiality and temporality of social media – that is, the networked publics with which such content can be shared, and the fact that it is digitally recorded through *time* – mean that exposure is only ever a click or two away. Second, Zoe argues that sometimes 'it's just that they wanna impress someone or something. Or that they're tryna prove a point'. These dynamics are still very much about power, but are less focused on power *over* the party who participated in the original intimate act, and more about power *within* a separate group dynamic – a group that will be impressed by evidence that the individual in question has also participated in said intimate act. In other words, intimate digital content is used as evidence that the owner – remembering that this owner is almost always positioned as male – is sexually active. Yet again, a longstanding offline dynamic – of boys showcasing their sexual experience as a display of masculinity, whilst girls are far more likely to be judged as 'sluts' or 'skets', plays out in new ways through social media.

The contradictions of teenage intimacy

Intimacy is utterly entangled with possibility. It is about the possibility of a relationship developing in a particular way, the possibility of others being privy to

something personal, and choosing whether or not to share. To return again to Lauren Berlant's words, if intimacy 'involves an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about oneself and others that will turn out in a particular way' (Berlant 1998: 281) – then it is a projection into the future, an understanding of myriad possibilities and a hope for one of them in particular. Intimacy, then, involves a *journey*; it involves tangible difference between the present and the future.

The teenagers I interviewed intricately unpacked such differences, and expressed an array of emotions in relation to those journeys. Social media enable teenagers to play with different variations, different possibilities for those stories – and even to hold multiple versions of them concurrently. Their stories about forming digital connections – and the different degrees to which they might 'know' such connections, or judge their 'realness', spoke to a tension between what they could know in the present, and what they might find out in the future. Their stories about flirtation spoke to a tension between actually *wanting* to transition a digital conversation into the physical world, and perhaps enjoying the frisson of the purely online chat even more. And their stories about showing *just* enough of their intimate relationships to intrigue, but not enough to reveal everything, spoke to a tension between public and private, wanting to both be seen, and yet to remain unseen. Following Kofoed and Berlant, I suggested that we could think about intimacy in social media as existing in tension between the desirable and the dangerous, and the stories told by these teenagers bore that out.

All storytelling involves an imagined audience, and multiple potential interpretations of the story *by* that audience. What makes intimacy as mediated by social media most different from intimacy in the offline world is the continuous, looming possibility of a much wider audience than originally intended. In other words, social media transform intimacy by making it *possibly* public, *possibly* on display, *possibly* shared with a broader audience than originally intended. They transform intimacy, also, by recording it in new ways, capturing it on film, in photos and within text conversations, changing ephemeral moments into permanent (if slippery, and amendable) records. Social media therefore make Berlant's process of aspiring to a particular narrative extraordinarily complex, because there are always so many different possibilities for how that narrative will play out, and they involve

people far beyond the original parties. The risk of exposure is always present – and this means, returning to Berlant’s concept of a narrative – that teenagers navigating intimacy within social media cannot totally control the destination of their journey. The story does not always turn out in the way they envisaged, or hoped. This seems to be a spectre – sometimes thrilling, sometimes threatening – over all of the intimacies shared by the teenagers I spoke to.

The concept of exposure has hugely loaded implications as far as temporality and spatiality are concerned. It relies on an imagined sense of scale – that is, a large (potential) audience for the exposed content or event – and an imagined temporal stickiness – that is, the perception that the incident of exposure will last through time. The exposure of intimacy is a blowing open of that intimacy, ripping apart the tight or one-to-one relationship in which an exchange took place and involving a much wider network. Yet it is also simultaneously small, focused on the physical proximity of the users in question. Teenagers told stories about being exposed to people at school, peer groups, people they know – in other words, whilst the exposure happens at rapid speed online, the fear is associated more with local peers than, say, the idea of notoriety many miles away.

Social media are at once built as platforms for sharing and for developing audiences – teenagers talk positively about building up good amounts of likes on Instagram posts, retaining ‘streaks’ with their friends and even showcasing a ‘business’ or personal brand – but there is a tension between this positive exposure and a more sinister kind. Exposure of intimacy is simultaneously non-specific – teenagers talk about the nebulous *potential* of being exposed, or use vague descriptors like ‘everyone’ – and painfully specific, with teenagers drawing on their own graphic experiences. And, at least in these interviews, it proved enormously gendered, with the trope in almost every conversation describing girls being exposed by boys.

Collectively, these stories suggest that intimacy always depends on the *possibility* of others; intimacy is, in part, the potential of sharing – and of keeping back. Intimate relationships are defined in part by the decisions of whom to share with and whom to exclude – precisely the structure enabled by social media. And the fear or risk of those choices being shattered – because one’s intimacy has been

exposed – is, perhaps, the neatest articulation of the contradictions and conflicts that teenagers experience when negotiating intimacy with and through social media. It is a deeply gendered phenomenon – and it draws us towards the theme of risk management more generally, which is the theme of my final analytical chapter.

Chapter 6: Peer policing, sinister surveillance: Stories about risk in teen social media

Karim smiles as he reads her latest message. Before he replies, he takes a screenshot. Just in case.

Tania opens her last post. It's a good one, right? She looks good? The caption is funny? So why does she have so few likes? What's wrong with this picture? What's wrong with her?

Oscar feels his stomach lurch as he realises what he's done. That last post – he didn't turn off the location tag. Who will know where he was? Who will guess where he's going?

Social media are meant to be fun – indeed, they often are. But a highly visible media and political landscape of concern, fear and even panic is associated specifically with teen social media use – a landscape which grew notably more dynamic and prominent throughout the research and writing of this thesis. Tragic cases such as the suicide of fourteen-year-old Molly Russell, who took her own life allegedly in part as a result of viewing images of self-harm on Instagram, became increasingly frequent, high-profile and part of the national news agenda during the project (see, for example, *BBC News* 22 January 2019). In April 2019, the UK Government published its *Online Harms White Paper*, seeking to address some of these concerns in a unified way and opening a public consultation into a 'new duty of care towards [online] users, which will be overseen by an independent regulator' (Gov.uk, 8 April 2019). This landscape, perhaps unsurprisingly, filtered down to the teenagers I interviewed; many of them mentioned digital rules set by parents or teachers, or educational programmes both within school and the youth clubs where my research was located.

Risk is not, of course, a concept unique to teens' digital lives. From healthy eating to knife crime, academic performance to sexual activity, a rich array of

concerns and controls pertaining to teenage behaviour are found throughout the media, policymaking and popular culture (see, for example, Dawn 2009; *Guardian* 18 July 2016; Haylock et al 2020). But the transformed spatialities and temporalities of social media reshape and complicate these risks. Teenage girls' sexualities, for example, already subject to complex webs of judgement and double standards offline, are now, through social media, subject to the risk of online exposure which I began to explore in the previous chapter. Teen-on-teen violence may potentially be fuelled or exacerbated – or *imagined* to be fuelled or exacerbated – by the location-tracking functionality within Snapchat and Instagram. Social media enormously broaden, speed up and complicate the peer networks in which teenagers participate – and in turn, the risk landscapes they must navigate. Many of these risks have a heavily gendered dimension, with boys and girls feeling (and applying to others) the weight of different threats, different judgements, and different expectations.

A significant thread flowing through these risks is that of *negotiation* – of teenagers continually managing sometimes contradictory pushes and pulls. I have shown how the virtual potentialities of social media – the multiplicity of possible outcomes which social media users must consider each time they log on, post a photo, send a message to a contact – generate uncertainty and ambivalence. Some of those possibilities are relatively benign – others are not. Teenagers' strategies for negotiating, navigating and managing such risks are the theme of this final analytical chapter.

As such, I begin by theorising social media risk more precisely. I consider the concept of the 'risk society' proposed by Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens, exploring how it extends into digital networked publics and arguing that the (potential) audiences within social media are critical to understanding the fluxes and flows of risk in these digital realms. Potential audiences make the difference between an intimate photo remaining between sexual partners, or being shared like wildfire across a school and beyond. Potential audiences make the difference between a teenager's location being known only to immediate friends, or being tracked by a (potentially) threatening individual. I explore these senses of surveillance, and disciplinary or threatening gazes. Whilst they can stem from social media companies themselves, they feel far more salient and sinister for my participants when they

originate from other social media users. I consider, too, the contrasting forms of violence which emerge throughout social media and digital culture – both virtual and physical.

Then, I turn to my fieldwork data, exploring the different types of risk which emerged throughout the interviews. These risks vary greatly in terms of complexity and perceived seriousness, and I begin at perhaps the simplest end of the spectrum. Teenage social media users, like adults, are aware of the idea that there might be such a thing as ‘too much’ social media activity. They speak of being ‘addicted’ to their smartphones, to Snapchat, to Instagram – and they may or may not desire to restrict or limit their social media usage accordingly. The teenagers I interviewed did not perceive the consequences of such ‘addiction’ as particularly severe, if they considered them at all, and the practices they employ to manage these risks are, as such, simple and often half-hearted. From there, I consider how my research participants talked about the broader organisations behind their social media tools and applications – the companies which build them. Here, too, I find that whilst teenagers seem acutely aware of the *potential* for such organisations and even the ‘government’ to track their data and to have their own goals and motivations, once again, these feelings seem unlikely to have any great impact on teen social media behaviour.

As such, I turn then to the more influential and significant risks which the teenagers referenced. I consider the kinds of virtual violence which emerged throughout the interviews, including the mechanism of exposure referenced in the previous chapter, and how the types of judgement and bullying which can take place through social media act as disciplining forces. Finally, I examine how these forms of virtual violence bleed into the physical world, and how location-tracking functionality and the process of meeting up with strangers initially introduced via social media are related to the threat of physical violence. Ultimately, I seek to explore how teenagers manage perceived risks or threats within the transformed spaces and temporalities of social media, and how these practices are gendered, and gendering.

Theorising risk: imagined audiences, physical boundaries

In 1986, partly as a response to the Chernobyl catastrophe, Ulrich Beck published *Risikogesellschaft*, later translated by Mark Ritter into *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. He explained the risk society as ‘a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernisation itself’ (Beck 1992: 21), thus characterising both the social and technological transformations of the modern era as introducing myriad new interrelated and often globalised risks. Beck discusses a great array of mechanisms through which risk operates. However, for my purposes it is useful to consider digital culture and social media as clear examples of technological innovation and globalisation in and of themselves, but which also introduce new types of risk. Personal data collection and targeted advertising; the publishing and sharing of violent and harmful content; the use of social media to form personal connections which are then exploited for violent ends – these are all risks engendered and to a certain degree controlled by social media companies which have made headlines and entered public consciousness over recent years. In these senses, then, social media may be seen as powerfully shaping and influencing today’s risk society.

Beck emphasised, also, the importance of reflexivity – that is, reflection upon the past and the application of this knowledge to future behaviour and decisions – in understanding the risk society. This temporal dimension was taken up further by Anthony Giddens, who in 1998 characterised the risk society as one ‘increasingly preoccupied with the future (and also with safety), which generates the notion of risk’ (Giddens and Pierson 1998: 209). A key quality of risk, then, is that it offers a *potential* future – a quality which is clearly closely related to my concept of virtual potentialities. The risk society as formed and experienced through social media, I would argue, is characterised by the *possibility* of particular negativities. Yet regardless of whether or not a perceived risk comes to fruition, it is nevertheless experienced viscerally in the present – and it is such visceral, embodied sensations that I wish to study in this chapter. I am particularly interested in risk as not just something which sits outside the individual, in the make-up of a society, but as something that is experienced on an individual, embodied basis. Senses of fear or

dread or adrenaline in response to an imagined future scenario are utterly real and yet also pertain to that which is not-yet-real.

