



*Citation for published version:*

Goodwin, I, Griffin, C, Lyons, A & McCreanor, T 2017, Beyond 'the profile': Multiple qualitative methods for researching facebook drinking cultures. in C Hight & R Harindranath (eds), *Studying Digital Media Audiences: Perspectives from Australasia*. Routledge Studies in New Media and Cyberculture, Routledge, Abingdon, UK, pp. 133-149. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315402062>

*DOI:*

[10.4324/9781315402062](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315402062)

*Publication date:*

2017

*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book chapter published by Routledge in *Studying Digital Media Audiences* on 22nd February 2017, available online: <http://www.tandfebooks.com/isbn/9781315402062>

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## Beyond The Profile: Multiple Qualitative Methods for Researching Facebook Drinking Cultures

Goodwin, I., Griffin, C., Lyons, A. and McCreanor, T. (2017). Beyond 'the profile': Multiple qualitative methods for researching Facebook drinking cultures. In: C. Hight and R. Harindranath (eds.). *Studying Digital Media Audiences: Perspectives from Australasia*. Taylor and Francis.

In this chapter we reflect on the insights made available through the multiple methods deployed in a large scale, team-based qualitative research project conducted in Aotearoa New Zealand on Facebook use. In this specific study, our aim was to investigate the convergence of young people's drinking cultures and their practices of online social networking and self-display. Young people's drinking cultures, often associated with particularly heavy, hedonistic and "risky" alcohol consumption, have always attracted a heightened degree of societal interest and concern, both from the media and policy makers as well as from academic researchers<sup>1</sup>. As drinking cultures have incorporated the online environments made available through social networking sites (SNS), they have produced new forms of heightened visibility for youth drinking practices. Much of the growing research in this area has primarily focused on examining the drinking-related content young people generate on their SNS profiles. Such content, for example digital photography depicting drinking and drunken behaviour, seems so self-evidently relevant to what is at stake in new forms of online drinking displays that the rationale for focusing analysis on "the profile" is rarely explicated in contemporary literature. Moreover profile content is not only readily accessible to the user's peers but can become much more publicly viewable, and hence seems to carry even greater analytical weight in terms of influencing emerging youth cultural practices around SNS and alcohol consumption.

Examining Facebook drinking displays through user profiles has produced valuable insights, particularly in terms of public health research seeking to minimise the negative health outcomes associated with alcohol consumption. However, in this chapter, we argue that the deployment of multiple, complementary qualitative methods reveals the limitations of focusing solely, or too heavily, on the content of users' profiles. We also contend that using multiple qualitative methods, derived from more "traditional" audience research projects and adapted for online contexts, allows for productive (if equally partial) insights into the nature of Facebook as a technological platform and into user engagement with its affordances. Indeed, following Christine Hine's earlier work on qualitative online research, we use this chapter to illustrate that understanding the distinctive features of Facebook as a technological platform, and relatedly "bounding" an appropriate approach for their study, is far from a clear cut exercise<sup>2</sup>. While "the profile" seems to be a logical, common sense place to begin any study, in fact complex problems always emerge about what to focus *upon* and where to *begin*, and these complexities are always bound up with the types of questions we are seeking to ask and answer. Rather than producing a simple contrast

between our approach and dominant approaches for studying Facebook drinking displays, we hope our discussion demonstrates that productive understandings of Facebook as a technology, and associated understandings of its users, can usefully emerge through reflexively managed critical enquiry, as end points of an adaptive research process<sup>3</sup>. This critical reflexivity suggests user profiles, while clearly being pivotal to the design and use of Facebook (and SNS generally) may not always be the appropriate place to start analysis, and cannot necessarily be straightforwardly “read” more or less “textually” without missing key elements of the novel dynamics they introduce to social life.

We first broadly describe the established literature on SNS and youth drinking, focusing on its key insights and limitations, and the relationship of both these factors to the types of methods deployed which tend to privilege analysing user-generated content posted on profiles. We then provide a methodological overview of our research design that focuses on how it was planned and implemented as we collected different strands of data. We will outline the three major stages of data collection, the ethical issues raised, and the participants involved. We then explore how these methods provide specific insights, often occluded in dominant approaches, into how online youth drinking cultures are related to processes of meaning-making, online display of user-generated content, participation, and interaction on Facebook. As a brief illustrative example, we then reassess the drinking photo as a form of user-generated content. Finally, we point to how our approach allows for different forms of theorising that enable a broader critique of Facebook and the power relations framing Facebook use.

