

From Youthful Experimentation to Professional Identity: Understanding Identity  
Transitions in Social Media

**Doi:** <https://doi.org/10.1177/1103308819834386>

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Abstract

The process of self-presentation is significantly complicated for people growing up with social media. Many individuals have time-stamped digital footprints in social media from early youth to adulthood. However, little is known about long-term consequences for these individuals, their experience of time, and their identity transition from youthful experimentation to a professional identity in social media. Through 15 in-depth interviews, our study explores challenges concerning identity transition and impression management in social media for young adults who have recently entered working life as journalists. Our participants described how they curated their image and self-censored both their previous and current self-generated content in social media. We also find that many have actively opted for passive and peace-keeping self-presentation and use of social media or for turning their usage into private messaging platforms, masking their online identity. Some participants indicated they felt trapped by their own identity making in social media.

*Keywords: identity, Facebook, self-presentation, social media, time, young people, Twitter*

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Over the last decade, social media have worked their way into everyday life (boyd, 2015; Thomas et al., 2017), and they now form our online identity from birth to death (Leaver & Highfield, 2016). Before the digital age, Grice (1941: 331) suggested that "self is to be defined in terms of memory." Yet, with Facebook and social media, time-stamped life-logs are transforming the relationship between the individual and memory as well as shaping how people define themselves. Life-logs in social media increase the transparency of a person's history, manifested by activities, photo galleries and general self-presentation over time (Stuart et al., 2012).

The presence of life-logs has made the time issue more significant for younger users who have grown up with social media identities while interacting over time on sites like Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. Morioka, Ellison and Brown (2016) suggested that the persistence of content in social media complicates critical identity transitions for people growing up with social media. An online identity archived in social media may not be a linear time process, but a muddled process. Hence, "you are what Google says you are" (Megan, 2009), or perhaps, to an even greater extent, "you are what Facebook and Instagram says you are." These collections of life logs that people have left behind in social media is also a question about privacy. In social media, people share their personal data with multiple audiences across time, reducing their privacy (Niemann-Lenz, 2018). As such, online self-presentation must also be seen as a threat to people's social and historical experience of privacy. According to Schoenebeck et al (2016: 1475) "parents, educators,

and policymakers have expressed concern about the future implications of young people's sharing practices on social media sites".

Given the increasing uptake and importance of social media, several scholars have investigated the new opportunities and challenges that self-presentations or identity in social media pose for young people (e.g. boyd, 2015; Livingstone, 2008; Niemann-Lenz, 2018; Thomas et al., 2017; Pitcan, Marwick & boyd, 2018). Still, researchers have little understanding of the influence of online self-presentation in young people's lives (Gardner & Davis, 2013), due to the complexity of time-stamped life-logs and the changing nature of social media (Brandtzaeg & Lüders, 2018). One such issue is how young people's use of social media for identity construction over time affects their online self-presentation, in particular during the identity transition from youth to professional. Little is known about how young adults themselves feel about their online self-presentation from youth being preserved and reappeared later in adulthood.

The goal of this study is to fill the current gap in research on identity transition in social media over time by exploring the motivations and experiences of younger adults concerning social media, especially in relation to self-presentation or impression management on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram when entering professional life. More specifically, this study aims to investigate how young adults have used social media for identity construction during important life transition events, from youthful experimentation in school to adult life in a more professional context. Youthful experimentation is herein seen as playful social media use during the exploratory phase of teenage identity formation.

To address the following research question: *How do young adults experience self-presentation in social media during life transitions from youth to professional?* we performed a qualitative interview study of young adults, labelled as social media natives, who had recently entered a profession. We investigated whether this group of young adults, who have grown up with social media, have been affected by their previous user-generated content from their youthful experimentation and self-presentation in social media. We further aimed to answer these questions through related work on young people, with concepts explaining self-presentation, context collapse and social media natives as analytical lenses. In this article, we discuss these relevant concepts and empirical evidence of young adults who have grown up with social media as part of their identity and impression management.