What do such not-yet-real scenarios look like in relation to teen social media practices? My data suggest that the most powerful senses of risk expounded by my research participants are related not to the broader companies behind their tools and applications, but to the networks of users they are connected to *through* social media. As we have seen throughout the previous two chapters, teen social media users are continually considering and negotiating potential mechanisms of judgement and exposure from other users – in other words, they are negotiating continual *surveillance*. Foucault's (1991 [1975]) use of the panopticon as a metaphor for the disciplinary society has driven myriad examinations of surveillance and modernity, and it seems clear that social media and digital culture offer new ways of interpreting this. Social media are explicitly designed to enable surveillance through space and time; much social media activity deliberately takes place with an audience in mind. These mechanisms of surveillance are sometimes highly visible and measurable – consider, for example, the number of Snapchat friends or Instagram followers, which provides a clear measure of the scale of a teen's social media network. But they can also be hidden and imagined – the narratives of judgement associated with different types of selfie which we saw in the chapter on embodiment, for example. As such, social media surveillance may be relatively benign – that is, it may simply be the knowledge that other users *can* see particular social media content – or it may be associated with (potentially) damaging consequences – scornful judgement from other teenagers, the exposure of private content or events, or even, as we shall see, physical violence.

Ultimately, risk within social media is a complex entanglement of possibilities; following Bat-Ami Bar On (1993), as outlined in Chapter 2, I am thinking of entanglement in terms of tension between contradictory positions. Being subject to surveillance can be risky, engendering the possibility of judgement, exposure and even violence – yet, *not* being subject to surveillance is a kind of risk in itself. Social media activity which does not result in visible feedback and approval – the creation of content which goes 'unliked' – is, in a way, failed social media activity. It is a tangible measure of the *lack* of scale of a teen's network, a concretised indication of

their lack of popularity. As throughout this study of teen social media practices and behaviours, risk management is ultimately a process of negotiation between different potentialities.

'If you're having trouble with something on Snapchat, delete Snapchat. Just like that. It's actually gone': Social media usage, frequency and volume

Perhaps the most straightforward route into considering teenagers' social media risk management practices is by exploring how and when they actually use said social media, how they feel about that usage, and how, if at all, they attempt to restrict and structure their social media activity. As we saw, the vast majority of the teenagers I interviewed described their social media use as extremely frequent – and this prevalence was blended with ambivalence. Teenagers are acutely aware that there might be such a thing as excessive social media activity, though the question of who dictates what counts as 'excessive' is rather more complex. In response to this, perhaps the most obvious means teenagers have of actively managing their social media activity is by turning the applications off – whether as part of a thoughtful strategy of restricting usage, or, more drastically, by deleting it from their phones altogether. Yet these seemingly straightforward actions turn out to be rather *unstraightforward* in practice. Consider, for example, eighteen-year-old Sam and Leo, whose comments on the prevalence of their social media usage were fairly typical:

Interviewer: How often are you on it?

Sam: Every day.

Leo: Too much.

Sam: [Emphatic] Every day.

[Laughter]

Leo: *Way too much.*

Interviewer: *Why do you say too much?*

Leo: *Cos I realise that it's the only thing I use my phone for.*

Sam: *If I'm unlocking my phone, the first thing I want to click on is Snapchat.*

Leo: *Yeah.*

Here, Sam and Leo simultaneously characterise their social media usage as excessive, but find that excess amusing, rather than serious. It is pitched less as something they actively *want* to curb, and more as something that they suspect they *should* curb, but either will not or cannot. This tension – the knowledge that there is a potentially negative undertone to frequent social media use, and the simultaneous knowledge that the desire to use social media supersedes that undertone – was articulated by many of the teenagers I interviewed.

Additionally, it is worth highlighting here the thorough conflation of social media and smartphones we first saw in the chapter on embodiment. Leo not only observes that social media is ‘the only thing I use my phone for’; he states this in response to a question about *why* he thinks his social media use is excessive. He implicitly acknowledges that he could use his phone for myriad other things, and that using his phone exclusively for social media could be in some sense negative or restrictive. Likewise, Sam explains explicitly that as soon as he engages with his phone, the ‘first thing’ he ‘wants’ to open is Snapchat. Social media applications are highly compelling; they exert both a cognitive and a physical pull. For teenagers, as we have already seen, social media and smartphones are inextricably related, and because smartphones are carried everywhere and engaged with on a constant basis, this means that social media is similarly omnipresent.

Likewise, fourteen-year-old Lee and seventeen-year-old Sasha described their social media usage as both extremely frequent and tied to their phones:

Interviewer: And so how often do you think you use social media?

Lee: Every day.

Sasha: Every day. Yeah. Most of the time. Especially Snapchat.

Lee: As soon as I wake up I check it.

Sasha: Yeah, same. Every like five minutes I check on my phone to see if I can get a message yeah. [Laughs]

Like Leo and Sam, Lee and Sasha laughed throughout this exchange, suggesting comedy or even absurdity in the frequency of their social media usage. Social media activity is presented not as something which *augments* their everyday lives, but rather as something utterly integrated into every aspect of those lives; something which punctuates their days from the moment they wake up. Sasha's mention of checking her phone for 'messages' underlines how interconnected these activities are with dialogic engagement with other users. That is, frequent social media use is not merely a case of logging on to observe generally what is happening, but rather a case of checking to see whether peers are trying to get in touch. The dialogic, productive aspects of social media are, it seems, at the forefront of teenagers' minds.

From here, Lee and Sasha went on to discuss in greater detail some of the more laborious and exhausting aspects of this frequency:

Interviewer: So you put your phone to – you turn it off when you go to sleep?

Lee: Yeah.

Interviewer: How come?

Lee: Because I won't get up for school in the morning, I won't fall asleep and then I'll be tired the next morning, and then I won't go to school in the morning.

Sasha: I just put it on silent. And then that way it won't disturb you. That's what I do. I don't put it off overnight but I put it on silent. My phone's always on silent. I miss all calls and texts. People get so angry at me.

Interviewer: [To Lee] Have you not tried that? Just putting it on silent?

Lee: No, my mum takes my phone anyway, so...

Interviewer: Okay, right.

Lee: ...Cos she don't like me talking on the phone when I'm – like when I'm upstairs, cos I could be like talking to different people, that I'm not supposed to be like...

Sasha's tactic of turning her phone to silent is relatively simple to implement, but comes with an emotional backlash if calls and texts are missed – precisely because, as we have seen, the dialogic aspects of social media are so foregrounded. Failing to engage with social media for a period of time means not simply failing to see some particular content – it means failing to respond to friends, failing to maintain relationships. The emotional labour implicit in teen social media activity starts to become apparent. Lee's tactic – or rather, as he went on to reveal, his mother's tactic – is rather more drastic, entailing the removal of the phone from his possession altogether whilst he is upstairs or sleeping. This anecdote not only emphasises further the emotional labour involved in teen social media usage; it also introduces the heavy awareness that teenagers have of potential disapproval or concern regarding that usage from parents, teachers and other adults. Lee noticeably did not criticise his mother for this particular policy; rather, his tone was casual and dismissive.

Rhianna, Chloe and Liv discussed similar dynamics with regard to the phone policies in their schools:

Interviewer: And so how does that work when you're at school, is it easy to just have your phone on you at school?

Rhianna: I just put it down under the table.

Chloe: My phone has to be turned off.

Liv: Yeah, same.

Chloe: No phone policy.

Rhianna: /Yeah, ours is turned off yeah, but we still use it.

Liv: /Yeah.

Chloe: /I just use it occasionally to check stuff.

Liv: /At break and lunch you're allowed to use it.

Chloe: /We're not.

Liv: /You're just not allowed to get caught with it, otherwise it's confiscated.

Chloe: In my school you're not allowed it at all, at all, but like, the teaching assistants are young so they let you use your phone.

Here, Rhianna, Chloe and Liv seem both acutely aware and relatively unconcerned that adults have a different approach, and a different set of concerns relating to

social media to their own. Their tone was flippant. ‘You’re just not allowed to get caught with it’ is particularly telling with regard to this dismissive approach towards adult-imposed sanctions and an unwillingness, or inability, to think through why there might be concerns.

The failure to confront the reasons for strict policies or punishments regarding smartphones and social media is hardly surprising, but in conjunction with Chloe’s comment that teaching assistants will let them use their phones because they are ‘young’, it does tell us something about the teenagers’ views of a generational divide in social media attitudes. Younger people, the claim goes, understand how important smartphones and by extension social media are – or else do not worry about the potential downsides as much as older groups. These observations, then, suggest that social media applications are absolutely integral to these teenagers’ lives, that living without them is unthinkable, and that this importance is not always properly understood by parents, teachers and other adults. In many of the interviews, as we have seen, teenagers spoke in hyperbolic terms about a broken phone feeling like the loss of a limb, or even a death.

Yet, despite this perception of a sharp generational divide on the part of young people with regard to the negative impact of excessive social media use, it is important to underline the contradictions, tensions and negotiations that teenagers nevertheless display when discussing the possibilities of turning off or turning away from social media. Many of the teenagers, when asked to consider some of the potential negative implications of social media more explicitly, were very quick to claim that turning social media off, or removing oneself from platforms, was easy and non-disruptive. For example, Sam, Leo and Robert insisted that ‘it’s not difficult to deal with problems on social media’:

Leo: It’s not difficult to deal with problems on social media. It’s like – if you’re having trouble with something on Snapchat, delete Snapchat. Just like that. It’s actually gone.

Sam: Or just delete the person or whatever’s making you feel some type of...

Leo: /It's actually a few buttons to press if you don't want the situation. It just depends on the person.

Robert: Yeah. Some people they go on social media and they're not like – they're not – I wouldn't say – not there to start with but they have issues to start with.

Leo: Yeah, I know what you mean.

Robert: And they go on social media and it's like they do certain things on social media and then it's like people see it react a certain way, people – it's just like – if people know something's wrong with someone, someone's not comfortable about something, like social media's a place where you can get targeted for that sort of thing.

Leo: Yeah. So many different...

Robert: It's just about who you have like – just being smart – it's not – it's not really social media that thing – cos like a lot of good things come from it.

The boys' insistence that dealing with problems on social media is a simple matter of turning off the applications in question comes in spite of their earlier acknowledgement – in the same interview – that they use social media 'too much', and that Snapchat is the very first app they want to engage with when they turn their phones on. There is a hint, then, that they know it is not this simple – though they are not actively engaging with that possibility. A tension between claiming that removing oneself from social media is easy – and knowing that this is not really the case – is sharply apparent.

There is a hint of victim-blaming throughout the exchange, articulated most clearly by Robert's suggestion that some people on social media 'have issues to start with'. Whilst this is not made explicit, I would argue that there is a gendered element

to the term 'issues', which is more likely to be applied to girls than boys. It echoes old claims of female hysteria, suggesting that girls are more likely to respond to social media trouble in an overly emotional way. When Robert goes on to explain that these people 'do certain things on social media' which are reacted to in 'a certain way' by others, there is a strong hint here of girls creating sexualised content which is then seen and potentially exploited by others – a theme which emerged throughout the majority of the interviews, as I will explore presently.

Social media applications, then, are acknowledged as platforms for exploitation, and yet the critical lens of that exploitation is pointed primarily at the victims, not the perpetrators. Social media are described as a 'place' where one can be 'targeted', because the visibility of particular 'issues' can be seen and exploited by others. The spatial metaphor is used to suggest that it is the responsibility of the vulnerable to simply not enter that risky 'place'. Robert is also particularly keen to highlight that 'good things' come from social media, and even suggests that social media itself is not the driver of such incidents. This eagerness to emphasise the positivity of social media was echoed in many other interviews, potentially reflective of the productive and dialogic characteristics of the interview as research method. The teenagers knew that they were being interviewed about a politically charged topic which, as made explicitly clear above, they also know that adults seek to police and manage. I would speculate, then, that they were keen to defend social media to me.

Meanwhile, when queried about what life *without* social media would look like, Sam and Leo were deliberately casual:

Interviewer: So what would happen if you didn't have it?

Sam: If I didn't have Snapchat, I'd probably just play on my PS4.

Sam/Leo: [Laughter].

Sam: Yeah. I'd probably just play on my PS4.

This jokey and flippant tone, similar to the one employed by Rhianna, Chloe and Liv when discussing the phone policies in their school, is used to suggest that social media is not essential at all, that there are clear alternatives, that life without social media would be straightforward. And yet this is both completely at odds with the emphatic ‘too much’ they mentioned earlier in the interview, and contradicted by the description of PlayStation 4 as a social media substitute since, with its global network for interaction and content-sharing, PlayStation 4 actually has rather a lot of features in common with mainstream social media applications.