### **Youth Drinking and Social Networking: Emphases, Findings and Methods of Enquiry**

Over the past few years a burgeoning literature has developed, overwhelmingly focused specifically on the activities of young people, examining alcohol use and social media. This research has, in the first instance, usefully established detailed evidence of the sheer prevalence of alcohol-related content on young people’s profiles. Here content analysis of SNS profiles is common. For example Kathleen Beullens and Adriaan Schepers found that 95.62% of the 160 Belgian college student Facebook profiles they analysed contained references to alcohol in either profile pictures or status updates<sup>4</sup>. They found 2,575 pictures and 92 status updates referring to alcohol use, which “represented about 6.50% of the pictures in the sample and 2.90% of the status updates”<sup>5</sup>. Similarly content analysis of 225 male college student Facebook profiles in the USA found 85.3% contained alcohol references. Here the researchers extended their analysis of profile content beyond pictures and status updates, to include group names, the personal information section and the use of an application for downloading and posting tailored icons (Bumper Sticker)<sup>6</sup>. These studies are indicative of broad patterns. For example further analysis of profile postings on Bebo in New Zealand<sup>7</sup> and MySpace in the USA<sup>8</sup> revealed young people’s profiles to be replete with alcohol references, suggesting strong relationships have rapidly developed

between young people's use of SNS, their drinking, and their associated online self-displays and socialising.

This phenomenon could be conceptualised and studied in a variety of ways. Previous research has identified youth drinking cultures as increasingly important sites of leisure, where the social practices involved become linked to broad processes around the formation of (class, gender, ethnic) identities as well as the development of friendships and wider social networks<sup>9</sup>. Ties between drinking cultures and broader contextual factors like alcohol deregulation and links to night time economies, increasingly central to wealth generation in cities and in turn linked to the corporate promotion of alcohol, have also been highlighted<sup>10</sup>. Some critical attention has been paid to aspects of these issues in SNS research examining drinking cultures<sup>11</sup>. Yet the predominant reaction to the documenting of large amounts of alcohol content within young people's SNS profiles has been to raise concerns about the "effects" such content may have on the health and wellbeing of young people. This is perhaps understandable as a first response given the well documented negative health impacts of alcohol consumption, which affect young people disproportionately<sup>12</sup>. Several researchers have created and manipulated fictitious Facebook profiles in studies designed to interrogate how drinking content on profiles influences SNS users' attitudes to alcohol. For example Angela Fournier and colleagues used a "between-subjects experimental design... in which participants viewed a fictitious Facebook profile with or without alcohol-related content and then reported their perceptions of college student drinking norms"<sup>13</sup>. Results suggested those exposed to drinking content viewed this content as indicative of actual alcohol use, and estimated higher college drinking norms than those who did not<sup>14</sup>. A similar experimental design used by Dana Litt and Michelle Stock led to similar conclusions for a younger user cohort; i.e. that "descriptive norms for alcohol, as portrayed by Facebook profiles" positively impacted on 13 to 15 year old students' willingness to use alcohol and attitudes towards alcohol<sup>15</sup>.

The major concern here is that alcohol-related profile content may encourage greater alcohol consumption, and tracing the "impact" of user generated alcohol content on actual drinking behaviour has therefore become the central thread that much subsequent research has followed. A US study of 5,679,008 tweets, examining keywords that are synonyms for "drunk" (wasted, shit-faced, buzzed etc.), suggested tweets relating to intoxication on Twitter peaked between 10pm and 2pm on Friday and Saturday nights, correlating to time periods of highest consumption<sup>16</sup>. Numerous survey-based studies, often combined with analyses of profile content and employing multivariate statistical analyses, have established strong correlations between posting alcohol content, alcohol consumption, and higher AUDIT (Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test) scores<sup>17</sup>. For example Brad Ridout and colleagues had 158 US university students "complete a range of alcohol measures [including survey-based AUDIT scores] before providing access for researchers to view their Facebook profiles"<sup>18</sup>. Profiles were analysed to assess the extent to which they portrayed alcohol content in profile photography and wall postings. They found content-driven "alcohol

identities” on profiles to be commonplace, and to be correlated with “alcohol consumption and problematic alcohol-related behaviours”<sup>19</sup>.