### **Definitions of Concepts**

*Self-presentation* in social media is related to impression management and identity, which describes individuals' efforts to control how others perceive them on social media (Pitcan, Marwick & boyd, 2018; Schlenker & Wowra, 2003). Self-presentation is often related to self-disclosure, or the act of sharing personal data and expressions on Facebook or any other social media platform (Niemann-Lenz, 2018). In a pre-social media time, Goffman (1959) argued that individuals often presented or self-disclosed themselves tactically to affect how other people saw them in order to avoid embarrassing situations or a reduction in status. However, when presenting oneself on social media, it is unclear for the user which part of a communication or life-log may become sensitive or not acceptable in future settings (Niemann-Lenz, 2018). For example, social media can bring earlier and

embarrassing episodes (e.g. drunken tweets, sex-related content, toilet photos, etc.) to the spotlight because the Internet never forgets.

*Identity transition*, which describes life changes that force young people to adapt to different life situations, is a significant event for young people, who will develop into adulthood (Erikson, 1994). Young people today have grown up with social media. They change their behavior, preferences and opinions over the course of their lives, and many may have retrievable old online content that may be viewed in a new context.

*Social media* is defined as web-based and mobile-based Internet applications that allow the creation, access and exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Social media platforms work differently, and their functions have changed over time. In this study, we focus primarily on how young adults have experienced Twitter, Facebook and Instagram over time because these are the most used social media platforms. We further label the young adults who participated in this study as *social media natives* (Brandtzaeg & Lüders, 2018; Brandtzaeg, 2016) because they have uploaded and published content on these social media since they were young teenagers. As such, these young adults represent the first generation that has experienced the important transition from youthful student to professional not only offline but also online, which makes them an important group to study.

We will discuss the research related to these concepts more in-depth in the section below.

### **Related Work**

According to Erikson (1994), some young people experience challenges in identity transitions, such as being uncertain about who they are, which may lead to social

disconnection and becoming cut off from others. Most people make mistakes through their life courses, especially when they are young. Most people also evolve from students to professionals, but it is unclear how this transition works in a social media context.

Previous research has identified that social media use is an important tool for identity construction in young people's lives (boyd, 2007, 2014) and may, therefore, also be an important tool in life-transition phases. However, most research concerning social media use and young people has focused on their present experiences with social media (boyd, 2007, 2014; Forte et al., 2014; Schlenker & Wowra, 2003) and often on their risky experiences (Livingstone, 2008). Young users are more likely to disclose risky behavior on the Internet (Sasson & Mesch, 2014), but little research has focused on how an online history affects young adults' current social media presence and identity transition.

Research on young people in general has shown that they have had useful trial-and-error experiences with the mechanisms and culture of the networked public (boyd, 2007). Scholars have described new technologies and social media as spaces where young people seek new opportunities for use, communication and creativity (Svoen & Gilje, 2012). The skills attained from these social media experiences include developing social learning capabilities, handling massive amounts of various communications and content, creating performances to draw attention (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009), developing new sharing practices and coping with the vulnerability of self-expression in social media public spaces—that is, balancing privacy and intimacy at the same time (Livingstone, 2008). Youth also have much experience jumping to and from various social media sites and, therefore, have the skills to handle diverse social environments (boyd, 2007).

Loader, Wromen and Xenos (2016) described young people growing up with social media as "networked young citizens", a term used in reference to youth whose relations are increasingly formed and played out in the networked environment of social media. What is missing in this understanding is that young people are networked not only socially but also across time events. This understanding prompts the need for investigation, as an individual's expressions and communications seems to have an increasing longevity and searchability in social media (boyd, 2010). As more people grow up with social media, the impact of social media use may increase, along with digital traces of user-generated content such as personal profiles and shared videos and images across time, life transitions and individuals' life stages.

On a more general level, research on self-presentation in social media has indicated that self-presentation goals vary between individuals and that they depend on personality and orientation towards others (DeVito et al., 2018). Research has also suggested that individuals change their way of self-presentation based on their interaction partners, with factors such as gender, social status and strength of social ties affecting their self-presentation (Banaji & Prentice, 1994). In other words, self-presentation will often depend on the context of the interaction and on the audience with which an individual is interacting.

Hogan (2010) referred to the concept "lowest common denominator" to explain that people decide to share in social media only those posts that would be normatively acceptable by their public (e.g. friends, boss, family). This take on the lowest common denominator may even be more relevant in contemporary social media, which store searchable traces of people's social lives and their expressions of online self-presentation

over time, from youth to adulthood. Facebook, for example, encourages users to be non-anonymous and to have a persistent identity over time (Brandtzaeg & Lüders, 2018).