We can see, then, that teenagers describe and experience tensions between a dismissive casualness with regard to restricting or eliminating social media use and an awareness that such restriction or elimination is actually difficult to put into practice. They know that they use social media a huge amount – perhaps too much – but rarely, if ever, seek to restrict that use. They know that authorities like parents, teachers and youth workers are likely to have concerns over their social media usage – but are quick to dismiss those concerns as baseless because restricting usage is (supposedly) easy. And they know that the companies ultimately in charge of the applications they use so frequently retain ultimate control of the content they produce and share – but are remarkably dismissive of the potential negative implications of this control.

This ambivalence is, in many ways, unsurprising. Social media are, as much of the literature on young people and new media demonstrates, an integral part of the vast majority of teenagers’ everyday lives, and simple or sensible as restricting social media might sound in theory, the practice is rather more complex. Ultimately, teenagers must hold several contradictory positions at once. They know that social media is integral to and utterly entangled with their lives – where entanglement, as outlined previously, is about interconnected contradictions. They enjoy myriad qualities of social media, whilst also knowing that there are potentially negative sides to those qualities, both individually and because of the influence of parents, teachers and other stakeholders. Consequently, management practices around the volume and frequency of social media usage are processes of constant negotiation, between ‘I should turn it off’ and ‘but I don’t want to turn it off’, and between ‘what other people do’ and ‘what I do’.

The sheer volume and frequency of teen smartphone – and by extension, social media – use is notable; my notes from fieldwork observations in the youth clubs are littered with references to just how often teens whipped their phones out of their pockets and clustered in groups around a single screen. As we explored in earlier chapters, from a temporal perspective social media – or at least, social media as accessed via smartphone – is both extremely fast-paced and utterly ubiquitous in teen lives, placing unprecedented demands on young people’s time and attention. Those demands have passed into physical spaces such as the classroom and the bedroom, blurring together teens’ online and offline temporality and spatiality. And of course, the very notion of ‘too much’ social media usage is a temporal measurement, implicitly suggesting that there is a better allocation of one’s time.

The teenagers I interviewed seemed highly aware that adults such as parents and teachers wish to control this temporality, but they were not particularly interested in interrogating why, nor indeed in paying attention to those wishes unless they had to. Whilst some participants evidently do manage to discipline and control their own frequency of social media activity, that discipline is more commonly imposed by adults.

‘I feel like it doesn’t actually get deleted’: Corporate control and the organisations in charge of social media

Looking, then, beyond teenagers’ own individual social media activity, they demonstrated a keen awareness of the corporations responsible for the apps they used so frequently, and of the risks and threats that might be associated with those corporations. Many of the interviewees displayed a thoughtful awareness of the idea that Snapchat and Instagram are, ultimately, companies with priorities and motivations of their own – and that these might translate into wanting or encouraging certain kinds of activity from users. However, this awareness did not necessarily translate into particular management strategies or behaviours; rather, most of the teenagers displayed a banal acceptance that this is simply how social media are. Leo and Sam, for example, discussed the archiving of Snapchat content as follows:

Interviewer: When you send something that has like a ten-second life do you think that it'll just disappear, do you think that people might save it, how does that work?

Leo: I don't worry about people saving.

Interviewer: Yeah?

Sam: I – I – I don't worry about that but I feel like it doesn't actually get deleted. I feel like they put it in like a database or something.

Leo: Yeah. Storage somewhere.

I thought I had framed my question around other social media users and the risk of them saving and sharing content which was intended to be ephemeral, but the boys both directed the conversation towards the idea of social media companies retaining an ultimate form of control over their data. First, they illustrate a performative casualness about their own peer network and whether or not they might save a shared image, both emphasising 'I don't worry'. Then, they go on to discuss Snapchat the corporation, and an awareness that behind the scenes of their own interactions on the platform, there is a company with motivations of its own, and with an ability to store their content for far longer than they and their peers might choose to. In other words, the boys are acutely aware that they may not retain ultimate control over their social media content and interactions, no matter how much the applications might appear to give them that control. They continued as follows:

Sam: Yeah. I don't know.

Leo: Yeah, like store it up.

Sam: Yeah,

Interviewer: What, like Snapchat owns it?

Leo: Yeah. Like we can't see it but someone still can.

Sam: Yeah.

What is perhaps most interesting about this dialogue is just how casual it is. The boys do not describe this awareness as having a dramatic impact on what they choose to share or post online, and their tone remained flippant even as they suggested that when they cannot see particular content, 'someone else can'. Of course 'someone else' is a remarkably vague term – and yet this vagueness did not seem to generate concern. 'Store it up' is also an interesting phrase from a temporal and spatial perspective. The boys here demonstrate a projection both into the future, and into another, distant place of storage. They conceptualise a huge – and growing – body of social media content being built up by Snapchat – a body of content with a potential permanence that they cannot control or even see. Examined through a framework of virtual potentialities, we can see explicitly here how teenagers negotiate between an awareness that they do not have total control over their social media content, and a desire to continue producing that content anyway.

A similar combination of these unknowable possibilities regarding broader organisational activity – and a flippant attitude towards those possibilities – was displayed by fifteen-year-old Phil, who described the experience of internet searches being tracked, and resulting in tailored advertising on Facebook. It is worth underlining here that Phil was from the rural youth club – the only club I visited where the teenagers described Facebook as a social media application they actively used:

Interviewer: What do you think? Do you trust social media?

Phil: No.

Interviewer: Why not?

Phil: I dunno – like – cos of like the government.

Interviewer: So – right so when you say you don't trust it, you think someone else might have created the stuff that you're seeing?

Phil: Like when you search something on the internet, it always comes up on Facebook, like a week later or something.

Clearly, 'the government' is a nebulous term that Phil does not explain in detail. Nevertheless, he articulates an awareness displayed by most of the teenagers; that of online activity, including social media activity, not being entirely private, and of power online being held by large organisations. He describes the experience of targeted advertising following his internet behaviour. Whilst this is clearly a very different phenomenon from that suggested by Leo and Sam, whereby supposedly deleted content has not truly vanished, there are some important parallels to draw. Both observations speak of a lack of control over how private social media behaviour and activity can truly be. Both observations, then, speak of a sense of surveillance, of power existing elsewhere, of a greater and more complex space than that immediately around the teenagers. And both observations speak of an interference in teenagers' control of their own temporal experiences; whilst they might wish to leave particular social media content, or particular internet searches in the past, they cannot always achieve this. The reflexivity of the risk society emphasised by Beck and Giddens is apparent, encompassed in an awareness of how social media activity or behaviour may re-emerge in the future in potentially sinister ways.

However, Phil goes on, like Leo and Sam, to speak very casually and dismissively of the influence this awareness has on his social media activity. He seems to display a sense of acceptance that these dynamics are simply how social media works, rather than suggesting they act as a hindrance or a motivator for particular activity. Returning to virtual potentialities, what we can see here is teenage *acceptance* of (some of) the unknown multiplicities within social media. They have a sophisticated understanding of social media applications and the internet more

broadly as stretching into virtual space far beyond their own engagements and interactions. They know that Snapchat and Instagram are companies with motivations of their own, and they are aware that the things they search for or post online – including within social media – are tracked. However, this awareness does not necessarily translate into a change in behaviour. The question then becomes – what *are* the most powerful policing influences on teen social media behaviour?

‘Everyone sees it’: Virtual violence - exposure through space and time

Returning to Robert’s earlier description of social media as a ‘place’ where individuals can be ‘targeted’ – and which particularly vulnerable individuals should therefore avoid entering – it is worth dwelling for a moment on precisely why that ‘place’ is deemed risky. Robert is not focusing on some feature of the place itself, but rather on the people within it – the individuals who may do the ‘targeting’. In other words, the peer networks within social media are powerful policing forces – far more powerful, it seems, than the parents, teachers or entire corporations referenced above. The panopticon is in place; teenagers believe that social media and internet organisations – perhaps even ‘the government’ – can see more of their social media activity than might be initially apparent – but it is the panopticon of their peer networks that has most influence over their behaviour. As I began to explore in the previous chapter, the risk of exposure is an enormously significant factor in teen social media activity. The point is, then, that risk lies not with companies or with the government – it lies with other social media users.

The unique functionalities of social media – their ability to save and spread content far beyond the initially intended audience, to foster new forms of bullying, to track individuals’ locations – introduce forms of surveillance and risk which do not exist in the same ways in teens’ offline lives. All of these risks can be understood as linked to the transformed spatiality and temporality in social media, whether because they ensure that teens are connected to each other at all times and in all places, or because of the huge potential audience for particular content and particular stories. And all of these risks are dependent on the peer (or stranger) networks that teenagers connect with *via* social media. That is, they stem not from

the question of what Snapchat might do with a teenager's photo, but what another user might do with it.

In the previous chapter, I introduced nineteen-year-old Freddie, who suggested that if a teenager had a video of someone 'stripping naked' then they could potentially post this online, exposing the individual in question. I asked him to explore this further:

Interviewer: And do you know people who have been bullied or have you seen bullying happen?

Freddie: Yeah I seen that happen but all you can do is just report really to take down the video.

Interviewer: Absolutely. Why do you think – do you think this happens differently through social media or do you think that in – I hesitate to use the word real life – but does social media make any of that different?

Freddie: Social media – everyone sees it. Everyone sees it. So – it depends how many likes or retweets it gets. Everyone sees them. But in real life – it's just – tell this person, that person tells their friends, it goes around. [On social media] even if a stranger sees you or recognises you on this video, it'll be like 'oh yeah, I saw you on this or that!'

This slightly meandering answer is worth unpacking. First, Freddie emphasises the word 'everyone' – meaning not just immediate friends or peers, but anyone who might touch the subject's life in some way. Any perceived privacy or intimacy is blown apart; social media are characterised as mechanisms for reaching *more* people than offline life, for participating in those broad and dynamic networked publics. 'Everyone' can never be an entirely literal term, but it is a highly emotive one – Freddie means everyone who *matters*. In this sense, social media offer a more efficient connection to more people than the offline world.

He references, also, the volume of likes or retweets that such a video might receive. We see again the concretisation and measurability of judgement and appraisal within social media. An intimate act or private moment is spatialised in a public way, each like or retweet a tangible measure of someone else having seen it, even participated in it. Freddie then contrasts this participatory process with what would happen offline, in so-called 'real life'. There, he claims, 'it's just – tell this person, that person tells their friends, it goes around'. There are at least two important points to bear in mind here: first, he describes a process which is primarily verbal, not visual; second, he describes a direct peer-to-peer process, as opposed to the simultaneous sharing with a group which can take place through social media. Freddie then returns to the functionality of social media – the hypothetical video that has been taken of someone 'stripping naked' – and points out that someone who does not actually know the original subject of said video may still be able to recognise them at a later point. In other words, social media networks rapidly spread content far beyond an original peer network, and the visual nature of social media content provides a much more fixed and recognisable trace of someone's actions than simply passing on the message that 'he or she did this'. As such, we can see at least three core functions of social media – their networked publics, their foregrounding of the visual, and their focus on individual profiling, through functions like selfies and 'My Story' – combining to create new spaces and temporalities of gossip. Because social media encourage the individual to create and curate a personal profile for others to appraise, as I explored in the chapter of embodiment, so they make individuals sharply subject to the judgement of others. In turn, this generates new forms of risk.

Sixteen-year-old Naomi told a very similar story, again drawing on the concept of exposure:

Naomi: Yeah, this girl that I know, she got exposed on social media cos she done something with a boy, and then it got exposed, and then her mum found out and then her mum called the police, and then the police come to the school cos the mainstream school that I was in was – she was there. The police come to the school. Because she was 14 and he was 17 so the mum reported the boy cos she's underage, she

can't be doing that, and he's basically having sexual intercourse with a minor. So, it's not right.

Interviewer: And he shared that on his social media?

Naomi: Yeah. He put it everywhere. All over social media.

Interviewer: Okay. And what social media would that sort of thing be shared on?