One of the key issues likely to strike a reader of this volume, focused on studying digital media audiences, is that despite the novel context this research examining alcohol-related content on social media has moved firmly into territory previously covered by established debates over “media effects”. However media and communications/audience research scholars are not the ones driving this research forward. As Sonia Livingstone recently noted, many diverse disciplines are justifiably interested in social media and they understandably bring with them their own particular perspectives on “the social” and “society”<sup>20</sup>. In this instance health promotion, behavioural medicine, public health and health psychology researchers are driving the agenda. The ultimate concern is that young people’s peer-generated alcohol content on SNS profiles may be producing potent, new “intoxicogenic digital spaces”<sup>21</sup> – online alcohol promoting environments – that are potentially damaging to public health. In terms of building broader theoretical understandings from this body of research, the over-riding concern with establishing relationships between drinking content, drinking practices and negative health outcomes has led to an interest in models like Social Learning Theory, the Media Practice Model, and even the tentative development of a conceptual approach entitled the Facebook Influence Model<sup>22</sup>. Here young people’s alcohol-related content on their profiles is presumed to have a potentially “predictive capacity, especially in relation to health behaviour”<sup>23</sup>.

There are two issues we wish to highlight here. First, like *all* studies of SNS, this research agenda does not straightforwardly reflect the “reality” of the issues at stake. Rather, it effectively brings into focus particular, partial versions of both the “user” and the technology(ies) they are engaged with. While authoritative creators of their own content, young people as active “users” remain open to the powerful effects of co-created online environments that encourage drinking, which is conceived of primarily as a health risk. In this way they remain ambiguously caught between being a traditional “audience” and being more active “users” (in the contemporary sense where, notwithstanding the nuances of active audience research, the two terms are often juxtaposed). While both drinking and SNS use are social practices, users are considered in a de-contextualised fashion and primarily as *individuals*, and their reactions/uses are measured in an individuated fashion. These constructions dovetail with dominant media and health policy frameworks, prone to segregating “youth” as a problematic “other”, which frequently construct young people’s drinking practices and associated uses of SNS as individual, risky behaviours<sup>24</sup>. The technology itself is also considered in an individuated and de-contextualised fashion. The focus remains firmly on individual profiles, which does allow for a consideration of certain key affordances of social network sites that relate to content creation and networking capacities. Yet, aside from considering user generated content on profiles and young people’s associated friendship ties, the technology/media itself is largely black boxed<sup>25</sup>. The way the user may negotiate, appropriate or resist the affordances of specific, variegated

SNS user interfaces is under-explored, as is the broader nature of the platform(s), and the meaning of content is “read” off SNS profiles as a form of new “self-textual” representation without exploring the complex social context in which profiles are produced.

Our second major concern is that the limited and partial nature of the insights any research agenda produces points to a need for a broad range of methods and methodologies to be applied in understanding social media, sociality and alcohol. We need to illuminate as much as possible about the complex processes of change underway without prematurely foreclosing productive avenues of enquiry. Here we argue, alongside others<sup>26</sup>, that – especially given the nature of the issues and limitations described above – methodologies associated with the rich history of “audience studies” can be usefully adapted for the purpose of studying “new”/social media. This certainly does not mean that user profiles become irrelevant, but it does mean that studies focusing on drinking cultures and SNS could usefully recreate the sort of rich, contextualised accounts of media and media audiences associated with this tradition of scholarship. This in turn suggests we need to consider using differentiated points of beginning – beyond the profile – and broader emphasises, and to look for new ways of exploring the significance and “effects” of user generated content.