In the case of Facebook and time, Zhao, Salehi and Naranjit (2013: 1) studied how people manage their personal data on Facebook over time and established three different functional regions: “a *performance region* for managing recent data and impression management, an *exhibition region* for longer term presentation of self-image, and a *personal region* for archiving meaningful facets of life.” Zhao et al. (2013) showed in that regard how self-presentation goals may vary due to the life-logs on Facebook. DeVito et al. (2018) defined self-presentation goals as the overall impression an individual is trying to make. In a recent study, these authors identified four different goals of self-presentation in social media:

- 1) *Authentic presentation* refers to self-presentation that accurately reflects how the social media user sees themselves, using a minimum of performativity.
- 2) *Polished presentation* refers to self-presentations where people aim to present a desired social image that fulfils the preferences of their social media audience and masks possible imperfections.
- 3) *Peace-keeping presentation* is similar to polished impression management, but here the social media user tries to avoid offending or challenging their audience. Peace-keeping goals are not tied to a desired image but rather attempt to avoid any offence in relation to their audience or friends in social media.
- 4) *Goal-neutral presentation* refers to users who claim not to pursue any self-presentation goal. They typically have no criteria for what content or images they use to present themselves.

These different goals of self-presentation and an overview of how people manage their personal data on Facebook are helpful for understanding how people interact and express themselves online. However, changing usage patterns and previous histories on social media may affect self-presentation goals. This latter aspect may, in particular, relate to social media natives.

To understand the precise meaning of social media among young adults in this study, we acknowledge the specific generational perspective of digital natives (Prensky, 2001), sometimes referred to as the "net generation" (Herring, 2008), whom we re-frame as social media natives (Brandtzaeg, 2016; Meyer, 2016). Prensky (2001) stated that specific historical, generational and technological experiences are significant factors explaining the differences between young and old people. In this study, the term *digital immigrants* refer to those who are familiar with and trained for a profession in an analogue reality, while the terms *digital natives* or *social media natives* refer to those who view social media as a natural part of life that has influenced their approach to friendships, relationships and self-presentation (Meyer, 2016). According to Prensky, digital natives socialize, think and process information differently from digital immigrants. Other researchers have challenged this concept of digital natives, however. Brandtzaeg (2016) identified significant differences in how different groups of young people use and engage in new media such as social media, arguing against a clear conceptualization of the social media native. Despite this criticism, the concept of digital natives continues to explain how different generations adopt or are affected by new technologies.

The concept of impression management among social media natives is an interesting topic because they are the first generation to have used social media in the experimental

phase of their early teens, which is characterized by the development of their self-identity and independence as they play with their youthful identities (Brandtzaeg, 2016; Ansell, 2016; Furlong, 2016). Social media users who were born in the early 1990s have been using social media for over ten years. It would have been impossible for these social media natives to know in advance how various content and self-presentations in social media would be interpreted and received later in life.

As adults and professionals, these individuals are still using many of the same social media platforms. Although not all professions are characterized by social media use, more and more occupations, such as journalism, are recognizing the importance of social media.

To investigate the time dimension in social media, we employ a widely used concept that describes the context-related difficulties in social media. This concept, *context collapse*, refers to the difficulties of self-performance in social media experienced as a consequence of different types of audiences collapsing into one muddled group (Hogan, 2010; Marwick & boyd, 2011, 2014; Vitak, 2012). In brief, context collapse means that the boundaries between different types of connections are flattened into one group. Moreover, Davis and Jurgenson (2014) identified two types of context collapse: *context collusions*, when social actors intentionally collapse, and *context collisions*, which are unintentional.

So far, the role of time in the social media context has been largely ignored. Marwick and boyd (2011) referred to Meyrowitz (1986), who drew on a spatial understanding to theorize that electronic media removes walls between individuals. Meyrowitz (1986: 37) considered a social situation to be an information system, or "a given pattern of access to social information." The elimination of walls is a consequence of information access between place-bound social situations. The elimination of time as a linear process,

however, has not previously been discussed in relation to context collapse. As highlighted in the introduction, social media such as Instagram and Facebook memorize and archive user-generated content and potentially affect people's ways of controlling their impression management over time. In this sense, the material basis of the human experience of time and space has changed, and the nature of technologies and networks generally affects the structure of time.

## **Methodology**

### *Sample*

Given the gap in the literature concerning the identity transition from an experimenting youth to a professional in social media, we decided to employ semi-structured interviews with young adults who had newly been appointed as professional journalists (Table 1). We chose this group of participants because research has suggested that self-presentation goals in social media are increasingly challenging not only for young people but also for young adults in some professions, such as academia (Greifeneder et al., 2018) and journalism (Rogstad, 2014).