Naomi: Snapchat.

Interviewer: Like on their – they'd post something to their story?

Naomi: Yep.

Interviewer: And then everyone who's got their name on Snapchat...

Naomi: /Yeah. Can see what they've posted. And then that person's gonna go back and tell that person 'ahh so and so's just posted that video of you and him'. And then she'll find out, then she'll get called every name under the sun. And it just won't end in a real nice way for her.

On one level we can see here a long-established, highly gendered and heteronormative trope of Western teenage culture, one which we began exploring in the previous chapter. A girl and boy have an intimate encounter, it is shared beyond the two of them (and it is the boy that does the sharing) and the girl is judged for this act far more negatively than the boy. One factor that is particularly striking here is the juxtaposition between Naomi's initially legalistic, technical language and then her description of the particularly harsh connotations for girls. 'Sexual intercourse with a minor' suggests that Naomi is well-versed in these issues and has perhaps received targeted education, warning her about the legal implications of underage sexual activity. She is clear that in this scenario the girl's mother was right

to report the older boy and his behaviour was 'not right'. Yet in spite of this, she goes on to declare that in such a scenario the girl will 'get called every name under the sun'. This is not, of course, to blame Naomi for complicity in such gendered double standards, but rather to draw attention to a long-established trope. Playground research long before the rise of social media has found repeated examples of heterosexual boys seeking to display their experience to their peer groups, to showcase their sexuality, and the girls in these very scenarios receiving harsh judgements just as the boys are praised (as per my literature review, see, for example Hird and Jackson 2001; Jackson and Cram 2003; Lenhart 2009; Livingstone and Helsper 2010; Ringrose and Eriksson Barakjas 2011; Ringrose and Renold 2011; Ringrose et al 2012; Salter et al 2013; Tolman 2012; Trottier 2013). But social media extend and expand these peer groups, and transform what was once primarily verbal gossip, whispers behind hands, into tangible content, shared and saved and granted a new kind of temporal stickiness. Indeed, Naomi's use of the word 'everywhere' reminds us just how spatialising social media can be – they operate like physical places. There is an echo, then, of Freddie's 'everyone'. Social media feel simultaneously intimate and infinite.

As our conversation continued, Naomi further illustrated the gendered double standards applied to teenage girls in such scenarios:

Interviewer: And what will happen to the boy?

Naomi: The boy, he'll just get cheers on. Like from other boys. Girls...

Interviewer: So tell me more about that, and why that's different. Why does the girl get called names and the boy doesn't?

Naomi: Cos the girl's the one that's done it.

Interviewer: The boy's done it as well.

Naomi: What boys do you know that's gonna video themselves getting something off another boy!

Interviewer: No but I mean in this case – so they both did something. And it was on social media.

Naomi: Social media, yeah.

Interviewer: But only the girl got called names.

Naomi: Yep.

Interviewer: So why do you think –

Naomi: /Nobody liked the girl anyway, so, I don't blame them. It's her own fault. Her mumma clearly raised her wrong.

Naomi's description of a boy in this kind of scenario receiving 'cheers' underlines a heteronormative masculinity (re)produced and displayed through sharing evidence of sexual exploits. And it underlines how the transformed temporality and spatiality in social media offer new ways for this (re)production and display to take place, through visual recording and the mechanics of sharing through a network.

We can also see my own feminist politics emerging in this exchange, as I tried to encourage Naomi to consider those gendered double standards of judgement that she was both referencing, and reproducing. She initially misunderstood me, interpreting my statement that 'the boy's done it as well' to mean two boys filming a sexual encounter together, and dismissing this out of hand, suggesting that no boy would do such a thing. On re-reading this extract I found it even more fascinating that Naomi more easily saw a same-sex scenario than the accountability of a boy in a different-sex scenario; it offered a compelling insight into sexist double standards. Then, as I tried to lead her toward considering that her own story referenced both a boy *and* a girl, with the girl receiving far more judgement and derision, she ultimately

shut me down with a firm statement blaming the specific girl in question. Because ‘nobody liked the girl anyway’ and ‘her mumma clearly raised her wrong’, the gossip and shaming the girl suffers is framed as ‘her own fault’.

It was difficult to ascertain the degree to which Naomi believed this, and the degree to which she was purposefully referencing and imitating a pattern she had seen before. Her tone oscillated between remarkably casual and dismissive, and a simmering anger. What she clearly *is* doing is reproducing a well-established set of double standards and sexualised judgements applied to teenage girls, and describing how the mechanics of social media give these a new shape. There is something particularly visceral about a sexual encounter being filmed rather than just talked about; it has clear echoes of online pornography and of course, when an underage girl is involved, the content produced is technically child pornography. Most of the teenagers I interviewed seemed knowledgeable on this front and, like Naomi, would demonstrate this awareness through the use of legalistic or technical language. And yet statements like ‘she’ll get called every name under the sun’ remind us that there are hugely emotional and affecting ripple effects from such incidents.

Returning to the concepts of the risk society and the panopticon, then, we can see social media operating as policing and disciplinary forces – but with that policing and disciplining coming not from the bodies in charge of social media, nor particularly from the police or parents, in spite of their stepping in after an incident has occurred. Rather, discipline is located primarily amongst other social media users, in a shifting entanglement of power and judgement. Fourteen-year-old Lewis summarised a mechanism which many of the teenagers referenced; saving particular conversations or content in order to have a record of something that might later be useful, or contentious:

Lewis: That’s what my brother does. Like my brother always saves chats like with girls and everything, so if they start playing shit on him he just shows them saved messages.

[...]

He saves all the chats.

Interviewer: Why?

Lewis: Because if girls try chat shit about him then he's got proof.

Interviewer: Has that happened to him before?

Lewis: Yeah.

Interviewer: What kind of shit?

Lewis: Just different shit. Like, girls. They cause a lot of grief.

Lewis's description of social media content or dialogue being saved in order to provide a proof point later on is a mechanism which was echoed by many of the teenagers I interviewed. This is another, particularly striking aspect of social media reshaping the temporality of teen experience, in this case by enabling otherwise ephemeral or fast-forgotten incidents to be fixed in time and re-revealed later on. The salient point is less whether or not this actually occurs, and more that the *possibility* of it occurring is always there. Here, virtual potentialities – that is, social media fostering multiple possibilities for how the future *might* play out – are exploited by Lewis as a form of insurance, a means of managing the risk of a girl causing 'grief' in the future. But there is an interesting double dimension to this insurance. Whilst Lewis's brother thinks that storing 'chats' is a means of protecting himself, one can imagine that, should he ever capitalise on that protection, the girl he is chatting to will be subject to a different kind of risk. If the point of saving conversations is to prove that certain things were said, then the power of that saving must lie in the conversation *potentially* being shared with others. In other words, the girl in this scenario can be threatened with the risk of exposure.

Complex and highly gendered layers of suspicion and judgement are also apparent throughout this narrative, through the implication that girls 'cause a lot of

grief' from which boys should take steps to protect themselves. Lewis did not elaborate further and so I could not determine a precise example of what he meant, but I was struck by the notion of social media being used as a concrete proof point or even a bargaining tool – a means of managing potential future risk today. There does not need to be a sexual element to these entanglements, as sixteen-year-old Libby explained when she also drew on the term 'expose', this time to explain how offline arguments can be amplified and extended using social media:

Libby: It's cos like – say – if someone that you know – you have an argument with them – and then they will send a person that they're talking to your Snap, so they can get something out of you, so then they can expose you massive time on the internet.

I clarified Libby's slightly confusing phrasing in the conversation that followed. She is referencing a mechanism mentioned by many of the teenagers I spoke to; using social media to gather evidence for fuel in disagreement. If, say, I were arguing with Libby, I could send another of my friends her username, encouraging them to connect with her. Alternatively, if that friend were already connected to Libby through Snapchat, I could 'send' them to her profile – that is, encourage them to message her immediately. The goal would be for them to 'get something out of' Libby – which I could then use to 'expose [her] massive time on the internet'.

What might this look like? It could be as simple as encouraging Libby to text something unpleasant about me – or another of our peer group – and then showing her that I hold such evidence. It could involve sharing that evidence *with* our peer group, causing Libby embarrassment or worse. As previously, the word 'expose' emphasises both the massive (potential) scale of the world that social media grant teenagers access to, and the blowing open of something initially intended to be private – though Libby is discussing an argument, rather than a sexual incident. This is a well-established facet of teenage behaviour – so-called 'bitching' (and all the gendered baggage that implies) – given a different speed and shape by the interplay of several unique functionalities of social media: the ability to form connections anonymously, and the ability to screenshot, save and share content. Social media

operate again as simultaneously very intimate and private, yet always carrying the potential of the wider audience, of throwaway comments being saved and shared.

Libby went on to discuss how this possibility interacted with her own ambivalence regarding social media, and how an oft-cited tactic for managing damaging social media connections – blocking people – does not necessarily work:

Libby: Yeah. Then I realised – it's like – say if someone blocked you on social media and you've got somebody on there that knows the person that you've blocked, that's how – someone's gonna get hold of you.

Interviewer: So you can't – so even blocking someone doesn't – because I've done other interviews where people have said 'oh you know, it's fine, people who complain about social media are talking rubbish because you can just block someone', but you're saying actually –

Libby: /You can't block someone because you might have someone that they know, and they chill with, on your social media page. So you can't do nothing about it cos you don't know who that person is.

In other words, the dynamic webs of connections within social media mean that blocking an individual will not necessarily prevent them from either contacting you, or even from knowing what you are doing. Provided that you remain connected through social media with someone that the blocked individual also knows, then a through line to that individual remains. And whilst this structure could of course exist in precisely the same way offline – a teenager remaining friendly with someone who is in turn friendly with someone they have 'blocked', for example – social media provide a far more visible, tangible and immediate line of connection, should that blocked individual still want to see into the subject's life. By simply picking up another user's phone, or asking them to send them screenshots, teenagers can see into each other's selfies, videos, updates, and – as explicitly named within social media – their *stories*. Social media spatiality and temporality are so complex and dynamic that however straightforward blocking sounds, it does not work that way in practice.

What is sometimes perceived as a useful disciplinary practice for managing risk in social media is dismissed by some of the participants.

Thirteen-year-old Rachel also described how offline arguments could interplay with social media functionality, creating more 'beef':

Rachel: And also, and on Snapchat, like, I prefer to argue on Insta, like, all the time. Because then normally – if some – like I'd rather argue on Snapchat because on Instagram if someone screenshots, you can't see that they screenshotted. On Snapchat it comes up that they screenshare – that they screenshotted. Or that they screen recorded as well. So it's like I know – so like you know like what to expect next. Cos it's obvious if someone screenshots they're literally gonna send to their friend to make like – to try to make the beef more intense.

Here, she contrasts the functionality of Snapchat (which tells her when another user has screenshotted what she has sent them) and Instagram (which does not). Snapchat is therefore 'better' for arguments because she retains a greater or more accurate sense of what the other party is doing. The spatialising and temporal recording mechanisms within social media transform teen experiences of arguing – and potentially, therefore, the ways in which their relationships are negotiated. If grievances and arguments can be recorded and shared to 'make the beef more intense', then social media arguments can never be truly ephemeral; they always carry the possibilities of permanence. In other words, social media engender new forms of risk, even within close friendships. Thinking back to the explorations of intimacy in the previous chapter, we can see here how relationships extend out from one-to-one connections and become a kind of group property, with the 'beef' between particular individuals discussed and shared. Whilst this is not in itself a new phenomenon, there is a particular intensity and a particular concretisation in terms of how it plays out in social media.