### **Rethinking Facebook Drinking Displays Using Multiple Qualitative Methods: SNS, Meaning Making and Drinking Cultures**

With this critical context in mind, our study aimed to explore the role of SNS in young people’s alcohol consumption and leisure practices from an epistemological perspective which emphasised capturing rich, contextual and interpretative data. We argue both SNS use and drinking alcohol are situated, complex, meaning-laden social and cultural practices. In essence our major goal was to identify these meanings, from young people’s own perspectives in their everyday lives, and their subsequent implications. While not wishing to minimise health concerns, we aimed to explore in detail why young people choose to post alcohol content, and the social and cultural practices it enables. Rather than “reading” the meaning of profiles from their content alone, we were interested in using a “socio-culturally grounded study of people’s activities in context”<sup>27</sup> as part of developing a more nuanced approach to the role of SNS in online drinking cultures. That is, one that would enable us to interrogate how the specific affordances of SNS technology, that is the “functional and relational aspects which frame, while not determining, the possibilities for agentic action”<sup>28</sup>, were taken up, resisted or appropriated by young people as part of their social lives and alcohol-based leisure practices.

The first set of choices we had to make revolved around how to choose research participants. Aotearoa New Zealand has a deregulated alcohol regime, a well-established alcohol-based night time economy, and a pervasive culture of intoxication similar to that of

the United Kingdom<sup>29</sup>. Our society is made up of multiple ethnic strands, and has patterns of power relations heavily influenced by the colonial history of the country. To provide insight into New Zealand's drinking cultures and SNS practices, it was important to specifically explore these issues within three major ethnic groups, Māori (indigenous people), Pasifika (Pacific descent), and Pākehā (European descent). More Pākehā drink and do so more frequently at lower volumes, while Māori and Pasifika people drink less often, and are more likely to drink to intoxication when they do<sup>30</sup>. Engaging with ethnic diversity therefore fundamentally matters to the framing of our study. We then developed three inter-related stages of data collection and obtained approval from the university's human ethics committee.

Stage one, being the period where we "entered" the field, was a particularly important phase. Here we decided to focus attention first on young people's alcohol consumption as a highly *social* activity, which research suggests is firmly based in *group*-related practices of having fun with friends<sup>31</sup>. We wanted to obtain situated meanings of drinking practices within the context of friendship groups, to examine how groups of friends developed shared, co-constructed understandings of correlated uses of SNS, and how they *collaboratively* made sense of their leisure-based nights out drinking and subsequent self-displays online. Between 2011 and 2012 participants for friendship group discussions were recruited using a mixture of convenience sampling and snowball techniques. Like drinking practices, the form and meaning of friendship can vary significantly across cultural groups<sup>32</sup>, so therefore we recruited friendship groups with naturally occurring networks of friends within each ethnic strand we were studying. Any interested participants subsequently asked 3-6 of their friends to take part in group discussions, so that friendship groups were determined by participants themselves. As groups formed, participants were provided with information sheets outlining the research objectives. In total 34 friendship group discussions were conducted with 141 participants aged 18-25 years. Twelve were made up of predominantly Pākehā participants, while 12 were predominantly Māori and 10 predominantly Pasifika. They included 57 male participants, 80 female participants, and 4 Fa'afafine, a third gender category specific to Pasifika cultures for people born male but whose spirit is female. We also sought to build diversity into our sample by recruiting across different geographical locations (including both urban and rural settings), varied workplaces and community centres (capturing differing occupations and unemployed young people), and educational institutions. Discussions were held wherever participants felt most comfortable, including workplaces, homes or university halls of residence. Upon arrival, participants were provided information sheets, assured of anonymity, offered the chance to ask questions, and signed consent forms. Discussions were semi-structured with questions about friendships, socialising, drinking behaviour, use of media and SNS, and the online self-display of drinking. They lasted 1-2hrs and were video and audio taped, and were facilitated by individual female PhD researchers whose ethnicity was matched to the predominant ethnicity of the groups.