Our study focused on journalists because these professionals are increasingly encouraged to use social media at work (Lee, 2015), and some are even regarded as public figures through social media (Steensen, 2016). As such, they may have unique social media experiences that may be translated to more general experiences for other occupations in the future. In addition, several studies (e.g. Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Tanner, Friedman & Zengh, 2015) have noted that journalists are particularly suitable for in-depth interviews due to their ability to reflect on their own communication practices and experiences.

We asked various media outlets to select young, newly appointed journalists. The journalists selected had between six months and three years of work experience, and all were motivated to participate in the study. The interviewees ranged from 21 to 26 years of age. Although previous research that employs the digital native concept has reached no consensus on a specific age definition for this group (Prensky, 2001), we focused on social media natives who were young teenagers (born between 1989 and 1995) when social media such as Facebook became popular. All participants reported that they used social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram both currently and as teenagers.

**Table 1 about here**

The sample presented in Table 1 consisted of nine women and six men. Seven participants were from Spain, and eight were from Norway. Although the sample had a good gender balance and was comprised of participants from two different countries, we will not focus on gendered, cultural or geographical differences. We chose journalists from Norway and Spain because both countries have a high rate of adoption of social media among the youth population but with interesting cultural differences. While Spanish journalists are accustomed to a top-down working culture, the Norwegian working culture is more individualistic than that of southern Europe and Spain (Widiyanto, 2013).

*The interviews*

We asked several open questions concerning interviewees' private and work-related choices, motivations and experiences with social media over time. Our interview guide also included questions about their personal understanding of their previous uses, their self-generated content and their experiences with social media as well as how this relates to

their current impression management in social media. During face-to-face interviews, these young adults offered us depth and context to understand the challenges related to self-presentation among social media natives. All the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Most interviews lasted one hour, although some extended to two hours, and all interviews were conducted in a neutral setting such as a café or a similar location that was chosen by the participant.

### *Analysis*

We applied thematic analysis to examine our interview data. During the first phase of the analysis, we familiarized ourselves with our data by reading through all the transcribed material. During the analysis, we considered the main concepts in the reviewed literature: (1) identity transition, (2) goals of self-presentation and (3) context collapse.

In the second phase, we coded the data according to categories derived from the issues that emerged in the interviewees' responses to the questions asked. Each data corpus was coded by the two researchers. We then searched for patterns or themes in our codes across the 15 interviews. For example, one theme could be young adults cleaning their social media user profile or deleting old self-authored content. Once we determined the final themes, we prepared our findings for the write-up.

## **Results and discussions**

It emerged that almost all interviewees had a story to tell about their changing identity over time, from their private experimentation with youthful identities to their establishing more professional identities. Participants reported that the identity development from being a youth to a professional had immediate consequences on how

they, as journalists and as private persons, behaved on social media and how they managed their profile accounts containing their previous content and expressions. The participants expressed clear concern about how digital traces from their youth were incompatible with their current brand and reputation as professional journalists and, as such, complicated their self-presentation.

We found the following central themes to be important for our research question: (1) a paranoid feeling about past self-generated content, (2) cleaning up of social media history and (3) peace-keeping self-presentation.

#### *A paranoid feeling about past self-generated content*

Most of our study participants reported concerns about future negative reactions to old content and expressions from their youthful experimentations. Some noted they had shared risky content in the past, while others simply found their past content to be embarrassing. These young adults expressed a fear that previous individual online experiences could be used against them and hurt their professional identity. They had often read about or heard about shame campaigns on social media, and two interviewees referred to how "one stupid tweet" blew up Justine Sacco's life. Justine had less than 1000 followers on Twitter when a large number of Internet users reacted to one tweet she had intended to be humorous but that was interpreted as offensive. This story indicates, according to some of the participants, that all individuals, not just celebrities, can face public scrutiny; in fact, the public itself is self-evaluating and judging. In this context, our respondents described their journeys from youthful experimentation to professional use of social media, and they talked about how they felt in danger of ending up in the public spotlight on certain

platforms. As shown in the quote below, the Norwegian journalist Julie explained that she viewed Instagram as more informal while Twitter made her paranoid about public scrutiny:

What's on my Instagram I don't really care about, but Twitter makes me paranoid. I was very active on Twitter between 2011 to 2012, saying out loud everything I was thinking about. That's maybe okay when you are a teenager, but not when you are in your twenties and a professional. Looking back, I see that my earlier expressions on social media are not too optimal, as they will be there forever. And, when I started at one of the bigger newspapers, the editor told me that I should keep my opinions to myself. I have become much more careful about what I write. (Julie)

A Spanish journalist, Roberto, confirmed this view by stating that he had used Twitter in his youth and that people searching could find something about him:

People my own age, who are now starting to work in media, have been using Twitter for four or five years. If someone wants to hurt you, they can find 140-character messages from a 16-year-old boy on social media. We were 16 years old, and things we talked about when we were 16 years are nothing that you want to share in public later (Roberto)

Another Norwegian journalist phrased it this way:

Old journalists don't have many nude photos of themselves online, do they? (Anna)

These quotes not only describe a paranoid feeling about past self-generated content, but they also reveal an experience of lack of individual control due to a private/public context collapse (Vitak, 2012) and, more specifically, context collisions or unintentional collapsing of contexts (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014). The following quote from a Spanish journalist nicknamed Beatriz further elucidates how the private mixes with the public:

It's a public profile, and you must be very careful about what you post on social network sites, as it influences your job because they see how you behave. If you share photos of your

private life in public, I think that this influences whether somebody will hire you for a job, for example, or whether they believe what you say. If you say stupid things, then even when you say something seriously, you may not be believed. (Beatriz)

The above quotes and concerns, such as those about nude photos, fall under our label of "time collapse." While the private/public context is well known from previous research (Livingstone, 2008), we use the phrase *time collapse* to refer to how the context in social media may mix and muddle the time boundaries between past and present (Brandtzaeg & Lüders, 2018). Our participants described their experiences of this muddling of time through their concerns about negative reactions to old content. In other words, this concern was about how playful or experimenting self-expression from the past could hurt their future professional identity or their identity in general. Similar to Morioka, Ellison and Brown (2016), we found that historical content makes forgetfulness more difficult in the identity transition and representation that takes place among social media natives.

Interview quotes revealed how social media natives had a sense of vulnerability about previous individual and online experiences from their youth being used against them in their professional lives.

#### *Cleaning up in their social media history*

Due to the time collapse in self-presentation as well as participants' vulnerability and paranoid sense of public scrutiny, several participants reported cleaning up their old social media profiles to avoid embarrassing situations, similar to what DeVito et al. (2018) called "polished self-presentation". These social media natives were striving not only for a desired social image but also for a desired history concerning their identity. Their statements likewise demonstrate how social media is an important tool for identity

construction in young people (boyd, 2007, 2014). In particular, the act of clean up an old profile demonstrates the complexity of growing up with social media and how both private and public spheres and the past and the present can merge. Social media natives have a history of life-logs that can be hard to deal with during identity transitions, as this quote illustrates:

**INT:** So, you have in a way cleaned your profile history on Twitter?

**Marie:** Yes, because some may go and look in your history of tweets. Yes, I have done that myself with others. Not that I have blamed some, but I have been looking into people's user feeds down to 2012 and suddenly found some that are really strange and embarrassing, that could have been used in some kind of confrontation. And I don't want that to happen to me because I can't really be accountable for everything I expressed when I was 18 and 19 years old.

The above quote conveys that social media natives do not want to be held accountable for or proud of everything they posted on social media in their younger years, illustrating a time-collapse in which past content muddles with present, current life. Some participants also had embarrassing photos of themselves posted by others removed. Many participants curated a well-thought-of online presence by avoiding nudity and drunkenness as well as by censoring opinions on controversial topics, as illustrated in our interview with Ola.

**Ola:** Yes, I have cleaned up all my photo galleries in my Facebook profile, in particular photos that others have published from my youth.

**INT:** How did you do that?

**Ola:** Either by sending a message to the person or by removing the tag. I also have quite strict privacy settings on.

**INT:** How?

**Ola:** Settings that make it possible only for friends to see photos.

**INT:** Why are you so strict?

**Ola:** I don't want to be nude online, and I'm very clear that I don't want to be drunk online. I believe I do this because I want to give the impression of being okay to people who do not know me well or at all. And, everything online can also be disseminated everywhere, and I think that is a really frightening thought, even if it does not hit me.