Recording particular actions or conversations and then recalling them at a later date has become a growing phenomenon in digital culture more broadly. Celebrities' social media feeds or archives of past work, for example, are routinely

mined for controversial content made prior to their current levels of fame. Artists James Gunn, Dan Harmon and Trevor Noah have all, for example, been targeted by ‘semi-coordinated attempts by the ‘alt-right’ to weaponise offensive material’ (*Guardian* 25 July 2018). Meanwhile, comedian Kevin Hart stepped down as the host of the 2019 Oscars ‘after past tweets from 2011 resurfaced and he was slammed for being homophobic’ (*USA Today* 7 December 2018). In the UK, *Emmerdale* star Shila Iqbal was fired ‘after tweets that she posted in 2013 that contained “inappropriate language” resurfaced online’ (*Independent* 12 April 2019). This is another dimension of social media’s virtual potentialities – there is always the potential for content to be remembered, re-shared, re-shaped and harnessed in new ways. When we think about this in relation to surveillance and the risk society, we can see social media extending that surveillance inexorably into the future. It never ends. Once something takes place within social media there is always the potential for it to re-emerge in the future – and social media exposure, therefore, is something which happens through time as well as through space.

‘Maybe I’m somewhere I don’t want to be giving out’: tracking and following

Another spatial risk in relation to opening up that which was originally intended to be private is the location-tracking functionality built into social media. At the time of my fieldwork, Snapchat incorporated a feature called ‘Snap Map’, which, when activated, shared the location of the user on a live map whenever they were using the app. In turn, this meant that any of their Snapchat friends (remembering, of course, that becoming ‘friends’ can be as simple as adding someone’s username and them accepting, or even using the ‘Quick Adds’ function) could view their location whenever they were using the app. Instagram’s location-tracking is less dynamic, but it does encourage users to ‘tag’ their posts with locations, which remain fixed through time unless actively removed. And of course, even without these explicit forms of location-tracking, the highly visual, photo-led nature of Snapchat and Instagram mean that it is all too easy for photos alone to provide a clear digital trail as to where that user has been, if the photos show distinct locations. These forms of tracking seemed to be among the most salient factors for the interviewees

when they discussed how and why they disciplined and managed their social media practices. The below exchange, for example, happened in response to my asking whether Snapchat's perceived ownership of content would affect Leo and Sam's behaviour. They moved the conversation on to consider the location-tracking implicit to the app:

Interviewer: And do you think – does that affect then what you send? Like would you not send certain pictures because of that?

Both: Yeah. Sometimes.

Leo: Cos like if I don't want like maybe I'm somewhere I don't want to be giving out.

Sam: Yeah.

Leo: If I send a picture it have like the location on it. I dunno. Sometimes I just like wanna keep my private life – I just wanna be private.

What we see here, then, is Sam and Leo choosing to focus on location, rather than interrogating what Snapchat might do with their content. They do not want other users to see where they are at a particular time – and this is associated with being 'private'. It is unclear whether they mean taking photos which render it obvious that they are in a particular place, or photos in which the app explicitly tags a location – but the effect is the same. I encouraged them to discuss further:

Interviewer: And so what on Snapchat it can – you think it can – well obviously it does often say where you are anyway but if you reckon that that's probably quite tracked...

Both: /Yeah.

Interviewer: And so you want to keep that private from Snapchat or private from people that you know? Or both?

Sam: I wanna be the only person who knows all that stuff. Yeah, no one else needs to know all the private stuff.

The boys' desire to keep their private lives private is clearly entirely acceptable. Yet social media demand that they take a more active role in preserving that privacy than in the offline world. Sam claims that he thinks of both Snapchat the organisation and the network he is connected to through Snapchat in a similar way insofar as he wants 'to be the only person who knows all that stuff' – primarily, apparently, what his location is at any particular time. Through social media, other users can all too easily gain access to 'all the private stuff' – including a teenager's physical movement through space. Privacy, then, is explicitly associated here with an individual's location in space – it is fine, it seems, to take a photograph of something you are doing or a new look you are trying out – but this crosses a privacy line when the location of that action is made explicit. Why? Some of the other interviewees provided some suggestions. Consider, for example, the following exchange between Liv, Rhianna and Chloe. They were discussing strangers contacting them through Snapchat and Instagram – the same phenomenon we began exploring in the previous chapter:

Rhianna: Normally they're nearby you know. They're always nearby. They're always like [nearby area]. And it's so annoying.

Liv: On my Instagram they're like, not even in this country. They're like far.

Chloe: That's true. On Instagram they're out of this country. On Snap, they're always in like close...

Liv: /Yeah. They're always like close, close by.

Here the girls contrast the different location-tracking capabilities of Snapchat and Instagram already discussed, explaining how the more sophisticated and dynamic map capability of Snapchat can identify users who are ‘close, close by’. They casually observe the locations of people who contact them through social media, underlining both their understanding of the functionality and social media’s entanglements between virtual and physical space. There is potentially no difference between the type of *virtual* exchange, the level of intimacy that can be fostered on social media with an individual ‘out of this country’ or ‘like close, close by’. But the latter – individuals who are ‘close’ – introduce a different type of risk, as they go on to discuss:

Chloe: /They’re always in like [nearby areas]. And it’s like [pulls a face].

Liv: Well, on Snapchat it scares me cos when they’re like close, close by yeah.

Liv: /They like see me, on like, on the streets, I’m just like [pulls a face]. So, I could get attacked. By these people.

Here, the girls form a link between virtual proximity within social media and physical proximity which could carry with it the threat of ‘attack’. A risk found in the physical world is reshaped within and by social media, because that physical proximity is rendered visible in a new way. An avatar on a map or a location tag next to a username is related to but different from seeing a threatening-looking individual standing nearby, or following them down a road – and when they are combined, new types of risk is formed. There are different levels of intimacy at play simultaneously. When Liv says ‘they like see me, on like, on the streets’ she draws attention to both the misalignments and the overlaps between being ‘seen’ on social media – that is, someone viewing one’s profile and content – and being ‘seen’ ‘on the streets’. ‘Seeing’ someone on social media can involve, as we have seen, seeing them in a highly intimate way, but physical distance offers a kind of safety net. By contrast, ‘seeing’ someone in the physical world carries potential risks associated with physical

proximity, whilst also in some ways being more private, less exposed. Combine the two, and there is a new form of risk to navigate, where the physically nearby stranger can also see into one's digital life. Hence Liv's description of being scared when unknown individuals on Snapchat are 'close by' – the point is that it is the *combination* of virtual and physical proximity which is frightening.

There is also a highly gendered dimension to this risk. Rhianna, Liv and Chloe were explicitly describing boys or men contacting them through Snapchat, often with a sexualised undertone. Chloe outlined a specific experience:

Interviewer: Do you have your location thing switched on, on Snapchat?

[All speaking at once, saying no, they turned it off].

Chloe: I had someone following me from it,

Rhianna: /Yeah, my brother had to switch it off.

Chloe: /I had a stalker. I actually had a stalker from it.

Liv: Yeah, same.

Chloe: Everywhere I went I see the same boy, the same boy. He looked about four years older than me but everywhere I went he was there, like within, within the space of...

Liv: Because you can see like – on Snapchat you like zoom in on the person and you can just see exactly where they are.

This exchange further emphasises the specifically sinister risk which emerges from the *combination* of virtual and physical proximity. Chloe describes having a 'stalker' – that is, seeing the same boy 'everywhere I went' – and Liv links this directly with the location-tracking functionality in Snapchat, which enables one to 'just see exactly

where they are'. We can see, again, the repetition of 'everywhere' – the sense of saturation which seems to emerge through a combination of social media space and physical space. What was so specifically unsettling about this incident, it seems, was the combination of Chloe seeing the same boy 'everywhere' in the physical world, and believing that this was 'from' Snapchat – that is, because the app's inbuilt map would show him where she was. There is something uniquely exposing about knowing that the physical figure on the other side of the road is the same stranger who appears as an avatar on one's smartphone screen – and can therefore see the content one has posted to a social media profile.

Another interesting facet of the themes of monitoring and exposure in this exchange is Rhianna's reference to her brother having to 'switch it off' – that is, the location-tracking function within Snapchat. There seemed to be a faint suggestion here of teen girls' behaviour being policed by male relatives – which the girls expanded upon later in the interview. I first quoted this exchange in the previous chapter; here I extend it to highlight the multiple ways in which social media functionality can be harnessed for surveillance:

Interviewer: And if you've got a boyfriend, or have someone has a boyfriend, what happens on social media then? Like do you post photos of your boyfriend?

All: Sometimes, mm, no.

Rhianna: No, I never do that because my brothers will see and they'll be like 'eh! Who's that?!' [Laughter]

Chloe: My brother always asks! My brother, my brother always has to have a conversation with them and my brother asks them so many questions.

Rhianna: Yeah, my brother [NAME] – if I find out – if he finds out I have a boyfriend yeah, he'll be like 'ah, let me message him, cos if he messes with my sister I'll do bla bla bla'.

Others: Yeah.

Liv: Yeah they have to, they have to -

Chloe: /Our brothers, they're like really protective.

Liv: Yeah, cos they don't like seeing us like upset, and crying. So they like to like meet this person and be like 'if you mess with my sister, then I'm gonna have to have words with you'.

Here we can see, then, social media overlapping and entangling with familial mechanisms of monitoring and even policing teenage girls' behaviour and relationships, particularly in terms of their sexualities and their romantic lives. On the one hand this is a phenomenon which clearly predates social media and digital culture, and exists offline, whilst on the other hand social media can invest it with new temporality and spatiality. Thanks to social media, the girls' brothers can monitor their relationships with boyfriends from a distance, both spatially and through time – and they can also form very direct lines of digital communication with those boyfriends, should they choose to do so. Interestingly, Liv's repeated 'have to' suggests that it might not even be a choice; perhaps because social media offer the ability to do this, their brothers absolutely *must* take it up. Not participating in this digital surveillance is not an option, and the girls must simply manage this from their side. Yet it is interesting to observe Liv's claim that such a brother would then like to 'meet this person' – an indication that face-to-face contact, in the physical world, still carries an impact and significance that digital channels may not. Virtual and physical space are interrelated.

‘It’s like, the amount of stabbings there’ve been, that’s how people are finding the kids, on social media’: The virtual meets the physical

Location-tracking functionality helps us to see, then, how the risks of virtual violence entangled within social media – the risks of being cruelly spoken about, bullied, exposed – are also entangled with and bleed into risks of *physical* violence. There is no clear dividing line between the virtual realm of social media and the physical world – rather, each feeds into the other. Connections within social media are not merely digital – there is a human at the other end of the imagined line.⁵ In turn, this means that there is always the possibility of a face-to-face connection as well as a digital one – and there are specific risks inherent to this. The teenagers in the London youth clubs in particular drew a line between location-tracking within social media and the rise in teen-on-teen knife crime which became particularly high-profile over the course of the research (see, for example, *BBC News Online* 18 July 2019; *Guardian* 4 March 2019). Many of the teenagers claimed to have purposefully switched off their location-tracking because of this.

I want to be clear that the rate of teenagers actually meeting up with strangers through social media – and then being subject to physical violence, whether sexual or otherwise – is not part of the scope of my research. Rather, I am interested in how stories about such risk emerged in the interviews. It seemed like the most stark example of how social media activity was tied to tangible, violent, physical risk, and how teenagers claimed to manage this risk via their digital activity. Naomi, for example, provided a succinct explanation:

Naomi: And then – there’s kids that just go on there and look for a bit of drama. People look for people they’re – it’s like, the amount of stabbings there’ve been that’s how people are finding the kids, on social media.

⁵ It is worth highlighting here the rise in fake social media users and ‘bot’ accounts, particularly on Twitter. They were not discussed in my interviews and focus groups, but are an increasingly high-profile phenomenon, especially in relation to political campaigning and lobbying (see, for example, Boyd-Barrett 2020; Orabi et al 2020; Persily and Tucker 2020).

Interviewer: Like finding out where they are, you mean?

Naomi: Yeah.

Interviewer: So – and that’s what you were talking about with Snapchat maps and things.

Naomi: Yeah. I just think it’s dangerous.