Starting with friendship groups enabled us to explore collaborative meaning making, social processes and interactions in an atmosphere where a wide range of responses can occur. This was important to capturing the *social* and *group* dynamics of online drinking cultures often overlooked in the established literature. However friendship groups can equally make it difficult for individuals to voice views which sit outside friendship group norms. In stage two the three female researchers undertook individual interviews, again with participants of their own ethnicity, to provide a space where countervailing views might be expressed, and also to provide an opportunity for more nuanced insights into uses of SNS in drinking cultures. Participants from stage one were invited to take part in stage two. A key feature of these interviews involved the use of an internet-enabled laptop. Participants were invited to navigate to favoured sites, texts, images and videos. We were interested in participants' varied uses of their own SNS profiles, in all the aspects they considered important, but were specifically interested in asking about their posting of alcohol-related content. Digital navigation capture software stored all online activity, while synchronous video recorded researcher questions and participants' responses (including nonverbal communications). This, we argue, provides a rich multimodal data stream that helps document essential aspects of how participants' make sense of their online social worlds in relation to drinking cultures. Those interested were given information sheets, had questions answered, and were assured of confidentiality and anonymity in any written research reports. All participants were Facebook users, and it was made clear to them that any information from their profiles shared during the interview would be anonymised for research purposes, whereas any information from other people's profiles would not be used in any form of dissemination as the owners of these pages had not consented to use of this material. Interviews lasted approximately one hour, and were open and flexible and driven as much as possible by participants themselves. In total 23 young people aged 18-25 years took part, including 15 females, 7 males, and one Fa'afafine. Seven were Pākehā, 8 were Māori, and 8 were Pasifika.

In order to help interpret the data collected throughout stages one and two, we needed to document and contextualise the online worlds participants were engaged in. In the last stage of the research we collated the web-based content and material, including but not limited to pages on social networking sites, which captured and engaged our participants' time and attention. We began by systematically documenting the sites referred to by our participants in stages one and two, including alcohol brand and bar Facebook pages and websites. To add breadth and depth to this database of content, we then supplemented it through weekly Google searches by research assistants across a 12 month period aimed at collating material concerning alcohol consumption, intoxication, Facebook, social networking and youth culture. Overall 487 sites/social networking pages, including web addresses and screen captures, were collected. The majority were derived from friendship groups (275) and individual interviews (131). Systematic searching provided a total of 81 additional sites. This database was not analysed separately. Rather, we used this material to



help in the analysis of participants' accounts of their SNS use and drinking as provided by them in stages one and two. Reflecting on this content enabled greater insights into participants' drinking-related leisure activities and associated forms of meaning making, and helped produce a broader context for our interpretations of young people's online social worlds.

In sum, stages one to three deployed a range of methodological techniques aimed at generating rich, detailed, contextually complex data including transcripts, video recordings, online screen captures of browsing sessions, and a database of broader/contextually significant forms of online content linked to audio, visual and textual material not produced by participants themselves but highly relevant to them (for example Facebook pages of bars they frequented). This enabled us to gain insight into how uses of SNS were embedded into young people's social lives, and into how social life online related to young peoples' social relationships generally and drinking cultures specifically. Discussions and interviews were transcribed verbatim. For individual interviews, Transana software was used to bring together and time-synchronise the three strands of data collected, namely the video recording, transcript and screen capture recording. This allowed us to engage with the multimodality<sup>33</sup> evident in participants' accounts of their SNS use, that is with the dynamic interactions between factors like text, speech, video and photography at play.

### **Illustrating the Value of the Research Design: Insights into Facebook Drinking Photos**

Given the nature and scale of the project, we cannot provide an extensive summary of all our findings. The general point we wish to make is that our interpretative emphasis on capturing young people's processes of meaning making in context has allowed for insights occluded or under-explored in mainstream research into online drinking cultures, while opening up a space for rethinking the nature of Facebook "users"/use and for different understandings of the technology itself. For example our published research has explored how young people appropriate Facebook affordances to not only represent their drinking online, but to engage in pleasurable real-time drinking practices with geographically dispersed friends which involve negotiating tensions around the fun of posting while drunk<sup>34</sup>. We have also explored how young people's sense making of friendship is bound up with their appropriation and negotiation of specific Facebook affordances and associated forms of novel online friendship work<sup>35</sup>, how their Facebook drinking displays present "airbrushed" versions of a carefully managed and yet "authentic" self<sup>36</sup>, and how self-display and friendship in online drinking cultures relate to structural constraints and power relations around class, gender, and ethnicity<sup>37</sup>. However, for the purposes of illustration, we will briefly re-examine here several key dimensions of the role of Facebook drinking photos in youth drinking cultures<sup>38</sup>. As we have previously noted, Facebook drinking photos have been singled out for concerted attention in mainstream literature due their documented

popularity online, and because of the links made to their “effects” on young people’s health behaviours.