Some other participants said the following:

I have become much more careful about what I write. And the other day, I went through all the tweets I had tweeted and deleted things, because I just was so paranoid about those issues, if any, if someone wants to go and find things about me to destroy me. (Julie)

**Svein:** Actually, I had to go through all the photos uploaded on Facebook, and I ended up having to delete some.

**INT:** Why did you do this?

**Svein:** Because I realized that there were too many party photos there, and I didn't like that colleagues or people on my team and readers could look at these photos, so I deleted them.

The latter quote focuses on how previous content looks to colleagues and the scary thought that any colleague or reader can easily go through an individual's history by clicking on the Facebook timeline. Facebook keeps all users' interactions and posts, and there is no "delete all history" button on Facebook currently, although such a tool could have been useful for social media natives going through identity transitions on Facebook. Users have to delete each interaction one by one, as participants noted when discussing their cultivation of their Facebook history. Some of these posts were unwise or posted in an 'emotional' or 'drunk' state, while others contained more childish content from their playful

or experimenting youth period. The results presented above is further supported by the fact that 59% (N= 802) of the teenagers in the US have deleted or edited something that they posted in the past (Vitak & Kim, 2014), which also puts into question the role of social media platforms in either facilitating or inhibiting a review of old self-generated content. Many of the issues involved in cleaning up one's profile are may be mediated by the affordances of the system, such as the timeline and the memory function on Facebook.

### *Peace-keeping self-presentation*

In general, the journalists in this study reported a broad awareness of their social networks as well as their working place, which made them more cautious about speaking up publicly in social media. They had a "peace-keeping" self-presentation (DeVito et al., 2018) in that they tried not to offend or challenge their audiences. This self-presentation behavior is also related to the concept of "lowest common denominator" by Hogan (2010). Interestingly, they expressed a reluctance to share not only personal but also professional opinions or experiences. Some said that they were afraid of presenting themselves as braggers:

**INT:** So, you never share your news stories on Facebook?

**Torgeir:** It happens sometimes, but it's very rare. In my generation, we have learned not to brag. It's such that you should not be bragging about anything. If you publish too much on social media, people start to react negatively.

**INT:** Can you explain a little bit more about the bragging part?

**Torgeir:** I believe that many are afraid of presenting themselves as being proud of their achievements. They should not be proud; that's the culture. I find it a bit sad because I do get

happy and find it interesting if someone publishes something they are proud of. But there is a culture that you should not "show off." It's more so that you should brag about others.

Spanish journalist Elena also stressed this peace-keeping self-presentation in social media:

There are many people who follow me in different social media because they know my name due to my having written in some media. And yes, it is true that I am becoming more cautious when expressing my opinions on social networks [...]. because this may hurt me or cause others to dislike me.

Participants' responses indicated that they avoid expressing their opinions on Facebook in particular and social media in general, as Julie noted:

All are very politically correct, and I think it characterizes how youth behave on Facebook, for example. That it's like that. You will not get any enemies, to keep you in a way. Yes, you keep the big points for yourself, and it just seems like it's important to be very generalizing, but it's important to lay out a nice picture and get, or do a thing, just the links that make people see that you are good person or cool, instead of actually expressing something that might upset someone.

Some even said they preferred Snapchat over Facebook to avoid digital footprints or the time collapse. Building on this point, Anna explained that she liked it "because there is no communication history in Snapchat". According to Pew Research Center (2018), Facebook is only the fourth most popular social media among teenagers in the US may offer some support for this view. In contrast, ephemeral platforms like Instagram and Snapchat are second and third, respectively.

It appears, therefore, that many of our study participants were constrained in their self-presentation in social media in two ways: first, by expressions of youthful

experimentation (e.g. time collapse) and, second, by the representatives of "professional society" (e.g. work, editors and readers) telling them how to behave (e.g. context collapse). These findings indicate that identity transition in social media is supervised by many different people, which may make it challenging and chaotic. Interestingly, one participant said that he had a separate "journalist profile" on social media to mitigate this chaos and to avoid a private/public collapse and time collapse. When asked to expand on why he had a separate profile, he explained:

It makes my engagement in social media easier, when using it for professional reasons only.