Social media applications are understood as carrying out a form of implicit surveillance; they not only offer teenagers access to vast and complex digital space, but track and locate them within physical space. This does not need to just occur automatically, via the apps’ default background functionality. It can also occur explicitly because of teenagers’ social media content; ‘checking in’ to particular locations, or creating social media posts where the location is ‘tagged’ both provide a digital record of where teenagers are currently and where they have been in the past. The wider landscape at the time of this project in London included an apparent epidemic of youth violence and particularly stabbings (see, for example, *BBC News Online* 18 July 2019; *Guardian* 4 March 2019). Here, Naomi suggests that those stabbings in part occur because perpetrators are able to identify where targets are located, based on the location-tracking built into Snapchat. This is conjecture – none of the interviewees suggested that they had directly experienced this happening. However, the association of location-tracking with threats and violence was repeated in other (urban) interviews (though not the ones which took place in a rural youth club). In other words, the *story* of social media location-tracking being a potentially dangerous function is one that teenagers tell and re-tell, and so a particular aspect of risk is created and recreated.

Consider, for example, Liv, Rhianna and Chloe, who were discussing the fact that boys ‘feel they can never go out’:

Liv: /Now, it’s – you get – boys now worry about um who’s around.

Chloe: /And it's true. Like, they feel they can never go out because they always got beef on their back and they're scared they're gonna get stabbed up. But like – [noise of frustration].

Liv: They don't like going anywhere.

There is a clear gendered dimension to this exchange, and unsurprisingly so. Knife crime in London at the time of writing was overwhelmingly centred on male teenagers. There is also, of course, a clear racialised and classed dimension; knife crime was also overwhelmingly centred on black male teenagers from poorer parts of the city. However, the division these black and mixed race girls explicitly focus upon is that of gender. They complain that their male contemporaries 'don't like going anywhere' because of fears of violence and 'beef'. These fears are entangled with social media, and in particular the ways in which social media transform spatiality, in some complex and even contradictory ways. On the one hand, social media are claimed to prevent teenage boys from visiting certain places, because of the associated risks if those visits are tracked and publicised through social media. On the other hand, social media enable teenagers to virtually travel 'anywhere' on their mobile devices, perhaps from the relative safety of their homes or other locations, so the drive to congregate in particular physical places may be lessened. Social media, then, offer simultaneous spatial freedoms and risks.

Physical violence was also cited by Lee, who raised a particularly high-profile incident which took place in 2014:

Lee: One of my old – one of my old mates got that done. Like, they were texting him and then he agreed to go and meet him, like it was all on PS4, and he agreed to go around to his house. No, it wasn't one of my mates, it was a story that I heard from cadets. Do you remember? I dunno if you'll have heard of it, the Breck Foundation?

Interviewer: I think so.

Lee: *It's about a boy that went round to somebody's house on PS4.*

Interviewer: *Oh yes, I do know this.*

Lee: *Yeah, he went round to his house cos he met him on PS4 and then he got stabbed in the neck. And the guy was sitting there on the phone to 999 while he's sitting there dying.*

Initially unable to recall whether this is a story relating to one of his friends, Lee then remembers that it was communicated at one of his army cadet meetings, as part of an educational or safeguarding programme. Fourteen-year-old Breck Bednar was murdered by eighteen-year-old Lewis Daynes, who initially made contact with Breck through an online gaming community, communicating with him digitally for months before inviting him to the flat where the murder took place (BBC News 12 January 2015). As such, Lee demonstrates an awareness of the broader landscape of risk and concern relating to teenagers and social media. He has absorbed narratives pertaining to the most shocking and sinister violence which (very rarely) occurs through teenage social media activity. He is aware that those risks exist.

Here there is an echo, then, of the theme of authenticity and verification which I explored in the previous chapter. The distance that social media create between two communicating parties – distance which is both physical and virtual – can be exploited by individuals for nefarious ends. They can pretend to be somebody they are not, or, rarely and tragically, they can groom others. In this qualitative study my purpose is not to analyse how prolific or otherwise such grooming is and therefore how *likely* teenagers are to fall victim to it; it is to explore the *stories* that teenagers tell about such grooming, and hence understand how an awareness of grooming is layered into teen social media activity. What struck me as remarkable about Lee's story was how his tone throughout the exchange was simultaneously casual, and fascinated or intrigued. This extraordinary story was positioned almost as banal; a performative acceptance of risk permeated Lee's tone and manner. He *knows* that the physical and virtual distance inherent to social media communication means that it can be impossible to verify a contact's true identity or intentions. He

knows that, very occasionally, this risk turns into tragedy. And his reading of this, whilst in no way flippant with regard to Breck Bednar's appalling murder, seems remarkably accepting of the fact that this is simply a risk of connecting to strangers through online networks.

Naomi demonstrated a similar performative casualness with regard to another serious form of violent physical risk:

Naomi: Yeah. [Pause] It's like paedos these days like – that's how they meet up with young girls; young girls don't know who that person really is. Yeah – for all you know them young girls could like meet up with a 65-year-old, and that 65-year-old's telling them 'yeah I'm 14, I like you' and everything, and you don't really know the age that person is that you're going to meet.

Unlike Lee, Naomi is not describing a specific event or incident here. However, that in itself tells us more about the narratives of physical risk which are built into teenagers' engagement with social media. Like Lee, she knows or believes that there is a potential physical risk associated with a certain kind of social media communication. She accepts it; she knows that it is there. It therefore filters into her own social media communication and activity; a continuous background awareness of sinister potential sitting below the surface. She knows, or believes, that teenagers meet up with strangers whom they originally connect with through social media, and she knows, or believes, that there is a potentially serious risk associated with this migration from virtual space to physical space. We can also see here yet another gendered dynamic, whereby the violent risk potential for teenage *girls* is specifically associated with sex and so-called 'paedos'. Indeed, this word in itself demonstrates a sharp awareness of a broader media and public landscape of risk and even moral panic, and almost a dismissive casualness about navigating such interactions.

I asked Naomi to elaborate further:

Interviewer: Tell me more about this strangers thing.

Naomi: It's like – say for instance – someone added me on Facebook and they've got like the same name as my mum, the same picture, same everything – I'm gonna think it's my mum so obviously I'm gonna add that person back. So then – this person that you don't know is starting a full-blown conversation with you asking where you are – for all you know you could be telling this person 'yeah I'm in school mum, I'm safe, can you come pick me up I finish early'. You leave your school thinking your mum's gonna be outside. Your mum's not outside. It's a stranger that's outside. You don't know who that person is.

Interviewer: So that's strangers pretending to be someone you know. What about strangers when people genuinely know they're talking to strangers?

Naomi: Then they're idiots, for meeting up with that stranger if they don't know them. They could get raped, or anything. Taken, kidnapped. Like, have they never watched like things on the internet?

I must underline here that Naomi was the only teenager at the urban youth clubs to mention Facebook, and she described it specifically as a platform she used for communicating with her mother. That maternal relationship is central to the story of potential risk which she paints here, suggesting that someone with sinister motivations could pretend to be her mother. Once again, there is no suggestion that this has actually happened either to Naomi or to anyone she knows; it is a story of potential and possibility. Many of the teenagers spoke very casually about being contacted by strangers and deleting or blocking them because they suspected that something sinister seemed to be going on. More than one teenager described an incident which involved making a report to the police. Like the casual clarity to both Lee's and Naomi's tones of voice, the young people seemed very confident in their abilities to handle such incidents, and very aware of potential risk.

Physical violence is not just something which teenagers understand to be a risk of taking the virtual communication of social media into the physical world; it is

also something they can be exposed to through social media. For example, fourteen-year-olds Billy and Tomas discussed seeing violent videos on Instagram:

Billy: Oh – Instagram. The reason I picked Insta – I said Instagram is because you can see like many things on Instagram – like funny videos. [Agreement] Some people – some people abuse the – some people abuse it.

Tomas: Yeah yeah yeah.

Billy: Like inappropriate things. But I don't do that.

Tomas: This one guy I knew...

Billy: /I use it yeah – I use it to look for videos like that can help my education as well. And then like I communicate with my friends on it as well.

Interviewer: Okay. Yeah. Sorry – you wanted to say something?

Tomas: Yeah, like this one guy I knew – this person like that was over eighteen – he like started posting like decapitation videos and like their body parts were getting chopped off and everything.

I should immediately underline that Tomas's story raised ethical concerns for me; I was worried that he had been exposed to graphic or inappropriate content and been witness to something criminal. Following the interview, I instigated a separate conversation in which he claimed that the video in question had been reported and taken down. His tone, as with the vast majority of the conversations with teenagers which related to violence or the sharing of explicit content, was remarkably casual; that in itself seemed to tell a story of how banal he perceived the incident to be.

We can see, then, that physical violence is not only an actual risk for teenagers which is *mediated* by social media; it can be something which is made visible to teenagers *by* social media. Billy introduces the notion of ‘inappropriate things’ being shared through social media, and is very quick to dissociate himself from these, in the distancing mechanism we have seen over and over. Tomas then viscerally describes a particular video he witnessed through social media. We might use a term which has become particularly familiar to describe this process; Tomas was *exposed* to violent content, via his Instagram network. Once again, exposure refers to the blowing open of something private or restricted into a wider audience – with potentially devastating impact.

The multiplicity of risk

Teenage social media users are aware of and navigate an array of different types of risk. There is an overlap here with a well-publicised risk landscape – media, education, moral panics and so on – but it seemed throughout my interviews that the most salient risks for young people pertained to other social media users, and in particular that notion of exposure which I began to examine in the previous chapter. That is, rather than being influenced by the risk of social media companies, or of a vague sense that there might be such a thing as ‘too much’ time spent on social media, a far more powerful force dictating what teenagers do – or do not do – on social media is their own peer networks. These networks include both individuals that teenagers ‘know’ – remembering that this incorporates complex layers of authenticity and familiarity, which I explored in the chapter on intimacy – and strangers with potentially nefarious motivations. Regardless of how serious or legitimate these risks and fears are, they drastically shape and influence teenage behaviour, teenage discussion of and understanding of social media. Risks are part of the stories teenagers tell about social media; risks are entangled in the narrative.

And risk, following Beck and Giddens, is, crucially, an uncertain, unfixed thing. It is a *possible* future threat, a *potential* way for danger, or pain, or fear to manifest. Some of the teenagers I interviewed described risks which were such unusual incidents they had made national headlines, such as the tragic murder of Breck

Bednar. Others described risks which were, as far as they were concerned, merely theoretical – the possibility that somebody could imitate their mother on social media, the possibility that a so-called ‘paedo’ could use social media to attempt to meet with them. None of these risks were concrete or discrete; they were general senses of possibility which the teenagers had to consider, and navigate, through their own social media activity.

Others still described specific incidents where they had been contacted by strangers and reported this, or, in the case of Tomas, accidentally viewed content which was graphic, illegal or violent. Generally speaking, the teenagers I interviewed seemed comfortable and confident in their ability to handle these incidents, understanding how to escalate and report them, and recognising that meeting up with a stranger who contacted them through social media could be dangerous. This confidence in their own ability to manage such incidents seemed to point to a kind of individualisation of risk, whereby the individual is ultimately responsible for what happens to them within social media. This, of course, rapidly spills over into victim-blaming, and potentially some complacency about the kind of people to whom bad things happen.

However, the most prominent concept of all for understanding risk within teen social media practices seemed to be one which I first explored in the previous chapter – the risk of exposure. This risk seemed to control both how teenagers limit and manage their own social media activity, and how they judge other people. It is a spatial and a temporal term, reaching out into a network of others and into the future – and it is also ironic, because so much of the perceived positivity of social media *also* relates to (carefully managed) exposure – building popularity by sharing the ‘right’ content with the ‘right’ people. Failing to achieve the right level of exposure, interpreted in the right way by the right audience, is a different kind of risk again – one which marks out particular teenagers as unattractive or unpopular. Unwanted, unrequested exposure may be thought of as a type of virtual violence – an individual whose private activity is shared online has undergone a kind of assault. But social media exposure also overlaps and bleeds into the physical world, because it *might* foster real-world physical violence, again, sexualised or otherwise. If we arrive back at the framework of virtual potentialities – the multitude of different things which

might happen within social media – those potentialities are never bounded entirely by that digital world.

(Open) endings

It's addictive. [...] I got my mum to lock my phone in a safe and I ended up breaking the safe, I threw it out the window.

Nathan, 14

People love to talk to strangers on the internet!