Notwithstanding its centrality to current debates, the first point we would like to emphasise is that our project’s central focus on the photography that occurs on Facebook as a platform was derived adaptively from the research process itself. It emerged from young people’s own accounts of drinking cultures in focus groups and interviews, rather than from any pre-existing assumptions as to Facebook’s technological features or its role and significance for young people. All of our participants reported using Facebook, to a greater or lesser degree, often after having migrated to it from Bebo and/or Myspace, and most often to the exclusion of any other social networking platform (including other fairly popular sites at the time like Twitter). This is important to acknowledge, because if we asked how young people negotiate online drinking cultures today this situation may not hold. Numerous other social networking sites have become prominent since we collected our data across 2011-2012. We may have caught Facebook at the zenith of its exclusivity as a uniquely popular site with unparalleled penetration into daily routines. It may be that a variety of different sites, with different sets of affordances, are now used simultaneously by young people for sharing drinking photos, and if so then then investigating each of them, as well as the *interconnections* between them and their associated social practices, would become central to the analysis. For instance the growth in popularity of the mobile app Snapchat, with its built in self-destruction of video and picture content, has made new technological affordances readily available for managing drinking, sociality and self-display online that may well have been taken up by young people. Indeed Facebook itself continues to change in response to the changing media environment it operates within, recently becoming easier to use in relation to privacy settings and more mobile friendly. Situating the analysis of online drinking cultures historically and temporally in terms of social and technological change therefore matters<sup>39</sup>, and yet is often overlooked in dominant approaches to studying SNS and drinking cultures. In contrast, our interpretative approach to asking young people themselves to circumscribe and describe the technologies that matter to them and how they use them provides one valid means for capturing some of this situated complexity.

Our interpretative approach was also designed to remain open to exploring diverse activities undertaken by participants on the social media platforms they chose to use. However our thematic analyses of focus group data made it apparent that young people’s social lives while on Facebook predominantly revolved around a broad, user-generated visual culture. That is, in describing its role in their everyday lives participants consistently constructed Facebook as a *visual* medium. For them its utility is linked to its affordances for photo uploading and photo sharing across manifold day-to-day contexts and events, from the ordinary and mundane like having lunch, to the more exceptional like holidays or weekends away. In this sense Facebook use is tied to a correlated culture of ubiquitous smartphone use, so that photo taking and routine uploading is a thoroughly normalised activity for young people. Facebook photos were valued here in a dual sense. First, as is well

established in the dominant literature on drinking cultures, for their referential function. That is as important forms of profile “content” that act as “markers” for self-display, and for recording and presenting (primarily with an “audience” of peers in mind) life events, places visited, and people you know. However, equally importantly, Facebook photos were also seen as vital *discursive resources* subsequently drawn upon in online conversations. That is, they were means for re-living shared experiences, becoming catalysts for ongoing, recursive social exchanges that helped to make one’s social life continually visible to one’s peers, while simultaneously helping to cement friendship bonds even while friends are “physically” absent. The temporal and spatial dimensions of Facebook photo sharing were highly valued because photos enable reflexive sociality. Uploading, sharing, tagging, “liking” and commenting on photos sustains forms of everyday social connections for young people across time and space. This was not only evident in thematic analyses of focus groups discussions, but equally in individual interviews as – for instance – participants commonly used photos and profile albums to navigate to other (friends’) profiles and highlighted the ways photos generate on-going comments. Indeed screen captures, as well as participants’ discussions in focus groups and interviews, suggested a heightened value is accorded to those photos that attract the most attention (“likes”) and comments from one’s peers.