People don't get access to me as a private person, which makes me more relaxed. (Jens)

These changing user contexts explained about are illustrating how privacy needs related to self-presentation change of time (Altman, 1975). According to Banaji and Prentice (1994), individuals seem to change their way of self-presentation based on the people with whom they are interacting. We find that professional norms and previous experiences force some young journalists to be less visible on social media such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. In other words, rather than being liberated by social media to engage in expression and discussion, many young journalists are constrained by networked contexts and the fear of a bad online reputation. The stress of managing their reputation on social media may contribute to their lack of sharing and public engagement. Some of this stress may also be due to larger job insecurity, experienced by younger journalists and people in general, when they know that future employers will be "googling" and researching their online background:

I'm very careful with images posted of me in social media [...]. I have been googled and searched on Facebook and stuff. And I think that employers should be better distinguishing

between the person you are at work and the man you are in everyday life. You can be a great journalist even with photos where you are drunk. (Anna)

Challenges related to identity management in social media are something professionals of any age may have to face, but this concern may be more acute for younger journalists, who are important voices in society. For all young professionals in this study, identity transition from experimental youth to professional on social media involved some self-editing of history and the present. These processes were accompanied by anxieties about public scrutiny, especially in relation to early impressions from their youth that did not always reflect the participant's "professional self," creating a paranoid feeling about past self-generated content. Recent work exploring self-presentation on social media has highlighted psychological benefits to being authentic (Grieve & Watkinson, 2016; Thomas et al., 2017).

However, in accordance with similar research (e.g. Thomas et al., 2017), we saw a number of disparities between participants' true selves—their character, nature or own opinions—and their more authentic history and self-presentation. Most participants acknowledged polishing their life-log history and aiming for a peace-keeping self-presentation. The lack of a true self, however, may affect psychological health as well as the manner of participation in a democratic society. In relation to the latter concern, we found that many new social media native journalistic voices were affected by a "spiral of silence" in social media (Gearhart & Zhang, 2015), which challenges free speech on those platforms. A spiral of silence results from the idea that a social group or society in general may exclude members due to their opinions. This fear of exclusion leads to members

remaining silent rather than voicing their opinions. At present, social media native journalists have to be cautious about not only their societal mission as journalists but also how they should present themselves in different networked publics.

Broadly speaking, the development towards a professional social media identity is more than ever influenced by previous self-concepts and experiences due to transparent social media life-logs. This excessive social transparency creates distrust rather than trust among social media members. It is also harder for young social media natives to balance their private and professional identities as well as their past and present (in the latter case due to our proposed time collapse). The participants in our study were coping with their life-logs by polishing their histories and maintaining a peace-keeping self-presentation. As a result, they were very cautious about expressing opinions and discussing matters on social media.

### *Limitations*

This study consists of a limited and explorative empirical research design. The theoretical extension and specific empirical findings that can be derived from our contribution should be explicitly tested in future research.

### **Conclusion**

In this study, we have focused on the first young adults in history to have grown up using social media for communication and self-expression. Specifically, we have concentrated on their identity transition in social media from youthful experimentation to a professional identity.

This study contributes to new knowledge on how the usage and culture of social media, with its interactive, public and archived elements, alter the experience of

impression management for young adults over time. Our topic of study is relevant to future and contemporary directions in youth research for many reasons. More and more people will grow up using social media, and a rapid increase in the use of digital technologies with time-stamped digital footprints of social interactions and expressions may harm their level of privacy over time. We show how digital traces in social media may have long-lasting consequences and an increasing pervasiveness in our lives and how social media may affect important life transitions. Therefore, we expand the current knowledge on how young people growing up with social media are dealing with and experiencing these time stamps and their evolving self-presentations. The right to be forgotten is not straightforward when social media provides an integrated approach to friendships, relationships and self-presentation from youth to adulthood.

The analysis indicates that young adults seek a critical distance from social media and are restricted in their use of social media due to time collapse and public/private context collapse. The apparent shift from youthful experimentation to professional identity has larger implications for young adults in terms of their opportunities and risks concerning self-presentation to avoid embarrassing situations. The latter often points to a time collapse, where young journalists who have grown up with social media struggle with navigating not only various social contexts (context collapse) but also time (time collapse). Our participants described how they curated their image and self-censored both their previous and current self-generated content. Interestingly, some reported feeling trapped by their own online identity in social media.

The young adults entering professional life in this study have struggled to develop effective ways of navigating old content and previous identity expression, often using the

presumption of an abstracted audience and future. This balancing act also causes a spiral of silence, where young people are less likely to be willing to speak out publicly in social media. Future studies should look more deeply into the concept of context collapse by also including the notion of time collapse when investigating professionals who have grown up with social media.

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