Bethan, 16

When you've got in a massive argument with your friend yeah, and you've told them some deep secret, they could splash it on Insta or something and then you're finished. Like probably millions of people can see it and then your reputation's gone.

Martin, 15

As I begin writing my conclusions, the world of social media looks extraordinarily different to how it did at the outset of my PhD, four years ago. This is in part due to the inexorable advancement of digital technology in those years – advancement which has made smartphones more powerful and social media applications more sophisticated, as well as launching entirely new forms of social media. It is in part due to changes in public awareness of the breadth and depth of social media companies' reach, and the lack of clarity as to what they actually do with users' data.⁶ Perhaps most immediately of all, it is due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, which means that I, like millions of others across the UK, have spent much of the year working from home and communicating with friends, family and colleagues primarily, or even exclusively, through digital channels.

There has been joy in this. Many friends and family members have commented on how video calls, whilst in no way a substitute for face-to-face contact, have nevertheless generated feelings of connection they did not expect during these strange months. In other words, we have directly experienced the virtual proximities

⁶ The Cambridge Analytica scandal, for example, hit headlines in 2018 (*BBC News Online* 21 March 2018).

and intimacies I spent months analysing among teenagers. But there has also been loneliness, anxiety and fear of what the future holds. Enforced self-isolation and homeworking have rendered the writing-up period rather different to how I originally envisaged it. During the more challenging days of our second and third years, myself and PhD colleagues at Warwick made dreamy plans for our final months of writing, discussing how we would cluster together in libraries or cafés, write all day and enjoy coffee (or something stronger) together afterwards. Now, we are creating camaraderie primarily through computer screens.

Nevertheless, reflecting on those hoped-for visions for these last months of PhD study – and comparing them with the reality I am currently living – feels like a particularly revealing articulation of some of the ideas I have been grappling with throughout the research process. Physical distance feels simultaneously amplified and lessened; temporal experiences are simultaneously ferociously present, wistful for the past, and fearful (but also hopeful) for the future. Joy is tempered with anxiety, apprehension with frissons of excitement. Such multiple imagined projections – myriad possibilities for how things *might* be, and their all-too-common misalignments with the physical world – are precisely what I have been trying to capture throughout my thesis. Social media, I contend, make those imagined projections particularly complicated, (potentially) vast in scale and impact, (potentially) concretised in text, image and video.

Tensions, contrasts and contradictions

These imagined projections are at the heart of virtual potentialities, the conceptual framework I developed in Chapter 2 for thinking about experiences of time and space in social media. Virtual potentialities describe the multiple contradictory ideas that social media users must hold simultaneously, such as describing their phones as alive or dead, whilst knowing that they are not *really* alive or dead – yet feeling as though they are. Virtual potentialities emphasise the imagined audiences and possible consequences which always exist within social media – sometimes joyful and enticing, sometimes threatening and sinister. And virtual potentialities point towards the imaginative processes which are so critical to

conceptualising social media – processes of imagining that other users are physically present, or that the interactions facilitated by social media generate similar intimacy to face-to-face communications. Social media are ultimately environments of imagination – both imaginative content *production*, and imaginative content *interpretation*. Social media are fundamentally creative.

These creative functions are only likely to grow in scope and sophistication as smartphones become more powerful and mobile cellular networks offer greater bandwidth and speed. Methodologically, my thesis has sought to shed light on these processes of creativity by asking teenagers to narrate them – rather than by analysing them myself directly online. In this way, I have foregrounded teen interpretations of social media – to borrow from Chapter 3, where I set out my methodology, I have foregrounded teens’ own processes of ‘making sense’. My methodological approach has also sought to pay close attention to the role of smartphones as teens’ primary means of accessing social media. I observed and analysed teens’ physical interactions with their mobile devices and the space around them, and asked how these interactions make social media *embodied*.

I do not claim that this methodological approach is entirely new, nor that it is the only effective means of researching social media – but I do argue that it is valuable, illuminating, and likely to become more so as social media evolve. Social media can no longer (if they ever could) be disentangled from smartphones (and their inbuilt cameras), nor from the rise of influencer culture which has thrown the curated aspects of social media into particularly sharp relief. In turn, this means that mobility, the ‘always on’ nature of social media, the embodied dimensions of smartphones and their cameras, and continual awareness of audience interpretation, are all integral to researching, and understanding social media. Research methodologies must account for these, and I suggest that combining observation of teens’ embodied interactions with smartphones and social media, along with an invitation to tell stories, is an effective means of doing so. Perhaps by understanding social media as landscapes of subjective, embodied storytelling – and embedding that understanding in our research methodologies – we can better mitigate the societal risks of thinking of social media as sources of fact or truth.

47 teenagers, 47 stories

The empirical conclusions of my thesis, then, are characterised by an overarching understanding of social media as creative and subjective, constantly shifting, continually being interpreted and reinterpreted. Furthermore, by focusing specifically on teenage negotiations of *gender* within social media, I have applied my conceptual framework of virtual potentialities to a particular set of behaviours, activities and discourses.

In my methodological chapter, I explained how I collected data pertaining to those behaviours, activities and discourses predominantly through group rather than one-to-one interviews, and how some of those interviews were single-sex whilst others were mixed. I drew on the work of Rob Pattman, Stephen Frosh and Ann Phoenix to unpack some of the potential implications of this for the data I collected, particularly in relation to gender. Gendered and gendering dynamics played out in different ways in the mixed and single-sex interview groups, and in the few one-to-one interviews, as the teenagers performed and negotiated gender in relation to each other. Rather like Pattman et al, I found that single-sex groups tended to elicit more critical or forthright descriptions of how boys or girls behave on social media. Sometimes mixed-sex groups seemed to encourage more nuance – witness Lee, in Chapter 4, telling Sasha *I'm not on about like you girls, like obviously – no I'm not tryna say that it's every girl*. Other times, mixed-sex groups seemed to tease out especially performative – and stereotypical – forms of masculinity in particular, like Callum, also in Chapter 4, who 'leaned back in his chair, crossed his arms and laughed knowingly', and simply said social media could be used for *business innit*, eliciting laughter from the rest of the group.

I suspect that the structured, one-to-one reflective interviews Pattman et al were able to run would have proved impractical on this project, given the 'organic' setting of the youth clubs and the fact that the vast majority of the participants seemed keen to attend with their friends – though admittedly I did not try to implement them. Had I done so, perhaps I would have been able to shed greater light on these dynamics, and assess my interview data in a yet more multi-layered way than I have – though clearly the masculine rapport Rob Pattman was able to establish with the boys he interviewed would have been unlikely to apply in my case. Instead,

perhaps I would have encouraged deeper reflections both on femininities, and femininities as performed against masculinities, from the teenage girls.

Nevertheless, such dynamics can still, in themselves, be assessed through my framework of virtual potentialities, illuminating just how unstable gender itself is. Depending on who was in the room with them – both the other teenagers, and myself as interviewer – the teenage participants in this project discussed, performed and negotiated gender in different ways. As such, the group interviews themselves operated rather like a mirror of the social media they were set up to investigate.

In Chapter 4, I analysed teenage self-representation and embodiment within social media. There, the notion of virtual potentialities helped me to unpack the relationships between teenage social media users and their smartphones. In particular, it helped me explore the highly embodied demands those devices place on their owners and the ways in which those demands are gendered. I described, for example, how some of the teenage girls I interviewed associated responsiveness to their phones with performance of the ‘right’ kind of friendship. Also in that chapter, I explored unwritten rules of self-representation within teen social media, and the contrasting expectations and judgements vis-à-vis teen boys and girls looking ‘decent’. Virtual potentialities helped me to unpick the (potential) misalignments between that ‘decent’ self-representation in digital form and in the physical world, to highlight teenagers’ continual negotiations of how they look, how they *might* look, and how their looks *might* be interpreted or judged by others. Virtual potentialities revealed the slippery tensions between authenticity and falsity navigated by teen social media users – tensions felt particularly acutely by teenage girls.

In Chapter 5, I examined intimacies within social media, exploring the ways in which the teenagers forged social media connections and used the functionality of Snapchat and Instagram to perform and negotiate their relationships. Virtual potentialities offered a way of thinking about the *aspirational* aspects of intimacy – the desire for ‘a story about oneself and others that will turn out in a particular way’ (Berlant 1998: 281) – as oscillating between different future possibilities, with different degrees of desirability. I found the decisions the teenagers took as to whom to share with, whom to *include* within social media, and whom to reject or exclude to be highly complex, often inflected with gendered judgements and sexist double

standards. As I outlined in the introduction to this thesis, ‘create and share’ might be the most succinct description of what social media are designed for, and yet there is a huge amount of decision-making, second-guessing, apprehension and anticipation bound up in those ostensibly simple actions. Social media make these decisions sharply visible – and they always carry the risk of those decisions being undone. The intimate decisions teenagers make within and through social media always carry the possibility of being blown open, exposed to others.

I analysed this concept of exposure in greater detail within Chapter 6, where virtual potentialities offered a particularly useful way of thinking about future threat potential, and managing that potential in the present. I explored how the teenagers I interviewed discussed the risks of using social media ‘too much’, or of social media companies storing and using their data – and, ultimately, how a far greater perceived risk was that of exposure by their peers. I showed how exposure within social media incorporates both spatial and temporal elements, generating judgements which spread beyond immediate peer groups and stick through time. And I discussed how the teenagers managed these risks, whilst also, always, knowing that having *no* social media exposure – that is, too small an online audience – would in itself be a different kind of risk.

Collectively, these analytical chapters also set out some broader contributions to the literature on young people and social media that I unpacked in Chapter 1. I have shown, for example, how social media and smartphones are now symbiotically linked, and how many of the observations I have made of social media are rather, specifically, of social media as accessed via mobile devices. Smartphones ensure that social media are both carried with teenagers everywhere and constantly available; they mean that social media are designed to utilise, above all else, smartphones’ inbuilt cameras. In Chapter 2, I quoted Niels van Doorn figuring the virtual as an ‘immanent and immaterial form of agency of potential’ (van Doorn 2011: 533); smartphones with access to social media can, I think, be characterised as *agents* of potential.

Returning to Seyla Benhabib’s words on making sense, from which I quoted in my methodology chapter, I find in social media a stark illustration of how ‘[o]thers are not just the subject matters of my story; they are also tellers of their own stories

which compete with my own, unsettle my self-understanding, and spoil my attempts to mastermind my own narrative' (Benhabib 1999: 348). I have shown, throughout my analytical chapters, how social media are inherently contradictory and unstable, saturated with the possibility of one's narrative being disrupted, misinterpreted, shared further than one intended, altered. This might be precisely what makes them so enjoyable, exhilarating, even thrilling. The always-present others within social media are telling their own stories just as teenagers are telling theirs; they prevent teenagers from ever entirely masterminding their own social media narratives.

Potentially agentic, potentially vulnerable

Such tensions between different contradictory positions – and the frissons felt because of or even *against* particular possibilities – make social media, for these teenagers, saturated with ambivalence. Through virtual potentialities, I have aimed to articulate the tensions, negotiations and bleeds between digital and physical which social media make starkly visible. I have aimed, also, to foreground the idea of *potential* – an idea which I would suggest is particularly useful when researching gender, and/or teenagers. If, as I argued in Chapter 1, gender is understood as *embodied potential*, and teenagers are understood as in transition between childhood and adulthood, moving towards the *potential* of adulthood, then a conceptual framework of virtual potentialities helps to articulate the multiplicities and the ambivalence of those potentialities – and the ways in which both adulthood and gender never totally leave the past behind. Neither gender, nor teenagerhood, is fixed or simple. There are always sinister possibilities as well as positive ones – gender, and adulthood, restrict and imprison just as they liberate.

This articulation of tensions between contradictory positions is crucial, I contend, for making sense of social media – now more than ever. Influencer culture and comparing oneself to others; online misogyny and racism; trolling, deep fakes and misinformation, social media pile-ons, online shaming – many of these phenomena have been amplified in Anglophone media and popular culture during the course of my research (see, for example, *BBC News Online* 8 October 2020; *Insider* 6 August 2020; *Time* 21 November 2019; *Vox* 25 August 2020). Disinformation and misinformation in particular have been thrown into sharp focus

throughout 2020, from Covid-19 conspiracy theories and anti-vaccination campaigns, to the ongoing fallout from the US presidential elections. Meanwhile, the explosion in Black Lives Matter online activism following the death of George Floyd continues to generate debate on the misalignments between performative online allyship and real-world activism (see, for example *Metro* 2 June 2020; *New York Times* 20 June 2020; *New Yorker* 3 August 2020).