It is *within* this wider culture of online socialising, tied to technologically mediated visibility, that drinking photos take on specific meanings and functions. Young people’s accounts of the pleasures of heavy social drinking have always invoked identity, storytelling, friendships and socialising as key elements. Drinking stories are often told and re-told amongst peer networks, playing a crucial part in identity construction and maintaining friendships<sup>40</sup>. As with Facebook photography generally, our participants’ accounts emphasised that Facebook drinking photos “capture” the moment, and enable reflexive forms of enhanced socialising to ensue online. Moreover, as we have pointed out in detail elsewhere<sup>41</sup>, both the representative and interactive dimensions of drinking photos were constructed as being beneficial in specific, and powerful, ways. First, for young people drinking occurs in the company of one’s peers and is often tied to social events, and drinking photos were therefore constructed by participants as providing particularly potent, and yet authentic, connotations of being sociable and popular. That is, they connote a “successful” social life while carrying less risk of producing inferences that one is overtly seeking attention or “falsely” claiming popularity. Second, our participants’ accounts emphasised that drinking photos were particularly effective at facilitating recursive feedback, enticing multiple comments and attracting numerous “likes” from one’s peers, both in real time and – through leaving searchable and persistent traces of social interaction<sup>42</sup> – asynchronously across time as drinking narratives are stored, modified, and retrieved at will. It was this dual, heightened ability of drinking photos to represent an authentically popular social life, while also being particularly effective at *actively developing* online attention and Facebook facilitated social connections, that was highly valued. This is especially so within a culture of regular and routine photographic documentation, where the sheer weight of images

produced daily raises questions as to the traditional truth claims of photography, and where many images were largely ignored.

As Gillian Rose argues, these ways of *using* specific images “much more as communicational tools than as representational texts” is a key feature of contemporary visual culture which deserves closer scrutiny when developing our forms of methodological enquiry<sup>43</sup>. That is, too often visual research methodologies focus solely on the creation of images as mechanisms for making aspects of the social visible. This focus on *visibility* obscures the *visuality* of contemporary cultural practices where images become meaningful objects central to symbolic and communicative activity, at the same time underplaying the competency of research participants as skilled negotiators of visual culture<sup>44</sup>. In our data a complex interplay is revealed between the representative and “social/interactional” functions of Facebook drinking photos, which is important for young people’s social lives, but is left under-explored in investigations that focus too closely on the representative aspects of photos as they are displayed on individuated profiles. While drinking photos, as a form of profile “content”, are clearly a key part of individuated self—displays, the “user” here equally emerges as situated in a broader, more complex and collective cultural context which they constantly negotiate, and which is not reducible to individuated levels of analysis.

There is much more to be said about these processes. In particular, realising the benefits of drinking displays demanded an enormous amount of online self-management work from young people, in terms of strategically choosing images to upload and on-going processes of monitoring, tagging and un-tagging oneself from images uploaded by others. Participants articulated an acute awareness of the imperative placed upon them to remain in command of the body and its online display while drinking, especially in the knowledge that employers and others (such as parents) may form broader “invisible audiences”<sup>45</sup> watching peer-orientated drinking displays. The authentic popularity achieved through drinking displays is highly valued, but is always *precarious*. Indeed the continued willingness to transparently reveal/perform drinking practices online to one’s peers despite this broader risk of “outside” moral judgement by others, contributed to the peer-sanctioned, relatively unique form of authenticity drinking photos produce “within” the peer group. This enhanced their effectiveness as facilitators of young people’s online sociality. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, all these practices are riven with power relations related to gender, sexuality, class and ethnicity. Young people’s willingness and ability to engage in online drinking cultures as a site of self-realisation and authentic popularity/sociality, and the associated amount of work drinking photos require in terms of managing self-displays, is always contingent on structural forms of domination that must be actively navigated, and contested, while online<sup>46</sup>. The risks and benefits of drinking displays are unevenly distributed across the social formation.

We don't have the space to explicate these important concerns here. Rather we would end this section by briefly pointing out that the form of detailed, contextual analysis multiple qualitative methods provide enables a different form of theory building from dominant approaches focused on the "effects" of Facebook content. For example we have argued that the complex, multivalent accounts young people provide through qualitative methodologies can form the basis for a conjunctural analysis<sup>47</sup>. This form of theorising, following the impetus of the youth (sub)cultures approach developed in Birmingham's Centre For Contemporary Cultural Studies, does not simply ask *why* young people produce drinking photos, but focuses on *why now*? That is, why has "online youth drinking" become so prevalent in young people's social lives, and why is this attracting such concerted attention from the media, academia, and policy makers? Why is this happening at this moment, and how does this relate to the "political, economic, and sociocultural changes"<sup>48</sup> of the current time? In our published work in this area we have highlighted connections between the processes young people engage in as we describe them above and broader forces of social, technological and historical change. We examine how, for instance, the affordances and algorithmic structure of Facebook that actively encourage the online display of drinking cultures reflect and reinforce the broader formation a new "attention economy", where neoliberal forms of popularity have become a dominant means for generating wealth, and where young people are exhorted to recreate themselves as "brands"<sup>49</sup>. In this way, the contextual, situated richness of qualitative methodologies enables a wider, more "generalizable" form of critique pertinent to understanding contemporary media technological forms and their users/audiences.