Analysing, understanding and, where necessary, countering such phenomena will require, in part, an understanding of both the spatialities and the temporalities of social media – an understanding of how they are experienced through tensions, contradictions and misalignments, always with an awareness of multiple possibilities. It will require, also, an understanding of the titillation and *temptation* of those possibilities – an understanding of precisely how intoxicating the vast (potential) audiences of social media can feel. *Virtual potentialities*, I contend, offers a framework for analysing such misalignments, for teasing out the shapes of online agency and understanding the pushes and pulls which motivate social media behaviour.

The teenagers I interviewed frequently alluded to or explicitly articulated such pushes and pulls. They demonstrated a sharp awareness of a broader landscape of concern and even panic pertaining to social media, and particularly social media and young people. They referenced anxious educational initiatives which attempted to shape their social media use; they discussed the possibilities of ‘paedophiles’ and violence. Often, as I explored in most detail in Chapter 6, they displayed a remarkable complacency about such risks – and a remarkable confidence in their own abilities to manage them. Yet these senses of control were always tempered by senses of anxiety and fear – and those vulnerabilities stemmed, not from faceless corporations or shadowy strangers, but from their own peers. *Virtual potentialities* highlights these pushes and pulls between agency and vulnerability.

I would argue that research and policymaking on online safeguarding should focus on managing these tensions – on helping young people to expect and understand these contradictory forces. Social media are not environments over which users can exert total agency, and so initiatives which focus too heavily on what teenagers should or should not do on social media are missing something important.

Rather, there will always be elements of social media – often very large elements – which lie outside of their users’ control, because they are elements controlled by *other* users. And there will always be elements of social media which are enjoyable precisely because of these possibilities. Whilst the teenagers I interviewed identified risk and even danger within social media, this was by no means enough to compel them to remove themselves from social media – sometimes, it even seemed to be precisely that which compelled them to stay.

There are echoes, in these tensions between vulnerability and control, of the concerns around sexualisation and young people which I outlined in Chapter 1. There, I highlighted an all-too-frequent failure to acknowledge teenagers’ agency. Social media offer an exciting landscape in which teenagers can explore gender and sexuality, and the joy and liberation of this should not be discounted. But researchers, teachers, youth workers and policymakers must acknowledge and understand the *tensions* of this landscape, the ways in which social media are imaginative, creative and interactive, the ways in which peer networks continually destabilise and disrupt teenagers’ agency. This might include better recognition in teen education of the joy and pleasure in receiving social media ‘likes’ – married with discussion of how one can never truly know the motivations for such likes. It might include a greater focus on the potential longevity of social media content, and how this can be both a goal (for example, in the world of social media influencers) and a burden. Through such initiatives, we can create better education and intervention, and help teenagers to better comprehend the (potential) temporal and spatial stickiness of their social media activities.

Ultimately, then, I see my conceptual framework of virtual potentialities as the overarching contribution made by this thesis, with implications both for how we produce knowledge and also how we generate educational and practical interventions to support young people. By focusing on an articulation of the spatialities, temporalities and imaginative dimensions of social media, rather than the precise functionality of individual applications, the concept of virtual potentialities should remain relevant even as new forms of social media emerge and Snapchat and Instagram are (perhaps) supplanted. It should continue to help to

explain how and why social media content is mis/interpreted, and to shed light on the consequences of – and perhaps the solutions to – those interpretations.

Ambivalence, contradiction and open endings

My research question asked what gendered, and gendering, stories teenagers tell about social media. Whilst the preceding chapters have hopefully created a complex tableaux of such stories, I want to conclude with a simple message. Social media, I have shown, are inherently ambivalent. Their abilities to engender joy, excitement, pleasure – and there are plenty of them – are always tempered by abilities to engender uncertainty, anxiety and discomfort. We cannot hope to help these or future teenagers to navigate social media painlessly – but we can help them to recognise, accept and manage those ambivalences. As social media become ever more accessible, powerful and multi-faceted, a balanced approach will be imperative.

I drew on Hannah Arendt's words on the term 'public' to formulate my framework of virtual potentialities, and I return to her again to end my thesis:

The term 'public' [...] means, first, that everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity. For us, appearance – something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves – constitutes reality. Compared with the reality which comes from being seen and heard, even the greatest forces of intimate life – the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses – lead an uncertain shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatised and deindividualised, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance. The most current of such transformations occurs in storytelling and generally in artistic transposition of individual experiences.

(Arendt 1998 [1958]: 50).

The stories I have related throughout this thesis are not mine – they are an ‘artistic transposition of individual experiences’ of forty-seven funny, infuriating, thoughtful and inspiring teenagers. And those stories, in turn, relate the teenagers’ artistic transpositions of experience within social media – the ways in which they created and curated narratives for themselves, and their social media audiences. I have shown, throughout the preceding chapters, how social media are characterised by the continuous *potential* of those narratives being exposed through time and space, meaning that teenagers never entirely control their own storytelling. And yet, re-examining Arendt’s words reminds us that there is joy, pleasure and even a greater sense of *reality* to be found in (certain kinds of) exposure, (certain kinds of) being seen and heard. The teenagers I spoke to seemed to prefer telling stories that they could not totally control than not telling them at all.

Those teenagers are already more than two years older than they were when I spoke to them. Some of them probably still attend those youth clubs; some of them have likely moved on. I imagine they all still have smartphones, and all still use social media. Perhaps they made TikTok videos during lockdown – an ‘artistic transposition of individual experiences’ which would seem at once novel and familiar to those younger versions of themselves back in 2018. I remain grateful to them above all else for their contributions to this thesis, and can think of no better end note than the most familiar storytelling conclusion of all – that I hope they all live happily ever after. Such certainty, however, is not to be found within social media.

Appendices

Appendix A: Interviewee profiles

I visited four youth clubs, three situated in inner London boroughs, and one in a market town in North East England. All of the clubs were specifically set up to cater to areas of relative economic deprivation, with the attendees drawn from the local area.

I interviewed forty-seven teenagers who were dispersed relatively evenly across these clubs. I casually spoke to other teenagers when I encountered them in the various spaces of the youth club, and in one of the London clubs, when I was invited to participate in activities such as painting. Some of my field notes references these casual conversations, or other teenagers whom I observed over the course of my visits.

The forty-seven interviewees consisted of twenty girls and twenty-seven boys. Twenty-one of the interviewees were black or mixed race, twenty-five of the interviewees were white and one of the interviewees was Asian.

Appendix B: Email to youth clubs

The below email is representative of the introductory emails I sent to the youth clubs, though each was tailored to the club in question. All of the youth clubs in which I carried out fieldwork subsequently invited me to come in for a face-to-face meeting, prior to making arrangements for the fieldwork.

Dear [NAME]

I hope you're well. I'm a doctoral researcher in the Sociology department at the University of Warwick, working on a project investigating teenagers' experiences of social media and how these relate to gender. I'm getting in touch to explore the possibilities of working with some of the teenagers who use [YOUTH CLUB'S] services.

As you are no doubt aware, young people's online practices and how they relate to gender are currently under significant scrutiny from both media and government. The Department for Education's new requirement for all secondary schools to teach sex and relationships education explicitly recommends that schools address 'issues like cyber bullying, sexting and internet safety'. Phenomena such as so-called 'revenge porn' and 'baiting' are frequently discussed across all strata of the media.

As such, I am conducting a research project to better understand what young people do online and how these behaviours affect them emotionally – and I would love the opportunity to interview some of the teenagers who use [YOUTH CLUB'S] services. This would involve a mixture of focus groups and one-to-one interviews. The project has gone through a detailed ethical approval process.

Teenage participants in similar projects – both those undertaken by myself and colleagues – typically get a great deal out of the process, enjoying the opportunity to delve into their online experiences and think more carefully about their interactions with each other. I'm hopeful that it would be a really beneficial process for the young people involved – and something fun and a bit different for them too!

I take the position that young people can only be effectively safeguarded online – and given the freedom to enjoy the vast benefits the digital realm can offer – if policymakers truly understand what those young people do online and how it affects them emotionally. I very much hope that this project will contribute to such understanding, and be interesting and valuable to schools and organisations like yours.

I can email through a more detailed plan for the project, as well as my own experience and credentials, but I would also be delighted to meet with you to discuss my plans in person. This would give you the opportunity to learn more about myself and the project, and ask any questions.

Thanks so much for your time.

Kind regards

Sarah Handyside

Appendix C: List of interview topics/themes

As outlined in Chapter 3, the interviews were semi-structured. I generally began the interviews with an open discussions, asking questions like:

- Can you tell me about the social media you use?
- What do you use it for? What kind of things do you do with it?
- Why do you use it? What do you like about it? What do you dislike?

From there, the interviews generally flowed as open discussion. Every so often, I steered the conversation back to the below topics, ensuring that I covered them within each interview.

- **Emotions** – how does social media make you feel?
- **Smartphones** – how do you use them? How do they make you feel?
- **Selfies and social media stories** – how do you create them? How do you want other people to view them? How do you view other people's?
- **Networks** – who are you connected with on social media? Who adds you? Who do you add? Why?
- **Risks or problems** – What are the challenges with social media? Does social media ever make you feel bad?
- **Gendered differences and similarities** – do any of these things apply differently to teen boys or girls? Are these things the same for teen boys and girls?

Appendix D: Information sheet and consent form for participants

As outlined in Chapter 3, my main means of introducing the project to the teenagers was verbal. In each club, the teenagers were gathered together in a group, and I

spoke to them with a youth worker present. The youth workers also spoke about the project and why the teenagers might wish to take part. Teenagers who chose to participate were provided the below information sheet and consent form.

INFORMATION SHEET: TEENAGERS AND SOCIAL MEDIA RESEARCH PROJECT

[DATE]

Please email [REDACTED] with any further questions.

The project

You are being asked to take part in a **focus group** or a **face-to-face interview**.

The research is about how teenagers use social media and how it makes you feel. It is for my PhD at the University of Warwick (www.warwick.ac.uk). It may also be used for shorter articles published in academic journals or the media. People who work in education or youth services may read it.

Could there be any problems for you if you take part?

I hope you will enjoy sharing your ideas. Most people who participate really enjoy chatting about their experiences, learning about others' experiences, and discovering things they had never noticed or thought about. Some people may find some topics upsetting – in these cases you can say that you don't want to be a part of the project at that point, or you can get up and leave.

I will not tell anyone what you have said or showed me unless I think someone (including you) may be hurt. I will decide with a youth worker from your club the best thing to do next.

If you have any problems with the project, please tell me on [REDACTED].

Important things for you to know

You will be **ANONYMOUS**. Your name and the name of [YOUTH CLUB] will be changed in my reports, so no one will know who has said what.

You **DON'T HAVE TO TAKE PART**. You can answer some questions, or none at all, and you can leave the project at any time. You don't have to give a reason.

The interviews will be **RECORDED**. I will use a voice recorder in the interviews and focus groups. When I write out the recordings, you will be given a false name, to keep you anonymous, so your name will never be stored on my computer.

PARTICIPANT

Please tick all
boxes

1. I have received information regarding the social media research project. I have had time to consider this, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason.

3. I understand that the focus groups and interviews will be audio recorded.

4. I understand that I will remain anonymous in all of the reports written up from this study.

5. I agree to take part in the above study.

Name

Date

Signature

PARENT/GUARDIAN (if participant is under 18)

Please tick all
boxes

6. I understand that my child's participation in this project is voluntary and that they are free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason.
7. I understand that the focus groups and interviews will be audio recorded.
8. I understand that my child will remain anonymous in all of the reports written up from this study.
9. I agree for my child to take part in the above study.

Name

Date

Signature

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