### **Conclusions: Adapting, Applying and Re-Valuing Qualitative Audience Methodologies in Studies of Social Media**

In this chapter we have described the design of a team-based, qualitative research project into the nature of new online drinking cultures, and have outlined some of the alternative insights that qualitative designs generate which are occluded in the development of more mainstream research into SNS and drinking. In doing so we have argued that qualitative methodologies like focus groups, interviews and broader archival research approaches, traditionally associated with "audience studies" of "mass media", can be productively adapted to study contemporary online contexts like SNS. This is an important point to re-make in the current moment. As Martin Hand argues, qualitative social research has shifted markedly over time in response to changes in online phenomena, but "arguably finds itself in 'crisis' when faced with algorithms and ubiquitous digital data"<sup>50</sup>. In current data intensive online environments like Facebook, so much of the "social" seems to be automatically "captured" through the analysis of user-generated data on profiles that the rationale and advantages for generating qualitative research designs – beyond the profile and the data it readily contains – needs to be argued for anew. We have sought to

demonstrate how the ability of our qualitative methods to contextualise, situate and critique “audience”/user practices enables productive new insights into both users and the technologies they engage with.

## Acknowledgements

The authors wish to acknowledge Marsden funding administered by the Royal Society of New Zealand (contract MAU0911). The authors would also like to acknowledge the contributions of our fellow researchers on this project: Helen Moewaka Barnes, Fiona Hutton, Kerry-Ellen Vroman, Patricia Niland, Lina Samu, and Dee O’Carroll.

## Notes

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25. See Livingstone "From Mass to Social Media?" for a discussion of this tendency in the broad range of disciplines (outside of media studies) that study social media.
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38. These are primarily adapted from Ian Goodwin, Christine Griffin, Antonia Lyons, Timothy McCreanor, and Helen Moewaka Barnes, "Precarious Popularity: Facebook Drinking Photos, the Attention Economy, and the Regime of the Branded Self," *Social Media + Society* 2(1) (2016), 1-13.

39. It is necessary, in this sense, to set out some of the key technological features of the Facebook profile and the platform's affordances during our specific period of study, and in particular to highlight those features our research participants engaged with most often. Upon logging in users would regularly check their "notifications" and "personal messages" via icons located handily to the right of the Facebook logo (and if indicated via a third icon, also check any friend requests), often responding to new content or messages as they did so. Many female participants reported using notifications, which could be monitored via mobile phone, to immediately check what photos they were "tagged in" in order to vet them (quickly un-tagging any content deemed inappropriate so it disappeared from their wall). The "friends list" formed a prominent component of the profile occupying the left of the screen. The newsfeed and wall were regularly checked and Facebook chat functionality was highly valued for enabling real time engagement with friends. Friends were automatically highlighted by Facebook as being online at the same time (although it was possible to log in and disengage from chat so that friends could not see you were online – an option utilised for example when users were at work). Facebook's video sharing and photo sharing functionalities, including the ability to upload content, tag content, comment upon and "like" content, were also regularly utilised. "Status updates" were also key, and "events" and "notes" features were available, with the former engaged with much more often and regularly than the latter. The "people you may know" section and "sponsored" links/content were prominently displayed on profiles to the right of the page. The profile went through several minor format changes, and the site's privacy policy and associated settings were regularly changed. Perhaps the most prominent shift that occurred during the study period was the introduction of "timeline" (at the end of 2011/beginning of 2012, after much of our data had been collected). For a detailed discussion of Facebook's specific development from 2004 to 2013 see Niels Brügger, "A Brief History of Facebook as a Media Text: The Development of an Empty Structure," *First Monday* 20(5) (2015).

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